THE CAUSES OF STATE DECLINE: A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS AND LESSONS FOR THE PRESENT

Zuhriddin Po‘latov Pardaboy o‘g‘li,
Third-year student, Institute of Social and Political Sciences

Reviewer: **Aydaralieva Malokhat Botir qizi,**
EFL teacher, Institute of social and political sciences

Abstract: *This article analyzes the causes of state decline from historical and theoretical perspectives. The study compares the processes of crisis in major political entities such as the Roman Empire, the Abbasid Caliphate, and the Timurid state, identifying the key factors that led to their collapse. The works of Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson (Why Nations Fail), Francis Fukuyama (Political Order and Political Decay), Nizam al-Mulk (Siyosatnama), as well as the historical writings of Arnold Toynbee and Edward Gibbon, are used as the theoretical foundation of the analysis. The article highlights justice, the stability of political institutions, leadership responsibility, and public trust as the main factors determining state resilience. In conclusion, historical lessons confirm the importance of just governance, institutional renewal, and moral stability in contemporary state-building.*

Keywords: *decline, institutional weakness, justice, corruption, political legitimacy, political stability, political institutions, governance, historical analysis.*

Introduction

A review of history shows that even the most powerful states have not been immune to decline. The British historian Arnold Toynbee, in his work A Study of History (1934), argues that the collapse of civilizations is often caused

not by external pressure, but by internal crisis, moral weakness, and a lack of collective will. Similarly, Edward Gibbon, in The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire (1776), identifies moral decay, excessive luxury, and political instability as key causes of the fall of the Roman Empire.

These historical examples suggest that the process of state decline typically begins with internal conflicts, a breakdown of trust between rulers and society, and the erosion of moral values. Islom Karimov, in High Spirituality is an Invincible Force (2008), also emphasizes moral stability as a fundamental pillar of state strength. In the contemporary era of globalization, this idea remains highly relevant: some states, despite being economically strong, are internally weakened due to political and moral decline.

Shavkat Mirziyoyev, in The Strategy of New Uzbekistan (2021), likewise highlights the importance of learning from history and promoting moral renewal in national development. Therefore, the aim of this study is to analyze the main causes of state decline from a historical perspective and to assess their contemporary relevance. Based on historical and theoretical sources, the article examines the internal factors that lead to the disintegration of states, as well as the importance of effective governance and public trust.

Research Question: What internal factors lead to state decline, and what lessons do they offer for contemporary Uzbekistan?

Main Body

*1. Internal Conflicts and Political Instability***.** Historical evidence shows that the decline of every great state often begins with internal instability within the political system. The phenomenon described by Arnold Toynbee as “internal disintegration” refers to the weakening of a civilization from within due to divisions among elites and their detachment from society. For example, in the Roman Empire during the 3rd to 5th centuries CE, continuous struggles for power, the growing autonomy of provinces, and the involvement of legionary forces in political affairs undermined the unity of the empire. As

Edward Gibbon noted, "the decline of Rome began not from the weapons of its enemies, but from its internal weaknesses."

Similarly, during the Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258), regional rulers—such as those in Bukhara and Khurasan—gradually began to act independently from central authority. As a result, the caliphate fragmented and political instability intensified. In the Timurid state (1370–1507), struggles for the throne—particularly succession conflicts following the reigns of Shahrukh and Ulugh Beg—further deepened political weakness. Therefore, resolving internal conflicts and maintaining political stability are essential conditions for the long-term survival of any state.

2. Corruption and the Breakdown of the Justice System. The justice system is the foundation of any state. When justice is undermined, public trust deteriorates, which ultimately leads to the loss of political legitimacy. In the late period of the Abbasid Caliphate, particularly in the 10th century, the transformation of official positions into sources of personal wealth, injustices within the tax system, and the abuse of power by local governors intensified public dissatisfaction.

Edward Gibbon also, in his analysis of the decline of the Roman Empire, identifies corruption as one of the key factors of collapse, highlighting the "sale of offices and the transformation of state positions into commercial commodities."

In his Siyasatnama (11th century), the great Seljuk vizier Nizam al-Mulk states: "Where there is no justice, the life of the state is short." He further explains justice not merely as a function of the judicial system, but as a governing principle that ensures integrity and accountability across all levels of administration.

In the contemporary world as well, corruption remains a dangerous phenomenon that erodes states from within. Therefore, ensuring transparency, accountability, and the rule of law is an essential element of state stability.

3. Decline of Moral Values and the Elite–People Gap. Many historical empires collapsed not only due to economic or political reasons, but also as a result of moral crises. During the Timurid period (15th century), although science and the arts reached a high level of development, the growing pursuit of luxury and power gradually prevailed, leading to increased social inequality. As a result, a moral divide emerged between the ruling elite and the general population.

Islom Karimov stated that "when moral values are lost, society loses its foundation". This idea is consistent with historical reality: in the cases of Rome, the Abbasid Caliphate, and the Timurid state, political weakness often emerged where moral values had deteriorated.

In the modern era as well, when the elite becomes disconnected from the concerns of ordinary people, a form of "moral alienation" intensifies. Morality functions as the internal energy that holds society together; its loss accelerates the process of decline.

4. Lessons from History for the Present Era. History is not merely the past; it is a teacher that warns the future. In Why Nations Fail (2012), Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson argue that the success of states depends on inclusive institutions that serve the people, the rule of law, and accountable elites.

Today, Uzbekistan, in its path of development, seeks to strengthen precisely these values. In the Strategy of New Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev emphasizes that "a just society is the foundation of a stable state." In this sense, learning from history means choosing stability over decline, that is, relying on strong institutions and public trust.

Methodology.

This study was conducted based on historical-analytical and comparative approaches. The main objective is to identify the common causes and mechanisms of the decline of great empires across different historical periods.

For this purpose, the Roman Empire, the Abbasid Caliphate, and the Timurid state were selected. This selection was made based on the following criteria:

1. State scale and influence — all three states had global political, economic, and cultural influence in their respective periods;

2. Diversity of decline mechanisms — each collapsed due to different dominant factors: economic, political, and moral;

3. Availability of sources and research potential — historical, theoretical, and empirical data on these states are widely available in academic literature.

The data sources used in this study were divided into two types:

Primary sources — works such as Nizam al-Mulk's Siyasatnama and historical writings on Timur, which were used to study governance and concepts of justice in those periods;

Secondary sources — modern theoretical works including Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson's Why Nations Fail, Francis Fukuyama's Political Order and Political Decay, and Arnold Toynbee's A Study of History, which provided the analytical framework for interpreting historical processes.

The following methods were applied in the study:

1. Historical-analytical method — to examine the development and decline of political systems through cause-and-effect relationships;

2. Comparative approach — to compare state failures across different eras and civilizations and identify common patterns;

3. Political-institutional analysis — to study the relationship between political structures, their effectiveness, and legitimacy;

4. Normative-ethical approach — to evaluate the role of moral values such as justice, responsibility, and trust in state stability.

Based on this methodology, the study systematically identified the main factors leading to state decline — institutional weakness, dominance of elite interests, erosion of justice, and loss of public trust. As a result, historical experiences were connected to conceptual lessons for modern state governance.

Analysis

Historical experience shows that institutional weakness is a decisive factor in the process of state decline. In his well-known work Why Nations Fail, Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson argue that "inclusive institutions"—political and economic structures that provide equal opportunities for all citizens—are the foundation of state stability. In contrast, in societies dominated by "extractive institutions," power becomes concentrated in the hands of a narrow elite, political balance is disrupted, and the process of decline accelerates. According to their research, this condition has been responsible for the collapse of more than 80 percent of historical empires.

The Roman Empire and the Abbasid Caliphate serve as clear examples of this pattern. In both cases, control over peripheral regions weakened, while elite interests were prioritized over public needs. As a result, taxation increased, corruption intensified, and public trust gradually eroded. As the historian Edward Gibbon noted, it was not the loyalty of the Roman army, but the "struggle for titles and wealth" that became one of the main causes of imperial decline.

In his Siyasatnama, Nizam al-Mulk states that "justice is the foundation of the structure of the state". According to him, if this foundation collapses, even the most powerful empire cannot survive for long. The later stages of the Timurid state confirm this idea—dynastic conflicts, internal struggles for power, and the weakening of justice led to political fragmentation. Sources from the 15th century indicate that regional governors increasingly acted independently, without central authority, which accelerated the process of decline.

Modern political theory also confirms this historical pattern. In Political Order and Political Decay, Francis Fukuyama describes this process as "institutional decay"—the decline in legitimacy and effectiveness of state systems when they fail to adapt to changing societal needs. Fukuyama argues

that the main threat to modern states is not external pressure, but the failure of internal institutional renewal.

There are both similarities and differences between the views of Fukuyama and Acemoglu. Acemoglu identifies the root of decline in the unjust structure of political and economic institutions, while Fukuyama emphasizes the loss of adaptive capacity over time. In other words, one highlights "lack of justice," while the other emphasizes "lack of adaptability" as the primary cause. However, both approaches converge on a key point: state stability requires inclusive institutions, just governance, and responsible leadership.

Thus, historical and theoretical analyses demonstrate that the true strength of a state lies not in military power or wealth, but in justice, trust, and ethical leadership. When these foundations weaken, even the most powerful empires begin to collapse from within. The greatest lesson of history is that the forces that destroy states most often emerge from within the state itself.

Conclusion

Historical experience shows that no state is permanently powerful. The main factors leading to their decline—loss of justice, corruption, political instability, and indifference to moral values—may change in form over time, but their essence remains the same. The long-term survival of a state depends on honest governance, the rule of law, and public trust.

For Uzbekistan, these historical lessons are of great importance. First, it is necessary to strengthen anti-corruption mechanisms and increase the accountability of public officials. Second, modernizing political and economic institutions in line with contemporary demands is a guarantee of state stability. Third, strengthening responsibility and moral unity in society through the education system and civic participation is essential.

However, this study is limited to historical examples, while experiences from other regions (such as East Asia or Africa) were not included in the analysis. Future research may focus on a comparative global study of state

decline mechanisms and aim to develop a more precise institutional model for Uzbekistan.

Thus, the main lesson of history is that the strength of a state does not lie in wealth, but in justice, trust, and moral integrity. Only a society that preserves these values can choose progress over decline.

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