BUREAUCRATIC REFORM

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Comprehensive and effective bureaucratic reform initiatives require more than a one-size-fits-all or recipe approach to improve capacity and performance. Pakistan's efforts to reform the bureaucracy have stagnated as they run into issues of red tape or full-bodied resistance from the different parties involved. Recent work on bureaucratic reform which has focused on, for example, iterative design (Andrews 2013)[1] and adaptability (Sharp 2021)[2] acknowledges that both structural and political factors are key to ensuring these features are embedded in reform processes. There are important lessons for bureaucratic reform in Pakistan in such work, but foremost this essay contends that the centralisation of power by political, bureaucratic, and military elites has not just fundamentally shaped the bureaucracy but also hindered reform.

Bureaucratic reform has been a preoccupation of every government in Pakistan. However, only a limited set of proposals are ever actually implemented because most end up being disputed by one or the other set of actors. The fundamental problem with such reform initiatives is that they fail to acknowledge that bureaucratic reform is a political problem that requires political solutions, not technocratic ones. Attempts to separate politics (the study of how power is distributed) from reform initiatives have been and always will be misguided. Technocratic solutions do not recognise or acknowledge centralisation of power, neither can they accommodate the differing interests and incentives at play when reforms are being planned. As such, technocratic reform is poised for failure. The first step toward meaningful reform must be an inclusive process that acknowledges power dynamics in rethinking the bureaucracy's structure and operations.

How can political considerations – an understanding of where power lies – be incorporated into designing reform initiatives? While there are no easy or standardised answers, researchers have provided key considerations to bear in mind in thinking about political factors constraining the reform of bureaucracies. Leadership is, for example, key as it sets the scope and tone for conversations about reform. Leaders can be foundational to creating the right environment, one that encourages listening, learning and collaboration rather than a hierarchical, top-down approach that imposes its own preferences. It is not enough, therefore, to form a

committee – leadership must be about a willingness to be challenged and adapt to shifts in the distribution of power resulting from any meaningful reform process.

Equally important is representation in deliberative processes on reform: who heads the reform committee, who is represented, who is left out of consultations. Pakistan's bureaucracy has retained its hierarchical structure since the colonial era – generalist recruits to the administrative services enjoy the most privileges while provincial civil servants frequently decry about being deprived of posts and opportunities that they should have had access to. Street-level bureaucrats remain the worst off, with low pay and prospects despite doing the actual work of implementing policy on the ground and acting as the citizen's point of contact with the state. Ensuring these bureaucrats are represented in discussing reform initiatives, their voices heard and their concerns addressed, is one of the key factors for the success of any effort to reform the bureaucracy.

Aligning with this bottom-up approach to reform are considerations of structural factors that impact the success of reform initiatives. There is considerable evidence that decentralisation is foundational to reform success as it allows greater autonomy and flexibility for bureaucrats in both designing and implementing policy. In India, decentralisation has produced results by allowing local communities to be involved in

shaping the provision of public goods (Singh 2015; Kruks-Wisner 2018)[3] and allowing bureaucrats autonomy at the local level in the design and implementation of programs (Mangla 2023).[4] In China, Ang (2016)[5] describes that the central government shows flexibility in allowing local bureaucrats some autonomy in how it raises and allocates fees for local services through 'bureau-franchising'.

However, Pakistan's chequered history with decentralisation has centralised power rather than empowering local communities and officials which could inform bottom-up approaches to reform of public service provision and bureaucratic performance. Though Musharraf's local government reforms handed substantive administrative powers to non-partisan locally elected officials, there was the belief that the military was 'colluding with officials in occupational groups such as the police and [the] income tax group to cut the powerful DMG down to size' (ICG 2010, 8).[6] An unintended consequence was the unification of DMG officers to resist the reduction in their power, seeking support from politicians to do so (Shafqat 2013, 111; Jaffrelot 2014, 347).[7] In effect, Musharraf's attempt to use decentralisation as a means of political and bureaucratic engineering encouraged the politicisation of the bureaucracy, further weakening its capacity. The dissolution of Musharraf's local government system in 2009 led to powers that had been held by elected nazims reverting to the senior echelons of the bureaucracy.

The 18th Amendment (passed in 2010) was transformational, not least due to a multi-party consensus but also in amending constitutional articles to mandate the devolution of power to the provinces and in turn, that provinces devolve 'political, administrative and financial responsibility and authority' (Art 48). However, not only did it not specify any timelines or processes, it also did not make any changes to constitutional articles related to the civil services. As a result, decentralisation processes left much to be desired and bureaucratic and political elites sought to game them to centralise power in their own hands. For example, bureaucratic resistance led to slow progress in the dissolution of federal ministries and the creation of provincial ones (Waseem 2011)[8] because a lack of capacity within the Provincial Civil Services meant that the devolved provincial departments ended up – yet again – in the hands of elite, federal (PAS) bureaucrats (Waseem 2015).[9] Because the onus to bring about reform to align the distribution of power with decentralised decision making was on politicians and elite bureaucrats who stood to lose significant power if reforms were introduced, the 18th Amendment has only reinforced the centralisation of bureaucratic policy, practice, and appointments. This is not to say that the amendment should be rolled back – quite the opposite: the amendment's intentions should be respected and further amendments and reforms should cement decentralisation processes by focusing on implementation and ensuring stakeholder buy-in for the shifts in power caused by such reform.

Finally, it is important to think about how reform is conceptualised and justified. The narrative is often that a specific reform is being implemented to 'deliver' to the people or in the 'public interest'. Certainly, public

[1] Andrews, M. 2013. The Limits of Institutional Reform in Development. Cambridge University Press.

[2] Sharp, S. 2021. Adaptive bureaucracies? Enabling adaptation in public bureaucracies. ODI Working Paper 604. https://odi.org/en/publications/adaptive-bureaucracies-enabling-adaptation-in-public-bureaucracies/

[3] Singh, P. 2016. How Solidarity Works for Welfare: Subnationalism and Social Development in India. Cambridge University Press; Kruks-Wisner, G. 2018. Claiming the State: Active Citizenship and Social Welfare in Rural India. Cambridge University Press.

[4] Mangla, A. 2023. Making Bureaucracy Work: Norms, Education and Public Service Delivery in Rural India. Cambridge University Press.

[5] Ang, Y. Y. 2017. Beyond Weber: Conceptualizing an alternative ideal type of bureaucracy in developing contexts. Regulation & Governance, 11: 282–298. doi: 10.1111/rego.12123.

[6] International Crisis Group, 2010. Reforming Pakistan's Civil Service. February 2010, Asia Report No. 185.

[7] Shafqat, S. 2013. Reforming Pakistan's Bureaucracy. In, Anita M. Weiss and Saba Gul Khattak (eds.), Development Challenges Confronting Pakistan, Sterling, VA: Kumarian Press. 99-119; Jaffrelot, C. 2014. The Pakistan Paradox: Instability and Resilience. London: Hurst.

[8] Waseem, M. 2011. Pakistan: A Majority-Constraining Federalism. India Quarterly, 67:3, 213-228.

[9] Waseem, M. 2015. The Post-18th Amendment Federalism in Pakistan. Development Advocate Pakistan, 2:1, April 2015, 11-12.

services can be important carriers of legitimacy (Nixon, et al. 2017)[10] for bureaucratic and political elites alike. In the absence of meaningful local government, however, it is not clear that those designing and implementing these reforms have any definitive sense of what the public interest actually is or what it is that people want delivered or how. Bureaucratic reform in such circumstances amounts to elite capture rather than a representation of public interest.

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[10] Nixon, H., Mallett, R., & McCullough, A. 2017. Service delivery, Public Perceptions and State Legitimacy: Findings from the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium. Working Paper 55. https://securelivelihoods.org/wp-content/uploads/13.-Are-public-services-the-building-blocks-of-legitimacy_Input-to-the-World-Banks-2017-WDR.pdf