

# Reforming the Bureaucracy

## The Clerkdom Needs to be Demolished, But How?

What Bangladesh needs is a bureaucracy that works, not the bloated bureaucracy we have now. "Civil servants for service to people" should be the objective of the much-delayed high-powered Public Administration Reforms Commission (PARC), writes Quamrul Islam Chowdhury

**B**ANGLADESH bureaucracy has never been under fire. Critics whisper that the state itself has been reduced to a miserable Clerkdom. White-collar clerks abandoned by the British Raj have been ruling this country since the colonial era. Bangladesh won independence, but, is yet to taste the fruits of sovereignty. Bureaucracy has prospered to an extent that it is too hot to be handled by the inept politicians. Even after restoration of parliamentary democracy in 1991, bureaucrats are still masters, 120 million people are their subjects. Red tapism still is the order of the day. They can jeopardize parliamentary decisions. They can block cabinet decisions. Some of them are more powerful than some senior ministers because of their proximity to the highest level. Yes, there are also few exceptions. There are also some bright and honest secretaries. There are also a number of high calibre junior and mid-level officers. But, they are simply outnumbered by the thousands of clerk-type inefficient officers, who are simply time-servers. Here is the breeding ground of corruption, crime and nepotism. The entire people are the hapless victims.

The people can't raise their voice against this Clerkdom. From any police station to passport office, from registration office to income tax office, it is all pervasive. The people are victims. Their elected representatives are kept silent only to get a booty of administration. Governments come and go, but clerks are there to run the show in the name of the Clerkdom. They can easily change their colours overnight. Concepts of good governance, administrative reforms, transparency and accountability are alien to them. But, they were seen to behave very politely with those who know the art of down-sizing them. Once-mighty bureaucrats after their retirement were seen to kneel-down around the power corridor just to get a contractual job or consultancy. Honest and capable officers are being deprived and denied. An unholy politico-bureaucratic-business alliance is blocking outright the development process. National institutions fail to flourish. Magistracy is in an absolute mess. Can the Public Administration Reforms Commission (PARC) demolish Clerkdom and bring into being a pro-people, transparent, efficient and accountable administration to fulfil the hopes and aspirations of the independent nation? If, properly guided, tuned, trained, inspired and groomed, Bangladesh bureaucracy can achieve miracles.



Where lies the end to their ordeal?

**Background**  
 Bangladesh inherited this bloated bureaucracy from the colonial era. Since independence in 1971, there have been 20 reports of different high-powered commissions or agencies identifying the need to reform the bureaucracy. Nurun Nabi Committee Report on Administrative Reorganization, 1996 and the World Bank report titled "Government that works: Reforming the Public Sector", 1996 are now considered by different agencies. But not much progress has been achieved in reforming the bureaucracy.

**Good Governance**  
 Good governance is a broad area. The major element of this is political plurality nourished through regular free and fair elections, peaceful transfer of power and freedom to oppose. The second major element of good governance is the rule of law and protection of human rights ensured by a fair judicial system, a framework of laws and regulations, clear property and civic rights, upright enforcement machinery and freedom of expression, movement and association. Third, a small but efficient government only to promote creative initiatives of the private individuals without any hindrance. The fourth element is accountability, transparency and efficiency of the administration. The fifth is the participatory decision-making process. The last but

not the least, strong local government.

On this broad canvas of good governance, bureaucracy is for the services to people, which is the motto of PARC Chairman A. T. M. Shamsul Haque. Metro Chamber President Mahbub Jamil is right when he says without reforming bureaucracy, Bangladesh can't achieve economic development.

**Nothing Isn't an Option**

"Doing nothing isn't an option," a famous quote of former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher aptly depicts the inaction of the bureaucracy of her country. Bangladesh is caught in the same syndrome. Britain has overcome it. Bangladesh also can curb it.

### PARC Recommends, Bureaucracy Disposes?

Here are the recommendations submitted by the Public Administration Reform Commission to the Prime Minister:

- Few steps towards improving the quality of utility services and ensuring accountability of public sector enterprises rendering utility services to the citizens.
- The letter receiving system of the Secretariat.
- Voluntary retirement.
- Appointment of Ombudsman.
- To make easy the collection of travels taxes.
- Freezing the manpower under the revenue budget.
- Make easier the payment of pension and removal of harassment of the government employees.
- Encashment of transport services for the priority officers.
- Modernise the land administration of Bangladesh.
- Institutionalisation of the implementation mechanism of recommendations of the commission.
- One-stop utility bill payment system.
- Make easier the process of passport issuing.
- Make easier the process of driving license; transport registration, fitness and road tax payment.
- Work improvement team.
- Ensure the transparency of public administration.
- Develop highway traffic system and increase the security along the highways.

down-size it, clip it and make it a pro-people one. And that should be the agenda before the PARC for immediate action.

Enter any room inside the secretariat or any office at the district or thana level, you would see how slow they are to kill your innovative thinking, enterprises and zeal for progress. The cumulative result, the national economy is not taking off. You can't even blame them. What is their pay? It's far below the bare minimum requirements. So, a large number of them resort to corruption exercising their discretionary powers. They jump on 'speed money'.

Even this bureaucracy can achieve miracles, if properly trained, groomed and inspired to serve the nation. If, the other elements of good governance function smoothly, the bureaucracy would automatically come to terms with the new reality. Then the bureaucracy will behave properly. If, a bureaucrat finds that s/he can dodge the minister, then in most case, s/he would tend to do so. The problem is a deep-seated one. Parliamentary democracy needs to function smoothly. Parliamentary standing committees should exercise their responsibilities. Standing committees can enforce their supervision power over the respective ministry and departments.

Elections should be free, fair, neutral and peaceful for choosing public representatives. If, public representatives are properly chosen and they raise the people's concerns, then no bureaucracy in the world can suppress the people. They would only serve the public in it's true sense. If, parliament properly functions, then MPs are bound to outshine the bureaucrats. Land magistracy would also behave. People's concerns would be aired inside the parliament. People's representatives can make the bureaucrats accountable to them by making themselves accountable to the people.

Ministers and MPs can infuse efficiency in the bureaucracy by first making themselves efficient enough to guide them, lead them, dictate them in the true spirit of democratic governance.

If, a senior minister presurises managing directors of the nationalised commercial banks to float government decisions and unlawfully sanction loans for importing two-stroke auto rickshaws, then those officials would have scant regard for government decisions. No matter, whether it is taken at the cabinet, or at the parliament or at the high-powered national environment council headed by the Prime Minister. And some of the ministers are doing it.

They are promoting irregularities and corruption, without the slightest care for efficiency, accountability and transparency. Why not complete the Voters' Identity Card Programme for ending false voting? If a minister takes a very long time to give a decision, his time to issue that letter of order. Anyone who visits the secretariat, would find that officers and staff are not late in those ministries where the ministers are on time. There is little discipline in those ministries where ministers are irregular in their office. Bureaucrats are seizing the opportunity in a much larger scale. This cobweb of irregularity and corruption is so transparent that a Corruption Raj has been established over the years.

**Our-men Syndrome**  
 Our-men Syndrome promoted by the highest level has also it's natural fallout on the overall performance of the bureaucracy. Internal Resources Division secretary Abdul Mueed Chowdhury said "our-men" culture in administration has made it rotten. These "our-men" of yester-governments overnight become "our-men" of the present government only to make miserable the life of those honest, brilliant and non-partisan officers and staff. These corrupt and opportunist officers have always been successful in keeping themselves at the prized placements. Their accesses in the civil administration, in the police administration and in the magistracy have victimised others, particularly the ordinary people. This system of patronising the corrupt should go, if the government sincerely wants reform, said another senior secretary.

**Pockets of Excellence**  
 Bangladesh bureaucracy has

### Interview of PARC Chairman

A career bureaucrat, A T M Shamsul Haque is the chairman of the high-powered Public Administration Reform Commission (PARC). He infused some dynamism in the PARC to help reform the bloated bureaucracy. Recently, A T M Shamsul Haque shared some of his thoughts with Quamrul Islam Chowdhury. Excerpts:

**Question: Doing nothing has almost become an option for our bloated bureaucracy. How you, as the chairman of PARC, would change this very attitude, bring reforms, efficiency, accountability, transparency and prevent corruption?**

**Answer:** We have to look at it in the context of a broader macro perspective. There is a fear syndrome. We really need a breakthrough. Strong determined political commitment is of paramount importance. We, from the commission, are trying to create a congenial atmosphere for changing that attitude and reform it. We have initiated a public debate series with all professional groups of the society. After holding a number of seminars, roundtables and consultations, what I find interesting is that there is an understanding among all to attempt for reaching a kind of consensus. The national consensus on the fundamentals or on the principal issues or ground rules among the political parties and civil society.

No government can straight away take such difficult hard decisions. It's not an easy task to reform. Our strategy is to hold a series of seminars, roundtables, discussions with cross section. There is a kind of unity in taking some steps for administrative reforms. There are also problems of implementation of the recommendations. We are mainly scrutinizing two major reports, Nurun Nabi Committee report on Administrative Reorganisation 1996 and the World Bank report "Government That Works: Reforming the Public Sector" 1996. We are submitting our recommendations directly to the Prime Minister for considering and implementation. It's a very high-powered commission and the terms of reference is also wide. This shows the seriousness of the government. We have already submitted 16 recommendations and two more are in the process.

**Q: But, out of those 16 recommendations, so far none is implemented.**

**A:** PM okayed 8 recommendations and asked concerned ministries to process those for implementation.

**Q: You as a career bureaucrat knows more than anybody else that in our country the very word "Processing" is a very feared word. Because, here process means not a year, process means a sordid tale of couple of years. Then, how are you going to implement reforms?**

**A:** Yes, you are absolutely right. This commission is helping the government in monitoring the implementation. We have begun a transparent process by making the recommendations public. All our 16 recommendations are open papers, not secret. In this information age, except security matters everything should be open. We are emphasizing on public consultation to reach consensus about reforms.

**Q: All your 16 recommendations are on only tiny matters, pretty issues. Some critics say, these are at the dictates of some retired bureaucrats who were once known for their iron-framedness and now after retirement fallen victims of those bureaucratic hurdles. Don't you think, by sidetracking the big issues and concentrating so far on little issues, you are sending wrong signals? How will you melt the ice-berg?**

**A:** I'm fully aware of it. But, you know, implementation is a tough thing. Better to start with small, visible public concerns. Gradually to go into hard decisions. The World Bank has also suggested three-types of time-frame: short term, medium term and long term. Our 16 recommendations are a mix of simple issues with some serious one. It is a combination of recommendation for reform and improvement. We have emphasized mostly on easing the public life. We are looking at the administration as provider of services to the public. Our recommendation for introduction of one stop utility bill payment system is a revolutionary one in Bangladesh. We got the idea from Malaysia. We took the idea of introducing work improvement team in the office from Malaysia.

**Q: Why now after your retirement? Critics pose this question very often now.**

**A:** We must start at some point. We must create a congenial atmosphere for taking hard and strong decisions. Right-sizing of the government is essential. We can't clear the deck overnight. Reform is a bigger thing. Good governance is a big thing. The executive, legislative and judiciary, all three branches come under the good governance. Improving the administration is an easier task. But, reforming administration is a bigger matter.

**Q: Even for improving the administration, you need to bring a change in the whole atmosphere. You have to look at the issues of promotion, posting and retirement. Some are secretaries for fifteen years after getting some quick promotion in their early fifteen years service life. Same is not the case with the rest. But, there are some bright officers who even after completing seventeen years as assistant secretaries, could not get a promotion to elevate themselves to the position of deputy secretary. They thought they are being deprived by extensions of their seniors who otherwise would have been retired much earlier. How are you going to resolve those issues?**

**A:** We should look at the recruitment policy. During Pakistan days, say, there were 500 CSPs all over Pakistan. Every year, say 25 were recruited and 25 were retired. So, promotion was quicker. That balance was destroyed by general Ershad. He recruited over 2,000 BCS in just three years from 1982-85 creating a mess in the whole promotion system in the administration. You see so many officers are not retiring in three years. So, promotion prospects are becoming more bleak.

**Q: Why don't you introduce a fast-track. Only meritorious officers would pass through that way getting incentive promotion and prized posting? Why don't you directly recruit some highly qualified professionals at the mid-level for improving the quality of service? Why don't you properly train them in the nationally and internationally reputed institutions for raising their intellectual capacities?**

**A:** You are absolutely right. We must have a fast-track. It must be based on merit. There must be proper training. It must be correlated with promotion and posting. This is not done here so far. Need based training is a must. The training for career planning is essential in this age of specialization.

**Q: Land administration is another hotspot to be addressed. How are you going to approach it?**

**A:** Yes, it's a very delicate area. The people are suffering from it the most. Land registration is a problematic issue. Whether registration of land should be done by the Law Ministry or Land Ministry is another inter-ministerial tussle issue.

**Q: Land magistracy is our colonial legacy. Civil servants in those colonial days were taught to rule the subjects. That yesteryears master-servant attitude is still prevailing in Bangladesh. How, you are going to remove that master-client relationship mentality from the civil servants?**

**A:** It must go. We are determined to do it. The government is also determined to do it.

**Q: Do you think we can demolish this Clerkdom in the near future? When the downfall of this Clerk Raj the nation can enforce upon for the overall development and prosperity?**

**A:** I think, if the Parliamentary system smoothly functions without interventions, then it would go. It's a must to change the attitude of the bureaucrats. They are to serve the people. They should be ready to do that. So far we have given the partial reports. We shall make a final report.

Recommendations of PARC

its pockets of excellence. That should be up-scaled. A quantum leap in efficiency and effectiveness of the government in general and bureaucracy in particular is essential if Bangladesh has to achieve development, reduce poverty, anticipate the opportunities and challenges of the future and enable the citizens and private sector to realize their full potential.

**Too Many Responsibilities**

The bureaucracy-dominated government is doing too many commercial functions that others can do better. The corporations in course of time imbibed the culture of mainstream bureaucracy and became more inefficient and virtually unaccountable. They contributed to the mushroom growth of public sector and bloated bureaucracy.

The government is doing too little of what it should be doing more like poverty alleviation, infrastructure. May be, they misunderstood the Chinese proverb: Many little things done in many little places by many little people will change the face of the world. The size of the bureaucracy should be trimmed. The number of ministries, divisions, departments should be reduced to easing some of the burden on the national budget. Over 4 per cent of GDP is spent for maintaining the bureaucracy, half of which can be easily pruned. Side by side, their salary should be increased. Their discretionary powers should go. Because it breeds corruption in the office-dom.

**Consultative Processes**

The decision-making process must be consultative. Administrative measures must be considered in the holistic perspective.

spectively-political implications, economic considerations and technical solutions. The government-civil society consultation process should be explored for good governance and better bureaucracy. There should be coherent institutional arrangements for formulation and implementation of bureaucratic reforms.

**Attracting Investment**

Bureaucrats are yet to be geared up for promoting the private sector. They are yet to attract foreign investment in the country. Some of the civil servants can easily perform this responsibility. Indian and Pakistan civil servants are doing that with tangible results in last couple of years. Some of OSDs can be placed for this task. And there should be some kind of incentives for them if they can successfully attract foreign private investment in the country for the national growth. The East-Asian countries have shown the value of strong bureaucratic-business interaction and effective public agencies which can help stimulate the private sector and investment.

**The Path of Reform**

The reform should begin by making all official papers except security matters open to all. Access to information is a right. It should be established. It would help the reform process to a great extent. Mounting public opinion in favour of reform is also essential to implement successfully any reform programme.

The PARC is making easier recommendations first to reform the administration. They are eyeing on the major and difficult ones. But not right now.

Dhaka University Public

Administration Professor Dr Mohabbat Khan is very critical about the future of those recommendations made by the PARC. The fate of these recommendations are uncertain, he said and pointed out that every government talked about reform or formed a commission, or committee but didn't make any attempt to reform the bureaucracy. Dr Khan says our leaders don't have any vision for the future and it is dependent on some of the top bureaucrats. If, these bureaucrats want reform only then the reforms can take place, he says adding but there is no change in their attitude.

But PARC Chairman Shamsul Haque is optimistic about the reform. There is no option before the nation. Bangladesh must reform it's bureaucracy for a better future of it's citizens. Enhancing the level and nature of accountability and responsiveness of the bureaucracy to citizens is essentially required for the flourishing of a democratic polity. The government and it's bureaucracy must be accountable to their owners æ Jatiya Sangsad, citizens and consumers. Sound policy formulation and effective implementation, speedy and transparent decision-making and simplified rules and processes are the indicators of an efficient bureaucracy and government.

The government itself is seen by the people through this long tail of bureaucracy. The degree of efficiency of any government is measured by the degree of dynamism, efficiency, commitment and professionalism of its bureaucracy. The nation is in quest for that dynamic bureaucracy.



Victims of bloated bureaucracy.