Politicization of Bureaucracy and Good Governance: Bangladesh Perspective

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Abstract

The paper analyses the extent of politicization of bureaucracy in Bangladesh and its underlying impact on the quality of the good governance. Good governance has become a pressing need for the developing countries in the age of globalization, and Bangladesh is not an exception in this process. But the persistent practices of politicization of public bureaucracy in Bangladesh is hampering the quality service delivery and ultimately halting the implementation of good governance agenda. The paper argues that the depoliticization of bureaucracy is an important step towards the fulfillment of good governance in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Politicization, Bureaucracy, Good governance, Bangladesh.

Introduction

From time immemorial bureaucracy has been an inevitable part of government whatever its nature. Public administration as an integral part of governmental activity has existed since the political systems have been functioning and trying to achieve program objectives determined by the political decision makers[1]. Indeed, in the jurisdiction of public administration, the career bureaucrats serve as a permanent instrument of government under conditions of changing party control only acknowledging and adopting neutrality. Such neutrality is the workings premise for the loyal support of any lawful or legitimate government whatever its ideological stance. But in the real situations, we sometimes see public bureaucrats do not adhere this principle and they are found in fulfilling the interests of political parties. This tendency of politicization of bureaucracy is very common in the context of developing countries and Bangladesh is not an exception.

Since independence, the people of Bangladesh are suffering a lot because of poor services from the public bureaucrats. They are also not happy at the bureaucrat's continuing linkage with the ruling political parties to gain favors and benefits. It is expected that the bureaucrats should be impartial and neutral in their jobs and they should not involve in the politics. This is also one of the common aspirations of any democratic society. Attlee argues that the concept of neutrality not only coupled with impartiality, anonymity, obscurity, loyalty, permanence and restricted political rights of public servants but also regarded as 'one of strongest bulwarks of democracy'[2]. There are certain areas of administration that should be insulated from politics for the sake of public interests. The neutral role of public bureaucrats is also important in the implementation of good governance agenda which have become an integral part of governmental objectives of the developing countries in the age of globalization. But, because of the politicization of the bureaucracy, the accomplishment of good governance program has become bleak. An evident consequence of the politicization of bureaucracy is that bureaucracy is becoming incompetent and ineffective in the absence of professionalism, fairness and impartiality. If unqualified or incompetent candidates get recruited in the civil services and promoted to different key positions in the government offices, they will not be able to provide quality services to the state and the notion of ensuring good governance will not be fulfilled in Bangladesh. The paper is focusing on the relationship between the concept of good governance and impartial bureaucracy in the perspective of Bangladesh and argues that without ensuring neutral and competent career bureaucracy, the idea of implementing good governance agenda will not be successful. In order to understand the overview of the impacts of politicized bureaucracy on the quality of governance, it is important to understand the concept of politicized bureaucracy.

Politicized Bureaucracy

The classical view of neutral bureaucracy cannot be beyond criticism in developed as well as developing countries who had adopted it as a permanent feature of their government. The policy making role of politicians and policy implementation role of bureaucracy is imagination[3]. Riggs viewed 'politics-administration dichotomy' a myth, implausible, an American illusion or perhaps more tolerantly as an artifact of the American Constitution[4].

Alavi states, the military and the bureaucracy in post colonial societies cannot be looked upon, in terms of the classical Marxist view, simply as instrument of a single ruling class. The

specific natures of structural alignments created by the colonial relationship and re-alignments which have developed in the post colonial situation have rendered the relationship between the state and the social classes more complex[5]. The Colonial State is therefore equipped with a powerful bureaucratic-military apparatus and mechanisms of government which enable through its routine operations to subordinate the native social classes. The post-colonial society inherits that overdeveloped. Apparatus of state and its institutionalized practices through which the operations of the indigenous social classes are regulated and controlled[5]. As Ostrom observed, the public servant in a democratic society is not a neutral and obedient servant to his master's command. He will refuse to obey unlawful efforts to exploit the common wealth or to use the coercive capabilities of the state to impair the rights of persons, but he will use reason and peaceful persuasion in taking such stands[6].

Civil servants, of course, do not operate in a social vacuum. Their opinions about relative "right" and "wrong" are determined, like those of all persons, by pressures existing in their social milieu. A department official is interested not only in whether a ministers proposals con be put into practice, but with the effect of such policies on the traditional practices of the department and on its long term relations with other groups[7]. Administrators contributions to policy making what Herbert Kaufman termed as "neutral competence" echoed the legitimacy of bureaucratic participation in policy making[8]. The determination of ends, the choice of means, the balance of social forces are the stuff of politics. In these terms it is clear that some civil servants are engaged in politics. The word policy is recognition of this; it is a way of describing what civil servants does when they play a part in determining ends, choosing means and fixing priorities... 'Policy' is then nothing more than the political activity of civil servants[9].

The concept of politicized bureaucracy is one which is involved or influences or is influenced to any degree consciously or unconsciously, by overt or by implicit actions in the stream of the politics of the day/whether of the party in power or of the party/parties in opposition. Such an involvement may mean the bureaucratic promotion of the special interest of political party at a type of bureaucracy which uses political parties in furtherance of their collective or individual objectives of which is used by political parties in the achievement of party objectives[10].

Politicization

A Comparative View: The politicization syndrome has almost been common in different bureaucracies, although the degree and nature may vary and to a certain extent every bureaucracy is politicized. The bureaucracies in the developed western polities are full developed and their role is fairly clear. The desirability of a line of demarcation between the line may be somewhat blurred. Some indicators point toward a double transfer of power in recent years – from the legislature to the executive,

and from the executive to the top civil service – which has resulted in a partial merger of political power and administrative actions in the careers of higher ranking bureaucrats who have been dubbed "the western mandarins"[11]. In Britain since 1964, conservative as well as Labour governments have used political advisers as well as career civil servants in policy making, apparently because of a belief that the top permanent officials would otherwise frustrate the party's plan[12]. In Australia since Whitlam's (1972-75) alternative sources of advice and assistance had been increasingly relied upon by ministers, mainly in the form of increasing number of ministerial advisers, who were often public servants[13]. The African countries of Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia, Nigeria and Uganda clearly demonstrate the fact that as the policy of political mobilization became an established feature of political systems, the political parties felt it necessary to look for the support of the bureaucratic apparatus. The result was that a variety of patterns of links between the political parties and bureaucracy came into play in these societies[13].

In the Arab world, a manager or official is always willing to reconsider a decision, regulation, or problem in view of someone's personal situation. Any regulation can be modified or avoided by someone with enough persuasive influence, particularly if the request is justified on the grounds of unusual personal need. In the Arab culture, people are more important than rules[15]. In Central America, public bureaucracies, whether efficient or not, have grown in size and represent a new political and economic class. In theory, the bureaucracy is a public servant, yet in practice it plays varying roles in the political processes of regime transition, advancing, retarding, or helping maintain the extant regime[14]. In all south Asian states, relaxation of recruitment norms in the bureaucracy has encouraged political interference designed to abuse the recruitment process as an instrument of political patronage and for politicization of administration.

After the Second World War most third world countries attained their independence where their bureaucracies enjoyed a significant institutional autonomy and social dominance due to the absence or underdeveloped political controls. To Riggs, a phenomenon of utmost significance in transitional societies is the lack of balance between political policy-making institutions and bureaucratic policy implementing structures. The relative weakness of political organs means that the political function tends to be appropriated, in considerable measure by bureaucrats[15]. The politicization of services in many societies in the third world has also led to a widespread increase in corruption, ranging on a scale from payments to petty officials for 'speeding the movement of files' to huge sums of bribes and kickbacks for facilitating higher financial and political interest. In some societies it has become so cancerous... common practice is to use their official position in the government to the advantage of their private interests[16].

Good governance

There has not been a universal agreement about the meaning of good governance. According to World Bank, the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country's economic and social resources for development. Aspects of governance: (i) the form of political regime; (ii) the process by which authority is exercised in the management of a country's economic and social resources for development; and (iii) the capacity of government to design, formulate and implement policies and discharge functions. The term usually describes conditions in a country as a whole[17]. To Landell-Mills and Serageldin, how people are ruled, how the affairs of the state are administered and regulated..... a nation's system of politics.... in relation to public administration and law[18].

Bureaucracy, Politics and Good Governance in Bangladesh

Bangladesh emerged as an independent state in 1971 after a war of independence against Pakistan. It inherited a bureaucracy which is a lineal descendant of the Indian Civil Service (ICS) during the period of British colonial regime. This colonial legacy is still evident in the mindsets of bureaucrats and they are found upholding the attitude left by the British even though Bangladesh has gained her independence more than three decades back. After independence, the consecutive governments tried their best to control the public bureaucracy in different ways. Because of distrust with bureaucracy the govt. denied the constitutional recognition of security of tenure which they enjoyed during the Pakistan period. Two presidential Orders[19] were introduced which enabled the government to remove by a single stroke of a pen a civil servant from service without assigning any reason whatsoever. In fact it was designed as a lethal weapon to be arbitrarily used against those members of the civil service who failed and refused to conform with government directions. Hanging like the sword of Damocles, it destroyed the sense of security in the minds of officers and seriously affected their efficiency and will to work.... it demoralized the services and paralyzed the administrative machinery to the untold suffering of the public. Bureaucrats were criticized severely in parliamentary debates, public meetings and in official documents[20].

Political leadership, instead of implementing the far-reaching recommendations of the different administrative reform commissions to overhaul the colonial bureaucracy and allowing popular participation at the local government level, allowed the members of civil bureaucracy and the armed forces to join the party. The bloody coup in August, 1975 which overthrow the Aawami League government form power marked the beginning of a new stare under the leadership of Major General Ziaur Rahman as the chief of staff of Bangladesh Army seemed to follow a pattern set in pre-liberation Bangladesh; a "marriage of convenience" between civil and military bureaucrats, similar to that which had existed in East Pakistan before its collapse in

1971[21]. A Council of Advisors to the president had been formed, and most of these Advisers were either bureaucrats or technocrats. Same situations had been seen during the tenure of another dictator, HM Ershad. The civil-military bureaucrats become dominant not only in the cabinet secretariat, divisions and districts, but also fully captured the chief policy making and policy-implementing institutions. Local government bodies have been used by the national political leaders as the political mobilization platform and not a genuine institutional partner. In conjunction with the military, the civil bureaucrats emerged as the key persons in decision making machinery. During the period of Zia and Ershad, there was a social process in which civil and military bureaucrats became businessmen and industrialists under state patronage. Moreover, it was a general trend that civil and military bureaucrats after their retirement first involved in business and then became active in politics. In many instances, they informally involved themselves in business even while in service[22].

After the fall of Ershad, installation of a non-partisan caretaker government headed by Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed hold election and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) under the leadership of Khaleda Zia came in power. This election is considered as one of the landmark in the journey of parliamentary democracy in Bangladesh. But the politicization of bureaucracy was going on and it has got a new form in the successive democratic governments in Bangladesh. In the first cabinet of Khaleda Zia in 1991 out of 29 members of her cabinet 8 were civil and military bureaucrats[23]. Both the BNP and Awami League governments have adopted different means to control the public bureaucracy despite having resistance from many bureaucrats and opposing the idea of giving undue favors to the ruling party supporters. The process of promotion to the higher posts of the secretariat resulted in tremendous grievances and suspicion in the mind of affected cadre officials, and alleged that established rules, regulations, order and in cases even constitutional principles have been violated. As a result, some officials were the worst victims of politicization of bureaucracy as they were not given their due rights and entitlements as civil servants. Those who opposed the ruling party's stance of fulfilling the party interests, they were transferred to different unfavorable locations and some of them were given the status of 'Officer of Special Duty (OSD), virtually a job without having any responsibilities. There were many cases of force retirement for public bureaucrats during tenures of past democratic governments. While on the other side, which had collaborated with the ruling parties, they were given promotions and the positions in different important ministries and departments as a result of their loyalty.

Once an area of administration has been politicized it is virtually impossible to reverse the process. Each new administration feels it is entitled to the same political controls as its predecessor. There is a feeling of built-in mistrust in the bureaucratic culture of Bangladesh. Such mistrust has resulted in a need for controls and counter controls in the governmental management process,

which in turn results in diffusion of accountability through overlapping checks and balances. The ultimate effect is a widespread attitude of buck passing responsibilities. Politicians, who are subjected to diverse pressures, have succumbed to the temptation to factor the service into the strategies of power politics. Willingly or unwillingly, the public service came to be associated with the use of public resources for partisan or private gain. As a result trust between the political authorities and public offices on the one hand, and between the service and its customers on the other, has been seriously eroded[24].

Bangladesh Public Service Commission's position as an independent constitutional body seems to been circumscribed by the fact that it is an attached department of the establishment Ministry. Violations of statutory rules and irregular appointments and promotion have become a common feature since liberation[25]. The whole process of selection of chairman and Members, since the beginning of the commission shows an absolute lack of transparency and were not totally immune from the element of political patronage. The secretariat is an 'open bazar' filled with personnel from diverse sources of recruitment, training and quality. Frequent tinkering with services structure, seniority rules and promotion have led to a debilitating effect on the morale of the small number of competent officers who work in the secretariat. Morshed Observes, a high incidence of power position and prestige status consciousness has been noticed amongst the officials working at all levels of administration ....a large proportions of the officials have a more bureaucratic attitude, which hinders the process of decentralization development[26]. The sense of unfairness and discontent that it breeds, adversely affects the whole regime on which governance rests. In a country where collective norms and personalized relationships are strong, weak institutional norms may be a breeding ground of tadbir to fulfill narrow individual interest. Institutional interest and collective good for the society may be sacrificed to pursue individual or partisan interests. Under such a situation civil service may suffer from professionalism and may become a tool for personal gain and benefits. Tabdir in this situation may become the building block of decision making in public administration in Bangladesh[27].

Nexus of officials-contractors in giving approval to development projects that are designed for sheer misuse of money and nexus among some politicians, police and criminals provides a protective umbrella for criminal activities. Corruption has become pervasive in public administration in Bangladesh. Hardly any public office or any section of public servants is free from this ignorable vice. Poor pay package, economic insecurity, lure of luxurious living, politicization, shortcomings in existing laws as well as lack of their rigorous enforcement, culture of secrecy are considered as important reasons for corruption by the public servants.

The quality of service has been deteriorated so enormously that an ill-informed and undereducated bureaucracy not only without proper training perpetrates wastage by their lack of skills and knowledge but almost at every level they are interested in making deals or money or seeking in making deals or money or seeking advantage from distribution of favor. The dismal state of affairs flourishes under the influence of partisan politics. Civil servants are discriminated on the basis of their political inclinations and as a result there is a competition for proving loyalty.[28] Political parties have politicized every segment of society. Rarely can one find an institution-social, administrative or economic where the intrusion of party politics is not evident: even junior schools and religious institutions do not remain an exception. The cost of politicization has been exorbitant and unless kingpins at the basting of power could fathom its malignant ramification, the nation will have to pay in dearer terms of generations to come. The Frankenstein has to be put into the cage before the monster maims the civil service for ever. Sooner the realization comes better it is for all of us. We cannot change the past. But definitely we can shape the future by promoting depoliticization but the onus rests with the politicians.

Conclusion

Bureaucracy has become an indispensible part of public administration and it is a pre-requisite of modern state and society. The idea of nation building and bringing about socio-economic development in any country cannot be implemented without having an active contribution from the bureaucracy. In fact, public administration is the key agency of development and bureaucracy can contribute to development by playing an impartial and dedicated role. There have been instances of many political appointments in public service in the context of industrialized countries and it has been well accepted in those contexts given the fair recruitment process, systematic management and accountability mechanisms of political appointees. Officials are selected or promoted on the basis of party membership and loyalty but because of their ideological commitment and their associations with particular policy commitments they are found competent in completing their responsibilities in most cases.

But, the governments of developing countries like Bangladesh, consider party 'loyalty' as one and only guiding principle for appointment and promotion of political appointees in the civil services. Thus, the bureaucracy in Bangladesh, which was once considered as the "steel frame" during the time of the British Empire, is now hanging between professional neutrality and political loyalty. Since 1991, almost all the democratic governments politicized the civil services for serving their narrow political interests. This politicization of bureaucracy is hampering the quality of governance and the people of the country are suffering while participating in the public administration to meeting their demands. So for the sake of national interests and the fulfillment of the people's aspirations, the process of the politicization of bureaucracy must be stopped now.

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