**The celebrity Twitter civil servant**

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The verbal clash between Dr Firdous Ashiq Awan, the Special Assistant to the Chief Minister of Punjab, and an assistant commissioner in Sialkot the other day has touched a raw nerve across different sections of the society. Twitter was ablaze soon after the heated exchange between the two officials went viral. Dr Awan gave a public dressing down to the official over the unavailability of fresh foods and vegetables in the market. Apparently, the assistant commissioner tried to evade responsibility and the lackadaisical attitude made Dr Awan go ballistic. In a loud and obnoxious manner, the de-facto Punjab information minister had a no-holds-barred frontal assault on the civil servant, who seemed petrified and deeply offended, and felt it better to walk away from the situation before any further escalation.

Soon, the battle lines were drawn. The civil servants quickly closed ranks. A representative body of the officers of Pakistan Administrative Service expressed deep anguish over the public humiliation of one of its young officers. It commended the officer for maintaining her dignity despite an onslaught that would have unnerved many. The Punjab Chief Secretary issued a statement condemning the attitude of the minister and said he had expressed his reservations to the chief minister. Dr Awan remained unrepentant and insisted that the bureaucracy is paid from the taxpayers’ money to deliver and not just lord over to give lip service while sitting in chilled offices. Supporters of the ruling Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf were initially a bit hesitant to unequivocally criticise the minister’s attitude. But they rallied behind the minister as soon as Maryam Nawaz Sharif, the PML-N leader, expressed support for the bureaucrat. The episode took a political turn as people took positions according to their political leanings.

[2 doses of Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine provide 95% protection: study](https://nation.com.pk/06-May-2021/2-doses-of-pfizer-biontech-vaccine-provide-95-percent-protection-study)

But most importantly, the response of the public on Twitter was telling. The clash represented the classic tussle between a politician, trying to show concern for the wellbeing of its voter, and a bureaucrat, affronted by the uncivilised behaviour of the public representatives playing to the gallery. The heated exchange also signified the public unease with the conduct of the bureaucracy. A large majority of the public lashed out at the bureaucracy for its impervious and colonial mindset. People were quick to note that the bureaucrats cannot act as holier than thou or unaccountable.

While many criticised the harsh mannerism of the minister, there was an outpouring of criticism and strong disapproval of the latest trend among recent graduates of the Civil Services Academy to use Twitter and other social media apps for what is widely seen as vain self-projection and glorification.

Of late, the young bureaucrats have started using social media, especially Twitter, for personal glory. They proudly post pictures while sitting inside or standing next to the expensive government SUVs, surrounded by gun-toting security guards, and yet complain of tough working conditions. They seek praise and self-validation for doing every obligatory and essential aspect of their official jobs, which are paid for by the public tax money. Furthermore, they want applause for even the smallest parts of their duties. In one cringe-worthy post, an assistant commissioner boasted that he spent Valentine’s Day undercover and visited different markets to inspect commodity prices. But he also had a camera loyally following each and every move subsequently posted on Twitter.

[Global food insecurity at 5-year high amid COVID, conflict, UN warns](https://nation.com.pk/05-May-2021/global-food-insecurity-at-5-year-high-amid-covid-conflict-un-warns)

Many people, including senior retired civil servants, find such exhibitionism in bad taste. Gone are the days when a civil servant was the embodiment of decency, sophistication, and refinement, they lament. Nowadays, a new lot of assistant commissioners and assistant superintendents, especially, have confused their jobs with existential rants, self-congratulatory posts, and stylised pictures. Dressed in branded clothes, official visits have become mere photo-ops. There is almost a sense of rivalry in these young CSA grads with sporting stars and showbiz celebrities for public approval and adoration. The civil servants who earlier aspired to be role models for society now seem obsessed with just being models.

This is not to suggest that the use of Twitter and other social media apps should be discarded all together. Social media apps have broken the proverbial barrier between the public and civil servants. Access has become far easier. A complainant does not have to keep dialling an unresponsive official number to reach an officer. A mere tweet can set off quick redressal of problems, many of which need immediate and urgent action.

[Hundreds of farmers head to Delhi to protest Farm Laws despite COVID restrictions](https://nation.com.pk/05-May-2021/hundreds-of-farmers-head-to-delhi-to-protest-farm-laws-despite-covid-restrictions)

But the trend of the young bureaucrats to play to the gallery and constantly seek self-validation needs to be checked. It is problematic if action is taken merely through Twitter complaints while a majority of people, who don’t have access to social media or are not as tech-savvy to compile compelling threads about their problems, continue to writhe on the sidelines unheard and unattended. Often it seems that complaints addressed through Twitter are aimed just at gaining popularity and the action is not taken with a sense of duty and official obligation.

The government should formulate guidelines for use of social media by officials. An official Twitter handle may be maintained for the position, not the person. This should be managed by an official PRO, not the civil servant him/herself. A personal account should not be linked, nor mentioned. A civil servant may add ‘public good’ pictures without self-projection. Personal pictures should be strictly censured if posted via official handles. In the case of a municipality head or district head, one account should suffice.

[Alibaba’s Jack Ma Foundation chooses African business idols](https://nation.com.pk/05-May-2021/alibaba-s-jack-ma-foundation-chooses-african-business-idols)

There is a scene in the cult classic movie American Psycho, starring Christian Bale. Several characters pull up fancy and yet indistinguishable business cards, each ‘Wall Street Yuppie” trying to outdo and impress the other in an almost manic and psychopathic manner. The young officers of the PAS and PSP cadre are acting in a similar manner by posting tweets just to get brownie points and validation from the public.

The public is, actually, having none of it.