

Civil service reform revisited

Dr. Sania Nishtar

The International Crisis Group's Report on Civil Service Reform has sparked conversations around the need and potential avenues for restructuring Pakistan's civil service. This, however, is not the first time that a report on the subject has been made public. Ever since the country's creation, more than thirty commissions/committees have been constituted and convened to frame normative guidance relevant to this area. A detailed account of past efforts has been summarised in the report of the National Commission for Government Reform (NCGR), the most recent of these initiatives, which was tasked with the responsibility of developing recommendations to reform the executive branch of the state. The report states that previous recommendations have "been neglected, were partially implemented or distorted beyond recognition".

The denotation of civil service reform in the reform jargon is not an isolated or a defined restructuring measure, but a set of locally-suited interventions centered on restructuring laws, codes of conduct, remuneration norms, institutional devices, and policy frameworks. Given this diversity, priorities for action and a plan for phasing reforms are important. In order to do that, the key problems with Pakistan's civil service must be appreciated as a starting point. Broadly, these fall into three categories.

First, is the 'colonial-contemporary lag'. Pakistan's civil service has been modelled on the colonial system, where the bureaucracy was geared towards command and control. In the district-divisional system, a single person was empowered to collect revenue, dispense justice, exercise administrative control, assume responsibility for delivering services, and allocate land rights—in other words, absolute control. Comparable prerogatives existed at the secretariat/divisional and departmental levels. This model served the purpose of keeping citizens sub-ordinate. The realities of the state are very different today. The government must not 'rule' but 'govern' in a democratic system; it must reconfigure its capacity to harness the resources of the economy towards the goals of development and learn to engage with the private sector in areas which were previously thought to be in the 'public domain'. Although successive governments have attempted to make some changes to be responsive to these realities, those measures haven't borne fruit. The local government system, which was meant to be a departure from the post-colonial style of administration, wasn't able to deliver on its premise—its current restructuring also offers little hope for reform. Frameworks for public-private partnerships, despite being in existence, have not been functioning because of institutional wrangling. And as for institutional performance, it is ironic that the most im-

portant organisation in the country—the government—upon which the functioning of almost everything else hinges, has not learnt from contemporary organisational management and business processes, and remains aligned on antiquated paradigms of ruling, which put the state at a disadvantage with respect to domestic realities and meaningful global existence.

The second problem relates to limited understanding of human resource management. In the public sector, human resource management is generally considered as being synonymous with the creation of posts, placement of staff, and disciplinary action, and is, as such, often used as a lever of power. Human resource management usually does not appear to be a priority and the capacity to plan in this area often does not exist within ministries. The environment is additionally not conducive to fostering improvements in performance. The system does not reward high performers, in general. Rules and regulations governing administrative and financial prerogatives are overtly cumbersome and tend to centralise decision-making. This is particularly relevant to operational decision-making, in relation to domains where strategic decisions have already been made at a higher level. A case in point is the re-seeking of permission for activities stipulated under approved PC 1s, which accounts for unnecessary delays and ingrains inefficiency.

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The third problem and one which compounds the other two relates to the space that exists for institutionalised manipulation. Over the last several decades, numerous changes have been made in the structure of civil service in the guise of 'reforms'. Some, as stated in the International Crisis Group's report, have "weakened the constitutionally guaranteed protection of employment that had previously shielded the bureaucracy against political interference". Other 'reforms' were aimed at ideologically reorienting the bureaucracy, entrenching military's presence in the bureaucracy, whilst still others eroded neutrality at all levels of the administration. By-and-large, administrative restructuring was used as a tool by many rulers for personal gains and political patronage in order to consolidate their bases. Over the years, therefore, a culture emerged where civil servants were patronised and promoted, not on merit but on perceived loyalty to their respective unnamed political affiliations. Civil servants have responded to this in many ways. Whilst a majority resents this trend and still tries to operate honestly in a politicised environment, others feel unprotected due to the fear of media accountability and choose to defer decisions whilst still others—and a growing number—tend to please their superiors rather than being responsive to citizens' needs. In doing the latter, they become party to politically expedient decisions that have limited grounding in evidence. These institutional behaviours promote a culture where a range of ethical, intellectual, procedural, and financial forms of malpractices are becoming pervasive in the system.

As a result of all these factors, Pakistan's system of civil service—which has yet to conform to contemporary realities after 63 years of the country's existence—has fallen prey to exploitation, both from within its ranks as well as from outside as a result of collusive behaviour of non-*bona fide* entities within the political system and the private sector. And hence malpractices and inefficiencies are getting institutionalised. Poor management and lack of accountability exacerbate malpractices, whereas on the other hand, there may be a disincentive for administrators to strengthen management and mainstream mechanisms that compel accountability. Both these factors complement each other in a vicious cycle.

Civil service reform, therefore, cannot be achieved through isolated technocratic solutions; the latter can only be useful if the broader political determinants are conducive.

Measures to reform the civil service are further deeply interlinked with the collective organisational structure, procedures, protocols, and sets of regulations to manage government's activity—in other words the prevailing system of bureaucracy. There are many unresolved questions of relevance to Pakistan in this space that need to be addressed: the relationship of the federal, provincial and district governments, the question of provincial autonomy, the fate of the many parastatal agencies, which cause the fiscal system to hemorrhage; the institutional relationships with respect to policy making, regulation and implementation; the structure of pre-service, in-service and ongoing training and capacity building; the government's supporting infrastructure, such as e-governance, and so on.

Reform of civil service, implicit within which is a set of measures to restructure recruitment, retention, training, career progression, capacity building, remuneration, and accountability frameworks, therefore, cannot be taken in isolation and needs to be framed in the context of this entire structure, which determines how a government functions. The feasibility of these changes additionally has to be locally determined, as there isn't a cookie-cutter multilateral framework that can make reforms work in any setting. Rather than reinventing the wheel at the cost of the taxpayers' money it appears most logical to use the recommendations of the NCGR to develop a multi-partisan consensus on the way forward, and analyse the resource implications of an agreed plan, based on which a phased approach can be adopted.

Pending long-term solutions, the single most important measure is to let merit and performance take over. There are many champions within Pakistan's bureaucracy whose potential can be harnessed through this approach.

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