

## [Remodelling The Red-tape Brigade](#)

DAWN, August 14, 2022 Special Supplement

[Ishrat Husain](#)



President Ghulam Ishaq swears in Benazir Bhutto as the first woman Prime Minister of Pakistan on December 2, 1988 at the Presidency in Islamabad. - Photo: Dawn Archives

**GOOD governance is closely linked with sustainable and equitable development. However good the policies may be, they will have little positive impact unless the institutions implementing them are**

**effective and efficient. One of the main institutions required for good governance is a competent, neutral and honest bureaucracy.**

For ordinary citizens, it is civil servants who are most germane to their daily lives. Pakistan was fortunate to have inherited a steel frame for its bureaucracy from the British. Initially, the civil services remained true to their tradition and were governed by the hallmarks that had distinguished the Indian Civil Service (ICS), like constitutional protection, political neutrality, permanency, security of tenure, anonymity, recruitment based on open competition and merit, and rigorous post-induction training.

In the period following independence, the civil servants focussed on their routine functions of maintaining law and order and collecting land revenue, but also provided stewardship in rehabilitating eight million refugees, laying the foundation of the new government structure and building institutions from scratch, such as the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP), the office of the Auditor-General of Pakistan, the Planning Commission, the Central Board of Revenue, etc.

However, with the passage of time, the requirements of a newly independent country went beyond the narrow set of functions their predecessors in ICS used to perform. Pakistan's civil services system and processes did not adapt to changed circumstances. Their attitudes towards the citizens of an independent country whom they were purported to serve remained ingrained in paternalism and the Mai-Baap culture of the past. The bureaucrats remained frozen in time and were unresponsive to the people's needs and aspirations. This status quo suited the military government that came to power in 1958 and the coalition of military-civil services ruled the country until 1971 to the exclusion of the political leadership.

*Transforming an antiquated and complacent bureaucracy into a force capable of excellence in service delivery will not be an easy task.*

### **Breaking the frame**

The post-1971 era ushered in a popularly elected government that decided to break the frame of the civil services and make the bureaucrats more pliable and flexible. The first hallmark of constitutional protection responsible for the civil servants' independence and neutrality was withdrawn. The quasi-monopoly of the Civil Services of Pakistan (CSP) in appointments and allocation of top positions was demolished. All different cadres were brought on par and unified under a common pay scale, recruitment and training.

Compression ratio (the salary of highest grade to the salary of lowest grade) was drastically cut down, to the great disadvantage of the officers' cadre.

These reforms did not address the larger question of the delivery of public services to the population at large. Except for a couple of thousand officers recruited by the Central Superior Services (CSS), the majority of civil servants remained confined to ex-cadre or non-cadre jobs. Several thousand doctors, educationists, teachers, scientists, engineers, lawyers, financial analysts, economists and accountants in the public sector have limited opportunities for career progression.

The antiquated system of primary interaction between the state and the citizen taking place through low-paid, ill-equipped, poorly educated, rude functionaries, such as the patwari, the thanedar and the sub-divisional officer (SDO) enjoying enormous discretionary powers remained entrenched along with rampant corruption, inefficiency and poor governance.

This bottom-heavy lopsided structure, where unskilled and semi-skilled employees occupy 95pc of the strength of the federal and provincial governments and consume 85pc of the total salary bill, has been a major factor in poor compensation and benefits given to the managerial and technical experts working for the government.

The resultant demotivation, demoralisation and despondency among the majority of civil servants is reflected in poor service delivery. Indifference, inaction and apathy towards clients and a mindset resisting change has become ingrained in their behaviour.

The 2001 devolution of power to local governments had abolished the post of deputy commissioner (DC) who formed the single-point anchor for both citizens and government leaders. Along with the superintendent of police (SP), the played a crucial role in enforcing the state's writ at the district level.

The new system of elected nazim as the head of the local government that replaced the old one was still being tested and tried and there were many ambiguities, lack of clarity and operational difficulties that needed to be addressed. But before this system could grow roots, it was dismantled in 2008. The vacuum thus created by abolishing the 2001 system strengthened non-state actors, various mafias, criminals and extortionists. Development projects that had picked up speed because of the ownership and leadership of the district nazims also fell into a state of disarray.

## Loyalty over competence



Ghulam Ishaq Khan, Chairman WAPDA — a civil servant who would rise in the later years of the century to become President of Pakistan — presents a small replica of the Hyderabad Thermal Power Station to President Ayub Khan on October 9, 1961. (Courtesy: Ayub Khan Archives/ Tahir Ayub)

The second hallmark of political neutrality was shattered in the 1990s when due to job insecurity and to gain prized postings and perks as well as out-of-turn promotions, the civil servants started to align themselves with political parties. Successive governments brought in their favourite civil servants to occupy key positions. Loyalty rather than competence became the acid test for survival. The winners in this game included political leaders and acquiescent civil servants, while the losers were ordinary citizens who ceased to have access to the government and had no way of having their grievances redressed.

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*computerisation, ineffective incentive systems that do not appreciate outstanding civil servants, but equally reward the incompetent and corrupt. A more recent and harmful tendency that has emerged is obsessive control exercised by the higher offices in the land where all powers have been centralised and concentrated.*

The third and fourth hallmarks of permanency and security of tenure where the changes in political regimes did not affect the tenures of the higher-level civil servants were also cast aside. The permanent civil servant used to furnish to the administration the indispensable element of continuity, institutional memory and expert knowledge. Frequent transfers to positions unrelated to their academic background or relevant experience led to widespread propagation of incompetence and lack of expertise.

A system that recruited some of the very best talent and then allowed them to be improperly used in outdated management practices soaked in patronage and corruption resulted in three kinds of responses. First, the best and the brightest, seeing the conditions of service and practices decided not to appear in the competitive CSS examinations, thus impairing the quality of new intakes. Another hallmark of an efficient civil service thus disappeared.

Second, honest and competent serving officers become frustrated, their job satisfaction is low and either they exit the service or get themselves posted to less-conspicuous or innocuous positions, lowering the quality of decision-making at key posts.

Third, the survivors adjust to the new rules of the game and lower their standards of honesty and engage in immoral administrative politics in order to continue to secure their own interests, caring two hoots for service delivery or public welfare. They do suffer temporarily when the political party to whom they owe allegiance gets displaced, and wait till the party is back in power.

### **Outdated, ineffective system**

Bureaucratic performance is also affected by outdated, outmoded rules and procedures, elongated hierarchy, absence of automation and computerisation, ineffective incentive systems that do not appreciate outstanding civil servants, but equally reward the incompetent and corrupt. A more recent but harmful tendency that has emerged is obsessive control exercised by the offices of the prime minister and the chief ministers where all powers have been centralised and concentrated.

Lack of trust in senior secretaries, second-guessing their judgment calls, looking for pliable and gullible civil servants who would toe their line deprive the rendering of objective and unbiased advice. Those who do not toe the line are shown the door. As a direct consequence, merit and experience are disregarded and wrong people are placed in key jobs.

### **The way forward**

What is the way forward? A number of reports of task forces and commissions have been prepared and are ready for implementation. The most recent ones are the report of the National Commission for Government Reforms (NCGR) and the report on institutional reforms. Three key reforms proposed in these reports are flagged below.

The present mode of the superior civil services that attracts young men and women through an open competitive examination who then spend 30-35 years serving the government had worked reasonably well in the first few decades after independence. The challenges of the 21st century for public service have become more complex. Therefore, this model of assured career path on the basis of an entry examination at a young age is no longer applicable or sustainable any longer.

A new hybrid model that nurtures, promotes and draws upon the expertise and domain knowledge and combines it with broad-based experience, leadership traits and the ability to synthesise different perspectives and policy inputs needs to be considered as the way forward. Leadership traits are not exclusively located within any one group but can be found across the groups too.

Many countries across the world have employed the model of what is generally referred to as Senior Public Service (SPS). Countries, including Britain, Japan, South Korea and Singapore and others, have their own versions of senior public services distinct from each other in regard to the degree of openness the system offers.

A similar system of National Executive Service (NES) without any reservations for any cadre or group open to all eligible and qualified candidates should be instituted in Pakistan without any entitlements or reservations for any cadre or service group. Recruitment should be made by the Federal Public Service Commission on the basis of merit through a competitive process.

All senior policymaking positions should be filled by members of the NES and given security of tenure and enter into annual performance agreements. NES should be divided into four clusters: General management; Economic sectors; Social sectors; and Technical sectors. Career progression should take place within each of the specialised clusters.

Next is the automation and compensation of civil servants. The switchover from manual to automated processes and the government's commitment to move towards e-governance should require a look at the skill mix and training requirements of the existing and future civil servants throughout the entire hierarchy. The whole system will itself flatten the hierarchical texture and make apparent the redundancies in the system. At the same time, it will involve basic computer literacy at all levels and grades, digital archiving, storage and retrieval of all files and documents. Consequently, only a few of the clerical and subordinate staff positions can be utilised in the future government organisation. Savings through attrition of surplus staff should be adequate to pay higher compensation packages to the officers who form the backbone of the institution.

Finally, the salary increments, promotions and choice postings should be linked to performance, rewarding the outstanding and excellent performers at the expense of the lethargic and inefficient ones. Non-performers and those with consistently poor service record should be compulsorily retired after a certain length of time.

*The writer carried out extensive institutional reforms as SBP Governor and IBA Director. He chaired the National Commission for Government Reforms (NCGR) in 2006-08 that produced a comprehensive plan for civil service reform and restructuring of the federal, provincial and local governments. In 2009-10 he was head of the Pay and Pension Commission, and from 2018 to 2021 adviser to the prime minister on institutional reforms and austerity.*