



# Redesigning government: Some suggestions

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ONE of the major issues of governing democracy is to reform the bureaucracy and the administrative structure to attain the goals of optimum service to the people and the electorate. Since 1991, after the rebirth of parliamentary democracy in our country, Administrative Reforms Commissions and Pay Commissions have been set up. While the work of the Pay Commissions have been accelerated and their recommendations accepted and implemented, to offer relief to the public servants in the administration, the same has not been true about the recommendations of the various Administrative Reforms Commissions till date.

This may be quite natural, in the course of things, but does not speak well of the successive governments' will—since 1991—to promote good governance for the benefit of the electorate, by modernising the bureaucracy, separating the executive from the judiciary, strengthening local government institutions, and bringing about a smoothly functioning interface between the elected executive and the appointed civil service. The executive order passed in November 2003, allocating the 64 districts to ministers to oversee development activities and law and order, created a deadlock in the day-to-day duties and responsibilities of the district officials from the top to the bottom.

After Liberation, Bangladesh retained, with slight modifications, the essential structure of the Central and Provincial services inherited from Pakistan and before that from the British. This model which we have inherited over the years may have served well in its day. As long as the tasks were simple and straightforward and the environment stable, it worked with some measure of success. But for the last quarter of a century such systems have been coming apart. In a world of rapid change, and with the beginning of the new millennium, technological revolution, global economic competition, an educated workforce, discerning electorates and demanding customers, and severe fiscal constraints, centralised, top-down monolithic bureaucracies are simply too slow, too incapable of change.

Add to that the misguided move to put cabinet ministers in charge of districts. The word 'bureaucracy' by now, has a markedly negative overtone. Faithful intelligent and essential civil servants are often denigrated as 'bureaucrats'. In all our government organisations, there is always the basic conflict. On the one hand there is the very practical need for cooperative acceptance of the established procedures and purposes; on the other hand the need to question those procedures and purposes as error calls for change. The

error in not separating the judiciary from the executive over the years, and, the imposition of ministers in charge of districts -- during the BNP-Jamaat regime -- exemplifies the point. There is the need now for the ability and the will to urge and effect change that will improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the bureaucracy. Bureaucratic systems were designed to be stable, but we have reached a point in history where this stability is counter-productive. In today's fast-changing, globally competitive age of information technologies, systems that do not change with the times are doomed to failure. They are like dinosaurs which could not evolve fast enough to survive when their environment changed.

The solution of the problem is in the hands of vigilant political leadership in the executive and legislative branches of government, and solution is essential if 'good governance in the good society', which we are aiming for, is to work effectively. However, since 1991, the score-cards of none of the governments demonstrate the success of vigilant political leadership in transforming public administrative systems. It is a tragedy that conservative governments in the global perspective, indeed reactionary ones, such as that of Margaret Thatcher in Britain, have been able to provide solutions for good governance with an innovative bureaucracy, while the socialist paradigm, which we have followed, has produced monolithic bureaucracies.

Admittedly the problems and prospects of the civil service in Britain have somewhat different parameters than in Bangladesh, but when we look towards efficient administration in the next millennium, particularly as many senior civil servants of talent and adequate training will have retired by then, the necessity for redesigning and advancing administration to the needs of the 21st century becomes urgent. The common principles that need to be studied and implemented whatever the country we care to mention, are in sum:

Government should 'steer' rather than 'row', direct rather than execute. Government should empower agencies rather than serve them. There has to be competition in the public service, amongst the agencies of government.

'Rule-driven' organisations have to be 'mission-oriented'. Funding in government has to be based on outcomes rather than inputs. Government should try to please customers and clients, rather than pander to needs of bureaucracies.

\* Focus has to be on earnings rather than spendings. There has to be anticipation, as this year's flood rehabilitation programme has amply proved.

\* Decentralisation has to be wide-ranging.

Market forces have to be utilised to bring about change in government.

## The strategies for redesigning the civil service include

1. The best talents of the country must be recruited in the administrative and diplomatic services through rigorous recruitment processes. And such officers have to be retained through adequate compensation packages, well-defined career advancement programmes, particularly in comparison with the private sector in the country, so that the lure of the private sector does not take away these officers, nor does it cause them to do undue favours to private sector clientele.

2. The training programmes at present followed are not of the highest standard and often supervised with little attention and no innovations by the officer in charge, such as in the Public Administration Training College, which has often been seen in the past as being a dumping ground for out-of-favour officers. At the beginning of the officers' training programmes, necessary foreign training in order to be conversant with the modern practices of governance in the developed countries has to be arranged, rather than in mid-career, so that the beneficial aspects of bureaucratic practices are ingrained in the new entrant to the system.

3. Lateral entrants, if required, into the decision-making positions must be selected with the same rigour applied in recruiting the initial entrants. In this connection it has been observed, political appointees to diplomatic posts, and contract services or extension of services in the higher echelons smack of overt political manipulation, and should be discontinued, or limited to only a micro-percentage of the top bureaucracy. If it is felt necessary, in consideration of the apparent vacuum in meritorious and well-trained officers recruited in the seventies, it is fairer to increase the superannuation age limit, and give an equal chance to all officers to serve his or her country, on an equal footing.

4. While local government bodies should be 'steered' by elected officials in the interest of devolution and decentralisation to power, they have to be advised and aided by young, talented and professional administrators.

5. The political leadership and the elected legislature have to choose between an efficient and talented body of professional civil servants and diplomats, and a group of politically pliable yes-men who would be giving misdirected advice and effecting partisan administrative strategies. It has



to be realised right away that only a just and efficient government under a strong political leadership can deliver the fruits of development to the people in this century and millennium.

The existing Regulatory Reforms Commission or a newly formed Administrative Reforms Commission can be entrusted with the responsibilities of studying the strategies for reinventing government and undertaking the project for implementing those strategies, much in the style of Britain's Efficiency Unit. The Chairman of such an organisation may be assisted by two officials of the rank of Secretary/Additional

Secretary, and four Joint Secretaries, all of whom have to work full-time, assisted by a pool of computer programmers and secretarial staff. Two of the six officials may be appointed from the private sector. This should not involve any increase in the overall personnel strength now existing in the civil service. As a concrete example of the work this Efficiency Unit would be doing in the Bangladesh context, let us say the Unit audits the Fisheries Ministry. They may recommend selling off the Fisheries Development Corporation or make it competitive with the existing private sector companies in the seafood trawling, processing and exporting

business. The Fisheries Department will have to be totally client-oriented so that it has concrete targets of service-delivery to clients with an overall objective of enhancing and enriching our fisheries resources. Just an annual event of 'Fisheries Week' can never serve the clientele the Fisheries Department has to service. Everyday should be a 'Fishery Day' and the organisation's budgets, personnel, objectives and monitoring of results should be tailored to that. The department may have to be broken up into separate functional agencies looking after, say, fish culture in ponds, diseases of fish etc, with the existing personnel

distributed among the several agencies. The specifications of the strategies and parameters of such an Efficiency Unit are rather evident, even commonplace. It is the actions necessary to achieve the ends of increasing efficiency and eliminating waste that are more controversial.

The solution for the existing malaises in governance is in the hands of vigilant leadership in the executive and legislative branches of the governments, present and in the future and solution is essential if our country is to develop effectively, socially and economically.

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