

A Thousand Wet-lands 4

The Liquified State

Tanzil Shafique

What a state the world is in, a state against which the idea of states (particularly nation-states) were normalised as the foundational state-of-being in the world. Statelessness is the ultimate heresy, for societies and for the individual. States were supposed to act against the “state of nature”, of lives lived as “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (1651). And about four centuries later, about four centuries of coloniality, violence, rupture, extraction, accumulation, pillage later, we stand in a world of states that are far from the Hobbesian utopia. To speak against the production of nation-state and its methodological necessity as the only future of the world, perhaps, is the borderland of treason, and one must always think about what one is not allowed to question. Or rather, one even never imagines questioning. For all the anticapitalist drum beats, how many soft taps can you hear that question the state of the state? This essay is an exercise as an apostate for a post-state imaginary seen from elsewhere, from unfamiliar wet-lands. Not a world without the state, but a worlds where the state no longer arrives as a singular, territorial container of sovereignty.

The State has always preferred the dry sentence, the surveyed field, the obedient bank, the road that does not wander, the frontier stone that wakes up each morning where it slept the night before. It has trusted what can be stretched under a chain, entered into a registry, disciplined into a district, enclosed within the neat fatigue of a line. It dreams in cadastral geometry. It loves the hush that follows drainage. Marsh to field, floodplain to revenue unit, river to border, village to countable settlement: this is its liturgy. It calls this order, though the word has always depended on an immense violence against movement. Mud must be persuaded to become land. Water must be slowed long enough to be taxed. The meander must apologize for itself and submit to the straightening hand. Somewhere in the distance, one can still hear the scratch of the colonial pen translating wetness into tenure, silt into ownership, seasonality into defect. A world of states was never built only with constitutions and flags. It was built with embankments, with surveys, with canals, with clerks who believed the earth could be convinced to remain where it had been written down. With so much certainty on offer, why should we not deify the State?

And yet there are places where the ground refuses biography. A char (চর - fluvial temporary islands in the middle of the river) rises out of a brown current, takes a few years of breath, gathers a few goats, a few courtyards, a prayer space, a handful of marriages, a season of pumpkins, then thins back into the river before

the archive can finish spelling its name. A bank slips. A channel remembers an older route. Mangroves return through cracked concrete like a script older than administration. The map blushes but says nothing. It goes on speaking in the confidence of permanence while monsoon water quietly edits the sentence from below. Wetlands do not argue with the state. They do not mount an opposition in the language of law. They simply continue to move a few metres to the left, or to the right. They let the line remain where it is, then rearrange the world around it. In the wet-land, land is merely a pause in water's longer thought. Sediment gathers, hesitates, breaks, settles elsewhere. Nothing is final enough to deserve sovereignty for long. Surely, the current fetish with the sovereignty of the nation-state has no place in such an arrangement of rearrangements.

The state has always found such landscapes intolerable not because they are chaotic, but because they reveal too much, without revealing the control settings. They reveal that the state is not ground but a technique of slowing. Gilles Deleuze saw this with the cold clarity of someone watching the line harden around a flow as an apparatus of capture. The state waits where movement can be intercepted and made to confess its shape. The caravan becomes taxable when it reaches the gate. The wandering path becomes a road when it can be patrolled. Grazing becomes property when it can be fenced. The river becomes infrastructure when its flood can be counted as loss rather than life. As such, capture is patient. It does not always arrive with spectacle. It comes with registry offices, cadastral maps, police stations, grain silos, checkpoints, valuation tables, zoning codes, and all those small devices by which a moving world is coaxed into standing still, is stratified. Striation is its habit: parallel lines, numbered plots, neat districts nested inside provinces, joined up to form a bounded state, one sovereignty resting smugly inside another. But the smooth has never disappeared. It seeps under the striated like groundwater under a wall. Wet-lands are the smooth returning inside the state's grid, an old refusal of the permanent parcel, a reminder that no apparatus of capture is ever complete because capture depends on stillness and stillness is a temporary mood of matter.

Long before modern sovereignty hardened into doctrine, Ibn Khaldun had already watched power arrive and depart like sediment (1377). He did not begin with the State because he had not yet been trained into that idolatry. He began with 'asabiyyah, with the cohesion of people moving together through hardship, kinship, loyalty, hunger, courage, memory. Authority, in his account, did not descend from some abstract constitutional outside and fix itself onto territory forever. It thickened among people, travelled with them, condensed into dynasty, softened in luxury, and was overtaken by another force gathering elsewhere. A formation rose, ruled, faded, and sank back into the wider current of social life. One might say that 'asabiyyah gathers like a current, pools into authority, thickens into rule, then disperses, evaporates, and reforms elsewhere. If the modern state dreams of itself as bedrock, Ibn Khaldun understood power as deposit: a little silt caught for a while in an eddy

of history. Read beside mud rather than marble, he becomes a thinker of alluvial politics, of temporary firmness, of sedimented authority, of states as islands that never fully forget the water from which they rose. Read alongside Deleuze, this is not a contradiction but a complement: where one traces the movement of cohesion, the other shows the apparatuses that attempt to arrest it.

This was precisely what the modern world tried to forget. It deified the nation-state by making it seem inevitable. The child opened an atlas and saw the globe already partitioned into coloured certainties. And his identity was tied with it. His self-worth. His access to the world. Essentially a formation of capture permeated the everyday. The captured citizen learned to imagine politics as something that happened inside those colours. The scholar inherited the state as the unit of analysis; the planner inherited it as the proper scale of intervention; the soldier inherited it as the sacred object of sacrifice. Even dissent rarely escaped the form. Better states, fairer states, smaller states, stronger states, postcolonial states, welfare states, developmental states: the adjective changed, the metaphysics endured. The State remained the vessel in which political life was expected to arrive.

And yet beneath this deification another cartography continued to pulse. Flows crossed frontiers without submitting an application. Energy moved across continents as if borders were a bureaucratic joke. Families lived across several jurisdictions at once, their survival braided through remittances, obligations, voice notes, flights, informal couriers, old loyalties, port cities, labour camps, and digital transfers that formed an economy more intimate and more real than many ministerial plans. The state went on speaking in singulars. Life had already become plural. Not that the state has suddenly become liquid, but that what was always sedimentary, always moving beneath, can no longer be held in place with the same certainty. The illusion of solidity is under pressure. The question is no longer whether this liquidity exists, but how it is recognised, organised, and contested.

Looking at a different past from a distant future, the first to recognize one another as entities of exchange were often cities. A port facing storm surges found it had more to say to another port across the sea than to its own distant capital seated on drier ground. A municipality upstream could no longer pretend its dam was merely national when silt and flood carried the argument downstream into other sovereignties. Delta towns listened to each other through water. Desert cities compared notes on heat. Border municipalities learned that migration was not a crisis arriving from outside but a rhythm passing through. One could invoke Bookchin (1991) here, and perhaps one should, because he had intuited that the city might become a more generous vessel for politics than the nation-state's hard shell. But even confederation, in its noble municipal form, now feels a little too architectural, a little too stony, too much like bridges between already stable banks. What emerged instead was softer and less ceremonious. Municipalities joined several currents at once. One belonged to a basin assembly following the moods of a river. Another moved

inside an energy corridor, a logistics chain, a digital commons, a migration compact. Alliances formed where a problem thickened and dissolved when the current changed. A city could be estuary in one season and tributary in another. Governance ceased to resemble the pyramid and began to resemble a braid.

That was not the disappearance of the nation-state. States do not vanish so quickly; they linger in stamps and seals, in police uniforms, in ports of entry, in schoolbooks, in constitutional nostalgia, in the exhausted rituals of diplomacy. But something in their claim had softened. The nation-state could no longer pretend it was the only ground on which politics stood. It became one formation among others, one thickness in a wider field of circulation. Flood management belonged increasingly to basins rather than borders. Energy belonged to grids and cables and regional dependencies co-owned by the populace. Food belonged to corridors and commons. Labour belonged to routes and labourers. Knowledge belonged to platforms, institutes, universities, and city networks that already acted as if the nation were too coarse a container for the subtleties of planetary interdependence. Authority thickened where coordination was needed, then thinned again. It pooled temporarily, like rainwater in a depression, then moved on. A harbour became decisive for a season. A municipal coalition mattered more than a ministry. A watershed assembly could accomplish what two foreign offices could not. The world, looked at closely enough, no longer resembled a mosaic of sealed units. It resembled a wetland of overlapping jurisdictions, partial sovereignties, sedimented loyalties, and shifting collaborations.

But such liquidity is not innocent. It can also dissolve responsibility, scatter accountability, and allow power to move precisely where it cannot be held. The same flows that enable connection can enable extraction. The same dispersal that opens new forms of governance can produce abandonment. Liquidity can nourish, but it can also drown. The question, then, is not whether the state becomes liquid, but how such liquidity is structured, by whom, and to whose benefit.

In this alternative imaginary, “Liquified State”, the phrase risks suggesting a reform more intentional than what actually occurred. It was not that the state wisely chose liquidity after reading ecological philosophy. It was that the world around it became too wet for its old certainties. Climate did not respect the district boundary. Finance did not remain national. The city outgrew the constitution. The basin ignored the flag. The diaspora braided the local and the global into an intimacy no ministry could contain. Under these pressures the state began to sag, then seep, then partially dissolve into the wider ecology of governance it had long denied. Ministries learned to sit beside municipal councils, basin forums, infrastructural consortia, digital commons, neighbourhood assemblies, informal brokers, and translocal solidarities without fully mastering them. The state remained present, but no longer transcendent. It was estuarine now, mixed with other waters.

Wet-lands had always known how to live like this. They do not place all force in one channel. They spread risk, distribute flow, let the flood move laterally, let sediment nourish what it can before the current turns. They survive not by permanence but by tact, by timing, by the intelligence of plural release. Villages on moving ground learn a comparable wisdom. One raises the plinth. One loosens the house. One plants according to the water rather than against it. One learns that relocation is not always defeat, that continuity can survive motion, that memory does not require fixity. Such knowledge sits uneasily beside the state's cult of permanence, yet it may be the more durable politics. What if governance, too, were judged not by how firmly it stands but by how well it moves? What if legitimacy belonged less to control than to accompaniment? What if sovereignty were measured not by enclosure but by the capacity to remain with the current without being destroyed by it?

Here Ibn Khaldun returns, as he must, because his old intuition about sediment now reads less like medieval sociology than like an unfinished deltaic science of power. States rise where solidarities thicken; they rule for a while; they soften into luxury and distance; another cohesion gathers elsewhere. The story is not linear progress but deposition, erosion, re-formation. Now imagine this at a thousand micro-scales. The modern state interrupted this wisdom by pretending that one sediment bank could become eternal if only mapped hard enough. But the wet century has been teaching the older lesson again. Power settles, yes. It also moves. Authority gathers. It also disperses. The polity is not abolished; it is redistributed. It is alluvial.

And perhaps that is the quiet scandal beneath all this, the one the nation-state has always feared. Which is why it had to invest so much towards claiming to be untouchable, to be sacrosanct, indeed, to be divine. It feared not that order might disappear, but that order might never have needed such dryness in the first place. Not that the map is false in every detail, but that it mistakes a pause for a foundation. Not that sovereignty is meaningless, but that it is seasonal, sedimentary, contingent, a temporary firmness in a moving field. The state once imagined itself as ground because it could not bear to think politically in mud. Yet mud has been thinking politics all along. It has been revising the bank, braiding the channel, nourishing the reed, carrying the mountain downstream, reminding every embankment that permanence is only a brief confidence between floods.

So let the state remain, if it must, but let it remain chastened, deified no longer, no longer confused with the earth beneath it. Let the solid statue of its illusory divinity be liquified into something more ordinary, more answerable, more partial. Let it know itself not as ground, but as one arrangement among many, one temporary holding of authority within a wider field of movement. For beneath the archive, beneath the checkpoint, beneath the anthem and the border post and the coloured map, there has always been another world at work: tidal, estuarine, soft at the edges, refusing to stay where it had been placed.

The question now is not whether this world will arrive. It is already here. The question is whether we continue to organise ourselves as if the ground were still solid, as if sovereignty could still be singular, as if authority could still be enclosed and held in place. Or whether we learn to recognise what has always been true but systematically denied: that political life does not reside in a single container, that it gathers and disperses across scales, that it thickens where needed and thins where it must, that it is composed not once but continuously.

The liquified state is not a collapse into disorder as a mode of an alternative deification, nor a quiet romanticised celebration of flow. It is a demand. A demand that authority be redistributed without being dissolved into irresponsibility. A demand that governance follow the grain of life rather than forcing life into the geometry of control. A demand that sovereignty be rethought as layered, overlapping, and accountable across the very scales through which life is already lived.

To persist in the fiction of singular scale of statehood now is not stability. It is denial. And denial, as the wet-land reminds us, does not hold. The embankment cracks. The line blurs. The ground gives way.

The State was never ground. It was only the driest moment of a wet-landic planet.

Bring down the statue of the State.

Let it wash away.

Let it liquify.

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