

# ‘Slow and unresponsive governance’

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**EDITORIAL:** Is it any surprise that all sorts of serious research continues to identify the bureaucracy as part of the problem, not the solution, when it comes to addressing inefficiencies within Pakistan’s government framework? For example, a fresh report by PIDE (Pakistan Institute of Development Economics) – Modernising Governance: Challenges and Solutions in Pakistan’s Rules of Business and Secretariat Instructions – has revealed that more than 50pc of all federal decisions are delayed due to what it calls “excessive bureaucracy”.

It also points out, as so many people have done for so many years, that while Pakistan's Rules of Business 1973 and Secretariat Instructions are the backbone of federal governance, they have simply failed to evolve to meet modern administrative needs. It is shocking that this far in the 21st century, "over 80pc of federal processes still rely on outdated, manual systems, significantly delaying decision making and policy implementation".

At a time when you wouldn't rely on firms using outdated technology to meet your needs, or even schools with obsolete curricula to teach your children, how can you count on a state still running like it was the early-to-mid 20th century to deliver the kind of governance that is required to address the country's many pressing problems? No wonder other countries have advanced while we have actually slid backward on the road to progress, especially in the 21st century that is marked by all sorts of rapid advances.

It turns out, also, that "centralised approval mechanisms" alone account for a good 60pc of completely unnecessary delays, which inevitably creates bottlenecks across ministries. The report also shows, just as expected, that less than 10pc of officials are held accountable for all their inefficiencies.

So we have a civil service that has become the very definition of inefficiency, and very deliberately so, which not only seriously resists any attempts at reforms, but also protects its officials who make sure it works according to a model that was in practice a century ago.

Highlighting inefficiencies in "inter-divisional consultation", the report notes that over 70pc of inter-ministerial communications face delays due to centralised and ineffective processes. These problems have been highlighted a number of times in the past, yet every attempt to remedy them has been savagely resisted by the bureaucracy itself. Hence the "slow and unresponsive governance system" that the

report laments, one that “lacks the accountability necessary for effective administration”.

It's not that solutions do not exist. Everybody knows about them and stakeholders and experts have been begging for them for the longest time. Yet, whenever some government tries to pursue bureaucratic reforms with any seriousness, the service itself sabotages them with the kind of efficiency that is otherwise lacking in its outlook and administration. Clearly, it does not want to move on from the so-called bureaucracy of the Raj where officials are showered with perks and privileges so they can lord over the people with little or no accountability of their own.

Dr Nadeemul Haque, vice chancellor of PIDE and co-author of the report, has been calling for embracing modern standards, especially transforming the country's major cities, since he headed the planning commission more than a decade ago. Yet for all his lobbying and pleading, that too just to get the government to exercise common sense and adopt modern practices that are vital for 21st century statecraft, not a thing has changed.

One can only hope that this report will jolt some people in Islamabad before the bureaucracy is able to throw it into some corner where it will gather dust forever. Bureaucratic reforms are no longer optional; they are necessary, and the government after government kicks this can down the road to the whole country's great disadvantage.

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