

How to modernise governance

Nadeem Ahmed Khan | 16th June 2025

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The current structure and productivity of Pakistan's public sector are increasingly seen as inefficient. While governance in any country fundamentally depends on its public servants, the underlying paradigm has shifted. The nature of work is evolving rapidly, and with it, the very concept of organizational structure is undergoing a profound transformation.

Traditional hierarchical models are becoming obsolete, as many countries have embraced flattened, more agile structures. In the federal government, for instance, a large portion of the workforce comprises support staff. Out of approximately more than 575,000 federal government employees (excluding the armed forces), nearly 95 per cent fall into the BPS 1 to 16 categories, which mainly include clerical and administrative support roles.

This reality presents a significant opportunity: why not transform this vast workforce into a more productive, independent segment through modern human resource development techniques? With the advancement of digitisation, the need for extensive staff support has significantly declined. The widespread adoption of e-office systems across ministries and departments has rendered roles such as personal assistants, typists and manual record keepers largely redundant. These functions are now more efficiently performed using technology.

Countries that have adopted flat structures have seen tangible benefits. For instance, Nordic nations such as Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland have successfully implemented flat organisational models in their public sectors. Denmark's emphasis on egalitarianism, decentralised decision-making, and high social trust has nurtured a work culture encouraging initiative and open communication. Likewise, Sweden, Norway and Finland prioritise consensus-building and inclusive practices that support minimal hierarchy and empower employees.

Other countries have also made progress. Australia and Canada have initiated efforts to reduce bureaucracy and streamline communication, although their systems remain more hierarchical compared to the Nordics. New Zealand has taken a more agile and performance-driven approach, while the UK has worked toward civil service reforms that promote collaboration and minimise management layers. Even in China, traditionally known for its strong centralised control, several provinces

such as Zhejiang, Anhui, Hebei and Jilin have introduced targeted reforms to decentralise fiscal authority and improve governance.

The core principles behind these reforms – decentralisation, delegated authority, employee empowerment, reduced red tape, and citizen-centric service delivery – offer valuable insights. A successful shift towards a flat organisation typically begins with empowering local governments through enhanced revenue-sharing mechanisms and greater financial autonomy. This allows them to tailor services to local needs. When decision-making authority is brought closer to service delivery points, responsiveness improves and unnecessary delays are avoided.

One such example can be seen in Punjab, where the provincial government recently decentralised the construction of school buildings up to a certain budget limit. School principals were granted the authority to oversee and manage renovation projects directly. As a result, construction costs and timelines were significantly reduced, while the quality of work improved. This initiative illustrates a key point: empowered individuals tend to act more responsibly. Moreover, local peer accountability often enhances motivation and performance.

However, implementing a flat organisational structure in Pakistan's public sector is no easy task. Numerous structural, cultural, political, and systemic barriers complicate the process. One of the most significant challenges is the deeply rooted bureaucratic hierarchy, inherited from British colonial administration. This structure, with its rigid 22-grade system, reinforces a command-and-control mindset and places a premium on seniority rather than innovation or performance. In such an environment, rule following often takes precedence over results, stifling creativity and flexibility.

Corruption, vested interests and limited transparency further challenge reform efforts. Cultural norms that emphasise deference to authority

and discourage risk-taking inhibit independent thinking. Favouritism, nepotism and politically motivated promotions weaken trust in institutions and demoralise competent individuals. The public sector lacks incentives for performance and does not cultivate an entrepreneurial mindset.

Political instability is another hurdle. Frequent changes in government disrupt continuity and hinder long-term reform efforts. Interference by political actors in bureaucratic processes undermines merit-based systems and forces civil servants to align with short-term political interests instead of long-term public goals.

Compounding these issues are capacity constraints. Many public servants lack the skills required to function effectively in a modern, digital, and collaborative workplace. Training programmes are often outdated or misaligned with current needs. Pakistan also continues to face a brain drain, with skilled professionals seeking better opportunities abroad. Resistance to change is also pervasive, with both senior officials and lower-level employees reluctant to abandon familiar structures.

Weak accountability mechanisms pose a final challenge. Evaluation systems are often focused on procedural compliance rather than performance outcomes. Without sufficient autonomy, civil servants lack the space to take initiative or demonstrate ownership. The absence of strong monitoring and reward systems makes it difficult to foster a culture of performance and responsibility.

Despite these challenges, there is growing recognition of the need for reform. To modernise governance and improve public-sector productivity, Pakistan must focus on decentralisation and empowerment. Devolving authority and resources to provincial and district governments will bring decisions closer to the point of service, thereby improving efficiency and responsiveness. Operational-level

managers should be given the authority and tools needed to make timely decisions without excessive dependence on top-down directives.

Establishing a Citizen Efficiency Commission could help ensure public service delivery remains efficient, transparent and result-oriented. Such a commission could serve as a watchdog to monitor progress, address inefficiencies, and provide policy recommendations.

Another critical reform step is consolidating redundant functions. Ministries and divisions with overlapping responsibilities should be streamlined to avoid duplication. A leaner structure would focus federal ministries on policy development and coordination while delegating operational responsibilities to subnational entities.

Citizens facing sectors such as education, healthcare, policing and land administration should receive priority. Clearly defining roles across federal, provincial, and district levels will improve coordination and accountability. These sectors have the most direct impact on people's lives and, therefore, should be at the forefront of reform efforts.

Technology will play a pivotal role in this transformation. E-governance tools can enhance transparency, increase access to services and improve operational efficiency. Simultaneously, investments in training and capacity building for civil servants are essential to equip them with digital skills, policy analysis expertise, and modern management capabilities.

Lastly, robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms must be established. Performance indicators should be clearly defined, tracked regularly and used to inform policy adjustments. Regular feedback and evidence-based evaluations will help sustain reforms and build a culture of continuous improvement.

Without stronger political leadership, all efforts to improve productivity in the public sector are likely to fall short. A significant transformation in

the political landscape is essential. We must create an environment that attracts qualified, visionary individuals to parliament, people who bring fresh ideas and foster a culture of meaningful debate, rather than simply acting as rubber stamps.

Discouraging routine politicians, dynastic representatives and those who enter politics solely through local influence or pressure groups is crucial. Reform can begin in the Senate, where political parties should prioritize electing technocrats and wise leaders, similar to the model of the ancient Greek Senate.

Comprehensive political reforms, combined with the establishment of strong, empowered local government bodies, will naturally reduce the influence of power-hungry individuals and those clinging to the status quo. Bureaucracy should not be involved in political matters for their own motives, ensuring that public administration remains impartial and focused on serving the people.

This shift will pave the way for a more dynamic, accountable, and effective parliament that truly serves the nation.

The path to a leaner, more effective public sector in Pakistan is challenging but achievable. With sustained political commitment, strategic investments in human capital, and a cultural shift toward merit, accountability, and service delivery, Pakistan can modernise its governance system to meet the demands of a fast-changing world.

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