

Beyond the red tape

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Countries with strong bureaucracies exhibit professional administration and policy consistency



Pakistan's economic stagnation and governance inefficiencies are deeply rooted in a bureaucratic structure that prioritises control over progress.

While the system effectively maintains order, its failure to adapt, innovate and serve the public interest has rendered it ineffective. Bureaucrats often operate with a mindset that sees power retention as the ultimate goal, turning governance into a self-serving mechanism rather than a means to improve people's lives. The real crisis is not just inefficiency but the deliberate misuse of rules to consolidate authority,

delay reforms and ensure the perpetuation of a status quo that benefits the few at the cost of national progress.

Bureaucracy, in its essence, should be the backbone of good governance. The World Bank's International Country Risk Guide assesses bureaucratic quality by measuring how independent it is from political influence, how efficiently it operates, and whether it upholds institutional integrity. Countries with strong bureaucracies exhibit professional administration, policy consistency and responsiveness to governance needs. Those with weak bureaucracies suffer from red tape, corruption and unpredictability, which erode public trust and economic potential. Pakistan finds itself in the latter category, where bureaucratic inefficiency isn't just a byproduct of poor governance but an intentional design to control the flow of power.

The nature of bureaucracy is not uniform across the world. Some nations have recognised the need for transformation and evolved their administrative machinery to align with modern governance. Others, like Pakistan, remain trapped in what can be described as machine bureaucracy — a rigid, rule-bound structure that prioritises procedural correctness over actual outcomes.

Machine bureaucrats are champions of the status quo. Their expertise lies not in problem-solving but in preserving layers of approvals, ensuring that even the simplest of government processes become needlessly complicated. They rely on outdated protocols and excessive formalisation to maintain their relevance, discouraging any attempt at reform.

At first glance, this rigidity may appear to serve a useful purpose: maintaining order. Rules, after all, provide structure, ensuring that governance does not descend into chaos. However, beneath this façade of stability lies a deeper problem. Machine bureaucrats master the art of contrived ambiguity, deliberately leaving policies vague to allow multiple

interpretations. This ambiguity grants them discretion over implementation, ensuring that every decision requires bureaucratic approval, keeping businesses, politicians and ordinary citizens at their mercy.

Those who attempt to work outside this labyrinth of regulations quickly find themselves entangled in a web of malicious compliance, where bureaucrats enforce rules in the most inefficient way possible, not to improve governance but to highlight their indispensability.

The result is an administrative structure that expands in size but not in effectiveness. Rather than facilitating governance, machine bureaucracies create unnecessary obstacles, making processes slower and more cumbersome. Pakistan's taxation system, for instance, is notorious for its complexity — not because it is designed to maximise revenue collection but because it serves as a tool for bureaucratic control. Instead of simplifying tax regulations to encourage compliance, bureaucrats introduce convoluted requirements that increase opportunities for rent-seeking behaviour. This culture of red tape deters investment, hampers economic growth, and reinforces the very inefficiencies that bureaucrats claim to address.

Contrast this with nations that have successfully reformed their bureaucracies. Singapore, once a developing country with governance challenges, restructured its civil service to be performance-driven, ensuring that bureaucrats were evaluated on measurable outcomes rather than tenure. South Korea embraced digital governance, reducing human discretion in decision-making and streamlining government processes. China, despite its centralised political system, adopted a goal-oriented bureaucracy that prioritises economic development and technological advancement over administrative formalities. These countries understood that bureaucracy should serve governance, not the other way around.

Pakistan must recognise that its bureaucratic structure is actively working against national progress. The transformation from a machine bureaucracy to an intelligent bureaucracy is no longer an option; it is a necessity. An intelligent bureaucracy is adaptive, innovative, and goal-driven. It focuses on outcomes rather than procedures, leveraging data and technology to improve efficiency. It is transparent, accountable, and responsive to the needs of the public rather than being obsessed with preserving its own authority.

To move in this direction, Pakistan must undertake fundamental reforms. Merit-based recruitment and promotions should replace the outdated seniority system, ensuring that competence — not tenure — determines leadership within the civil service. Digital transformation must become a cornerstone of governance, minimising human discretion and making government services more accessible.

Decision-making should shift from rigid rule-following to outcome-based performance, ensuring that bureaucratic success is measured by tangible improvements in governance, not by how many layers of approval a document passes through. Decentralisation is equally critical. By empowering local governments, Pakistan can reduce the excessive centralisation that slows down policy implementation and service delivery.

Bureaucracy should be a facilitator, not a gatekeeper. Public-private partnerships must be encouraged to bring efficiency into governance, allowing the private sector's innovation to complement state functions. Above all, there needs to be a cultural shift within the civil service — from viewing governance as an exercise in control to treating it as a responsibility to improve people's lives.

Pakistan has spent decades trapped in a bureaucratic model that rewards stagnation and punishes initiative. If we are to unlock our true economic potential, we must break free from this legacy and embrace a

governance model that is efficient, responsive, and future-oriented. The time for bureaucratic transformation is now — not as a political slogan but as an economic and national imperative.

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