

What stops civil service reform?

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The case for civil service reform has long been established beyond a reasonable doubt. Most new regimes begin with the talk of reform. It dies down as soon as the regime settles down, greased of course by the DMGs. Little wonder, they were described as the Central Sultans of Pakistan (CSP), replacing the Internationally Created Sultans (ICS). The present regime had no choice but to walk its campaign talk. No time was lost in setting up a task force and appointing a designated adviser to start the process. Eyebrows were raised about the composition of the task force, dominated as it was by DMGs, past and present. There were questions about the chair as well, who wrote a book on the elitist state and joined the most elitist regime of General Musharraf, and recently finished another to extol the overly incentivised DMG-centred model of governance run by Shehbaz Sharif in Punjab. If there was any hope left, it was dashed by the performance in the first month in office. Nearly all federal ministers were seen hostage to the ground-reality lectures that the DMG secretaries are so adept in giving to the new entrants. The ifs and buts in their public pronouncements became inversely proportional to their reformist zeal. The finance minister, oddly described as the most educated by the opposition leader, seems to have been the most mesmerised of them all. He was lectured for a month by the DMG demagogues on delicate issues facing the economy. Discarding the convention of a formal written speech backed up by explanatory publications, his extempore outbursts included, among other routine proposals, the repeatedly failed trick of leaving the bulk of the additional tax mobilisation to administrative measures. "Forget reform, leave it to the incorrigible FBR," is what it effectively meant. It should be obvious that the main obstacle to reform is the centralised services in general and the DMG in particular. The PTI leadership was at pains to expose these services as a colonial legacy. In the interest of the Raj, the colonial services were centralised. After the 18th amendment, the centralised state has been contained to a considerable extent. In contradistinction, the centralised services and their collective bargaining power continue. There are a lot more grade 22/21 positions than required by the subjects in Federal Legislative Part I. Akin to a mezzanine floor, the subjects in Part II are the domain of the CCI. It requires, and the Constitution stipulates, a separate secretariat. A few more positions will be needed here. All others, and the number will be huge, should have been placed in a pool and eventually deployed in the province of their choice. The federal government, provinces and local governments should have the autonomy to recruit their own for effective service delivery. Political interference is another issue that the PTI government has resolved to address. However, it fell directly into the trap laid by the DMG about the restoration of the constitutional protection of service withdrawn by prime minister Bhutto under the 1973 Constitution. It was also a colonial relic, designed to ensure loyalty to the British crown rather than the 'native' politicians emerging after the promulgation of the Government of India Act of 1935. After independence, the 'civtablishment' stepped into the shoes of the British crown because of this protection, superseded in time by the more powerful 'miltablishment'. Thus, started the unending tussle between the political and other institutions. It is possible to frame rules of business that ensure operational autonomy without constitutional protection. One way would be the legal protection proposed by the caretaker PM Moin Qureshi.

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