Parchis, Petitions and Political Connections

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The recognition that representations are material encourages a shift from semiotic structures (texts) abstracted from their material vehicles to the relationships of material forms to their significance. Even the concept of writing, though a convenient shorthand, abstracts from the concrete material forms through which inscriptions reach our eyes and hands. People don't read writing. They read—and do much else with—visiting cards, files, receipts, and of course petitions.

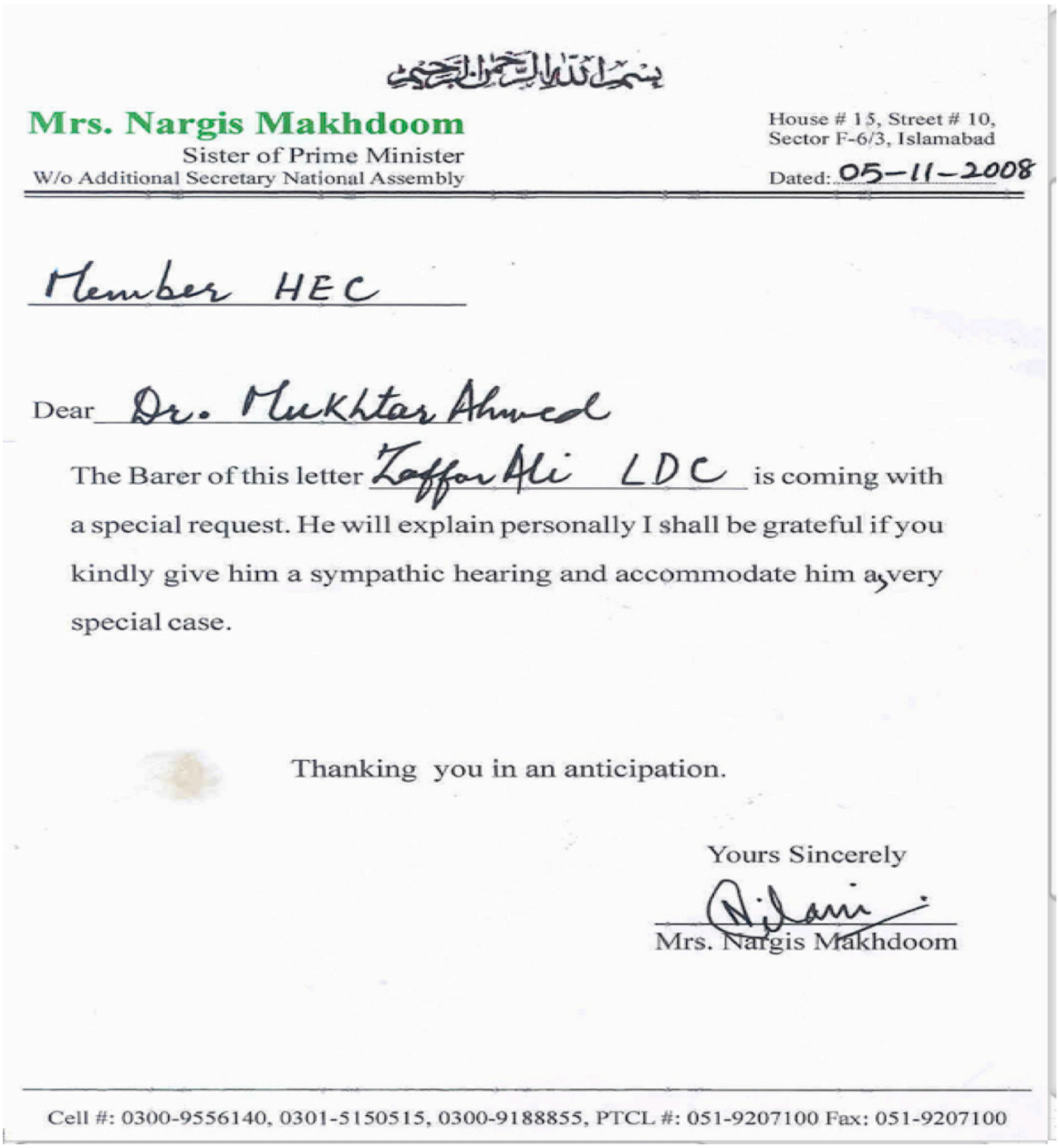
The material forms of writing shape not only their significance, but also the forms of sociality they constitute. Michael Warner conceives of a public as a form of sociality "that comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation," a "space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself". As an ideal–typical sociocultural form that is organized by no other "external framework" such as a state or kinship, a public is a form of sociality that is especially dependent on the circulation of the artifacts of discourse.

These insights on publics and circulation can be extended to other graphic artifacts and social forms. The public is merely a theoretically specified limiting case where discourse mediated by graphic artifacts is postulated to be the *only* determinant of social form. But all forms of writing contribute to their own unique forms of sociality, though not with the same liberty from other social processes as Warner's public. Even in bureaucracies, which have organizational determinants that compete with those of written discourse (hierarchies, divisions of labor), we can see a similar function of written materials.

In Islamabad, a file draws particular bureaucrats into a matter or excludes them as it moves across their desk or is routed around them. A list of names entitled to compensation for expropriated land engenders an alliance between senior bureaucrats and villagers, crossing the antagonisms between the state and the village.

Unlike a public, these forms of sociality are not as easy to specify and generalize about, partly because, being irregular and often relatively short lived, they are rarely culturally typified like more common or stable forms of sociality that have labels like "directorate," "family," or "community." They are more transient and more particular, irreducibly dependent on the peculiar characteristics of the graphic artifacts around which they form and the milieu in which they are taken up. The significance and function of bureaucratic inscriptions are heterogeneous. A property title and a government file may inhabit the same world of bureaucratic inscription, but they circulate differently and gather around themselves different people and things.

Today I will talk about two forms of graphic artifacts that make different political connections in the bureaucratic arena of Islamabad: petitions and parchis, that is, small slips of paper or visiting cards.



بسم اللہ الرحمن الرحیم

Mrs. Nargis Makhdoom
Sister of Prime Minister
W/o Additional Secretary National Assembly

House # 15, Street # 10,
Sector F-6/3, Islamabad
Dated: 05-11-2008

Member HEC

Dear Dr. Mukhtar Ahmed

The Barer of this letter Zaffar Ali LDC is coming with a special request. He will explain personally I shall be grateful if you kindly give him a sympathic hearing and accommodate him a very special case.

Thanking you in an anticipation.

Yours Sincerely

Mrs. Nargis Makhdoom

Cell #: 0300-9556140, 0301-5150515, 0300-9188855, PTCL #: 051-9207100 Fax: 051-9207100

In 2008 an extraordinary contemporary example of a parchi, allegedly from the sister of the Pakistan Prime Minister, was posted on the web for ridicule and condemnation. It was a "form" parchi created on printed letterhead, with the common Arabic Islamic invocation "In the name of Allah, the Gracious, the Merciful" at the top. The writer is identified as both the "Sister of the Prime Minister" and wife of Additional Secretary of the National Assembly. The parchi form has a generic message, indicating the "Bearer of this letter is coming with a special request. He will explain personally. I shall be grateful if you kindly give him a sympathetic hearing and accommodate him as very special

case." As you can see, spaces were left open so the names of the recipient and client with the special request could simply be filled in—in this case that of a member of the Higher Education Commission (HEC) and a humble lower-division clerk (LDC). Many participants in online forums doubted its authenticity, but more assumed its authenticity and went on to comment on its significance. Many expressed shock and outrage at the blatant use of a form ("probably printed by a government office!" exclaimed one post), but few were surprised that papers invoking the support of powerful patrons were being used to gain access to government officers. If it is a forgery, then like all forgeries that are taken seriously, it is close enough to what a good many Pakistanis imagine to be the paper forms of connection among elites, subalterns, and the bureaucracy.

Parchis mediate encounters between visitors and government officers by materially testifying to and helping to constitute the relations individuals have with institutions and powerful supporters.

Older officers told me that twenty to thirty years ago, one was required to send a chit into the officer before being admitted. Officers don't demand them routinely nowadays but do in some cases. A village leader from western Islamabad involved in disputes with the CDA over land expropriation complained to me that the CDA Chairman wouldn't admit him to his office without a "chit" from the Wafaqi Mohtasib, or federal ombudsman.

The defining feature of a parchi is the name of a powerful person who requests that a favor be granted to the bearer. Critics of government corruption decry Pakistan's "parchi system" and "parchi culture." A person holding a position through connections rather than merit is often called a *parchiwalla* or simply a parchi.

A popular Pakistan Television comedy in the 1980s called *Parchi* featured the exploits of a character always on the hunt for opportunities to be gained through use of *parchis*. A 2003 movie, *Baba Parchi*, similarly centers on a character who strives to obtain a *parchi* without which he can't secure a job.

Today, parchis are more often printed visiting cards than slips of paper. Pakistani visiting cards are just like American business cards. And, much like elsewhere in the world, visitors present a card to identify themselves. In Islamabad, however, visitors sometimes present not their *own* card, but that of *another*, usually a powerful politician or government officer, situating the visiting card within the longstanding and morally fraught practices of the parchi. The card of a powerful person serves as his or her emblem and implies a material and therefore social relation of support between him or her and the bearer. Often the influential person will pen a brief, signed note on the back requesting that the bearer (usually identified by name) should be assisted in any way possible. If such notes are not addressed to a specific individual (a kind of "To whom it may concern"), they are returned to the bearer, making them reusable instruments of access and favor.

Cards with a signed request are obviously the most influential, but even unsigned cards without a message serve the bearer anonymously as political currency, because of the assumption that the source of the card must be the hand of the powerful person himself. A printer in Islamabad who prints visiting cards for a large number of powerful officers makes good use of this assumption. He always keeps for himself a few of the cards he prints and files them carefully. With a well-chosen card, he can facilitate his business in any office he deals with.

Condemned by liberal discourse in Pakistan, the parchi contrasts with the petition, normatively the document of direct and open approach of citizen to government. In the graphic ideology of liberal Pakistanis, parchis and petitions ideally are opposites in form and in the relationships they constitute and represent. Parchis are sized for the pockets that carry them unofficially; petitions are sized for the files that convey them officially. (Thus the A4-size paper of the alleged parchi of the prime minister's sister was another violation of parchi norms.) If parchis stitch together an opaque world of private, discreet connections and call for special treatment, petitions are an open engagement with

government, publicly invoking their citizen signatories' rights to or needs for just treatment under policies and laws. Parchis are drafted for the use of others, explicitly invoking relations of their bearers' dependence on the more powerful; they are representations by others. Petitions are the documents of formally autonomous citizens, self-representations submitted under the names and signatures of their principals. The meanings and effects of parchis are deeply dependent on the contexts in which they are deployed: they are trafficked in undocumented face-to-face encounters of bureaucrats and clients; read, and then secreted in the pockets of their bearers or addressees. Parchis mark the absence of their writers but require the presence of their beneficiaries, animated if not by the voice then at least by the hands of their bearers. Petitions, in contrast, are written to stand on their own, their signatures a graphic proxy for the presence of their writers. They straightaway take their place within the open, artifactual documentary order of the bureaucracy through formal procedures of registration and other practices of written response. Parchis enact the proximity of their bearers to wealth and power. Petitions provide a substitute for this proximity. Although the capacity to produce institutionally acceptable petitions is differentially distributed, petitioning is a basic political right, and may be submitted by the humblest people.

If the ideals of parchi and petition conflict, in practice they are complementary. Through their discourse, graphic layouts, and patterns of circulation, petitions are drawn into the politics of the parchi.

The issues of petitions submitted to the city government are as varied as the kinds of activities these organizations are involved in: the construction of drains; the repair of roads; the approval of a promotions; better compensation for expropriated land; and the sectarian allocation of planned mosque sites.

Commonly used throughout South Asia (FC 2009), petitions are particularly important as representations and enactments of normative political subjectivity in Islamabad, a city with no representative municipal institutions to channel the expression of popular political will. Petitions also offer bureaucrats a very different sort of engagement

with the populace than that provided by bureaucratic techniques of documentation (Scott 1998), giving bureaucrats a view of how the populace sees the state.

Petitions are central artifacts constituting political subjects in Islamabad, but they do not converge on a singular normative subject. Furthermore, practices of submitting petitions reveal the doubts of petitioners as to the adequacy of any of these forms of political subjectivity and the efficacy of the artifacts that constitute them. In practice, petitioners recognize the inability of petitions to stand for them in their absence by complementing them with the presence of *parchis*.

What I am calling "petitions" are written communications that their writers call, in English, an "application," "petition," "appeal", or "request," and in Urdu, an "arz," or "darkhwast." In internal government writings, they are most frequently referred to with the depoliticizing bureaucratic terms "application" and "letter," but references to "requests" and "appeals" are also common. Accounts of such communications within newspapers usually call them by more overtly political terms, "darkhwast," (demand, application, entreaty, petition, appeal), "petitions," sometimes even "demands" and "maltalba" (demands).

They are written in both English and Urdu, but Urdu ones have a good deal of bureaucratic English words and abbreviations written in either Roman or Perso-Arabic script, for example, "family unit," "NOC" (no objection certificate), and "bulldoze." English-language petitions are occasionally handwritten, but most often they are produced on typewriters or, increasingly from the mid-1990s, computers. Urdu petitions are sometimes penned by the untrained hand of the petitioner, but they are more commonly written by a trained scribe.

English-language petitions are occasionally handwritten, but most often they are produced on a typewriter or, increasingly from the mid-1990s, computers. Petitions on major issues were sometimes printed, though the computer has taken over this role in the last couple decades. A large portion of English-language petitions is produced in government offices: officers often have their staff type up petitions as they would a final

copy of any official letter; staff also produce them for themselves on office typewriters. Urdu petitions are sometimes penned by an untrained hand of the petitioner, but they are more commonly written by a trained scribe who helps the petitioner shape the language as well. However, the role of a scribe in Islamabad is rather more simply calligraphic than elsewhere in Pakistan and India (Cody 2009), since an understanding of bureaucratic processes is widely distributed in a city of so many government servants. People connected with government departments overseeing Islamic matters, where Urdu typewriters are commonly used, often submit petitions in typewritten Urdu.

The material production of petitions is part of how they make political persons. The handwriting of parchis is valued for its material connection to the writer and his or her unique investment in the bearer, hence the mocking of the alleged parchi form of the prime minister's sister. By contrast, petitions are valued for their public connections to education and wealth indexed by the quality of their production. Better-produced ones, especially those in English, receive greater regard. For this reason, when petitioners repeatedly submit petitions, each is usually "better" produced than the last. For example, the first submission in Urdu might be in an untrained hand and subsequent ones by a calligrapher; Urdu petitions are sometimes followed by English-language ones.

Although modern petitions are commonly associated with constitutions and democratic bodies, petitions have been an integral part of political orders of all kinds. Contemporary Pakistani petitions are not only instances of a global phenomenon, they have a global history. Many of their contemporary features and uses took form in the colonial period as English and South Asian practices of petitioning combined in the practices of early East India Company rule. South Asian petitions emerged from colonial rule as an ambivalent genre, employing both the idioms of modern democratic citizenship as well as that of the subordinate subject of a kingly or modern authoritarian order. The present Pakistan state, as a combination of democratic and authoritarian governmental processes, has maintained

the political vitality of both these idioms, provoking petitioners to enact themselves as supplicants, citizens, bureaucrats or some ambiguous combination of the three.

DISCOURSE

It should be clear from what I have written so far that petitions are mixed, by language (English and Urdu), script, discourse, and graphic layout. Likewise, some petitioners deploy the language of all three kinds of subjects in order to persuade the government to act in their favor, at turns demanding their rights, abjectly praising an officer, and requesting some particular document. However, petitioners enact these forms of political personhood in particular discursive and graphic genres of petitions and we turn to these now.

From the early 1960s, during both martial law and civilian governments, residents of the area have submitted petitions as citizens appealing for their rights in the liberal tradition. Although the language of these petitions is deferential and patriotic, demands for the recognition of rights are forthright. Consider a 1964 petition from an association of villagers whose land had been expropriated.

RIGHTS:

Having declared that they are patriotic citizens, the petitioners bluntly assert that the government has trampled on their rights as property owners:

> Notwithstanding the above considerations, we believe that when lands and houses are being acquired on compensatory basis, It shall not be inconsistent to demand that the considerations of Natural justice and fairplay shall not have been ignored. Basically, it was unjust that a special law should have been formulated for acquisition of Capital site with

> provisions stricter and water-tight than the General Law of acquisition prevalent in the land.[1]

contrast SUPPLICATION

Sir, by God and his beloved friend and by your soul would you give me ten marla plot in the empty place on street no. 9 G-7/2 so that I can take out a loan and so forth and build a small house so that I can provide a place for my children to hide their heads. Sir, my family numbers 11 people. I am the only support for children and elder parents.

Rather than simply articulating his request, the imam adopts a hortatory tone, repeating his request for a plot several times, then characterizes the allotment in an idiom of Islamic praise.

> I am helpless….With courtesy I submit that a ten marla plot on the empty place on street no. 9 G-7/2 should be allotted to me. This will be your small kindness and your offering of charity will endure until the resurrection. Sir, this world will pass away. But this benevolence will, like the names of God and his Messenger, endure until the Resurrection Day. If you by your hand you show mercy and allot a plot, I and my children will keep praying for you and your children.

[1] All non-standard spelling, diction, and capitalizations in the original.

GRAPHIC FORMS

Various political persons are also enacted through distinctive graphic organizations of the petitions.

Although petitions taking the form of the bureaucratic letter often speak the language of rights, they are densely mediated by bureaucratic signs. They begin not with a title but with "To:" followed by a title that precisely locates the addressee within a bureaucratic order. The heading of the traditional petition giving the petitioner and issue is analyzed into discrete conceptual and graphic units in the bureaucratic petition: the name of the petitioner follows a "From:" and the issue of the petition is written in underlined text next to "Subject" or, in Urdu, '*unwaan*. This is followed by the date, which articulates the petition with bureaucratic temporality, unlike petitions taking the more traditional form, which are usually not dated. Petitions from established groups even include a "letter number" or in Urdu "hualeh number." Often no number actually follows this heading, suggesting the letter number is more a means to present the petitioner itself as a bureaucratic entity rather than a designation with a functional significance for the petitioner. As in bureaucratic prose of all kinds, every paragraph
is numbered. The growing adoption of the bureaucratic form of petition can be seen over the series of petitions submitted by a individuals and groups. In the mid-1980s, petitions from the representatives of the mosque Mogheera bin Shobah, for example, were in Urdu and took the traditional form but by the mid-1990s they are paragons of the English-language bureaucratic petition, even though these latter petitions are typed on Urdu letterhead. In such bureaucratic form petitions, the citizen-government relation is often still central, but the very form of the petition implies a bureaucratic addressee, an effort to articulate the political demands of paramount government with the processes and discretion of bureaucratic activity.

Such hybrid petitions enact the citizen through discourse but the bureaucratic subject through form; the discourse addresses a guardian of the rights of citizens, the form addresses officials who process paperwork in their sphere of authority.

Sometimes a petitioner sometimes combines different linguistic idioms and graphic elements—for example, abject praise presented in the graphic form of an inter-office memo—to constitute a politically ambiguous person.

Ideally, petitions are written to stand on their own, making just claims that the bureaucracy must address on their merits. But the ways that petitions circulate show that few petitioners have confidence in this ideal efficacy.

Petitioners sometimes try to help their petitions by submitting them to newspapers. But petitioners rarely send their petitions to the city planning agency by mail or even deliver them by hand to the central registry of an office. Rather, they usually attempt to present the petition in person to the official to whom it is addressed. Their goal is to overcome the very distance from influence that required their resort to a petition in the first place, to generate as best they can the sort of favor constituted through parchis.

One day I was sitting in the office of a director when a lower-division clerk was admitted. He couldn't think of sitting down. He walked straight over to the director, greeted him solemnly and respectfully then handed him a single sheet of paper. When the director asked what it was, the man began to tear up as said that he has been at the same grade for fifteen years and has no hope for promotion. He said that the paper was a petition for a promotion. By the time he finished telling his story he was sobbing. Then he suddenly went to his knees and leaned into the director who held him firmly as he wept on his shoulder. The director told the man reassuringly that he would try to do something. The man's petition was a political act of self-representation, but his dramatic abasement before the director showed it would need a patron to be effective. A better-placed petitioner communicates circumstances relevant to the petition that the petitioner prefers not to articulate in the petition itself, including who might be supporting him and his petition. Face-to-face meetings also provide the opportunity to use a parchi to support a petition, to insert the petition into the networks enacted through parchis.

Many petitions come to the city planning agency forwarded from officials in the senior ranks of the federal government and occasionally the army. While sent openly through official channels, the cover letter that accompanies such a forwarded petition functions much like a parchi, materializing the influential person's interest in the case, especially when the person forwarding a petition has no official authority whatsoever over the matter. For example, when a minister of education forwarded a petition for a Shia mosque. But more often petitioners submit their petitions to politicians and bureaucrats having formal authority over the city planning agency, though authority far removed from concrete decision making. It is not uncommon to find a petition for a minor matter, such as the repair of leaking government apartments or the extension of a mosque, forwarded from the office of a federal secretary, a member of parliament, a minister, or even the president or the prime minister.

It is not uncommon to find a petition for a minor matter, such as the extension of a mosque or the adjustment of a financial compensation award, forwarded from the office of a federal secretary, a member of parliament, a minister, or even the president or the prime minister. For example, a 1995 petition for a mosque on Jinnah Avenue was submitted to the President of Pakistan before being forwarded to the CDA. During the time of Zia-ul-Haq's martial law (1977-1985), petitions were addressed to him. A 1978 letter from the "People's Welfare Committee G-6/1-2" appealed directly to the Chief Martial Law Administer, Zia-ul-Haq, to order the CDA to repair the leaking roofs of their government quarters.

Submitting petitions through an influential person is so common that petitions that have been sent, according to prescribed procedure, directly to the officer with authority over the matter sometimes call attention to this good behavior by including an underlined "Through proper channel" on the top right corner of the first page. Those submitting petitions to high officials hope that the officials will forward the petition with a favorable recommendation, though letters accompanying the copies of petitions are usually neutral, requesting that the city planning agency "take appropriate action" or resolve the matter "on its merits," according to policy and the facts of the matter.

Although petitioning was part of both metropolitan English political practice as well as the East India Company business, the contemporary Pakistani practice of submitting petitions to the highest political authority also has its roots in precolonial South Asian political traditions. The practice helps sustain the widely held views that influence is strongly concentrated at the apex of government and that petitions will only be successful if senior politicians and officials put their weight behind them. The role of influence within the bureaucracy is much debated within Pakistan, but no one puts much credence in a classic Weberian picture. A critique of reified structural order is commonsense in Pakistan. It is a popular conception that even the smallest actions of government are done at the behest of senior politicians and officials.

While this conception oversimplifies the routine operation of the bureaucracy, it is encouraged by the frequent interventions of senior bureaucrats and politicians in even the most minor affairs of the bureaucracy, a practice with roots going back to pre-colonial traditions of kingly rule in South Asia. High government servants and politicians of the Pakistan government have an interest in promoting this practice because it can subvert the administrative hierarchy and rules of business by giving them influence on matters outside their direct authority. None of the many comments on the parchi alleged to be from the prime minister's sister suggested it was implausible that the sister of a prime minister would involve herself in the minor affairs of a low-level clerk.

Parchis and petitions in Islamabad show us not only how particular material forms of writing can constitute particular forms of sociality; but how material practices combining the two artifacts can mediate the ideological and practical contradictions of these forms of sociality.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion let me make two points, the first about how to place contemporary petitions historically and the second about the broader effects of parchis in Pakistan.

In his examination of petitioning by poor rural residents of contemporary Tamil Nadu, Cody links supplication in petitions to longstanding conceptions of government in terms of godly and human patron-client relations. But these villagers are also relegated to enact supplication because they do not control the "embodied, material means to satisfy the requirements of political self-representation" in the modern bureaucratic arena (Cody 2009:355). Villagers in rural Pakistan and some in Islamabad are likely to face the same problems. However, the use of supplication cannot be cast within a modernization account. The majority of Islamabad petitioners are not limited by their ignorance of democratic ideals or bureaucratic procedure. The English-language petitions pleading for mosques are both models of bureaucratic graphic layout. Finally, we see petitioners moving among these different political subjects as they tangle with the bureaucracy over a series of petitions. After unsuccessfully "beseeching" the officer for a Shia mosque in 1995, these same petitioners turned around and wrote several unemotional perfectly-formed bureaucratic petitions from 1996 on. In Islamabad, petitioners cast themselves as supplicants because it remains a vibrant form of political relationship within the most modern arena of government

Lastly, somewhat counterintuitive argument of the effect of the play of parchis and petitions.

Egregious violations of regulations are the staple of Islamabad gossip, yet it is difficult to judge the overall extent and effects of the intervention of the influential. One measure of such influence, of course, is the frequency of permitted violations of CDA regulations. In the area of building regulations, officers and staff members estimated that 70 to 80 percent of the structures in the city are compliant with regulations, while 20 to 30 percent of them violate them with the impunity obtained through a varying mix of bribes (*rishvat*) and influence (*sifarish*). But the effect of interventions by powerful individuals is complex, sometimes stimulating outright illegality, but in other cases merely eliciting shortcuts to approved results. One CDA director told me that such pressure didn't usually make functionaries move in directions they didn't want to go and often supplied much-needed initiative. Pressure from above, he said, "is good for us. It gets us moving and

sometimes we need that. Often it's just a matter of circumventing procedures. Someone calls up and says 'Just get it done.'"

Anyway, there probably never has been a very good method for an absolute measure of corruption, however hard Transparency International tries to improve its methods.

I am going to make a relative argument—that influence might be much less common that it seems to people engaged with the bureaucracy.

Influence may in fact be less pervasive than prevailing discourses about bureaucratic corruption suggest. At different moments, officers and politicians may exaggerate either their influence or their subordination to the influence of others. Politicians and bureaucrats have a strong interest in convincing others of their ability to influence the course of bureaucratic events. A reputation for influence is, of course, one constituent of being influential. This is no where clearer than the so-called "open katcheris" held by officials from district collectors up to the prime minister: "open *katcheri*s" (open courts), meetings in which common people can approach government officials and political leaders to voice complaints or present petitions.

This forum was especially popular with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif during his second term. Sharif was widely reputed to be modeling himself on Mughal emperors, and these open katcheris, like those of the British colonial government, were modeled on imperial *durbar*s (courts). In different cities, Sharif, along with a full consort of assistants and senior bureaucrats representing most government divisions, would meet a large gathering of common people (*aam log*). While the form resembled the "town meeting" of recent American presidential elections, the statements of individuals rarely touched on principle, policy, or personality. Rather, they were requests for the prime minster's intervention in minor government affairs such as the award of a pension, the transfer of a family member, the improvement of local trash collection, or the award of a bank loan.

Nawaz Sharif would listen patiently to the petition of the speaker, express his sympathy or indignation, and solemnly vow that something would be done immediately. Then he would call an assistant or the concerned official and publicly give him instructions to resolve the matter in favor of the petitioner.

But such displays of potency are sometimes be more a means to protect a reputation for power—and even to disguise officials' inability or unwillingness to get things done for others. Nawaz Sharif's exhibitions of influence were occasionally shown to be instances of this tactic. Several times an individual allowed to address the prime minister claimed that a petition granted by the prime minister in a previous open katcheri had not been accepted by the concerned office. Sharif usually responded to the embarrassing evidence that his grandiloquent public orders were not carried out with frothy fulmination against his staff and a renewed command that the matter be handled forthwith.

Additionally, officers sometimes portray themselves as acting according to the wishes of others even as they adhere to regulations. This unacknowledged conformity to regulations is generated by the fear of repercussions from irregular actions and the collision of the ethics of public service with those of the market, of patronage, of friendship, of kin, and of Islam. Propriety, like impropriety, sometimes requires deceit. Paradoxically, officers disguise not only their violations of regulations but also their adherence to them. The latter form of dissimulation is generated by the political risks of openly opposing an influential individual. Such lying is often more a matter of respect than truth (Bailey 1991). One CDA director claimed that

> Here one has to lie to get by. Someone calls and says, "So and so told me to call you and I need this done." I know it can't be done, but I can't tell him that straightaway. I will ask him to come down, discuss his problem, and tell him I will try to do something—it will come out at some point; he will come to know that either it can't be done, or I am not trying to do it, but only later. And I can't just tell him "no" right off, because that would indicate I don't respect the person who told him

> to call me. Out of respect for this other man I have to be very indirect, smooth things over, waste my time and his time.

As the director observed, such indirectness may be a waste of time in getting some particular task done, but not for maintaining valued relationships. Sometimes an official will represent his adherence to rules not as a principled stand, but as subordination to some other influential individual or group. If he claims that he openly stands for the rules, the responsibility will rest with him. By claiming he himself is under pressure, he deflects this responsibility elsewhere while not making himself an enemy.

Rumors among subordinate officers and staff concerning the origin of orders they receive on file also exaggerate the role of high-level, irregular influence. One assistant in the ICTA described how orders frequently come from "high-ups," but his evidence was nothing more than the verbal testimony of his immediate superior accompanying written orders. "When someone high up wants something done irregularly or quickly, we must do it because we are told that the orders come from high up. But we never know who or why—we just do it." There is plenty of evidence that senior politicians and bureaucrats do intervene in this fashion, but probably less frequently than they are rumored to. At every level, an officer takes the word of his immediate superior that someone important above this superior is behind an issue, when this is often not the case. At least in some cases, officers falsely report high-level involvement to push matters along with their subordinates.

The frequent invocation of the names of particular influential individuals, while more verifiable, also contributes to an exaggeration of the role of influence. As we've seen, visiting cards often circulate without the consent of those they name, but names in oral form are even harder to control. When opposed by approving officers or confronted by the CDA staff who enforce building codes, individuals sometimes claim that an influential officer has agreed to the proposal or allowed the violation. Influential officers aggressively police such uses of their names to maintain the integrity and market value of their name. However, the whiff of impropriety usually discourages subordinate would-be fact checkers from confirming whether the influential officer has in fact lent his support. This opens up the possibility for individuals to claim the support of influentials with whom they have no

such relationship. Although the prevalence is hard to judge, names are likely invoked more often than support is actually lent.

This helps explain the power of parchis, which, however covertly and ambiguously, document the backing of the influential figures. The use of parchis, whatever their real influence, contributes to a sense that influence is required. Parchis help solve a problem that they themselves in part generate.