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CIVIL BUREAUCRACY AND DEMOCRACY IN PAKISTAN: DO THEY MUTUALLY CO-EXIST?

Usman Khan (Principal Author)

Ph. D Scholar at Qurtaba University of Science and Information Technology

Peshawar Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Pakistan

Dr. Aziz ur Rehman

Assistant Professor Political Science Qurtaba University of Science and Information

Technology Peshawar Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Pakistan

Dr. Imtiaz Ahmad

Assistant Professor Journalism and Mass Communication University of Malakand

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Pakistan

Correspondence (usman.khan.uom@gmail.com)

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Abstract

This paper explores the co-existence of democracy and powerful civil bureaucracy in Pakistan. The available literature informs that there are multiple factors responsible for the failure of democratic or parliamentary governance in Pakistan including inept political parties, socio-economic inequalities, direct and indirect interventions of the military, a centralised federation, and geo-strategic location of Pakistan. In addition to these factors, using Alavi's "over-developed" thesis, this paper argues that "powerful" civil bureaucracy is one of the main obstacles in the way of Westminster democratic model of governance in Pakistan. Colonial legacy, institutional structure, a sense of superiority, technical know-how, and feuds among the politicians make civil bureaucracy 'powerful' and 'over-developed' and enable civil servants in Pakistan to resist any reforms that threaten their power and status. Data is collected through interviews from a diverse group of academics, bureaucrats and politicians.

Keywords: democracy, bureaucratic elite, colonial legacy, classical Weberian model, administrative reforms

Introduction

Pakistan, being a former British colony, has adopted Westminster model of governance under the constitution of Pakistan 1973. The model is fundamentally based on the notions of popular sovereignty imbibed in the parliament, responsible cabinet, disciplined political parties, fair and free elections, and rule of law (cite automatic references Dicey, 2005). Unlike England, these credentials are lacking in Pakistan. In this context there are different strands of scholars who have highlighted multiple factors that contribute to failure of the parliamentary governance in Pakistan.

A group of scholars argues that indigenous political culture of Pakistan is incompatible with western parliamentary democracy. They argue that prerequisites like discipline political parties, a constructive opposition, and fair and transparent elections are missing (Jalal, 1995; Tudor, 2013; Kapur, 2006). Indeed, Pakistan lacks to provide a suitable environment to Westminster system to flourish. Though India too had such problems, yet she has provided a better space to the parliamentary democracy.

Another group of scholars contend that strong centre at the cost of autonomous federating units is the most significant factor behind the failure of democracy in Pakistan. Until 18th amendment, 2010, the federating units had grievances against the centre (Noman, 2009; Akhter, 2009; Jafferlot, 2016; Waseem, 2005). However, despite the commencement of amendment in 2010, parliament is still weak at the face of a powerful civil bureaucracy in Pakistan.

In this regard, there are other scholars who demonstrate that weak socio-economic structure of Pakistan weakens Westminster model of democracy (Zaidi, 2015; Brass, 2019; Mohmand, 2019). Of course, Pakistan is having a weak socio-economic base; however, India and Bangladesh too are not that much economically stable, but democracy is relatively stable there. Yet other scholars claim that the geo-strategic location and interests of the powerful states such as the United States, Russia, China, and Saudi Arabia strengthens authoritarianism at the expense of democracy (Paul, 2014; Ali, 2018; Waheed & Abbasi, 2013). The argument that the geo-graphic location is a curse for Pakistan might be persuasive, but it is also a fact that India, Japan, Taiwan, and Malaysia also have strategic significance, but they are more stable than Pakistan in terms of democratic politics.

A group of scholars opines that representative institutions are too weak to perform their functions effectively. This failure provides space to non-democratic forces like military in Pakistan (Chada, 2000; Rodrik, 2016; Ganguly & Fair, 2013). Representative institutions like political parties are weak to perform, however, the un-elected apparatuses like military and civil bureaucracy are too strong that do not let elected institutions to perform its work in effective manner.

Undoubtedly, colonial legacy, a centralised federation, weak socio-economic structure, frequent military interventions, and geographic significance highly influence democracy in Pakistan. However, these arguments offer an incomplete explanation about the failure of parliamentary governance in Pakistan. This paper argues that 'powerful'

and Alavi's "over-developed" civil bureaucracy in Pakistan is a significant obstacle in the way of stable parliamentary governance in Pakistan. Below is the elaboration of this argument.

Strength of bureaucratic elite

There is a contest among scholars on the position of civil bureaucracy in Pakistan. There are scholars who believe that role and powers of civilian bureaucracy has minimized. In this context, one of my respondents, Taqweem Saeed, a custom collector, quoted S Akbar Ahmed, stated that the strength and role of bureaucracy has reduced. He added that the 'steel frame' has vanished and has totally shattered after Bhutto's administrative reforms in 1974 and Musharraf's devolution of power plan in 2002. The reforms have weakened the hitherto predominant role of civilian bureaucracy. Further, its quality has jeopardised due to politicisation. Judiciary, instead, has taken more assertive role through activism and so-motto interventions. Anti-corruption agencies like National Accountability Bureau, Federal Investigation Authority have taken strict actions. Social media and the campaign of mainstream media put question marks on the performance of bureaucrats. All these have led to serious governance issues that have compelled civil servants to leave their departments and go to the development sector or abroad and find scholarships and settle there (Saeed, 2020). However, despite all these developments bureaucratic elites are still powerful enough to influence the government and sovereignty of the parliament. Various factors like colonial legacy, sense of superiority, technical know-how, over-centralized structure and concentration of powers, and vendettas among political leaders give strength to the bureaucratic elite in Pakistan.

Continuation of colonial legacy makes civilian bureaucracy a powerful institution in Pakistan. The colonists developed a hierarchical-centralised bureaucracy based on strict rules and powers aiming at curtailing possible threats to their rule in British India. Pakistan after independence continued with the same colonial trends of over-centralisation and hierarchy. This has turned civil and military bureaucracies over-developed in comparison to the representative institutions in Pakistan (Alavi, 1972).

Sense of superiority among civil servants is another source that makes them powerful in Pakistan. Muhammad Alam, commissioner in Inland and Revenue department based in Mardan stated "civil servants, passing through a tough examination, are superior, cream, and legacy holders of the colonial masters. With this sense of superiority, it is quite natural that civil servants would look down upon the politicians who are ordinary people, not well educated. Also they come into power corridor but totally unaware of how is governing taking place, what is the constitutional dispensation or what are the rules and regulations, what are the rules of the business. This 'ignorance' of politicians regarding the technicalities of governance gives civil servants a sense of superiority over elected representatives who come to power for a short span of five years" (Alam, 2020).

Likewise, a deputy secretary, Sajid Iqbal who is a high ranked bureaucrat, shared an anecdote by referring to a cartoon in 1990s where a secretary was shown followed by a minister. He stated, “This is how the structure of governance operates in Pakistan as the powers are concentrated in the hands of the secretary and the minister’s status is just an impartial observer or a person sitting from above giving verbal orders or very rarely orders in writing. Most of the decisions are taken by the secretary. If a minister obliges his secretary, he may take the decisions otherwise it remain pending for weeks”. He further added

“Once I went with a minister to the office of a secretary for a legitimate favour. The minister requested the secretary to do it unlike developed democracies where the secretary would be called in to the minister office and would be asked for whatever job whether lawful or unlawful. Although unlawful things would not be asked in any western developed democracy but within a developing country like Pakistan this is quite odd where the secretary is in the driving seat or in the chair and the senior minister come and sit in front of him rather than being the reversed” (Iqbal, 2020).

Moreover, civil servants have a strong network in Pakistan and can be found in different departments. In this connection, Jan Muhammad, a merchant who had experienced bureaucratic hurdle in his business, commented “If we go to the judiciary, we will find a DMG officer as the registrar, when there is an issue of land allotment, we will find bureaucrats in the municipal corporation, if there is an issue of tax or the rights of the labours or the owner of the factories, again there will be labour inspectors in the labour department, same goes for the agriculture and for other sectors where they are engaged. They have to come back to the state for the resolution of their dispute and that is where civil bureaucracy strikes compromises as well which leads to clientelism. In Pakistan, bureaucrats play a she thinker role. They not only make fortunes for themselves but perpetuate the injustice and exploitation in the system” (Muhammad, 2020).

Another reason behind the strength of bureaucratic elite is its technical know-how. Muhammad Alam, a senior bureaucrat stated “bureaucrats have more knowledge, expertise and skills so they know the links and connections, the tricks and tips of how to exercise power and how to get things done. These tricks are not usually known to the elected politicians”. These factors contribute to over-development of civil bureaucracy in Pakistan which enables them to resist any change or reforms aimed at ensuring parliamentary governance. Parliamentary politics during 1988-2019 best illustrates role, strength, and response of civil servants of Pakistan.

a) Bureaucratic resistance to the reforms of elected government

During 1988-2019, several governments have attempted reforming civil services to make it accountable and efficient, but all such efforts have not remained successful. In this regard, Sajid Iqbal hailing from bureaucracy

informed me that Nawaz Sharif's first term government in 1990 had tried to separate civil and judicial powers of the civil servants but that had remained an unsuccessful story due to the fact that bureaucrats had created hurdles in its way. Similarly, he added, Yasin Watto, Speaker of the National Assembly, in 1993 made a similar attempt to bifurcate judicial and civil powers. However, once again it could not be implemented at the face of powerful bureaucrats. Likewise, the respondent commented, there were continuous efforts from the political leadership on mainstreaming and merging of erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and marginalised and disadvantaged regions but resistance on the part of bureaucrats held it delayed till 2018 because such moves would threaten interests of the civil servants that were deeply entrenched in preserving status of FATA (Iqbal, 2020).

Further, a senior bureaucrat, Maroof Gul,¹ had to say that several commissions were formed, and reports were submitted to ensure accountability, transparency, but all had fallen victims to bureaucratic resistance. The respondent added that for Federal Bureau of Revenue (FBR), the government tried to seek help from the World Bank (WB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) to reform the whole machinery from tax administration to the tax policy. Huge chunks of money, a lot of technical support in the form of trainings, automation and the business process engineering came. Unfortunately, after more than twenty years have passed now, but FBR still has that problem of data integration, poor automation, and desire level of accountability and responsiveness.

Moreover, Muhammad Alam, a tax collector informed me that in the federal secretariat, the government launched a project known as e-office initiative in 2006, moving of files through automated environment rather than physically moving from one office to another. The initiative was required to be done within two years, but it took sixteen years to implement the project. He quoted "The more the system is manual or works on traditional manner, the more the civil servants are happy" (Alam, 2020).

Likewise, the government has taken various steps to ensure accountability but due to lack of cooperation these initiatives remain unsuccessful. Sarwar Iqbal² told me that different agencies like Ehitsab Commission (Accountability Commission) at provincial and district levels, National Accountability Bureau (NAB) at national level were introduced by the political leadership but the implementation remained poor and below far because the bureaucrats created hurdles. He added that in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan Tehreek Insaaf (PTI) government attempted to change rules of business of 1973 which proposed that secretary being head of department should be replaced by the minister concern. It led to huge tussle between Pakistan Administrative Services (PAS) supported by

¹Maroof Gul is an assistant commissioner in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa who has experienced reforms at FATA especially merger of the tribal agencies, now districts.

²Sarwar Iqbal is a young bureaucrat based in Nowshera.

the Provincial Management Servants (PMS) officers and the government in power (Iqbal, 2020).

The above comments and passages inform that civil bureaucracy obstructs any reform that threatens its existing power and status. In addition, civil servants adhere to the old classical bureaucratic model which inherently protects their status, power and prestige.

b) Classical Weberian model and civil servants in Pakistan

Civil servants of Pakistan adhere to the classical Weberian model of bureaucracy and resist any changes in it. The model is based on hierarchy, divisions of labour or specialization of function, and strict rules and regulations. Most of the scholars argue that reforms like India and Bangladesh could not be brought into the structure of civil services of Pakistan due to the stubbornness of civil servants. India and Bangladesh had the same bureaucratic structure, but they have successfully modified and reformed it. Inherently there is no contradiction between the classical Weberian model and parliamentary politics but elite in bureaucracy resists adjusting it in line with modern trends (Choudhery, 1990).

Ayesha Jalal on Zoom meeting to the civil servants on 30th June 2020 stated “One of the key issues in Pakistan is that the bureaucrats do not allow classical Weberian model to make it more market oriented unlike several developed democracies where the classical Weberian model has given way to market public management model. The public management model is open, inclusive, accountable, and responsive. Margret Thatcher in England and Ronald Reagan in the US during 70s and 80s have brought the new model of governance in their respective polities that ultimately led to minimal government and contributed to efficient governance. The governing structure in these states became more accountable, efficient, transparent, professional, and inclusive. On the other hand, since inception, Pakistan continues with the outdated classical model which is not suited to the aspiration of nation as service delivery and governance was required rather than strict rules, regulations and control” (Jalal, 2020, Interview with civil servants on Zoom meeting, 30th June, 2020).

Stubbornness of the bureaucratic elites do not allow over-centralised bureaucratic model to be adjusted with the need of time. Muhammad Alam had to say “There is no room for new public management due to the bureaucratic elite stubbornness. We still have this lord sahib, my bap concept, kind of untouchable, the two-nation theory, one the ruler and the other which is being ruled. So, this thing is not quite conducive to parliamentary democratic culture considering that democracy is inclusive, pro-people, responsible and responsive, it is accountable, and these things in a way are not in harmony with parliamentary democracy” (Alam, 2020).

Moreover, any future endeavour towards reforming the civil service is contingent upon the response of bureaucrats in Pakistan. Taqweem Saeed was of the opinion “Currently, civil services reforms are underway under Dr. Ishrat Hussain which is more tilted towards public management model. The reforms propose accountability, job specific requirement, career

planning, placement, hire and fire policy, and reward and punishment system. All these things are now aligned to make bureaucracy more in league with the demands and trends of governance elsewhere in the world more specifically to the market demand that is the public management model. Again, implementation and success of the proposed reforms depend on the response of civil servants of Pakistan” (Saeed, 2020).

Hence, adherence of the bureaucratic elite to the classical bureaucratic model impact autonomy and sovereignty of elected and representative bodies in Pakistan. Further, to maintain their status and resist change, bureaucrats develop connections with politicians and influential political figures.

c) Nexus between bureaucrats and politicians

There is a binary relation between bureaucratic elite and politicians in Pakistan. Bureaucrats often develop connections with politicians and political parties for personal interests. On the other hand, politicians also use bureaucrats for their own political purposes especially during elections. One of the respondents, Muhammad Hussain, told that a section of District Management Group (DMG) was close to the Chief Minister Punjab during Nawaz Government which was unofficially called as DMG (N) where N represents Nawaz Sharif. The section was exposed to the political bosses who were given good postings. However, with the arrival of new regime, the old guys who enjoyed the hay days were pushed behind and faced accountability charges (Hussain, 2020).

Further, Pakistani politics is characterised by patronage. There are big patrons who offer services to the masses on reciprocal terms and conditions. The local influential political leaders often use civilian bureaucracy as a mean of patronage to have hold over the masses (Shafqat, 1999). On the other hand, Ghulam Sadiq, a professor having expertise on bureaucratic elite, said, “Bureaucracy mediates state-market disputes, intra-market disputes, and conflicts among different stakeholders. There may be disputes between taxpayers, the corporate entities, employees and corporate bodies, investors, entrepreneurs, and the landlords. The role of bureaucracy comes to intervene, to facilitate, to provide services, legal services, security services, infrastructure development, health services, all that. This arbitration and mediation also pave the way to patron-client relations. The bureaucrat demands money and other favours like promotion and transfers from the big politicians and industrialists” (Sadiq, 2020).

Civil bureaucracy works like a web within Pakistan. Jan Muhammad, a merchant by profession was of the view, “Role of bureaucrats is too important and if we go to judiciary or supreme court where the registrar is the DMG officer, when there is an issue of land allotment, we will find bureaucrats in the municipal corporation, if there is an issue of tax or the rights of the labours or the owner of the factories, again there will be labour inspectors, the labour department, same goes for the agriculture and for all the sectors where they are engaged” (Muhammad, 2020).

In addition, politics of patronage and utilisation of state resources for political purposes has led to a situation where a district administration, bureaucrat—politician nexus is emerging as a salient characteristic of Pakistani politics. This nexus if allowed to grow at the current rate, would result in the formation of “Crime cartels” that have been witnessed in Latin American states where there used to be crime, smuggling, ransom and the culprit could easily be escaped from the law as his patron was to be there at the concern office (Shafqat, 1999). Bureaucratic elite alliance with politicians and influential political leaders enable them to work as means for the big patrons and in response they pursue their interests.

Mutual co-existence

Democracy will not be able to strengthen and find firm roots in the presence of powerful civil bureaucratic elites because the latter always try to create hurdle in the way of effective parliamentary governance. The logic is simple; in a stable set-up, they lose power and status. In this context, Sajid Iqbal expressed his views in these words,

“Bureaucratic elites pose a constant challenge to the parliamentary democracy in Pakistan. It is a fact that strong parliamentary set-up jeopardy and threatens power and prestige of the civil servants. In other words, stable democracy ensures efficient civilian bureaucracy. Parliamentary system of governance stands on the principle of accountability where a minister must be accountable to the parliament for his concerned ministry and if something goes wrong, he has to vacate his office. To escape such a situation, a minister has to keep a tight grip over the whole ministry where most of the personnel are the civil servants. Hence, true parliamentary system of governance ensures accountability within the polity. Therefore, bureaucratic elite, who are constitutionally bound to work under ministers, do not like parliamentary democracy to flourish in Pakistan” (Iqbal, 2020).

Second, an academic said, “Bureaucratic elite often tries to sabotage any reforms that either threaten their power and status or strengthen parliamentary governance as in the latter case they have to work under cabinet and parliamentary oversight which is again dangerous for them. Again, if these bureaucratic elite had allowed reforms well in time, a stable parliamentary set-up would have established in Pakistan”.

Third, one of the respondents hailing from bureaucracy remarked on the condition of unanimity, “Bureaucrats are often happy with a weaker or fragile government as has always been the case in Pakistan. Further, they are powerful enough but their role and strength is hidden unlike military and religious elites who either directly remove elected government or compel and influence them through demonstrations and strikes respectively. This does not happen in case of civilian bureaucrats who weaken elected government from within. And this is why the elected governments during 1988-2019 remained weak”.

In the last two decades, role of bureaucratic elite has minimised but unfortunately on the other hand elected government is also vulnerable.

Though elections take place on regular basis since 2008, however, the parliament remains a weaker body that could not maintain an oversight on them. The same respondent shared an anecdote “We are happy and comfortable with a weak government like PTI. The reason is very simple as most of the ministers are incompetent who rely on us and without us they cannot do anything”.

Conclusion

This above discussion informs that civil bureaucracy, in comparison to the elected and representative institutions, is “powerful” and “over-developed” in Pakistan. Colonial legacy, centralised institutional structure, a sense of superiority, technical expertise and know-how, and personal feuds among politicians contribute to the strength of civilian bureaucracy and enable them to subvert any reforms that endanger their power, status, and prestige. Further, civil servants in Pakistan adhere to the classical bureaucratic model because the model protects their colonial inherited power and status. Moreover, a stable parliamentary or Westminster system of governance threatens perk and privileges attached with the structure of civil services of Pakistan. Therefore, Pakistan could not develop a stable and effective parliamentary system during 1988-2019 since civil servants perceive threats to their historically established status-quo. The discussion unpacks that Alavi’s ‘over-developed’ state structure where civil servants still enjoy a predominant position in the Pakistani society at the expense of promoting parliamentary and model of Westminster governance.

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