**The disappointing administrative reforms II**

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The attack on public servants in 1969 and onwards to turn them into pliant subordinates of the ruling elite particularly after the so called administrative reforms introduced by the first PPP government dispensing with the security of service and tenure had a cumulative adverse impact on the performance of bureaucrats. The Federal Public Service Commission, to a greater extent, kept its system of recruitment intact but the recruitment, and posting of bureaucrats from the Central and provincial cadres in the provinces continued receiving crippling blows.

All the political governments in Sindh irrespective of their complexion have had a parallel system of recruitment reducing the Sindh Public Service Commission (SPSC) to a peripheral position. The practice of direct recruitments in lucrative state departments and public Sector Enterprises (PSEs) was introduced by Z.A. Bhutto bypassing all the merit-based systems of recruitment that then existed in the bureaucratic structure. The public service was thus filled with the sons, nephews and daughters of political demigods of the party. This spoils system continued unabated in the successive provincial governments leaving heads of departments and PSEs with no powers even to appoint their orderlies.

During this long period from the early 1970s to 2008, stunning instances of slaughter of merit and fair play were noticed. However, the years from 2008 to this day have witnessed examples of cronyism and favoritism even unprecedented in the annals of medieval kingdoms and utilitarian states. For the past one decade and half, the Sindh High Court remained seized with scores of petitions of the successful candidates of the SPSC competitive examination of 2003 who were deprived of their hard-earned right to recruitment to cadre posts by manipulating results and appointing the failing sons and nephews of politically influential families, and members of the SPSC.

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The National Accountability Bureau has filed references against the then Chairman and some members of SPSC, and 18 officers so wrongfully appointed. Despite a verdict of the Honorable Court six months ago to accommodate the petitioners, the Government of Sindh (GoS) has been employing all delaying tactics to circumvent the verdict of the court.

This spoils system was taken to consummation by the successive PPP administrations from 2008 reducing the provincial bureaucracy to a cesspool of corruption, aberration, inefficiency and dysfunction. The Supreme Court had to intervene to stop the ever expanding process of absorptions of low ranking officials from various departments into senior cadre posts, shoulder promotions and postings in personal pay and grade.

The landmark judgment of the Supreme Court compelled the Government of Sindh (GoS) to revert scores of officers to their original grades in parent departments. We witnessed Senior Superintendents of Police of the day reverting to their original ranks of Inspector or Chief Municipal Officers going back to their original posts as billing Assistants to Water and Sewerage Board of Karachi. Yet, in another judgment, the Apex Court cancelled the Competitive Examination of SPSC held for recruitment medical doctors in 2015.

In a highly shocking example of the flagrant violation of service rules, unearthed in the District Municipal Committee, West Karachi just a couple of days ago, clerks, orderlies and drivers were found holding the charge of the important posts of Directors and Education Officers. Besides, the appointment of many influential officials as Directors in the Karachi Municipal Corporation and the DMC, North has been found unlawful. This scandal has been the lead news of the print and electronic media for the past two days. Would these institutions save Karachi from another deluge? The MQM-P can answer this moot question as their tenure of local bodies in Karachi and Hyderabad ended in December last year.

In one of my previous articles I had covered the episode of the 500 officers of 17 to 20 grades, re-appointed to lucrative posts by GoS after their plea bargain with NAB. It is saddening to see federal bureaucrats working on deputation in the province falling prey to temptations for fortune making. Until recently, about a dozen officers of the rank of Provincial Secretary from various federal service groups were in jail or NAB custody on charges of corruption and misuse of power. The bureaucracy has genuine grievances. They need security of service and tenure and need leeway to respond to call of duty. An upright officer would loath to acquiesce in unnecessary interference in the performance of his responsibility. The misplaced and unprecedented system of picking up officers of their choice by Ministers or MNAa and MPAs for their home districts is mainly responsible for decline in the performance of bureaucracy. All the field appointments, by law, should be merit-based and the responsibility of the Chief Secretary and the Inspector General of Police.

Bureaucrats have genuine apprehensions about arbitrary arrests by the National Accountability Bureau (NAB). The arrest of senior bureaucrats by NAB sent shockwaves in bureaucracy compelling the senior public servants to avoid taking decisions. This is too serious a problem to ignore. The accountability is the hallmark of every civilized society. No public office holder or private persons from any trade and profession could be allowed to swindle public funds or cause loss to the public exchequer.

The Government should legislate to subject the arrest of an officer by NAB to a proper warrant of arrest by a judicial officer, and the permission of a committee comprising Chief Secretary, Additional Chief Secretary and Inspector General of Police in a province, and a similar three-member committee of Secretaries of Establishment, Cabinet and the concerned Ministry or Division in the centre may look into the charges framed by NAB before allowing the arrest of the accused officer. This could assuage the apprehensions of bureaucracy about arbitrary arrests by NAB.

We cannot have desired results from cosmetic administrative reforms by ignoring the provincial pillar of the bureaucratic structure or stopping the misuse of bureaucrats and arrogant violation of service rules by political bosses. We direly need good governance in the provinces. The provincial bureaucracy is unable even to deliver petty services like price control.

(Concluded)

*The author was a member of the Foreign Service of Pakistan and he has authored two books*