

THE NEWS Recalibrating governance - Part III

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A major departure has to be made in the deployment of civil servants. Instead of senior, qualified and courteous officers being assigned to secretariat positions and junior, rude, unqualified functionaries at the local level as under the present configuration there has to be a reversal of roles.

As most of the public services are delivered at the local level, young, dynamic and competent officers should occupy key positions in the metropolitan corporations, municipal committees, district and tehsil councils. Assistant and deputy commissioners, assistant and superintendents of police and district executive officers of the devolved departments should be legally empowered to resolve the issues and difficulties faced by citizens at their level without referring the matters to the provincial secretariats.

The rules of business have to be changed accordingly. It would be imperative that the chief executive officers of metropolitan corporations and large district councils are appointed from among Grade 21 and 22 officers of the Pakistan Administrative Service and the provincial executive services. After all, the chief secretaries of the provinces are at present selected from this pool of officers. There is no reason why officers of the same caliber and status should be utilized at the local government level. We have to invert the pyramid of hierarchy between the three tiers of the government.

To achieve sustained economic growth, a competitive private sector has to be nurtured and relied upon. Therefore, a major area of reforms in Pakistan is to create space for the growth of new entrants in the private sector by removing the constraints created by the state in their entry and smooth operations. R&D and innovation by private-sector firms should be encouraged through fiscal incentives. The entrenched firms that have subsisted on protection, concessions, exemptions and subsidies should be given timelines either to compete or wind up.

Despite the pursuit of policies of liberalization, deregulation, delicensing and disinvestment during the last 15 years the overbearing burden of government interventions in the business lifecycle looms large. The difficulties faced by new businesses in acquiring, titling, pricing, transferring and possessing land, in obtaining no objection certificates from various agencies, in getting water and gas connections, sewerage facilities, reliable electricity supply, access to roads, securing finances for green field projects or new enterprises using emerging technologies are still horrendous and nerve-racking. The powers of petty inspectors from various departments/ agencies are so vast that they can either make or break a business.

The growing trend towards 'informalization' of the economy particularly by small and medium enterprises is a testimony to the still dominant nature of the government. Over 96 per cent of the establishments reported in the economic census of 2005 fall in this category. The attitude of middle and lower functionaries of the government in the provinces and districts towards private business remains ambivalent. Either functionaries harass businesses to extract pecuniary and non-pecuniary benefits for themselves or they are simply distrustful, hostile or hesitant towards private entrepreneurs. The multiple agencies involved, too many clearances needed and avoidable delays at every level raise the transaction costs for new entrants. Unless the ease of entry and exit is facilitated, competitive forces will remain at bay and the collusive and monopolistic practices of large businesses will continue to hurt consumers and citizens.

The other area has to do with accountability for results. There is both too much and too little accountability of those involved in public affairs in Pakistan. On the one hand, the plethora of laws and institutions such as anti-corruption bureaus, National Accountability Bureau, auditor general's reports, public accounts committees of the legislature, parliamentary oversight, judicial activism and the ombudsman system have created an atmosphere of fear, inertia and lack of decision-making among honest civil servants.

On the other hand, instances of rampant corruption, malpractices, nepotism and favouritism and waste and inefficiency have become a common folklore in the administrative culture of the country. Too much emphasis on ritualistic

compliance with procedures, rules and form has taken the place of substantive concerns with the results and outcomes for welfare and justice.

One way of improving transparency and accountability is through digitalization. The world is moving swiftly towards Information and Communication Technology that is bringing benefits to the lives of the common citizens. E-government tools and development in digital technology offer promising prospects for improving the efficiency of government, reducing the costs of transactions, conveniencing ordinary citizens, introducing transparency and reducing discretionary powers and corruption and tracking performance and output.

Despite such a potentially powerful impact of e-government, the resistance, reluctance and contrived delay in its adoption are fierce. Training of those already working in the government in electronic filing, messaging, sharing and exchange of documents, retrieving, reporting, and archiving will make the transition from a paper-based environment quite smooth. The transparency achieved through e-government will also help curb corruption and exercise arbitrary discretionary powers by government functionaries.

Along with e-government, another way to reduce the discretionary powers of officials is through simplification of rules and regulations, codification and updating and wide dissemination through e-governance tools such as a dynamic website or information kiosks. Online access to government functionaries can help enforce internal accountability standards while at the same time making it convenient for citizens to carry out hassle-free transactions. Strong pressure from organized civil society advocacy groups on specific sectors or activities from the media, political parties, private sector and think tanks can also compel government departments and ministries to become more accountable for the results.

The next area of reforms has to do with the size, structure, scope and procedures of the federal, provincial and local governments and the skills, incentives and competencies of the civil servants. The entire value chain of human resource policy – from recruitment to compensation – needs to be reviewed and redesigned. Similarly, the division of functions and

responsibilities between the different tiers of the government has to be clarified and delineated. A number of federal and provincial departments that are already redundant or would become so under the proposed devolution should be abolished. The elongated hierarchy within the ministry/division has to be trimmed down and the relationship between the ministry and the executive departments, autonomous bodies has to be redefined.

Another source of grief to citizens is caused by uneven and discriminatory application of government rules, regulations and instructions. As these rules are not known to anyone except some limited number of lower functionaries, they exploit their power of hoarding this knowledge for their benefits. Multiple and conflicting rules exist on the same subject as there has been no systematic weeding out exercise. The multiple rules, regulations, instructions and circulars existing in the manuals should be screened, updated and compiled in the form of a concise and accurate manual. Rules of business have to be drastically modified and updated from time to time to reflect the present exigencies of service.

The revision of the establishment manual and the finance manuals deserve priority attention. These manuals after updating and revision should then be uploaded on the websites of the government of Pakistan so that they are accessible to the public at large.

To be continued

The writer is the author of 'Governing the ungovernable'