**Bureaucratic Paradoxes**

**Those matters of principle could only be safeguarded if you have the nerves of steel.**

[Najm us Saqib](https://www.nation.com.pk/columnist/najm-us-saqib)

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Somewhere in the suburbs of Islamabad..

Young man: Perhaps I did not phrase my question properly. Let me try again. In our country, why do our politicians keep cribbing about the Establishment’s ‘intrusive role’ but do not wish to break the shackles? Whether in power or sitting on the opposition benches, they play the victim card and keep blaming each other for being ‘their’ product. I want to know the real reasons for this paradox. Let’s say I clear the CSS exam and get selected for any service; shouldn’t I be able to know who my real bosses are? How will I be able to serve the people of my country?

Old man: If I were on the Selection Board, I would have disqualified you for asking this idiotic question. By joining the Government Service, you are bound to serve the Government. It is not the People’s Service. It is the Government Service. Clear your perceptions first. Now, would it matter to you where the orders came from? Orders are there to be followed. End of story. The only relevant question in bureaucracy is: Sir, how much time do I have to complete this task?

Young man: That is discouraging…!!! Does it mean whatever my mentor said was a lie? He said that he never compromised on matters of principle, and he retired as a Federal Secretary.

Old man: Those matters of principle could only be safeguarded if you have the nerves of steel required to stay on course. Secondly, ask your mentor if he was able to make any difference. The plaques have his much less educated Minister’s name on them—the tasks that he completed within the stipulated time. He is living an ordinary retired life in a rented apartment, whereas his clerks have houses for each of their children. What would you prefer?

Young man: Even more discouraging…!!! Sir, if that is the case, why do thousands of young boys and girls appear for the CSS exam every year?

Old man: They don’t have better choices. Secondly, the driving force here is not to serve the country or the people. The objective is to get a decent job. My dear future bureaucrat, if you want to become a boss, start a business or be a plumber or a motor mechanic.

Young man: What would you choose between skills and talent, Sir?

Old man: Both. But skills and talent are not enough to be at the top. You need to be in the right place at the right time as well.

Young man: Coming back to my questions again, Sir. How would you explain the takeover of Afghanistan and Syria by bad and good ‘terrorists’ respectively under the watchful eyes of the United Nations? The annihilation of Gaza in the Muslim neighbourhood? The sudden silence of the lambs between Iran and Israel after an exchange of missiles? A pat on the back for Netanyahu soon after his indictment by the International Criminal Court? The open-ended Ukraine war in the heart of Europe? The Sino-US trade war amidst an increase in bilateral trade?

Old man: Somehow, everyone seems to be in a hurry to achieve the stated and unstated goals while showing no respect for any rules or laws, let alone morals. Everyone is talking. No one is listening. That’s a bad omen. However, don’t worry about your future. The world is not likely to complete its destruction in the next three to four decades. You might be retired by then. For the time being, let those who need to act or react worry about such events. Answers to these questions are not going to help you in any way unless you desire to score a point or two in any WhatsApp group.

Young man: Don’t these paradoxical events bother you, Sir? You seem so composed.

Old man: Why should I be bothered about something I don’t have any control over? What bothers me right now is that I am getting late for my dental appointment.

Young man: How do you see the ongoing unending political uncertainty in Pakistan, Sir? When do you think this charade will end?

Old man: For the ones in power, there exists no political uncertainty. Yes, as Khan wants to become the PM again—his party feels that way.

Young man: Last question, Sir. Power politics in the age of Artificial Intelligence? Why do you think Khan is asking Washington for help?

Old man: Power politics breeds power-hungry foxes. AI is yet another way to wield power. Those who rule economically or otherwise hardly care about the edicts of morality. For them, being in power and making more money is the ultimate objective. In the process, they remain open to new alliances or to sacrificing existing relationships. The world has always been full of paradoxes. The difference? No one has the time to sugarcoat their desires….!! Didn’t you mention the comedy of errors a while ago? Read that play again and you might find answers to some of your questions. And on Khan, try to understand what Shakespeare said in the same play: Since mine own doors refuse to entertain me, I’ll knock elsewhere, to see if they’ll disdain me.

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