**Elusive change**

B Y S Y E D S A A D A T 2021-02-21

LAST month, the government announced much-awaited reforms for the civil service and introduced changes to rules governing civil servants. However, it seems to be more of an attempt to reform the civil servant rather than the civil service. Civil servants will not be reformed unless the civil service undergoes some drastic changes which continue to be elusive.

The reform is more of the same and very typical of the current government`s method of doing things which entails doing everything except what is necessary. This way they tick their promise in the manifesto checklist and get plenty of material for positive social media campaigns. But that is about all they achieve.

Let us evaluate some of the most advertised aspects of these reforms. I have been the greatest advocate of getting rid of `tie fan wan` a Chinese term literally meaning `iron rice bowl`, and referring to an occupation with guaranteed job security, a steady income and benefits. These rules do pretend to break the bowl but fail to give a roadmap to implementation. Everything has beenleft to the discretion ofindividuals like the secretary and chairman of the Federal Public Service Commission when we already know that these positions are rarely occupied by those courageous enough to take tough decisions.

The proof of this lack of ability to take bold decisions lies in this very attempt at reform. Military officials enjoy direct induction into three service groups namely the Pakistan Administrative Service, Foreign Service and Police Service, in violation of merit. These inducted officers have occupied pivotal positions in the civil service over time. They are inducted very young, without taking any exam of significance, and the civilians around them who are not privileged enough to avail such shortcuts retire. Even now, many of the important positions in the civilbureaucracy are occupied by these individuals.

Similarly, there is nothing in these reforms regarding the mindless appointments of generalists to highly specialised positions just because they passed one, in most cases, absolutely irrelevant CSS exam.

For example, often the guy heading an engineering organisation has no experience in engineering. Once appointed by virtue of being the blue-eyed boy, this individual tries to learn a bit of engineering jargon from his subordinates and then tries to become an authority on the subject, and ends up making appalling decisions. This horrifying practice causes more loss to the exchequer than corruption as losses from the latter might come to a halt by the regulation of conscience or a leak in the media butlosses due to incompetence are perpetual.

There has not been anything on the fasttracl( promotion of civil servants who are top performers. Why can`t they be promoted quickly to the highest level? If somebody is good enough, get them to a better position quicker where they can make informed decisions. The rules actually have cemented the age-old principle of seniority. If an officer is superseded thrice, he can be removed from service which shuts the door on elevating younger officers to higher positions as it would have more consequences for others.

Specialisation in recruitment has been ignored. In a nutshell, people with marketing, sales and media qualifications should be inducted through specially designed exams in the following service groups: the Postal Group, Railways (Commercial & Transport) Group and the Information Services of Pakistan. Similarly, those with a background in economics should vie for Pakistan Customs, Audit and Accounts Service and the Inland Revenue Service of Pakistan. Those interested in internationalrelations and history should compete to join the Commerce and Trade Group (CTG), Foreign Service of Pakistan.

The general group should cater for Military Lands & Cantonment, Office Management andSecretariat Group and the Pakistan Administrative Service. A piece titled `Square pegs, round holes` by this author on April 11, 2011, explained the reasons in detail.

The Police Service should be a separate force with recruitment and training similar to that of the military as it becomes increasingly difficult with age to inculcate the characteristics desirous of a police official.

Again, readers can refer to `Police reforms`, published on Oct 15, 2019, on these pages.

The induction and deputation from one block to another should be strictly prohibited as these are specialised domains and the culture of blue-eyed boys moving from one green pasture to another after destroying the former should come to a stop.

Lastly, Einstein once said: `Any fool can know. The point is to understand.` Those who know the civil service in Pakistan might appreciate these reforms, but those who understand the service and the problems ailing it, would be disappointed.  The writer is a former civil servant.

syedsaadatwrites@gmail.com Twitter: @SyedSaadat55