**Of civil services reform**

BY I. A . R E H M A N 2021-02-18

IN an article contributed to a publication of the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, Dr Ishrat Husain has thrown considerable light on the objectives and scope of the civil services reform undertaken by the present government. All this information needs to be shared with the citizens of Pakistan, the long-suffering victims of questionable governance, who have higher stakes in the reform process than any other party.

The public has reason to feel gratified at the statement that the rationale for the reform process `should be viewed in the context of the present malaise and weaknesses in our government structure, long-term vision of Pakistan, the external environment in which Pakistan will be operating as a country, the lessons learnt from other successful developing countries, the diagnostic studies including public opinion polls about government performance in Pakistan and the growing expectations of the public at large`.

The broad objectives of the civil services reform that Dr Husain underscores have been listed here: 1) Transparent and merit-based recruitment with due regional representation. 2) Performance-based promotions and compulsory training at all requisite levels. 3) Equal opportunities for career advancement.

4) Equality among cadres and non-cadres of all public servants. 5) Guarantees of a living wage and a decent retirement package. 6) Security of tenure for specified periods. 7) Separate cadres of regular civil services and contractual staff at all levels. 8) Establishing an All-Pakistan National Executive Service for senior management posts. 9) Creation of four specialised cadres under the NES (for economic management, technical, social sector management and general management).

We are told that the policies that have already been approved by the cabinet pertain to selection of heads of public-sector corporations and bodies (a transparent procedure has been followed since 2019);training of officers (systematic training of ex-cadre and noncadre officers on the lines of the cadre services has been made mandatory for promotion), performancemanagement agreements, promotion not on seniority but on performance reports, training institutions` assessment and evaluation by service boards. Under Directory Retirement Rules officers superseded or those showing poor performance consistently would be retired by independent boards on completing 20 years of service. With a view to attracting highly skilled professionals from the private sector and overseas Pakistanis attractive packages have been prepared, and to assist ministers holding charge of technical ministries the posts of technical advisers have been created. All this is quite impressive.

However, as mentioned in his article, a number of proposals are yet to receive the cabinet`s nod. The second Task Force on Restructuring of the Federal Government and Austerity has concentrated on (a) 441 organisational entities and has reviewed their functions, ef ficacy and legal status; the entities have been reduced to 324; (b) revitalising the e-office suites in the ministries; (c) Business process re-engineering; (d) public financial management; and (e) strengthening the Secretaries Committee for interministerial coordination. In 2019, a public finance management law was adopted for the first time.

Among others, the Rules of Business and the Financial Rules are being updated and posted on the websites. There is a move to abolish 71,000 posts that have been vacant for at least a year, while 23 training institutions engaged in the training of civil servants are being made autonomous. The maximum limit for PDSP schemes has been raised and a division can now approve schemes up to Rs2 billion.

The scope of the civil services reform is as comprehensive as needed and conclusions have been reached after due consultation with stakeholders.

Those responsible for the exercise appear to have done their job pretty well. However, one does not find any reference to the state of Madina af ter which Imran Khan claims to have modelled his state. One also wonders how much of the reform package can be distinguished from the pattern followed by the colonial m asters.

Further, civil services reform constitutes only apart of the much bigger scheme of governance which is showing some traces of regression. Under the much maligned governments that preceded the PTI regime, the country was trying to raise its political culture in accordance with the universal standards of secret balloting to the extent of making it constitutionally mandatory. Now the country is being pushed down to the more conservative and less democratic scheme of open balloting. No proposal for any retrogressive shift is backed by any study or inquiry or reference to any precedent at home or abroad.

Castration, a cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment, has been added to the Penal Code, and suggestions for inhuman punishments, such as public execution and filming of capital punishment rituals, are being made in the official narrative with rhetorical flourish. What good will civil services reform herald if the state is proudly brandishing its conversion to primitive theories of crime and punishment that even the most underdeveloped societies are struggling to abandon? Good governance and plain common sense demand a reiteration of the definition of the state of Pakistan in accordance with the ideals mentioned by the Quaid-i-Azam. Unless this is done soon Pakistan will risk becoming a pariah in the comity of nations and its citizens will be obliged to carry a burden heavier than all external and domestic debts put together.

One should like to hope that the people of Pakistan still have the time needed for a reality check on the state of the nation and the status of the individual and that they have the will and the means of pulling the state back from the precipice.

Unfortunately, the opposition parties are trying to fight the government with the help of rules of the game the rival in power doesn`t accept. In this situation a fruitful engagement is perhaps impossible.

The authority`s goal to acquire the means of absolute rule is no secret and no knights in shining armour are in sight among the challengers. Where does one find the means to sustain hope of a positive turnaround?