

En Route

Politicians' qualifications

ATLE HETLAND

The newspapers are still spending ink and paper on 'news' about MNAs and MPAs who don't have the degrees they have claimed they have. Jail terms have even been given. And the Higher Education Commission (HEC) seems stuck in the whole mess, which has escalated much beyond what it should have. They should rather spend time on more important issues, and let the degree issue be an internal disciplinary matter of the legislative and executive bodies.

Elected and appointed representatives and officials should be honest and not feel the need for beautifying themselves with 'borrowed feathers'. They don't need degrees anyway, of course. At the most, there might be a requirement for a literacy and language test in Urdu, and maybe also in English.

A pilot needs a test to fly an airplane or navigate a ship; an engineer needs qualifications and permits to build a high-rise building; a medical doctor needs a license to treat patients and write prescriptions; a lawyer needs certain qualifications to understand and interpret the law and pass judgments; and so on. But religious or secular leaders don't need technical certificates and degrees. The qualifications they need are vast and broad, and hardly possible to measure, even if we wanted to.

It is perhaps interesting to note that many of the historic heroes we see in bronze statues on columns in capitals and in paintings in national art galleries, had no degrees. Well, some of them lived before universities had been invented. The greatest prophets in Christianity and Islam had no degrees, of course, and they were probably illiterate, too. Yes, I am talking about Jesus (Issa) and Muhammad (PBUH).

A leader today as in the past needs honesty, compassion, integrity and a will to do what he or she can for the electorate. Maybe a test in ethics and morality would be useful, but it is unrealistic, of course. Besides, a test only measures so much. What a politician will do in practice is different, and not quite possible to predict in advance, even by the person himself or herself. The context and environment, too, make the men or women as the situations demand.

The reason why former President General Musharraf's government in 2002 introduced the regulation requiring a Bachelor's degree for all members of the national or provincial assembly, that had to do with a hope that it would lead to more enlightened and better legislation and other decisions. This was well-intentioned, although it had some inbuilt gender, class and geographic shortcomings.

If Musharraf's government and later governments had made primary school compulsory, as they should have, the rule would have been superfluous. This time around, at the 11 May General Elections, there are no education restrictions on candidates. They will neither be better nor worse from it. They will probably not be more or less honest, principled, well-intentioned, and compassionate, or, better or worse at solving present-day and future problems. And they will probably not be less corrupt either. Our spines and backbones are built on values and standards; degree awarding institutions cannot tell who we are and what we can do, as politicians or in other important fields in life.

When I come of age in Norway in the 1960s, I remember that it was still common for the labour parties all over Europe to be suspicious of academic leaders and parliamentarians. The parties were workers' and poor peoples' parties. They were organized as members of the Socialist International, and they had drawn some lessons from the Russian Revolution (1917). It was the labour parties (also called social democratic parties) that built the welfare state in Europe. In many ways they took away the power from the university educated civil servants and the bourgeoisie parties. And if the earlier leaders were not highly educated, then they were rich real estate and land owners, artisans and traders, or large farmers. Many lived off inherited wealth, which gave them status too.

That time in Europe, after the World War I, and also after World War II, highly educated politicians were not what the labour parties wanted. They wanted politicians who new how it was to till the land for meager pay, work long hours in factories, be labourers for daily wages, be fishermen and sailors, and so on. They wanted politicians who had felt hunger, who had no savings in the bank, and who could not get a bank loan if the harvest failed. They were not against education, and all European countries had compulsory primary education that time. But since they were poor, working class people they didn't have higher education. They could not afford that. And if they were better educated, most of them would leave their lower social classes and become bourgeoisie. That was why the labour parties were suspicious of educated leaders. It should be added that there were educated leaders that time, as currently, who did indeed serve the lower classes. But the suspicion is not quite gone, till this very day.

In Europe earlier, one was also skeptical to rich leaders, especially if they said they supported the labour parties and lower classes.

In Europe today, as in Pakistan, poor people, and they are in majority, should be skeptical to rich people wanting to represent them. Poor people should represent themselves.

In Pakistan and many other developing countries, I am worried about millionaires representing the poor as politicians or NGOs. It is a fact that many parliaments have a very high percentage of representatives being millionaires, including Pakistan. Can they know what to do for the masses? And would they really be willing to share their privileges and wealth with the poor, as would be necessary in a more democratic and less class-divided society? Instead of working for betterment of living conditions for the masses, millionaire parliamentarians may be more interested in status quo?

However, it can also be argued that a wealthy politician is more independent than a poor or middle-class politician. And some would say that politicians, who are not already rich, would be more corrupt. I remember from my time in Africa, when multi-party democracy became common some twenty years ago that some people were against it because they argued that if they frequently change politician, they will all want to become rich when they get into power. Better then to let those who have already become rich, stay in power.

I don't know if these arguments are logical. But politics is often not logical, as we human beings are not always logical and stringent thinkers. Many contradicting aspects must be taken into account. Take for example, that we are all somehow impressed by people who are rich, have expensive cars and big houses, even if we know they didn't earn the money honestly, or had someone else write their doctoral dissertation.

I shall not defend rich politicians either. I don't think they are the best to represent the masses in parliament. I generally think that parliamentarians should come from the groups they represent; they should not be from above or from outside. Yet, there are also examples of the opposite. The great social democratic Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme, who was assassinated in 1986, was himself from an upper-class background. It wasn't an advantage, but he managed to identify with ordinary people. There are some other examples, too, but they are not many. I believe much more in the opposite: Nelson Mandela in South Africa is an excellent example along with several other leaders at the time when former colonies gained independence.

Generally, the best education, the best background a politician can have, is to be part of the lives of the people he or she wants to represent. Direct experience of suffering and injustice is the best background a politician can have to work for change.

I am for education for all, including more and better further and higher education. But it is not automatically making a politician better. Today, we all need a lot of education, and it can help in understanding concepts and problems, analyzing issues, and finding solutions. Modern politicians need good education, but they need much more, and should be more proud of having compassion, principles, and a wish to help the people they represent. Perhaps courses and discussions in such fields are more important than degrees. After all, a politician is not a technocrat or sector-specialist. A politician is a generalist who shows compassion, listens to people, considers and prioritizes issues, works for change, and gives hope.

The writer is a senior Norwegian social scientist with experience from research, diplomacy and development aid.