IN SEARCH OF A PERFORMANCE-BASED CIVIL SERVICE IN BANGLADESH: OVERCOMING THE CULTURAL BARRIERS

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Introduction

The public sector is under intense scrutiny. Basic questions regarding its role, size and operations are being raised and there is a growing consensus about its limitations and capabilities. During the last fifteen years or so, criticisms about the supremacy of the public sector both in academic and political circles have increased considerably. There have been calls for 'rolling back the state', 'shrinking the state' and giving the market a greater leeway rather than the state controlling the market. In fact, the relations between the state, market, non-governmental sector and the citizens have changed considerably during the last decade. This has paved the way to reexamine the role of the public sector in a different light. Nowadays it is being seen more of facilitator who steers others who can deliver better services and acts as a catalyst to inject competition in service delivery. The role of the public sector, albeit changing as a pacesetter and facilitator, remains crucial in providing necessary social, educational and economic support for
the market. As a result of those changes, there is growing emphasis on making the civil service more accountable for achieving results, linking their performance with rewards and punishment and making them more responsive to public needs.

Making the civil service more responsible and accountable for the tasks to be achieved involve improvement of competencies in the civil service. Competencies bridge the gap between what a person 'is' and what that person 'does'. They link inputs to outputs and can bring about personal changes for improved performance. Competencies can include areas like customer focus, results orientation, leading others, team development, strategic thinking, problem solving, effective communication, self development, etc.

Governance in developing countries involves coping with a range of socio-economic needs and demands that far exceed the capacity of the government to respond. The public management reforms in developing countries are constrained by the existing economic and social realities and the political and social consequences must be addressed as part of the change strategy. Moreover, the public sector in those countries will continue to play an important role in years to come and there must be continued focus on access to basic public services.

The Bangladesh Scenario

In the case of Bangladesh, the quality of governance is cited nowadays as an obstacle to development efforts. Since its independence in 1971, Bangladesh have achieved remarkable progress in many areas, showing great resilience in face of great odds. However, as the World Bank (1996) comments it is a country-
Critics view the civil service in Bangladesh as overbearing, intrusive, with powerful discretionary regulatory system, weak financial controls and having deteriorating human resource management, which fail to meet the challenges of the future. The bureaucracy is highly centralized and believes in the closed career concept. It enjoys wide ranging powers and discretion in view of the abundance of rules and regulations, many of them obsolete. Moreover, there is lack of respect for the citizens due to minimal accountability and opaque transparency in the dealings in the public sector.

In face of increasing pressure from both within and outside forces (global reform movements and pressure from donors), shouldn't the civil service in Bangladesh change in order to meet the new challenges? Shouldn't it become more performance and results oriented instead of remaining a traditional and rule bound bureaucracy?

**Past Reform Efforts in Bangladesh**

Though all recent reform efforts aim to make governments to be more efficient, effective and accountable in the case of Bangladesh, there has been many as 16 commissions/committees since 1972 and a number of reports have come out prescribing structural, procedural changes. The list of the various commissions/committees on public sector reforms in Bangladesh since 1972 and
their focus are listed here under:

| Names of the commissions/ committees | Main Focus |
|--------------------------------------|------------|
| Administrative and Services Committee, 1972 | Service Structure |
| National Pay Commission, 1972 | Pay Issues |
| Pay and Services Commission, 1976 | Services structure and pay issues |
| Martial Law Committee for examining Organisational Set Up of Ministries Divisions, Departments, Directorates and Other Organisations, 1982 | Organisation and rationalisation of manpower in public sector organisations |
| Committee for Administrative Reforms and Re-organisation, 1982 | Reorganisation of district thana and field level administration |
| Committee for Examination of Irregularities in appointment and Promotion of officers and Staff, 1982 | Review of Recruitment and Promotion in the Government |
| Martial Law Committee for Examining Organisational Set Up of Public Statutory Corporations (Autonomous/semi-autonomous Bodies and Allied Organisations), 1983 | Organisation and rationalisation of manpower in public sector organisations |
| National Pay Commission II, 1984 | Pay issues |
| Secretaries Committee on Administrative Development, 1985 | Promotion aspects of the Services |
| Special Committee to Review the Structure of the Senior Services Pool, 1985 | Structure of Senior Services Pool |
| Cabinet sub-Committee, 1989 | Review of Senior Service Pool and promotion prospects |
| National Pay Commission III, 1989 | Pay Issues |
| Four Secretaries Committee (Towards Better Government in Bangladesh), 1993 | Administrative and procedural improvement and related matters |
| Administrative Reorganisation Committee, 1993 | Structure and rationalisation of manpower in public sector |
| National Pay Commission IV, 1996 | Pay Issues |
| Public Administration Reforms Commission, 1996 | Comprehensive Administrative Reforms |

Source: Khan 1998 and Islam 1999
In search of a performance-based Civil Service in Bangladesh

Past efforts were mostly initiated by the government and the emphasis of those efforts was based on the assumption of a big government providing jobs, welfare and services to the people and at the same undertaking commercial business activities in the public sector. Therefore, those efforts focused on public service and structural changes, pay adjustments, promotion opportunities, etc. The major thrusts of the most of the government initiated previous reform efforts were decentralization of the administrative structure, rationalization of administrative processes, and training for human resource development, etc. It is only lately that ideas have emerged about making the civil service more performance oriented and measuring performance of public servants.

In 1993, the UNDP with consultation with the government carried out the Public Administration Sector Study in Bangladesh (PASSB), which is otherwise known as the UNDP report. Among the various other recommendations of the UNDP report were recommendations on (a) establishing results oriented management systems through setting of objectives and measures of outputs and impacts throughout the government; and (b) establishing units in each ministry and division, responsible for developing and applying performance audit capability. Around the same time in 1993, the senior civil servants came up with their own report called 'Towards Better Government in Bangladesh'. This was the outcome of a visit to UK (financed by the then Overseas Development Authority) by four senior civil servants. This report too touched upon recommendations regarding instituting a workable predetermined and transparent standard for efficient and speedy system of delivery of essential services; linking standards of performance to a reward and penalty system; and installation of an efficiency unit in the cabinet division to monitor achievement of government-wide targets against standards of performance.
It is to be noted that from the eighties onwards, the donors have been putting pressure on the government to bring about changes in the public sector. The UNDP Report (PASSB) and Towards Better Government in Bangladesh reports of 1993 were outcomes of this pressure. Therefore, The World Bank sponsored and financed another study between 1994-1995 in which Bank staff, Bangladeshi experts and foreign consultants jointly took part. The study entitled "Government That Works: Reforming the Public Sector" (GTW) was made public in March 1996 and formally presented to the government also talked about introducing productivity related evaluation system in the civil service. Even the Public Administration Reforms Commission (PARC), which was set in 1996 by the then government, have included ideas on performance based annual reporting system by ministries and introduction of performance standards in its reports to the government (PARC 2000). However, these recommendations are yet to be implemented.

All these recommendations reflect the global paradigm shift towards a focus on results in terms of efficiency, effectiveness, and quality of service; a shift towards a decentralized management environment; cost effective alternatives to direct public provision and regulation; efficiency in services provided; and strengthening of strategic capacities of the government (OECD 1995). But the question remains can they be implemented in Bangladesh where the bureaucracy is still very strong and remains resistant to changes?

The Intervening Cultural Issues

The Bangladesh bureaucracy being the inheritor of the British colonial civil service and the Pakistani 'elitist' Civil Service still retains many of the characteristics of its predecessors. They remain aloof from the people, are largely unresponsive to the needs of the people, and are largely interested in their own goals and ends.
Hofstede (1991) came up with the concepts of 'power distance' and 'uncertainty avoidance' to describe cultural differences in societies and organizations and how people are influenced by the cultural context of the societies they live in. Power distance according to Hofstede is the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organization within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally and uncertainty avoidance is the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations. Hofstede argues that the 'large power distance' is rooted in the family, which contributes towards long term programming of the 'mental software'. 'Power distance' entails that inequalities among people are both expected and desired and there is also the existence of the concept of obedience and respect for elders and the more powerful which is reflected almost-equally-in both more and less educated persons.

Hofstede is of the view that the 'power distance' is larger and stronger in a collectivist society a society in which people from birth are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, and throughout their lifetime continue to protect and nurture them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty and support for the collectivity. Therefore, in a collectivist society like Bangladesh, family norms and options predominate, and in a "situation of intense and continuous social contact the maintenance of harmony with one's social environment becomes a key virtue which extends to other spheres beyond the family" (Ibid: 58; Italics in the original). Thus Hofstede's concept of 'power distance' combined with the 'uncertainty avoidance concept' in matters of general norm, family and workplace, politics and ideas resulting in emotional need for rules, even if they never work, resistance towards innovation, citizen's incompetence versus enduring competence of authorities, etc. (Hofstede 1991 pp.125 and 134) do provide a framework for analysis of behavior of the bureaucracy in the case of Bangladesh.
A recent research (Jamil 1998) on the internal and external relationships of the Bangladesh Civil Service shows that it harbors negative perceptions of politicians; distrust of citizen's political competence but accepts citizen participation and private economic initiatives; is suspicious about NGOs; displays a high degree of power distance (acceptance of unequal relationship between boss and subordinate); gives emphasis on hierarchy; displays a high degree of 'uncertainty avoidance'. It also emphasizes on rules, regulations, with low flexibility and little room for innovation; and demonstrates greater preference for employees with traditional norms such as obedience, respect for superiors, etc. The civil service in Bangladesh, in fact, reflects the cultural orientations of the collectivist society it operates in.

The existence of greater power distance and uncertainty avoidance in the Bangladeshi bureaucracy as has been pointed out by Jamil (1998) implies their unwillingness to take risks, depart from norms and preference for written detailed instructions. Moreover, as Schick (1998) points out that the existing dichotomy between formal and informal rules of the game in developing countries and the rules of behavior that people follow in those societies can be very different from what is expected according to formal codes, rules and contracts. Informal ties and agendas will make people simply disregard the formal ones, because the informal rules of the game are part of their social psyche and are necessary for their social acceptability and survival. He argues that the predominance of the informal structures and practices in the performance oriented organizations over formal ones may very well short circuit the whole exercise of performance and efficiency oriented reform measures as demanded by global reform measures emanating from pluralistic and legal-rational minded developed countries. This could result in more corrupt practices in the public sector as contractual mechanisms of accountability may be disregarded.
This would spill over in areas of decision, making and performance accountability as socially approved roles takes preference over tasks and feelings dominate over task considerations and performance feedback may be interpreted as attacks on the person rather than on the job behavior. Therefore, the spectre of informal and cultural practices may very well go on to haunt the new performance oriented reform rescriptions.

The above analysis of Schick in case of performance driven public sector reforms may very well ring true also in the case of Bangladesh. One would therefore wonder how far a performance oriented civil service would be successful in the context of Bangladesh, given the socio-cultural conditions as well as the prevailing culture of the bureaucracy.

Conclusion

What is the way out of this maze of cultural barriers to achieve performance oriented civil service? One way is inculcating modern values through learning. It is found that bureaucrats working in public sector organizations dealing with social and economic issues tend to be more flexible as non-traditional avenues of communication and information are more necessary there. What is required then is transforming our public sector organizations into 'learning organizations' where innovation will be encouraged, civil servants will be expected to try out global trends of reforms by doctoring them in consonance with the local socio-cultural milieu. The civil service should be allowed to innovate solutions to diverse problems. This will obviously entail some structural and procedural changes but will definitely go a long way in making the civil service more self-confident, problem solving and result oriented rather than rule or process oriented. This will also initiate changes at the micro-level where the bureaucrats themselves can initiate those changes. In this respect Bangladesh Public Administration Training Centre (BPATC) and other training institutes can play
active roles in changing the mind-set of the civil servants by making them aware that changes are needed and they can bring changes individually and collectively.

In the context of a developing market economy in Bangladesh, the bureaucracy is already under pressure to change and the stage for changes at the macro level is already quite matured. The continuing search for solutions of problems in the public sector requires open-minded and adapted measures. What is now needed is a supportive political environment in the form of stable and consistent policies and organizational arrangements to make the civil service more focussed on organizational and societal goals rather than goals of individuals and respective cadres. Many argue that the whole thing is a political issue and what can bureaucrats do? However, considering the influence and power the civil service still enjoys even with a political party in power points to a path through which the bureaucracy can at least show signs of their desire to change, so that their political bosses take note of it and take steps to initiate changes.
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