**Of democracy and bureaucracy in Pakistan**

[Zahid ur Rehman](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/zahid-ur-rehman/%22%20%5Co%20%22More%20Articles%20by%20Zahid%20ur%20Rehman)

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The core meaning of democracy is that the power lies with people, and they exercise this power through voting. It is widely believed that democracy is the best system of governance. Pakistan is a democratic country. However, almost everybody knows that the governance in Pakistan is awful. So, the question arises what is wrong with democracy in Pakistan?

There are many answers to this question. Some say that there is no real democracy in Pakistan. Others believe that it is the lack of continuation of democracy. While some argue that democracy is not successful in countries like Pakistan, because the literacy rate is too low. In other words, this means that people in Pakistan cannot critically evaluate the leaders and vote for the wrong reasons. However, something different has happened this time. After ten years of continued democracy, a new party Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) is democratically elected to form the government for the first time.

To run state affairs, the government establishes policies and ensure the proper implementation of these policies. This is achieved mainly through bureaucracy and other state institutions. The main aims of these policies are to ensure the safety of people, provision of basic necessities, and to facilitate them in daily lives. So, bureaucracy plays a vital role in the perception of democracy by ordinary people. Therefore, democratic governments play a lot of attention to the administration so that the fruits of democracy reach the grass-root level.

Political governments rely heavily on bureaucracy to implement their vision of governance. Governance rest on three pillars: 1) power, 2) decision making and, 3) accountability. This means that people in power are responsible for making policies and ensuring their proper implementation. But they are also accountable for their actions and decisions. Unfortunately, accountability has long been ignored in Pakistan, resulting in a proportional increase in the power of politicians and bureaucrats. However, ordinary people are left hopelessly weak, which negates the fundamental principle of democracy.

Let me tell you, with an example, how bureaucracy works in Pakistan. Punjab government has computerized the land records, apparently to make life easier for citizens. Imagine you have a property in a rural area of Punjab. A typical person needs to visit the land revenues office to acquire an official document of ownership, called Fard. You are required to get a token before 10 AM and wait for your turn. The story of humiliation and corruption starts from here. You wait for hours, and your token number is not called. You get frustrated and ask around what is going on. You get smiles, which are kind of mocking you. You are asked to wait and that your number will be called soon. But still, it does not happen. So much so that time reaches close to 5 PM and you are sure that you don’t want to return to this place. You desperately want to get out of this place. You tell the staff that you are a busy person and can utilize your time usefully rather than just endlessly waiting here. But your cry for help falls on deaf ears. If you are fortunate enough, there will be a nice guy who will say “sir aap nay bataya he nahi”, as if they asked you before. Then the nice guy will give you a piece of wise advice. Sir, you should hire an agent -even though a notice clearly saying agents are not allowed. Anyways the agent is a magician; you pay the “fees”, and he will get the work done in minutes for which you wasted a whole day. The same story is repeated at every government office. You have to find an agent, pay the “fees”, and let him do the magic.

*The current system cannot support the vision of Naya Pakistan. This system is designed to enslave people not to empower them*

Anyways you get the Fard, but the name of the owner is misspelled. It happens in almost every case. Now you genuinely realize how atrocious the system is and that there is no escape. Because to get a name right on a Fard is a nightmare. From here, it is a steep learning curve about how the bureaucracy works in Pakistan.

I will try to mention the procedure as succinctly as possible. You write an application to Assistant Director sahib at the land revenue office; he will mark it to his munshi. Munshi sahib will stamp it and mark it to Tehsildar sahib, who will sign and mark it to Qanoongo sahib. After getting signed from Qanoongo sahib, you take the application to Patwari sahib. Patwari sahib does something with your application and require you to go back the same route you come by. Means from Patwari’s office go back to Qanoongo and then to Tehsildar and then to the Assistant Director’s office, all over again. It is needless to mention how you will feel if you attempt to do it all by yourself. If you are lucky or smart, you find an agent. It doesn’t matter how busy you are, the system gives you one message at every single step; you are a worthless slave to the system, Britishers made for you.

Everybody knows that you should have somebody called Tehsildar or Assistant Commissioner or pay some “fees” to someone. Then your work will be done in no time. The question is if the system can be so efficient in particular cases why it can’t be efficient overall? Everybody from a Patwari to Minister knows that the system is broken and they know how to fix it. But nobody seems to care. It’s because this broken system empowers them and keep them relevant. A broken system would keep people seek their favors to get things done. Deriving power through such despotic means shows how sadistic our elite is.

One thing is clear that the system is designed to humiliate people. Also, such a system works to hide the incompetence of the officials. So that if something goes wrong, many people are responsible, which means no one is responsible.

PTI has come into power on the promises that it will improve governance. Imran Khan has repeatedly mentioned that improving governance is the top priority of his government. In keeping with these promises, the government is trying to reform the system but failing so far. It is difficult to understand why is this such a difficult task. There can be only two reasons: either government lacks the true will to implement reforms or that it is incompetent. It may be too early to judge this government. But, the government should stop being blackmailed by bureaucracy. If bureaucrats are not complying, professionals should be hired and given authority and powers to fix and run the system. One successful example in the form of Shabbar Zaidi is already there.

This government is not given a mandate only to fix corruption but also to fix the system. If corruption is the biggest problem of this country, then incompetence and laziness are not far behind. As mentioned by ex-IG Zulfiqar Cheema, reforms will not happen by sending notes and letters to officials. The mentality of the ruling elite needs to be reformed. It will require extensive training, a proper reward for honesty and hard work, and severe punishments for negligence and incompetence. It is time to get over our colonial past and train our bureaucracy to serve the people not to rule them. This requires reforms at the civil services training academy. The CSP officers should be continuously reminded that they are public servants, not the “superiors”, as Central Superior Services (CSS) may imply.

The current system cannot support the vision of Naya Pakistan. This system is designed to enslave people not to empower them. The government expects citizens to work hard and contribute to the growth of the country. But how people can work if the government institutes humiliate them and make them run in circles from one office to another. Fix the system so that skilled professionals stop dreaming about going overseas, and develop a sense of ownership for their country. Democracy will only flourish, and the economy will only grow if ordinary people are empowered.

The rulers of this country should remember that they are Pakistani’s too. Internationally, they will be only as much respected as the citizens of Pakistan are. And Pakistan will be only as strong as the Pakistani’s are.

*The writer is a researcher and educationist. He holds a doctorate from Massey University New Zealand*