

BUREAUCRATIC REFORMS IN PAKISTAN: CHALLENGES AND WAY FORWARD

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Abstract

Bureaucratic reform remains central to the crisis of governance in Pakistan because the state's developmental ambitions, fiscal stabilization efforts, social policy delivery, and regulatory capacity all depend on the quality of its public administration. Yet the reform debate has often oscillated between moral criticism of the bureaucracy and technocratic proposals that understate political constraints. This article critically examines the trajectory of bureaucratic reforms in Pakistan from the colonial inheritance to contemporary debates on right-sizing, lateral recruitment, digitalization, and performance management. It argues that reform failure has been rooted less in a lack of diagnostic knowledge than in the interaction of patrimonial politics, institutional fragmentation, weak incentives, legal rigidity, and the unresolved federal-provincial-local relationship. Pakistan's bureaucracy has been simultaneously over-centralized and weak, rule-bound and selectively politicized, formally meritocratic and informally distorted. Drawing on academic literature, official reports, donor assessments, and policy commentary, the article identifies the major structural, organizational, and political obstacles to reform. It proposes a sequenced reform agenda that prioritizes depoliticized recruitment, specialization, performance contracts, pay and pension restructuring, empowered local government, digital process reengineering, stronger accountability, and citizen-oriented service delivery. Sustainable reform, it concludes, requires political coalition-building and institutional continuity rather than episodic commissions and short-lived administrative campaigns.

INTRODUCTION

The quality of bureaucracy shapes the capacity of the modern state to tax, regulate, coordinate, and deliver public goods. In comparative political economy, capable bureaucracies are associated with better developmental outcomes, higher institutional credibility, and greater policy consistency because they provide what Max Weber identified as rule-bound, predictable, and professionally administered authority (Weber, 1978; Evans & Rauch, 1999). In developing states, however, the bureaucracy is rarely a neutral instrument. It is also an arena of patronage,

status competition, colonial legacies, and political bargaining (Alavi, 1972; Wilder, 2009). Pakistan exemplifies this tension. Its civil service has long been described as the "steel frame" of the state, yet it has also been criticized for elitism, centralization, proceduralism, weak service delivery, and periodic subordination to political and military rulers (Siddiqi, 2007; International Crisis Group, 2010; Husain, 2020).

Bureaucratic reform in Pakistan has therefore been a recurring but unfinished project. From the Administrative Reorganization Committee of

the early postcolonial era to the 1973 reforms, the National Commission for Government Reforms (NCGR), and recent proposals associated with institutional restructuring and digital governance, each wave has promised merit, efficiency, accountability, and citizen orientation (Government of Pakistan, 1973; World Bank, 1998; National Commission for Government Reforms, 2008; Husain, 2020). Yet implementation has been partial, uneven, and often reversible. Reform packages have tended to focus on structure rather than incentives, rules rather than organizational culture, and technical blueprints rather than political feasibility (Grindle, 2004, 2007; Khan & Hussain, 2020; Abbas, 2023). As a result, Pakistan's bureaucracy remains caught between inherited generalist traditions and new demands for specialization, between legal formalism and performance pressures, and between central control and the constitutional logic of devolution (Cheema, Khwaja, & Qadir, 2006; Shah, 2014; PIDE, 2023).

This article argues that bureaucratic reform in Pakistan should be understood not as a single administrative problem but as a crisis of state organization. The weakness of the bureaucracy is not merely a matter of low salaries, outdated rules, or poor training, although these matter. It is equally a problem of political incentives, judicial and legal constraints, fragmented accountability, weak local government, and a reform tradition that treats the bureaucracy as an isolated machine rather than a component of a wider governance system (Islam, 2004; International Crisis Group, 2010; Husain, 2021). The article proceeds in five steps. First, it situates Pakistan's bureaucracy within its colonial and postcolonial trajectory. Second, it reviews major reform efforts and their stated objectives. Third, it analyzes the principal challenges that have undermined reform. Fourth, it explains why reform has repeatedly stalled despite broad diagnostic agreement. Finally, it outlines a sequenced way forward anchored in institutional realism, political economy, and administrative capacity.

Historical Trajectory: From Colonial Steel Frame to Postcolonial Strain

Pakistan inherited from British India a bureaucratic order that was relatively cohesive, hierarchical, and legally formalized. The colonial Indian Civil Service and allied services were designed less for democratic responsiveness than for territorial control, revenue extraction, and maintenance of order (Misra, 1977; Jalal, 1990). The postcolonial Pakistani state adapted that legacy under conditions of acute insecurity, scarce political institutionalization, and administrative overstretch. Scholars such as Hamza Alavi argued that the postcolonial state in Pakistan came to rely heavily on the "salariat," including the military and bureaucracy, because representative institutions remained fragile and unevenly rooted (Alavi, 1972). In early Pakistan, the civil service did not merely implement policy; it often shaped policy and substituted for weak party structures (Jalal, 1995; Newberg, 1995).

The Civil Service of Pakistan (CSP) became emblematic of administrative prestige and authority. Recruitment was highly competitive and the officer corps cultivated a strong esprit de corps, but this elite insulation also reinforced distance from citizens and provincial societies (Khan, 2009; Wilder, 2009). During the first decades after independence, centralization was further strengthened by the imperatives of refugee settlement, security competition with India, uneven provincial integration, and the weakness of parliamentary rule (Jalal, 1995; Talbot, 2012). Bureaucratic dominance was intensified during military regimes, especially under Ayub Khan, when technocratic planning and centralized administrative control were treated as instruments of modernization (Rizvi, 2000; Burki, 2015; Jawad & Shabbir, 2024a). Yet the same model also deepened regional alienation, particularly in East Pakistan, where bureaucratic and military centralism came to symbolize West Pakistani domination (Jahan, 1972; Alavi, 1972).

A major rupture came with the administrative reforms of 1973 under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. These reforms sought to dismantle the CSP's inherited elitism by abolishing service classes, integrating

cadres into a unified grading structure, opening lateral entry, and emphasizing common training and mobility (Government of Pakistan, 1973; Kennedy, 1987; Jawad & Shabbir, 2024b). Normatively, the reforms aimed to democratize administration and reduce the social distance between officials and citizens. In practice, however, they also weakened institutional coherence without establishing a robust alternative. The abolition of constitutionally protected service guarantees increased bureaucratic insecurity; politicization expanded as tenure protections eroded; and the prestige hierarchy of old services gave way to new struggles among occupational groups and cadres (Khan, 1980; Wilder, 2009; International Crisis Group, 2010; Jawad & Shabbir, 2024b). Rather than resolving the generalist-specialist tension, the 1973 reforms often relocated it.

Subsequent decades witnessed repeated but incomplete efforts to repair the system. General Zia-ul-Haq's period partly restored bureaucratic authority but embedded new forms of political control and informalism (Rizvi, 2000). Democratic alternation in the 1990s brought promises of merit and accountability but also frequent transfers, coalition pressures, and attempts by elected governments to secure administrative loyalty through appointments (Islam, 2004; S. H. Khan, 2001). The resulting pattern was paradoxical: civil servants complained of political interference, while politicians criticized bureaucratic resistance and inertia. By the late 1990s, donor institutions and domestic reformers increasingly framed Pakistan's administrative crisis in the language of governance, incentives, and service delivery rather than merely hierarchy and law (World Bank, 1998; Asian Development Bank, 2001).

The devolution reforms introduced under General Pervez Musharraf after 2001 represented another major turning point. The Local Government Ordinance 2001 aimed to shift administrative authority downward, separate policy from implementation, and make district administrations more responsive (Cheema et al., 2006; Manning, Mukherjee, & Gokcekus, 2003). In theory, devolution could have disrupted

provincial bureaucratic monopolies and connected officials more directly with local needs. In practice, however, design weaknesses, provincial resistance, ambiguities of authority, and the absence of stable democratic ownership limited outcomes (Cheema & Mohmand, 2007; Shah, 2014). Devolution created new coordination problems without fully institutionalizing local accountability. When later governments reasserted provincial control, many district-level gains proved reversible.

The NCGR, established in 2006, produced the most comprehensive recent blueprint for restructuring government and civil services. It proposed clearer functional assignment across tiers, stronger local government, merit-based human resource management, specialization, performance evaluation, and business process reengineering (National Commission for Government Reforms, 2008). The report remains important because it identified many of the same pathologies that still define the system: cadre dominance, weak professional incentives, fragmented accountability, slow decision-making, and obsolete procedures. Yet its recommendations were only partially pursued, illustrating a broader Pakistani pattern in which reform commissions generate high-quality diagnosis but weak implementation (International Crisis Group, 2010; Husain, 2008, 2020).

Recent debates have revisited these themes through the language of institutional reform, right-sizing, digitalization, and performance management. Dr. Ishrat Husain's reform proposals stressed the need for a smaller but more capable state, specialization, continuity of tenure, open competition for senior posts, and results-based management (Husain, 2020, 2021). Policy institutions such as PIDE have emphasized bureaucratic overreach, excessive rules, and the need for citizen-centric redesign (PIDE, 2023). Public commentary in newspapers has similarly underscored that civil service reform cannot be detached from local government, fiscal realism, and technological modernization (Haque, 2023; Nizami, 2025). The persistence of this debate suggests not that reform is conceptually elusive,

but that the problem lies in implementation and political settlement.

Major Challenges to Bureaucratic Reform in Pakistan

Colonial Legacies and Organizational Culture

One of the deepest obstacles to reform is the persistence of colonial administrative culture. Pakistan's bureaucracy continues to valorize command, file work, protocol, and control more than problem-solving, collaboration, and service delivery (Wilder, 2009; Khan & Hussain, 2020). Formal hierarchy remains strong, but this has not consistently produced professionalism. Instead, it often generates excessive deference upward, limited horizontal coordination, and an administrative imagination oriented toward procedure rather than outcomes (World Bank, 1998; Husain, 2020). The "generalist" ethos of the superior civil services has historically conferred status on broadist administrators while under-valuing sectoral expertise in health, education, taxation, energy, procurement, digital systems, and regulation (Kennedy, 1987; International Crisis Group, 2010).

This cultural legacy matters because reform is not only about legal design; it is also about changing organizational norms. Even when new procedures are introduced, officials may continue to behave in ways shaped by inherited conventions of secrecy, distance from citizens, and preference for rule citation over initiative (Islam, 2004; Farooqui, 2019). Such norms discourage innovation and create what reform literature calls "capability traps," in which formal institutional change outpaces actual administrative behavior (Andrews, Pritchett, & Woolcock, 2017). In Pakistan, the result is a bureaucracy that may appear procedurally dense but substantively weak.

Politicization Without Accountability

Politicization is perhaps the most frequently cited challenge in Pakistan's reform discourse, but it needs careful unpacking. Bureaucracy is never fully outside politics; elected governments must direct administration in line with democratic mandates. The problem in Pakistan is not political oversight per se, but arbitrary

interference in transfers, postings, procurement, investigations, and career progression (International Crisis Group, 2010; Abbas, 2023). Frequent transfers undermine continuity, discourage long-term planning, and create incentives for civil servants to cultivate patrons rather than perform effectively (World Bank, 1998; Husain, 2020). Officers often rotate before they can understand local conditions or institutional mandates, while "desirable" posts become tied to influence rather than competence.

At the same time, politicians often accuse bureaucrats of unresponsiveness, delay, and resistance to elected authority. This mutual distrust has produced a dysfunctional equilibrium. Bureaucrats seek legal cover, avoid risk, and defer decisions; politicians circumvent procedure or seek loyalists; and neither side builds stable rules of engagement (Wilder, 2009; Siddiq, 2007). Politicization thus weakens both merit and accountability. It does not create democratic control in a principled sense; instead, it personalizes administrative relationships and erodes institutional neutrality (Shafiq, 1999; International Crisis Group, 2010).

Weak Incentive Structures

Pakistan's civil service incentive system is poorly aligned with competence, specialization, and performance. Promotions are still significantly influenced by seniority, cadre politics, and opaque evaluation practices, even when formal merit criteria exist (National Commission for Government Reforms, 2008; Government of Pakistan, 2015). Annual Confidential Reports and related appraisal mechanisms have historically rewarded conformity and networking more than measurable results (World Bank, 1998; Husain, 2020). In such a system, high performers receive limited reward, while poor performers are rarely exited in a credible manner. This compresses effort and encourages risk aversion.

Compensation is another longstanding problem. Public sector pay in Pakistan has often lagged behind private opportunities for specialized professionals, especially in technical fields such as

finance, data systems, engineering, and regulation (World Bank, 1998; PIDE, 2023). Although public service can still offer prestige, security, and non-salary rents, these do not create the kind of transparent incentive structure needed for a modern merit bureaucracy. Pension liabilities further distort fiscal space, making governments reluctant to undertake rational pay restructuring unless accompanied by broader pension reform (World Bank, 1998; Husain, 2020). The result is a system that struggles to attract, retain, and motivate talent in areas where state capacity is most needed.

Generalist Dominance and Lack of Specialization

Pakistan's administrative architecture has been repeatedly criticized for privileging generalist cadres over specialized expertise. The Pakistan Administrative Service and other elite groups exercise influence across a wide range of policy domains, while technical cadres often face lower status, fewer leadership opportunities, and weaker career progression (Kennedy, 1987; International Crisis Group, 2010). This imbalance may have been more defensible when the state's core functions centered on district administration, land revenue, and basic law and order. It is far less appropriate in a state required to regulate complex financial systems, climate adaptation, digital infrastructure, public health, and energy transitions.

Modern governance requires deep domain knowledge as well as coordination capacity. Yet Pakistan's reform efforts have often oscillated between preserving elite generalism and introducing ad hoc lateral entry, without building a coherent specialization framework (Husain, 2020; NSPP, 2024). Ad hoc appointments can temporarily inject expertise, but if they are not embedded in transparent rules, they may be perceived as politicized or exceptional. A sustainable solution requires career tracks, professional accreditation, training ladders, and senior leadership pathways for specialists. Without such reform, the state continues to rely on administrators asked to supervise sectors they do not fully understand.

Fragmentation Across Federal, Provincial, and Local Tiers

Administrative reform in Pakistan cannot succeed without confronting the architecture of the federation. The 18th Constitutional Amendment deepened provincial responsibility in several social sectors, but capacity, coordination, and role clarity remain uneven (Shah, 2014; Kugelman & Hathaway, 2020). Federal ministries often retain influence through funding, regulation, or informal authority; provincial departments vary sharply in capability; and local government remains politically contested and institutionally weak (Cheema & Mohmand, 2007; Nizami, 2025). This creates overlapping mandates, duplication, and blame shifting.

The civil service structure reflects this fragmentation. All-Pakistan services, federal services, provincial civil services, and district-level administrative arrangements coexist without a consistently articulated human resource strategy (National Commission for Government Reforms, 2008; Government of Pakistan, 2020). Officers may be socialized into one tier but operate in another; provincial ownership of administrative reform may diverge from federal agendas; and local functionaries often work with limited authority, budgets, and protection. In effect, Pakistan suffers from both centralization and incoherence. Decision-making authority is often concentrated upward, but responsibility for implementation is dispersed downward without commensurate capacity (World Bank, 2019; Husain, 2021).

Outdated Rules, Red Tape, and Process Inflation

Pakistan's bureaucracy is often criticized for "red tape," but this should be understood as a systemic accumulation of rules, approvals, and documentary rituals that slow decision-making and encourage rent seeking (PIDE, 2023; Haque, 2023). File movement remains cumbersome; procurement and financial controls can be excessively slow without reliably preventing abuse; and legalistic procedure is often used defensively to avoid responsibility (World Bank,

1998; International Crisis Group, 2010). The problem is not simply that there are too many rules, but that rules are poorly designed, inconsistently enforced, and rarely reengineered around citizen needs.

Business process reengineering has been recommended in successive reform reports, yet implementation is uneven (National Commission for Government Reforms, 2008; Husain, 2008). Digitalization can help reduce discretion and delay, but if introduced without process redesign it may merely automate inefficiency. Pakistan has seen encouraging movement in some areas of e-governance, citizen portals, and digital payments, but these islands of modernization have not fully transformed the core administrative chain (World Bank, 2024; NSPP, 2024). A genuinely reformed bureaucracy requires simpler procedures, fewer approval layers, interoperable records, and delegated authority matched with accountability.

Training Deficits and Weak Learning Systems

Training institutions in Pakistan, including the Civil Services Academy and provincial academies, play an important symbolic role, yet the overall training regime remains uneven in quality and relevance (Government of Pakistan, 2015; Abbas, 2023). Initial training cannot substitute for continuous professional development, mid-career specialization, and problem-driven executive education. Too often, training is treated as episodic classroom certification rather than part of a larger performance and capability strategy (Husain, 2020; PIDE, 2023). Courses may emphasize administrative law and traditional office procedure but underinvest in data analysis, negotiation, project management, regulatory economics, digital governance, and behavioral insights.

Moreover, training is often disconnected from incentives. If promotions, postings, and rewards do not value new competencies, training yields little organizational change. International experience suggests that public sector learning works best when embedded in career streams, linked to leadership development, and reinforced through real work problems (Pollitt & Bouckaert,

2017; Andrews et al., 2017). Pakistan has yet to institutionalize such a model at scale.

Corruption, Informality, and Selective Accountability

Corruption in Pakistan is commonly discussed in moralistic terms, but from an administrative perspective it reflects the intersection of discretion, opacity, weak oversight, and political patronage (Transparency International, 2024; IMF, 2025). The bureaucracy is neither uniformly corrupt nor the sole source of governance failure, yet administrative systems can create opportunities for bribery, favoritism, and collusive contracting when procedures are opaque and accountability selective (Siddiqi, 2007; World Bank, 2019). Anti-corruption bodies have often been used episodically and politically, while routine internal controls, audit systems, and procurement transparency remain underdeveloped in many departments (International Crisis Group, 2010; IMF, 2025).

Selective accountability can be as damaging as weak accountability. When civil servants fear retrospective investigation but do not see consistent standards applied across the system, they become even more risk averse. Decision paralysis and rule fetishism then increase because avoiding signature becomes safer than making timely decisions (Husain, 2020; Haque, 2023). Reform must therefore distinguish between accountability that deters abuse and accountability that merely induces fear.

Judicialization and Legal Rigidity

Service matters in Pakistan are heavily legalized. Courts and tribunals play a major role in transfers, promotions, seniority disputes, recruitment challenges, and disciplinary actions (Law and Justice Commission of Pakistan, 2013). Judicial oversight can protect fairness, but excessive litigation also slows reform and makes personnel management cumbersome. Governments often attempt administrative change through notifications and executive decisions that later face legal contestation because statutory foundations are unclear. Civil servants, in turn, may rely on litigation as a defensive tool

in a low-trust environment (International Crisis Group, 2010; Abbas, 2023).

This legal rigidity creates a reform dilemma. On the one hand, depoliticized administration requires clear legal rules. On the other, rigid service structures can obstruct adaptation, specialization, and performance management. Pakistan has not fully resolved this tension. Reformers must therefore combine legislative clarity with administrative flexibility rather than treat law as either the sole solution or an obstacle to bypass.

Capacity Gaps in Service Delivery Sectors

The weakness of Pakistan's bureaucracy is especially visible in service delivery sectors such as education, health, municipal administration, taxation, policing, and social protection. Here the problem is not only high-level policy design but front-line administrative capacity, monitoring, and coordination (World Bank, 2019, 2024). Schools and clinics may be staffed and funded on paper but poorly supervised in practice; district administrations face unclear authority; and citizens encounter fragmented, paper-based systems that impose high transaction costs. Reform debates focused narrowly on elite cadres overlook these everyday administrative bottlenecks.

A capable bureaucracy is not just a secretariat in Islamabad or Lahore. It is also a revenue inspector with usable land records, a procurement officer with e-bidding tools, a district health manager with reliable data, and a municipal authority able to respond to citizens. Pakistan's reform discourse has too often been top-heavy, concentrating on BS-20 and BS-21 posts while neglecting middle management and front-line systems (Cheema et al., 2006; Shah, 2014). Yet these layers determine whether citizens experience the state as functional or predatory.

Why Reforms Repeatedly Fail: The Political Economy of Stagnation

The persistence of bureaucratic weakness in Pakistan is not due to diagnostic ignorance. Across commissions, donor reports, and scholarly assessments, there is striking convergence on the

main issues: politicization, weak incentives, lack of specialization, procedural overload, poor accountability, and weak local government (World Bank, 1998; National Commission for Government Reforms, 2008; International Crisis Group, 2010; Husain, 2020). Reform fails because these pathologies are embedded in political bargains. Elites benefit from discretionary transfers, control over appointments, and opaque procurement; bureaucratic groups defend status hierarchies; and governments often prefer short-term control to long-term institutionalization (Wilder, 2009; Siddiq, 2007).

Reform also generates concentrated losses and diffuse gains. Those who benefit from existing arrangements can mobilize against change, while citizens who might gain from better administration are dispersed and weakly organized (Grindle, 2004, 2007). For this reason, even widely admired reform blueprints become diluted during implementation. Measures that threaten patronage networks, pension privileges, cadre monopolies, or politically useful discretion encounter resistance inside and outside the state. Governments then cherry-pick less disruptive reforms, such as training seminars or renaming departments, while avoiding harder questions of tenure protection, specialization, or devolved authority (Khan & Hussain, 2020; PIDE, 2023).

A further reason is reform volatility. Pakistan's political system has long been marked by alternating civilian governments, military interventions, judicial activism, and fiscal crises. Administrative reform requires continuity over a decade or more, but Pakistani governments often operate under immediate survival pressures (Jalal, 1995; Rizvi, 2000). As a result, reform commissions are created at moments of political transition, yet their recommendations lose momentum as leadership changes. Each incoming government announces a fresh reform agenda, often without institutional memory of prior efforts (Husain, 2008; NSPP, 2024).

Finally, there is a mismatch between imported reform models and local institutional realities. New Public Management ideas such as performance contracts, agency autonomy, and

market-style incentives have influenced reform discourse globally (Hood, 1991; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). Some of these ideas are useful, but transplanting them mechanically into settings with weak information systems, fragmented authority, and politicized personnel can produce hybrid dysfunction rather than efficiency (Grindle, 2004; Andrews et al., 2017). Pakistan's challenge is not to choose between classical bureaucracy and managerialism, but to build a context-appropriate synthesis: rule-bound enough to protect merit, flexible enough to solve problems, and decentralized enough to respond to citizens.

Comparative Lessons and Implementation Priorities

Comparative experience suggests that successful bureaucratic reform in developing countries rarely begins with wholesale institutional replacement. Rather, it proceeds through selective improvement in core state functions, backed by elite commitment and administrative continuity (Evans, 1995; Grindle, 2004; Andrews et al., 2017). East Asian developmental states built meritocratic islands in strategic sectors before broader bureaucratic consolidation, while many low-capacity states failed because reform packages were too comprehensive, externally driven, or disconnected from political incentives (Evans, 1995; Rodrik, 2007). Pakistan can learn from this literature. Reform need not wait for an ideal political order, but it must identify priority domains where improved administration can generate visible gains and expand constituencies for change.

One such domain is revenue administration. Pakistan's chronic tax weakness is not only a matter of political exemptions; it is also an administrative problem involving information systems, field incentives, fragmented authority, and distrust between taxpayers and officials (IMF, 2025; World Bank, 2025). Professionalized tax administration, better audit selection, simplified procedures, and protected tenure for revenue officials could produce measurable fiscal gains while demonstrating the benefits of competence-based reform. Similar logic applies to

procurement, where e-bidding and standardized disclosure can reduce both corruption opportunities and transaction delays (World Bank, 2019; Transparency International, 2024). In these areas, reform yields not only abstract governance dividends but concrete fiscal and developmental returns.

Another priority area is social sector administration. Pakistan's recurrent learning and health crises are often framed as questions of funding or policy vision, but implementation failures remain decisive (World Bank, 2019, 2024). Teacher deployment, drug procurement, district monitoring, facility maintenance, and absenteeism control all hinge on ordinary administrative systems. Reform in these sectors should therefore focus on managerial data use, district-level authority, citizen feedback loops, and professional middle management rather than only ministerial policy announcements. Where state capability is visibly weak, citizens often lose faith in both politicians and civil servants. Conversely, improvements in schools, clinics, municipal services, and licensing can create broader public support for bureaucratic reform.

A further comparative lesson concerns the relationship between bureaucracy and politics. The most effective systems do not eliminate politics from administration; they structure it. Ministers set direction, appoint a limited number of political advisers, and hold senior officials to performance standards, while career civil servants enjoy enough professional autonomy to provide candid advice and implement decisions consistently (Peters, 2010; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). Pakistan has too often oscillated between the rhetoric of "neutral" bureaucracy and the reality of personalized control. A healthier settlement would define the legitimate sphere of political leadership and the protected sphere of professional administration. This requires explicit rules on transfers, appointments, procurement interventions, and use of advisers. Ambiguity in these areas invites conflict and manipulation.

Implementation strategy is therefore as important as reform content. Pakistan should adopt a phased agenda over five to ten years. In the first phase, legal and procedural foundations should

be laid: guaranteed minimum tenure, revised recruitment rules, digital HR records, transparent posting boards, and pilot performance agreements in selected ministries and provinces. In the second phase, specialization tracks, compensation rationalization, and process reengineering should be scaled up. In the third phase, deeper changes in local government staffing, pension restructuring, and intergovernmental administrative alignment can be consolidated. Sequencing matters because not every reform generates quick wins, and a government that attempts everything simultaneously may lose administrative cooperation and political support (Grindle, 2007; Andrews et al., 2017).

Communication is another neglected aspect of reform. Bureaucratic change is usually debated in elite circles, but public understanding is thin and civil servants themselves often hear of reform through rumor. Reform should be accompanied by white papers, public dashboards, consultations with service associations, and clear explanation of why specific changes are necessary. This does not mean surrendering reform to veto players. It means recognizing that organizational change requires narrative legitimacy as well as legal authority. Officials asked to alter long-standing routines need clarity about objectives, training opportunities, and career implications. Citizens, meanwhile, need visible benchmarks by which to judge whether reform is improving service delivery rather than merely reshuffling elites.

The question of ethics also deserves greater prominence. A technically capable bureaucracy without public ethics can become efficient but exclusionary; a morally earnest bureaucracy without competence cannot deliver. Pakistan's reform agenda should therefore include ethics training, conflict-of-interest rules, asset disclosure, whistleblower protection, and service charters that define obligations toward citizens (Transparency International, 2024; IMF, 2025). Ethical administration should not be reduced to anti-corruption slogans. It must be embedded in everyday practices: fair treatment of citizens, timely response, transparent records, reasoned decisions, and stewardship of public resources.

Such habits are learned institutionally, not only preached normatively.

There is also a gender dimension to bureaucratic reform that is often under-addressed. Recruitment into the civil services has become more socially inclusive over time, yet women remain underrepresented in many field, technical, and senior leadership positions, and organizational cultures can still reproduce exclusion through postings, informal networking, and weak workplace support systems (UN Women, 2023). A more effective bureaucracy is also a more representative one. Pakistan should therefore link reform to gender-sensitive workplace policies, safe postings, transparent promotion criteria, childcare support where feasible, and leadership pipelines for women in both generalist and specialist cadres. Diversity is not only a question of equity; it also improves the state's social intelligence and legitimacy.

Ultimately, the test of reform is whether it changes the everyday encounter between citizen and state. If land registration remains opaque, if police and district offices remain extractive, if businesses cannot secure permits without delay, and if public hospitals and schools remain badly administered, then reform at the apex will have limited meaning. Pakistan's bureaucracy must move from a control-centered culture to a problem-solving and service-oriented one. That transition is difficult because it challenges status hierarchies and inherited identities. Yet without it, the state will remain trapped in an old administrative form increasingly mismatched to twenty-first-century demands (Hood, 1991; PIDE, 2023; Husain, 2021).

Way Forward: Toward a Realistic and Sequenced Reform Agenda

A credible reform strategy for Pakistan must begin from institutional realism. The goal should not be bureaucratic perfection, but a capable, accountable, and citizen-oriented administration that can perform core state functions with greater consistency. Reform should therefore be sequenced, politically negotiated, and anchored in law, incentives, and organizational redesign.

First, Pakistan needs a new civil service compact based on merit, professionalism, and protected but conditional tenure. Civil servants require reasonable security against arbitrary transfer and dismissal, especially in operational posts where continuity matters. Minimum tenure rules should be legally entrenched and enforced through transparent posting boards at federal and provincial levels (International Crisis Group, 2010; Husain, 2020). At the same time, tenure should not mean immunity from performance scrutiny. Clear disciplinary standards, transparent inquiry processes, and time-bound decisions are essential so that protection from politicization does not become protection from accountability. Second, recruitment and promotion systems must be redesigned to privilege competence and specialization. Competitive examinations remain valuable, but their content should be regularly updated to assess analytical reasoning, policy writing, digital literacy, ethics, and domain knowledge rather than rote learning alone (Government of Pakistan, 2015; PIDE, 2023). Generalist entry can be retained for some coordination roles, but career streams for tax administration, public financial management, regulatory governance, health administration, education management, procurement, urban management, and digital systems should be institutionalized. Promotion to senior leadership should increasingly require demonstrated domain competence, completion of accredited training, and performance evidence rather than seniority alone (National Commission for Government Reforms, 2008; Husain, 2020).

Third, Pakistan should adopt a carefully governed model of lateral entry and exit. A modern state cannot rely exclusively on lifelong career officials for every specialized task. Open competition for selected senior and technical posts can bring expertise into the state, but only if the process is transparent, criteria-based, and insulated from patronage (Husain, 2020, 2021). Lateral recruitment must therefore be the exception within a rules-based framework, not a vehicle for discretionary appointments. Similarly, there should be pathways for officials to move between public service, academia, international

organizations, and regulated private sectors under conflict-of-interest safeguards. Such permeability can refresh state capacity if managed properly.

Fourth, performance management must be rebuilt from the ground up. Pakistan's appraisal systems should move away from generic confidential reports toward role-specific objectives, measurable indicators, and periodic review conversations. Not all public functions are easily quantified, but many can be evaluated through output quality, timeliness, team leadership, citizen feedback, fiscal discipline, and project execution. Senior positions in ministries, divisions, and service delivery agencies should be governed through annual performance agreements linked to departmental plans (World Bank, 1998; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). Performance information must be used developmentally as well as evaluatively: to identify training needs, recognize excellence, and correct underperformance. If appraisal remains ceremonial, reform will remain cosmetic.

Fifth, pay and pension reform is unavoidable. A fragmented compensation structure with large non-transparent allowances and fiscally burdensome pensions undermines both fairness and efficiency (World Bank, 1998; Husain, 2020). Pakistan should gradually rationalize allowances into salary, improve pay for scarce professional skills, and move toward pension arrangements that are fiscally sustainable and portable. Reform here must be gradual and consultative because abrupt change will provoke resistance. Yet without compensation reform, the state will continue to lose talent in specialized sectors while carrying heavy legacy costs.

Sixth, administrative simplification and digital process reengineering should be treated as core reform, not auxiliary modernization. Every major ministry and provincial department should undertake process audits to eliminate redundant approvals, duplicate reporting, and paper-heavy workflows. Citizen-facing services such as licensing, certificates, land records, tax filing, procurement, pensions, and social transfers should be redesigned around single-window digital interfaces wherever feasible (National Commission for Government Reforms, 2008;

World Bank, 2024). However, digitalization must be accompanied by record standards, interoperability, cybersecurity, and grievance redress. Otherwise, corruption may simply migrate into new technological forms.

Seventh, Pakistan must empower local government as an administrative necessity, not just a democratic slogan. No central or provincial bureaucracy can effectively manage urban services, primary facilities, local infrastructure, and community responsiveness from afar (Cheema et al., 2006; Shah, 2014; Nizami, 2025). Reform should therefore create constitutionally protected, fiscally viable local governments with clear functional assignments and professional local cadres. Provincial bureaucracies will resist this shift because it redistributes authority, but without local institutionalization the state will remain over-centralized and under-capable. Local government reform should include municipal finance systems, local HR rules, service standards, and integrated digital records.

Eighth, accountability institutions need recalibration. Pakistan requires stronger procurement transparency, internal audit, public disclosure, and legislative oversight, but it also needs to reduce the climate of indiscriminate fear that discourages decision-making. The emphasis should shift from episodic punitive drives to routine systems of accountability: e-procurement, asset disclosure, risk-based audit, independent complaints handling, and transparent public reporting (Transparency International, 2024; IMF, 2025). Anti-corruption architecture should be harmonized with administrative law so that honest mistakes, negligence, and criminal corruption are treated differently. When all errors are potentially criminalized, administrative paralysis follows.

Ninth, reform must invest in middle management and front-line administration. Ministries often focus on senior officer reshuffles while neglecting the supervisory layers that actually run programs. District education officers, hospital managers, budget officers, municipal engineers, procurement specialists, and tax administrators need professional development, tools, and autonomy matched to responsibility

(Cheema & Mohmand, 2007; World Bank, 2019). A capable bureaucracy is built through the “missing middle,” not only elite secretariat reform. Pakistan should therefore establish sector-specific administrative cadres, continuous learning systems, and modern HR databases that map skills across the service.

Tenth, reform leadership should be institutionalized through an independent, time-bound civil service reform unit with parliamentary reporting obligations. One reason past initiatives faded is that they were embedded in transient executive arrangements or personalized leadership. A permanent reform secretariat, supported by federal and provincial representation, could track implementation benchmarks, publish annual progress reports, and maintain continuity across governments (Husain, 2008; PIDE, 2023). Such a unit should not become another layer of bureaucracy; its value would lie in coordination, monitoring, and public transparency. Reform survives when it is visible, benchmarked, and politically owned across administrations.

Finally, bureaucratic reform must be tied to a broader conception of the state’s role. Pakistan does not merely need a smaller bureaucracy or a stronger bureaucracy in the abstract; it needs a more coherent state that distinguishes between functions it must perform directly, functions it should regulate, and functions it can enable through partnerships (Husain, 2020; World Bank, 2024). This requires functional review of ministries, reduction of overlapping mandates, and strategic right-sizing. Right-sizing, however, should not become an austerity slogan detached from capability. Downsizing without process redesign and skills strategy would weaken the state further. The objective must be a leaner but more competent public administration.

Conclusion

Bureaucratic reform in Pakistan has remained unfinished because it has been approached episodically, defensively, and often apolitically. Yet the bureaucracy sits at the center of Pakistan’s governance crisis. Fiscal stabilization, social service delivery, climate adaptation, regulation,

and citizen trust all depend on administrative capability. The core challenge is not simply one of corruption or red tape, but of an institutional order pulled between colonial legacies, patrimonial politics, legal rigidity, weak incentives, and unresolved federalism. Pakistan's reform history demonstrates that diagnostic clarity is not enough. What is needed is a sustained political settlement around merit, specialization, tenure protection, empowered local government, digital process redesign, and credible accountability. Reform should be incremental but cumulative, context-specific but principled. Without such a reorientation, commissions will continue to multiply while the administrative state remains trapped between over-centralization and under-performance. With it, bureaucratic reform can become a foundation for democratic governance and developmental effectiveness rather than another recurring promise deferred.

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