**Growing paralysis**

BY T A S N E E M N O O R A N I | 10/9/2019

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| THE government seems puzzled as to why the bureaucracy is not working. Pep talks by the prime minister and threatening statements by high-ups, frustrated by their inability to get things done, have not worked. The reasons seem clear to everyone except the government.Suleman Ghani, former secretary commerceandchairmanPlanning&Development Board, Punjab, retired for nine years, competent enough to be working as senior policy adviser at DFID and adjunct faculty at Lums, was arrested by NAB recently. His crime? Fifteen years ago, as chairman P&D he `deliberately` did not oppose in a board meeting (which he did not attend) a proposal to give the iron ore exploration/ development contract at Chiniot Rajoa, Punjab, to a firm perceived as being close to the PML-N.Apparently, he also wrote on the file (when the department`s summary was on its way to the chief minister for approval) that the proposal would bring value to the exploration of minerals in Punjab.The fact that P&D has no role as per the rules of business in awarding contracts and that the endorsement on the summary is a reflection of the province`s mineral policy will be considered at the trial stage. It is a case that will almost certainly be thrown out after a few years. But by then it will be too late for him to either redeem his honour or be a source of reassurance to working civil servants.Young civil servants see that anyone associated with the previous government, even one with as stellar a reputation as Mr Ghani, will be sent behind bars, his reputation sullied forever.Younus Dagha, another outstanding officer, has sought and obtained early retirement after being transferred out as secretary finance unceremoniously and treated shabbily since. His crime? He disagreed, for professional reasons, on some issues during negotiations with the IMF. After the transfer, apparently he was told to cool his heels and was not given any posting. He chose to leave rather than face ignominy. It is not a loss to Mr Dagha, a competent individual, who will probably do better out of government. It is a loss to the government which complains repeatedly of the dearth of competent officers who can deliver.It is clear to young civil servants that there is no tolerance for disagreement, even on the basis of merit.Media bashing of the bureaucracy continues because it sells. A young civil servant, with only five years` service, has written to a journalist working for a newspaper which published a story recently, headlined `1,700 civil servants in Punjab given 150pc raise in salary`Theletterisreproducedhere andhasbeen edited for reasons of space and clarity: `I joined the civil service in 2014 by making it to the top 25 from among 15,000 aspirants.Briefly, I am drawing Rs115,000 including the alleged 150pc increase. This figure of Rs115,000 includes basic pay, big city allowance, executive allowance, medical allowance, house allowance, etc. I am married and have family responsibilities. I do not own a house in Lahore and currently live in rented premises. In the last four weeks, I have not even taken a Sunday off to see my parents in my native town. Despite all these challenges, I am trying my best to keep myself away from all the temptations and allurements that this service offers one every day in return for favours that one can offer, using official authority unethically or illegally.`I can show my personal record to prove that I declined offers from the most prestigious financial institution in Pakistan to join the civil service and make a difference. I do hope that you will be kind enough to pay heed to my submissions and write a follow-up edi-tion of your story to make things clearer for your readers.Then there is the issue of inter-group rivalries where the police group, better connected with the media and better organised through an effective group of retired officers, always steals amarch on the rest and refuses to accept any oversight in which anyone from the civil bureaucracy plays apart.One does not have to be a rocket scientist to understand why the bureaucracy is not working. The state of affairs is deteriorating.The government seems to have adopted too casual an approach towards allaying fears of civil servants, as the incidents cited here happened only in the past week.Can you fault civil servants for not taking decisions when they could be locked up and disgraced for either supporting or opposing a proposal any time until they die? Can you fault them for not taking decisions if they can be cashiered for disagreeing with the boss? Can you fault them for taking a back seat when they feel they are demonised by the media? There is no way the government machinery will start working again until the prime minister`s advisers on bureaucracy convince him to practically address these concerns and not arrange pep talks alone. The writer is a former civil servant. |