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# [The cancer of ‘sifarish’](http://www.dawn.com/news/1128641/the-cancer-of-sifarish)

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IT may not be obvious but the common ground that brought protest marchers to Islamabad was a sense of exclusion from the affairs of the state. The anti-incumbency sentiment is strong because the common citizen feels deprived of basic services by the state and of job opportunities.

In fact, any disgruntled political party would be able to bring people out on the streets. We have, therefore, to look at the root causes of this deep-seated, widespread sentiment. Corruption, politicisation of the bureaucracy, nepotism, favouritism and sifarish have become the bane of society, creating a governance deficit and resulting in the declining writ of the state. The decay of institutions that provide these services is endemic.

Corruption is widely seen as the main malaise in society, that has hollowed out institutions. There are, however, laws and institutions such as the National Accountability Bureau that enjoy the power to bring the corrupt to book. Despite their various weaknesses, action has been initiated against corrupt officials and politicians under these laws.

The superior courts have also taken note of these offences and initiated suo motu action. While corruption is widely talked about and condemned, there is hardly any discussion about the more deep-rooted malaise of sifarish (no English equivalent can quite capture or convey the essence of this term that, in a general sense, relates to nepotism and favouritism). Sifarish is corroding the moral fabric of the governance structure and diluting the writ of the state.

**The almost universal practice of ‘sifarish’ does not raise any eyebrows and has become an accepted social norm.**

It is hardly realised that the almost universal practice of sifarish does not raise any eyebrows and has become an accepted social norm. It is surprising that a majority of people who otherwise consider themselves quite honest and above any pecuniary temptations think that there is nothing wrong about resorting to sifarish for appointments, postings, transfers, admissions and contracts.

Leave aside the politicians who are compelled to favour their constituencies in order to win votes, well-meaning individuals from other walks of life, too, do not hesitate to oblige others. The tentacles of sifarish have spread so ferociously throughout the system that they resemble cancer cells. The toxic effects of a single act may be insignificant in the view of the person resorting to this practice but the aggregate damage to the system is highly pernicious.

There is no social ostracisation but commendation for those who intervene. This implicit social approval has fortified and multiplied the numbers of those who indulge in this practice. The cost-benefit calculus favours the latter as there is ‘no pain but all gain’.

Let us trace the consequences of this disease on the economy and society through three examples.

First, if teachers are appointed not on the basis of merit but on that of sifarish we should not expect any improvement in the quality of instruction, the grooming of our younger generations or the discipline in their lives. Teachers remain absent from their duties because they are protected by their patrons. No disciplinary action can be taken against them because their supervisors hesitate to take any. If they do, they are certain that nothing will come of it and they’ll only end up antagonising their powerful patrons.

The effect on other teachers otherwise discharging their duties faithfully is revealing. These teachers realise they should also seek out some influential person as there is no penalty for deviant behaviour and no reward for good deeds. Poor educational outcomes, high dropout rates, an army of virtually illiterate young men and women unable to find productive jobs are natural. These people are either condemned to poverty or fall prey to extremists, criminals and other anti-social elements worsening the law and order situation in the country. These unemployed people respond readily to calls for protest.

The next sector is the police department. It is highly paradoxical that a policeman is feared by an ordinary citizen who thinks he will be subjected to extortion and ill treatment while criminals and mafias are at ease when it comes to carrying out their nefarious activities.

For induction into the ranks of the police there is either money or sifarish involved. To recover the money inductees have spent to get into the force they resort to extortion. In the case of sifarish, they can act with impunity because they can always turn to their patrons for coming to their rescue. This symbiotic relationship may be more harmful because the person applied to for sifarish had unwittingly obliged only a relative/friend without realising the adverse consequences of his action.

The worst damage to our future survival is being committed by admissions and examination results based on sifarish. We all complain about the absence of competence and professionalism in public service, even in the private and NGO sectors. If deserving and talented students are deprived of the opportunity to acquire higher education and mediocre students take their place the result would be obvious and should not surprise anyone.

It is quite common to come across students achieving top positions through these nefarious means at the inter board examinations failing to clear IBA admission tests. I am asked a difficult question when I address public-sector university students: ‘Why should I study hard when I know that the relative of an MNA with lower marks than mine will get the job?’

Sifarish is a routine matter for the majority because of the societal norms of lihaz, sharam and murawwat that are expected from all those who are in a position to exercise influence. Sometimes it is a reciprocal arrangement whereby I help your son get admission to a prestigious institution while you repay me by getting mine appointed to a lucrative public-sector job.

If a person refrains from sifarish he faces the wrath of his family, circle of friends, biradari, kinship etc. That is why sifarish has become so ingrained in our national DNA and is spreading like cancer making our institutions dysfunctional and weakening the state’s writ.

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