

# Squid Game of CSS

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**In a country grappling with debilitating debts, systemic inefficiencies across sectors, rampant inflation and unemployment, and a persistent energy crisis, one might wonder what fuels the celebration behind the civil service examination victories. Have you ever seen any servant rejoicing for being selected as a servant to a master? The joy is not about the opportunity to serve a sinking state but about securing a lifelong position of ruling without accountability. The answer, alarmingly, seems to be a profound misunderstanding of the word ‘servant’ in ‘civil servant.’**

This issue was starkly highlighted during a webinar conducted by the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics on March 4, 2022. An ex-Civil Superior Services (CSS) officer who retired as a secretary bluntly described the CSS exam and selection process as a “Neelam Ghar” or a game show. His analogy aptly captured the absurdity and superficiality of the current system: only in a game show do winners celebrate with such fervour, sharing their victories on social media as if they’ve achieved a personal milestone.

Is it not concerning that this Augean stable stands unaddressed? The former secretary’s remark reveals a harsh reality: for many civil servants, the position they occupy is less about serving the nation and more about personal victory and status. The problems that plague Pakistan are real and devastating, yet the exuberance of CSS exam passers suggests a disconnect from these harsh realities. Their joy is rooted in securing a prestigious position, a personal victory in the highest form of selfishness.

Why, indeed, should one cherish the thought of managing a sinking ship? The allure of the civil service position lies not in the responsibility it entails but in the perks it offers: a substantial house, a car with a blue light on top, and 250 million people waiting outside your office door. This is the crux of the issue: there is no real skin in the game.

The ex-secretary’s comparison of CSS to a game show is not merely a critique but a call for introspection. The civil service, in its current form, has devolved into a Squid Game, where the prize is not the opportunity to serve and uplift the nation but the acquisition of power and privilege. This perverse incentive structure not only undermines the essence of public service but also exacerbates the very problems it is meant to solve.

Consider the symbolism: civil servants, who should be the stewards of the country’s progress, are

instead seen as winners of a twisted game, celebrating their personal victories while the country suffers. The real challenge lies in transforming this mindset. The civil service should attract individuals driven by a genuine desire to address the nation's pressing issues, not those seeking personal gain.

Pakistan's civil service needs a radical overhaul. The recruitment process should emphasize not just intellectual capabilities but also a commitment to public service and ethical conduct. Training programmes must instill a sense of duty and responsibility towards the nation, reinforcing the idea that a civil servant's role is to serve the public, not to lord over them. If a citizen enters the room of a Deputy Commissioner, we will know whose heartbeat gets higher in worry.

Moreover, performance evaluations should be stringent and based on measurable outcomes related to national development goals. Civil servants must be held accountable for their actions, with clear consequences for inefficiency and corruption. The culture of entitlement that currently pervades the civil service must be dismantled, replaced with a culture of service and accountability.

Reforming the civil service is not just about changing the rules; it's about changing the ethos. Celebrating the CSS exam should be about the opportunity to make a positive impact, to steer the country towards a better future. This shift in perspective is crucial for aligning the civil service's objectives with the nation's needs.

In my previous writing, I was advised to mention data. But asking for data in this context is akin to demanding the temperature of the fire while the house is visibly burning from miles away. My country is not just a data point for another donor project or a research paper; the loss is so loud that even the deaf can hear. The challenges facing Pakistan are glaringly obvious and need immediate action, not more analysis. The civil service must be part of the solution, embracing a genuine commitment to public service and the urgent needs of the nation.

In conclusion, the civil service system in Pakistan must undergo a fundamental transformation. The current celebration of personal victory is a symptom of a deeper malaise: the disconnect between civil servants and the realities of the country they are supposed to serve.

By realigning the incentives and fostering a genuine spirit of public service, Pakistan can hope to turn its civil service into a force for national development rather than a bastion of selfish ambition.

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