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GOOD governance is closely linked with sustainable and equitable development. But, however good they may be, policies will have little positive impact unless the institutions implementing them are effective and efficient. One of the main institutions required for good governance is a competent, neutral, honest bureaucracy.

For ordinary citizens, it is civil servants who are most germane to their daily life. Pakistan was fortunate to have inherited a steel frame for its bureaucracy from the British. Initially, the civil services remained true to their tradition of maintaining law and order and collecting land revenue. But the requirements of a newly independent country went beyond this narrow set of functions.

Pakistan’s civil services system and processes did not adapt to changed circumstances. They remained frozen in time and were unresponsive to the people’s needs and aspirations. This status quo suited the military government that came to power in 1958 and the coalition of military-civil services that ruled the country until 1971 to the exclusion of the political leadership.

The post 1971 era ushered in a popularly elected government that decided to break the frame of the civil services and make them more pliable and flexible. The constitutional protection responsible for the civil servants’ independence and neutrality was withdrawn. The quasi-monopoly of the Civil Services of Pakistan in appointments and allocation of top positions was demolished. All different cadres were brought at par and unified under a common pay scale, recruitment and training.

These reforms did not address the larger question of the delivery of public services to the population at large. Except for a couple of thousand officers recruited by the Central Superior Services, the majority of civil servants remained confined to ex-cadre or non-cadre jobs. Several thousand doctors, educationists, teachers, scientists, engineers, economists and accountants in the public sector had limited opportunities for career progression.

The resultant demotivation, demoralisation and despondency among the majority of civil servants was reflected in the poor services delivery. Indifference, inaction and apathy towards clients and a mindset resisting change in the process became ingrained in their behaviour.

The antiquated system of primary interaction between the state and citizen taking place through low-paid, ill-equipped, poorly educated, rude functionaries such as the patwari, thanedar and sub-divisional officer enjoying enormous discretionary powers remained entrenched along with ram-pant corruption, inefficiency and poor governance.

The 2001 devolution to local governments abolished the post of deputy commissioner who formed the single-point anchor for both citizens and government leaders. Whether it was law and order, security and safety, land records, revenue collection or development work, the DC was assigned responsibility and was held accountable for the results. The DC-SP duo played a crucial role in enforcing the state’s writ in the district.

The new system that replaced the old one was still being tested and tried and there were many ambiguities, lack of clarity and operational difficulties that needed to be addressed. But before this system could grow roots it was dismantled in 2008. The vacuum thus created by abolishing the 2001 system has strengthened non-state actors, various mafias, criminals and extortionists. Development projects, that had picked up speed because of the ownership and leadership of the district nazims, also fell into a state of disarray.

At the policymaking level, job insecurity forced the civil servants to align with the political parties. Successive governments brought in their favourite civil servants to occupy key positions. Loyalty rather than competence became the acid test for survival. The winners in this game included political leaders and acquiescent civil servants while the losers were ordinary citizens who ceased to have access to the government and had no way of having their grievances redressed.

A detailed blueprint and action plan for reforming the civil services was prepared after analysis and stakeholder consultation. The basic recommendations can be implemented without much difficulty provided they are taken as part of an integrated and interlinked chain. Selecting one while excluding others can prove to be disastrous.

First, the concept of the superior and subordinate services and the distinction between cadre, ex-cadre and non-cadre, should be replaced with equality of all services at all levels of government. Terms and conditions in matters of recruitment, promotion, career progression, and compensation should be similar for all. Any officer can compete for the National Executive Service or Provincial Executive Service that will man high policymaking positions.

Second, a district service should be constituted for each district government comprising teachers, health workers, sanitary workers etc in Grade 1–16 who already work in the district. The present preoccupation of politicians with transfers and postings would come to an end with this change.

Third, recruitment at all levels should be on a competitive basis and on merit and in observance of the provincial quotas in all Pakistan and federal services. Public service commissions would hold the recruitment tests and interviews.

Fourth, the mandatory completion of training at mid-career and senior positions should be a pre-requisite for promotion. The present system of AERs should be replaced by objective-based performance evaluation system.

Fifth, a fair and equitable compensation system should be based on performance, and teachers, health workers, police, technical and professional experts should be taken out of the national pay scale and given different pay scales according to local labour market conditions. Future recruitment in Grades

1-16 except of police, teachers, health workers, technical experts should be frozen and the savings utilised to pay higher salaries to the officers.

The writer is former chairman of the National Commission for Government Reforms.