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Civil Service Reform and Administrative Devolution in Pakistan: A Historical-Institutional Analysis of Bureaucratic Governance

Sanam Chandio

Subject Specialist Pakistan Studies, Government Boys Higher Secondary Comprehensive School Latifabad, Hyderabad

sanamchandio1973@gmail.com

Gul Muhammad

Subject Specialist Pakistan Studies, GHSS Bahar Khan Mirjat, Tando Allahyar

gulbehan283@gmail.com

Shafique Ahmed

Lecturer, National University of Modern Languages, Hyderabad Campus, and PhD Scholar, International Islamic University, Islamabad

shafique.ahmed@numl.edu.pk

Abstract

This paper will analyze the historical development of bureaucracy in Pakistan, the key stages of civil service reform and the administrative implications of the 18th Constitutional Amendment. Pakistan inherited a centralized colonial system of administration which was mainly meant to collect taxes, to control the district and to perpetuate the government. Since gaining independence, civilian and military regimes have made reforms in areas concerning recruitment, cadre structure, training, pay scale, lateral entry, devolution, and accountability. Numerous reforms did not, however, bring much institutional change due to the fact that administrative redesign was not always in line with political stability, federal ideals, protection of merit and service delivery that is citizen-focused. The research design is based on a qualitative documentary and historical-institutional research, which synthesizes the scholarly literature, constitutional material, reports of reforms, and policy documents. The discussion is structured in terms of three goals: the tracking of bureaucratic evolution, the consideration of significant moments of reform, and the evaluation of the administrative environment after the 18th Amendment. These results show that the results of reforms have been informed by the ongoing effects of colonial administrative systems, recurrent regime-specific restructuring, disproportional protection of merit and tenure, and the unresolved federal-provincial service provisions. The 18th Amendment enhanced the constitutional foundation of provincial autonomy, but the administrative potential of the 18th Amendment is still subject to more explicit cadre regulations, better provincial public service institutions, professional training, transparent performance assessment, and accountable local government. The article concludes that a reform that is sustainable needs a balanced system that does not make the civil servants the arbitrary power but a democratic system that is legal, ethical, professionally competent, and responsive to the citizens.

Keywords: *civil service reform; bureaucracy; Pakistan; 18th Amendment; public administration; administrative devolution; governance.*

1. Introduction

Bureaucracy is a key institution where the state transforms the law, policies and political decisions into administrative action via bureaucracy. It keeps official books, enforces the popular policy, controls markets, raises funds, organizes the growth effort, and ensures continuity in case of transition in governments. According to the Weberian concept, bureaucracy should be designed based on rational-legal authority, hierarchy, written rules, recruitment based on merit, specialization, and professional discipline (Weber, 1978). These characteristics may sustain predictability and administrative continuity, yet they may also lead to detachment between citizens in case accountability, responsiveness, and learning in institutions are poor. Pakistan also presents a significant example to the study of bureaucratic reform since historically the civil service has been able to play roles other than those of routine implementation. The new state was left with a powerful administrative system of British India at independence with representative institutions, party apparatus and constitutional processes still forming. This asymmetry provided bureaucracy with an abnormally powerful status in policy advice, state management, and institutional continuity. The reform of the civil service in Pakistan has thus been viewed by scholars as a public administration, constitutional development, and political institutionalization issue, as opposed to a technical issue (Kalia, 2013; Shahzad, 2017; Wilder, 2009). Since 1947, the reforms in the civil service have been introduced or recommended by major governments in Pakistan. These have been in the areas of recruitment, training, pay and grade structures, lateral entry, cadres restructuring, administrative accountability, local government, federal-provincial relations and digital modernization. Certain reforms enhanced administrative capacity or broadened participation, others were unfinished or gave rise to new tensions. The history of reform indicates that change in the civil service cannot be effective as a result of isolated action but rather when it has a stable institutional structure balancing merit, accountability, provincial autonomy and delivery of services to the people. Reforming the administrative system, the 18th Constitutional Amendment of 2010 actually shifted the situation by giving provincial governments more power and rearranging the federal system. Constitutional devolution brought about expectations that administrative power, human resource management, financial accountability, and service delivery mechanisms would also turn out to be more province-oriented. Nevertheless, the realignment of civil service apparatus to the post-18th Amendment order has been slow and disputed (Arshad et al., 2018; Shah, 2012). The article thus analyzes the civil service reform debate in a historical-institutional perspective and concentrates on three objectives that are related to each other.

1.1 Research Objectives

2. To follow the historical development of the bureaucracy of Pakistan as the inheritance of colonial rule to modern government.
3. To analyze the key stages of civil service reforms that were implemented during a few civilian and military regimes.
4. To examine how the 18th Constitutional Amendment affects the administrative implications of the civil service structure, provincial autonomy and devolution.

1.2 Research Questions

1. How has the place of bureaucracy in Pakistan changed since the colonial administration to the present-day governance system?

2. What were the key trends and institutional characteristics in civil service reforms that were brought in during various political eras?
3. What has the impact of the 18th Constitutional Amendment been on the Federal-Provincial administrative structure?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Bureaucracy, Rational-Legal Authority, and Administrative Neutrality

Classical bureaucratic theory focuses on hierarchy, decision making that is rule bound, written records, specialization, merit-based hiring, and administration that is impersonal. Weber (1978) defined bureaucracy as rational-legal type of authority that has the power to enhance administrative predictability and persistence. Professional bureaucracy in the contemporary government, however, has to be checked by democracy, public accountability, and responsiveness of the citizen. Over bureaucratic insulation can be detrimental to accountability, whereas over political discretion to the professional neutrality. This balance is particularly relevant in developing states whereby administrative institutions might be superior to elected institutions. Under these circumstances, bureaucracy is able to take up a leading policymaking role, especially in situations where legislatures, local governments, and political parties are institutionally weak. On the other hand, in the event that political players have unrestrained power over postings and promotions, civil servants can be reduced to being dependent on patronage instead of professionalism. The experience of Pakistan is representative of both tendencies at various levels (Wilder, 2009; Kalia, 2013).

2.2 Postcolonial State Formation and Colonial Legacy.

The administrative legacy of the Indian Civil Service was inherited by Pakistan, a highly centralized administration modeled to provide imperial order, revenue collection, and district administration. Even though independence altered the constitutional purpose of government, a number of institutional characteristics persisted: a hierarchical command, social distance between officials and citizens, a strong district administration, and preference towards generalist administrators. Pakistan started its early years with a refugee rehabilitation, institutional inadequacy, uncertain constitutionalism and poor political party organization, which enhanced the significance of the civil servants in the management of the state (Jalalzai, 2003; Shahzad, 2017). Such inherited structure offered administrative continuity but it also rendered a democratic transformation challenging. The administration of the population was forced to shift to a developmental model of citizens rather than the control-oriented colonial model. Structural adjustment has not been the only nature of civil service reform in Pakistan, but also a gradual transformation in administrative culture, professional motivation, and accountability relationships.

2.3 Politics of Civil Service Reform.

Civil service reform has become a technical agenda with exams, training, salaries, promotions and appraisal. In Pakistan, institutional competition and the regime priorities have also influenced the process of reform, however, it is also influenced by political incentives. Wilder (2009) asserts that the issue of reform has not been easy since strong players have not always been inclined to substitute discretionary power with objective regulations. Kalia (2013) also mentions that executive preferences, institutional interests, and evolving political arrangements have influenced bureaucratic policymaking. Conclusions of the literature are thus that reform success is determined by institutional continuity. When backed by law, professional consensus, parliamentary checks and balances, and administrative capacity, reforms tend to be more sustainable. They have less chances of succeeding when they are presented as temporary solutions to urgent political/bureaucratic issues.

2.4 Federalism, Devolution and the 18 th Amendment. The 18 th Constitutional

Amendment is known to have been a significant change in the federal structure of Pakistan. It reinstated many parliamentary attributes of the 1973 Constitution and devolved many subjects to provinces (Government of Pakistan, 1973, 2010). The amendment has been characterized by scholars as a chance to enhance provincial autonomy, yet they also mention that devolution demands administrative, fiscal, and institutional capacity of the provincial level (Arshad et al., 2018; Hussain, 2012; Shah, 2012). The key to this debate is in the civil service arrangements. Devolved responsibilities can be reasonably performed by the provinces only when they possess enough power over the personnel, planning, budgeting, monitoring, and service delivery. The administrative effectiveness of devolution may be decreased in case of continued uncertainty in the relations between the federal cadres and provincial services. It is thus crucial to note that provincialization and cadres alignment have been stressed by Khwaja (2016) in the post-18th Amendment environment.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The research design of this study is a qualitative documentary and historical-institutional type of research. The design is correct since the article aims at interpreting the trends of bureaucratic evolution and reform over the years and not test a statistical hypothesis. The historical-institutional approach can be applied to the study of the bureaucracy in Pakistan as the process of administrative development has been influenced by path-dependent factors, such as colonial legacy, changes in the constitution, revolution, and federalization.

3.2 Data Sources

The research is based on secondary sources such as the peer-reviewed journal articles, books, constitutional materials, and reform reports, official rules, and policy documents. The most important sources are scholarship on civil service reform and bureaucratic policymaking, scholarship on the 18th Amendment, reform proposals related to the National Commission for Government Reforms and the reform agenda of Ishrat Husain (Husain, 2011, 2015; National Commission for Government Reforms, 2008).

3.3 Analytical Procedure

The documentary content was examined based on the three research objectives in a thematic way. First, the history was employed to follow the development of bureaucracy since the colonial government to the modern form of governance. Second, the major political periods were used to group reform initiatives to determine the key direction and institutional characteristics of each period. Third, the sources based on constitutional and federalism issues were reviewed in order to analyze administrative implications of the 18th Amendment. The interpretation focuses on institutional trends, as opposed to partisan opinion.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Objective 1: Historical Evolution of Bureaucracy in Pakistan

The history of bureaucracy in Pakistan started with a colonial system of administration that emphasized on order, revenue and concentration of power. The district officer played a key role in local governance and was an administrative, regulatory and developmental officer. Following independence, Pakistan inherited much of this structure due to the fact that the new state needed continuity due to institutional scarcity. This permanence was both administratively convenient and maintained a hierarchy and distance to the citizens (Jalalzai, 2003; Shahzad, 2017). In the early post-independence days, the bureaucracy was powerful due to the fact that the political institutions were in their early development. Weak party institutions, inadequate administrative capabilities, and uncertainty in the constitution enabled the involvement of senior civil

servants in policy making and the running of the state. This era established a lasting trend whereby bureaucracy was not just an implementing body but also a significant institutional player in governance. The next decades were characterized by altering relations between elected governments and civil servants and direct military regimes. During certain periods bureaucracy was more heavily guarded and empowered, during others, it was restructured, reprimanded, or exposed to new sources of political and institutional power. A key historical trend is thus a continuity with periodic reorganization. The bureaucracy has continued to play a significant role in the operation of the state, but its role has always been determined by the broader constitutional and political context in Pakistan. In the context of the public administration, the historical development of the bureaucracy has shown a challenge of recurring transition. A colonial model focused on control and administrative command whereas a democratic and developmental state needs responsiveness, quality of services, participation, and accountability. Reform debates in Pakistan may be thought of as trying to accomplish this transition without compromising the administrative continuity that is required to govern.

4.2 Objective 2: Significant Stages of Civil Service Reform.

The second goal is related to the stages of reforms that were implemented in various political eras. The Ayub Khan regime consolidated planning and administrative coordination and centralized executive power. The introduction of quotas and service modifications were partly contributed to the fact that the problem of regional representation was addressed, but the entire system was very centralized. The rule of Yahya Khan was relatively short and characterized by more interference than institutional redesign (Shahzad, 2017). The reforms of 1973 led by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was an attempt to change the inherited civil service of the elites. The structure of the old Civil Service of Pakistan was restructured, the Basic Pay Scale system was implemented, and the occupational groups were redefined. These changes were designed to lessen inherited elitism and expand administrative involvement. Nonetheless, researchers have observed that undermining the service guarantees at the same time as the establishment of open accountability frameworks raised the chances of politicized posts and appointments (Idrees and Iraqi, 2015). Civil administration government under Zia-ul-Haq regime worked in a centralized system of governance where the military and civilian administration intertwined. During the democratic era (1988-1999) of electoral government the establishment of civilian political power was reestablished through elected governments, and the high rate of changes in government and administrative transfers as a political tool weakened both continuities. These changes demonstrate that the form of democracy is not sufficient to guarantee administrative neutrality; there should also be guidelines on how to hire, promote, and assess employees. The Devolution of Power Plan brought about a significant local government reform during the Pervez Musharraf period. In an effort to make the governance of districts more accountable locally, the plan reorganized local authority and elected representation, including women. However, the reform experienced continuity issues as it was implemented in a military regime and had to be owned by the province, have fiscal transparency, and be legal to be sustainable. The reforms since 2010 have included examination reforms, performance checks, pay rationalization, e-governance, modernization of training and cadres management. The National Commission on Government Reforms focused on competence, capacity, accountability, and service delivery to the citizens (National Commission on Government Reforms, 2008). Husain (2011, 2015) also supported the ideas of professionalization, better training, human resource management based on merit, stability of tenure and governance using technology. These suggestions are still valid since they focus on structural as opposed to procedural reform.

Table 1: Major Phases of Civil Service Reform in Pakistan

Period	Main reform direction	Institutional significance	Continuing issue
Colonial to 1947	Centralized district administration	Created continuity, hierarchy, and administrative discipline	Designed for control rather than citizen-centered service
1947-1958	Continuation of inherited civil service	Supported early state management during institutional scarcity	Strengthened bureaucratic role in policymaking
1958-1971	Centralization and service adjustments	Expanded planning and administrative coordination	Regional representation and centralization remained sensitive issues
1973 reforms	Cadre restructuring and Basic Pay Scale system	Reduced old service elitism and created new occupational arrangements	Merit protection and accountability were not fully balanced
1977-1988	Centralized administrative management	Maintained administrative continuity	Civilian administrative autonomy remained limited
1988-1999	Civilian political oversight	Restored elected authority over administration	Frequent transfers affected continuity
1999-2008	Local government devolution	Expanded local representation and district-level governance	Continuity and provincial ownership remained weak
2010 onward	Constitutional devolution and reform packages	Strengthened provincial autonomy in principle	Administrative and cadre alignment remain incomplete

Note. The table summarizes broad institutional directions rather than evaluating individual governments or officeholders.

4.3 Objective 3: Administrative Implications of the 18th Amendment

The rejuvenation of the constitutional balance between the parliament and the provinces and the creation of the more parliamentary federal system was the result of the 18th Constitutional Amendment which altered the federal picture of civil service reform by devolution of the broad scope of responsibilities to the provinces. Ideally, this transition demanded more responsive administrative systems to provincial interests and needs, local requirements, and sector-specific governance issues. The amendment cannot be interpreted solely as a constitutional event, however; it also carries significant personnel management, provincial capacity and service delivery implications (Arshad et al., 2018; Shah, 2012). One of the key administrative implications relates to federal-provincial relations in terms of services. Provided that the provinces have other areas of policy responsibility, they must have sufficient control over higher postings,

technocrats, planning departments, surveillance apparatus and public service commissions. Nevertheless, the fact that federal cadres continue to hold important provincial offices has elicited controversy regarding the meaning of provincial autonomy.

Institutionally, it is not an issue as to whether federal coordination is needed, but rather how the coordination can be balanced with actual provincial administrative control (Khwaja, 2016). The other implication has to do with capacity. Devolution adds more responsibilities to the provinces, whereas constitutional power does not necessarily raise capacity. Provinces need educated officials, good data systems, budgets, open recruitment, and good local government systems. Devolution may only exist in form in the absence of these conditions. Reform agenda after the 18th Amendment should then focus on provincial public service commissions, special training, digital governance, and monitoring based on performance. The 18th Amendment also sheds more light on the importance of defining accountability. A devolved system, the citizens should be in a position to determine the level of government that is to deliver the services. Uncertainty in the management of staff, financial accountability, and administrative oversight can undermine accountability. The role of the federal, provincial and local institutions should thus be outlined in a coherent model of administrative devolution in a transparent and legally consistent way.

4.4 Cross-Cutting Institutional Patterns

In spite of the fact that three goals are limited to this article, the review of the history demonstrates a number of cross-cutting patterns. To begin with, reforms are more productive when institution-centered as opposed to regime-centered. Second, administrative neutrality involves not only safeguarding against arbitrary influence but also the responsibility in legal performance. Third, federal-provincial coordination should be patterned in such a way that constitutional devolution is upheld and national standards are kept where they are needed. Fourth, the current governance demands a more powerful equilibrium between generalist coordination and expertise. These trends indicate that reform cannot be discussed as a battle between politicians and bureaucrats. An effective civil service should be subservient to legal democratic power and also be safeguarded against personal, partisan or arbitrary influences. On the same note, autonomy does not imply lack of accountability but it implies rule-based safeguarding that enables officials to undertake their public responsibilities in a manner that is ethical and competent.

5. Policy Implications

The results imply a number of policy implications. To begin with, key administrative posts tenure regulations must be transparent and should be safeguarded by law and written explanations are necessary in case of untimely transfers. Second, the promotions have to be on objective grounds which may include performance, integrity, training and experience. Third, it should enhance provincial public service commissions with digital recruitment, financial autonomy, transparent syllabi, and examination reforms that are responsive to provincial needs of governance. Fourth, the federal system post-18th Amendment should be aligned with service structures. This demands explicit guidelines of federal officers in provinces, significant career opportunities in provincial services and intergovernmental coordinating mechanisms. Fifth, civil service training must cover public finance, digital governance, procurement, ethics, climate adaptation, local government, data analysis, project management and citizen engagement. Sixth, mechanisms of accountability must be free, evidence-based, time-limited and aligned with due process. Lastly, the public trust can only be enhanced when reforms in the administration are linked to service delivery. Service charters, timelines, grievance mechanisms, and performance dashboard should be published by the departments. When staff training, cybersecurity, and inclusive access to citizens are supported, e-

governance will be able to decrease the level of discretion, enhance transparency, and increase the accessibility of the public services.

Table 2: Institutional Issues and Suggested Reform Directions

Issue	Administrative risk	Suggested reform direction
Frequent transfers	Weak continuity and limited project ownership	Minimum tenure with written reasons for exceptions
Promotion uncertainty	Low morale and career insecurity	Transparent promotion boards and documented criteria
Federal-provincial ambiguity	Incomplete administrative devolution	Clear cadre settlement and provincial service empowerment
Weak performance appraisal	Seniority without measurable outcomes	Key indicators, citizen feedback, and training records
Limited specialization	Low capacity in technical sectors	Specialist tracks with generalist coordination
Public distrust	Reduced legitimacy of administration	Service charters, grievance redressal, and digital transparency

Note. The recommendations are presented as institutional directions and require adaptation to constitutional, legal, and provincial contexts.

6. Conclusion

Pakistan Civil service reform is an ongoing institutional project. Bureaucracy left behind by the colonialism system offered continuity to the administrative system, but it also perpetuated centralized and hierarchical practices that were less than consistent with democratic, participatory, and citizen-based governments. Over the years, the various governments tried to transform the civil service by reorganizing the cadres, reorganizing pay, lateral entry, local government reorganization, accountability mechanism and modernization of the administration. According to the record, the results of reforms are less related to announcements than to legal continuity, professional agreement, administrative capacity, and open implementation. The constitutional basis of provincial autonomy offered by the 18th Amendment is an important one, yet the administrative potential of the Amendment will not be fulfilled unless the personnel management, provincial capacity, cadre rules, and local systems of service delivery are streamlined to match with the devolution. A balanced reform model must ensure civil servants are not arbitrarily influenced and guarantee legal political accountability and performance accountability, ethical behavior, citizen responsiveness. Such a model would assist in transforming the bureaucracy in Pakistan to be less control based administrative heritage to a professional, accountable and service based system of a public administration.

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