Civil Service
The Wheels of the Government

How can the civil service be modernised so it can face the challenges the country throws at them?

Before addressing this question the role of the civil servant in a democracy must be clearly understood. What do civil servants do? Simply put, they are the ones who implement policies, programmes and projects undertaken by the government and maintain law and order. The main focus of the colonial era administration was the maintenance of law and order and generation of revenue. The focus of the post-colonial civil service has been the administration of development. To what degree this goal would be achieved depends a lot on the efficiency of the civil service.

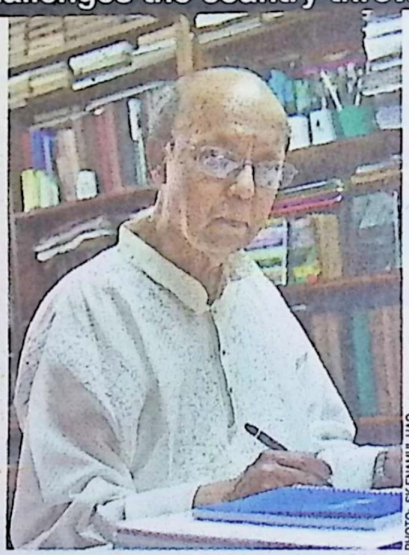


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Dr Mohammad Mohabbat Khan

"Civil service operates under the broad framework of governance of which the civil service is but a component," says Dr Mohammad Mohabbat Khan, Professor at the Department of Public Administration at the University of Dhaka "Unless we appreciate the broad framework, we cannot fully understand what problems civil servants face and how they can be remedied." A former member of the Public Service Commission, Dr Khan has written several books on topics related to governance and the civil service.

When political leaders and parties in general try to translate their mandate into policies, they may find that some of their mandates are opaque and vague—not clearly spelled out. It is the civil servant who assists in formulating these policies.

"Civil administration, often critically described as 'Bureaucracy', is inevitable in any society or state, an inseparable part of an organized society," Dr Mizanur Rahman Shelley, former secretary and minister writes in *Governance: South Asian Perspectives.* "Policy decisions and guidelines can be taken by politicians. Heads of government with their fellow ministers can take such decisions. The mechanism for implementing these happens to be a disciplined, well-trained and well organised machinery which is described as administration. Therefore, civil service or bureaucracy is an essential element for a society or state."

It is often the politician's lack of experience in governance and the civil servant's attitude that he is the reservoir of knowledge when it comes to developing the country that lead to mistrust between the two. The interaction between the political system and civil service is an important factor in conditioning the values of the civil service—more specifically the relationship between the minister in charge and the secretary. The motivation of the civil servant can be seriously affected if his or her executive role is interfered with by political representatives. "The loyalty of the civil servants should be to the people they serve, not to any political party," Abdus Sobhan Sikder, said to *the Star* in 2013. "Both the politicians and the civil servants have a responsibility to see to it that the administration can function free of any outside influence." Mr Sikder was Senior Secretary at the Ministry of Public Administration at that time.

So how to develop and motivate a civil service that exercises respect for law and order, intellectual pragmatism, neutrality, objectivity and rationality in the organisation and management of tasks they are entitled to do?

"Recruitment must be merit based, civil servants must be paid adequately and there should be a promotion policy based on merit and performance alone," says Dr Khan. "Training programmes have to be designed according to the training needs of the participants. Training for training's sake has to be avoided. Conflicts between the 28 cadres must be resolved. The domination of the administrative cadre must be reduced. For example, the secretary of the Ministry of Agriculture may come from the agriculture cadre rather than the administrative cadre. Both political and military interference demoralise the civil servants and the civil service."

The lack of administrative capacity is the single scarcest resource in a developing country like Bangladesh. Professor Khan posits that the civil service is in crisis. A sense of pride that used to be the main driver of motivation for civil servants needs to be reinstituted. ■