

Recruitment and Selection of Civil Servants in Bangladesh: An Expository Study

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ABSTRACT

The insightful understanding of the recruitment and selection process of civil servants in Bangladesh is crucial as it manifests the idiosyncratic nature of civil service in enrolling the talents in the highest echelon. The modern civil service system in Bangladesh is influenced by three pressing traditional legacies: Colonial Legacy, Pakistan Legacy, and Post-Independence Legacy. In the past, recruitment and selection in civil service exemplified as apolitical and elitist. Max Weber's prescriptions for neutral, permanent, talented, and salaried public officials assumed almost a universal acceptance. However, over the years, the apolitical and elitist nature of civil service has disintegrated due to political polarization and embedded culture of clientelism. The invasion of politics and option for a representative bureaucracy resulted in formulation of various types of quotas for some groups which made a serious dent in the concept of merit. The experience of last fifty years suggests that traditional examination system and the recruitment of all cadres through the same examination, effects of quota system, interference of political forces and corruption has damaged the efficiency of the civil service. A robust recruitment and selection system is imperative for enlistment of flair and professionals within the service for institutional effectiveness. Against this backdrop, this paper briefly reviews the merit versus representation debate, the policy and process of recruitment and selection, the examination system, and the role of the Bangladesh Public Service Commission (BPSC), (shortly referred to as PSC) as a recruiting agency, followed by a discussion on the consequences of political pressure placed on the PSC, based on secondary data and content analysis.

Keywords: Bureaucracy, Civil Service, Administrative Reform, Recruitment and Selection, Public Service Commission, Merit and Representation.

INTRODUCTION

An efficient and effective role of civil service in a developing democratic country is of utmost importance. "The Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS), being at the top of the bureaucratic structure, is the principal instrument for planning, executing,

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supervising, and monitoring the tasks of government” (Zafarullah 2011, cited in Jahan & Monem 2014). An efficient, dynamic and merit based civil service is essential for government performance and managing the affairs of the state to cope with the changing trends that shape the contemporary world. Therefore, the government needs to appoint the most “talented, competent, and committed” individuals in the highest echelon for effective implementation of public policy and delivery of public services. The civil service system in Bangladesh bears a legacy of the British colonial rule. The bureaucracy during colonial British-India was grounded on the notion of elitism and meritocracy. However, during British-India the system of personnel appointment into the East India Company (EIC)’s service can be considered as ‘closed system’ debarring Indians to join the highest echelon thus fabricating an incongruous civil service system for the native Indians. The infiltration of EIC servants into the civil service was widely practiced begetting the culture of patronage. Nevertheless, after the partition of 1947 the process of appointment into the civil service remained unchanged. The overall fabric and idealistic nature of modern bureaucracy in Bangladesh appears to be a ramification of Indian Civil Service (ICS) which is inconsistent with principles of “Ideal Bureaucracy” predicated by Max Weber. The ethnocentric essence of ICS remains mostly unwieldy and unaltered in BCS, though some cosmetic reform efforts have been made to reinvigorate bureaucracy. Multitudinous studies on bureaucracy concluded that the bureaucracy in Bangladesh has not been able to materialize its potentiality and seems confined in capability trap and other paradoxes that create an embargo to meet the contemporary challenges (Khan 2015).

This article reviews and assesses the experiences of recruitment and selection practices in BCS during the last five decades in general. It is a review paper based on content analysis and primarily drawing inferences from in-depth analysis of secondary sources such as books, journals, newspapers and research reports. The facts accumulated from written sources predominantly provide inclusive understanding of the attributes of bureaucracy in making the appointment decisions. Thus, the overall purpose of this study is to highlight the merit vs representation discourse; to delineate the recruitment policy and examination system in BCS; to assess the capacity of PSC in guaranteeing an egalitarian and transparent process of recruitment and selection; and the effect of political coercion on the overall performance of PSC. Moreover, it also demonstrates the practical limitations of BCS in creating an impartial and coherent recruitment and selection procedure.

THE CHRONOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT OF CIVIL SERVICE

The Civil Service in British Era

The civil service during the dominion of EIC was divided into two tiers: covenanted (upper tier also known as ICS) and uncovenanted (lower tier known as Provincial Civil

Service (PCS). The ICS was an elite and impassable cadre re-cruited expatriates from Britain with superior educational background (Jamil 2007; Khan 2015). British-India had a very centralized civil service management system exclusively dominated by two bodies; Court of Directors (COD) (responsible to nominate the 'Writers' for EIC's service) and Board of Examiners (select the candidates for EIC's service). Later the power to frame recruitment rules and regulations and to conduct preliminary examination was endowed to a parliamentary body named Board of Control. Eventually the supremacy of EIC and COD ceased after the crown rule embarked in 1858 (Ali, 2004).

However, no Indian was enlisted to the ICS until 1863, despite the initiation of competitive examinations in 1853 by the Charter Act of India. On the ground of Macaulay Committee report efforts were undertaken to substitute the system of patronage with merit-based recruitment. As such, the Civil Service Commission (CSC) was formed in 1855 to oversee the competitive examinations for ICS in London. The decision to hold ICS examination in London led to European bias and combats the Indian candidates to join ICS despite their merit and competency (Jamil 2007). The syllabus for the entrance examination was rigid and lack homogeneity as substantial marks were allotted to European Classics hence creating a civil service system more rigorous and least accessible for the indigenous Indians.

From 1922 forth, the open competitive examination started to take place in India's Allahabad and later in Delhi after the formation of Federal Public Service Commission (FPSC) as a result of the representation of Indians in ICS started escalating. Subsequently, in British-India there was no inclusive statute under which the structure and conditions of civil service would be licitly defined (Ahmed 1986). However, the system of civil service recruitment and selection during British imperialism reflects the consolidated system of appointment with a flavor of preeminence and probity. These dormant traits of ICS dissipated after the birth of Independent India due to frail institutional norms, unbridled corruption, and imprudent politicization.

The Civil Service in United Pakistan

After 1947, Pakistan was in a state of crisis due to political frenzy. Therefore, the main doctrine to run the administration was not to alter the administrative set-up left by the British but to protect it from fragmentation. Not many ICS officers opted to serve in Pakistan which eventually created a vacuum of qualified manpower in the service of the Republic. In 1950 the government of Pakistan adhered to the British tradition of reserving posts and constituted an elite cadre known as Civil Service of Pakistan (CSP) as a successor of ICS (Khan 2015). The reservation of superior posts for the CSP officer continued till 1971. The civil service during this time can be broadly categorized into three classes namely: All-Pakistan Services, Central Services and Provincial Services (Ahmed 1986). From the studies of eminent scholars, it is evident that the recruitment to CSP cadre was predominantly made from West

Pakistan in juxtaposition to East Pakistan during 1949 to 1970. The reservation of posts for CSP officers also continued in East Pakistan Civil Service (EPCS).

Many reform committees were formed to mitigate the discrepancies between CSP and other cadres but with no constructive outcome. The information divulged from different literatures exhibit that the personnel policy during united Pakistan was somewhat indefinite, with no predefined criteria for the appointment into CSP. The elitist nature of captured out to be anachronistic with the ingress of incompetent officials in the superior posts. Thus, the recruitment and selection of personnel in United Pakistan was nothing but a mirror image of ICS model with disbanded ethos.

THE CIVIL SERVICE IN INDEPENDENT BANGLADESH

The civil service system in independent Bangladesh post 1971 bears the legacy of ICS and CSP with some conspicuous modifications. A well-balanced civil service system was unavoidable to revamp a war-ravaged country and to meet the requirements of the newly built nation. The consecutive political regimes formed numbers of reform committees for unification and ramification of civil services in the unitary state. The rationale behind the formation of such reform committees were to nullify elitism from civil service, to ensure fairness and justice, and to introduce a merit based and unified recruitment system. It is clear from the existing literatures that most of the recommendations of the reform committees were remained largely unenforced because of disputes between CSP and EPCS officers and institutional bottlenecks. In the viewpoint of Khan (2010), the institutions in Bangladesh are muffled in humpty-dumpty syndrome due to poor implementation capacity of the civil servants thus posing challenges to reform. Besides, isomorphic mimicry (replicating western ideas without having the prior capability) also perpetuated the reform failure.

From 1971-1975, the interim recruitment policy placed notable preferences to individuals labeled as freedom fighters thus compromising merit. Like Pakistan the military and political infiltration in bureaucracy become a customary practice in the following regimes. The lack of lucid recruitment policy after independence led to erratic and gradational decisions on appointments. The Industrial Management Service (IMS) cadre and Senior Services Pool (SSP) were created for ensuring efficiency and equality within the services, however the appointment to these cadres became the subject of massive inconsistencies. The role of PSC remains trivial during these despotic regimes. The confrontational party politics in Bangladesh facilitated generalist ascendancy to bureaucracy (Obaidullah 1996).

The bureaucrats in British era portrayed dichotomous role. In one hand, they were committed to the colonial rule, and on the other hand, they distanced themselves from the general crowds (Jahan 2016). In the successive eras, bureaucracy depicted the similar notion. It is palpable from the three eras that spoils system in recruitment and substantial generalist crux have spurred the generalist-specialist conflict, thus disturbing the true spirit of bureaucracy.

MERIT VS REPRESENTATION DISCOURSE IN THE CIVIL SERVICE: AFFIRMATIVE ACTION BUT NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES

Max Weber advocated an ideal type of bureaucracy and considered it to be the most rational and inevitable organization in a modern state. Weber (1947) stated that the bureaucratic forms of organizations are technically superior to any other form “in precision, in stability, in the stringency of its discipline and its reliability.” The ideal type of bureaucracy includes a high degree of qualification and expertise of its members. Thus, the members of bureaucracy would be selected based on merit. Merit is an anti-discriminatory idea where best person is selected irrespective of clan, patrimony, gender, and race which implies competitive excellence. According to Weber, bureaucratic officials would not only be trained experts but would also come from the elite group of the society.

However, critics argued that modern bureaucracy must reflect the society at large and the realities of changing demand for diversity and participation in the affairs of the government. Organizations perform better if their workforces reflect the characteristics of their constituent population. The idea of representative bureaucracy was first developed by Kingsley (1944) who stated: “In a democracy competence alone is not enough. The public service must also be representative if the state is to liberate rather than enslave”. Long argued that public service must contain diversity of “races, nationalities and religions” to be representative and democratic “in composition and ethos” (Long 1952; Rice 2005). The idea later became popular through Mosher (1982) and Krislov (1974). A bureaucracy considered to be representative when “it is broadly representative of the public it serves” (Meier et al. 1999). It can be said that a representative bureaucracy which is diversified and inclusive will prevent discrimination, ensure social equity and is more likely to make decisions that benefit a wider range of people in society. Therefore, the concept supports affirmative actions such as quotas or reserved posts and arguing that through positive discrimination, bureaucracy can eventually succeed in ensuring democratic participation of all groups and interests in society. However, the demand for diversity and participation must not come at the expense of the merit system in recruitment and selection. A non-partisan recruitment and selection system can create a representative bureaucracy on the one hand and bring dynamism in civil service on the other. According to O’Connor (2014), ‘without surrendering the merit principle a true representative bureaucracy is attainable’. Many studies have stressed that meritocracy in bureaucracy has an unswerving effect in enhancing state performance and reducing corruption (Zaman 2015).

The bureaucracy in the past was used as an instrument to indoctrinate the customs and standards of British Imperialism. Since the colonial period the merit vs representation has been a gleaming issue. Although British Raj shows cases an elitist

form of civil service system however, the appointment of officials in the superior posts was a matter of subjugation. The racial bigotry was apparent in ICS. Between 1859-1939, out of 9378 officials appointed for ICS, 972 were Indians and the rest 8406 were Europeans (Khan, 2015). Indianization of civil service was a compounded issue as many reform commissions like Islington Commission, Lee Commission and Montagu-Chelmsford Commission opined that larger representation of Englishmen in ICS was a requisite for nurturing administrative efficiency and sound maturing of self-governing institutions.

The quota system became more formalized during Pakistan and Bangladesh eras. The studies conducted on the historical development of civil service in the United Pakistan illustrates the pervasive reservation of secretariat posts for the CSP and other services. It is apparent from the study of Ali (2004), CSP had the soaring percentage of representation in different secretariat and provincial posts, varying from 67 to 75 percentage. The disproportionate reservation for CSP and other services denotes the antagonistic attitude of the government towards the other services. The patrimonial bureaucracy prevalent during the colonial rule in India has an immediate effect in molding the bureaucracy in United Pakistan.

The culture of reserving secretariat posts continued in independent Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, from 1972 to 2018, a combination of merit and was used to recruit to higher posts. Quotas were introduced as an interim measure to offer a level playing field in civil service. The table below summarizes the distribution of quotas with minor modifications:

TABLE 1: Reservation under Quota for Class-I and Class-II Officers

Quota	1972	1976	1985-2011	2012- till 2018
Merit	20	40	45	44
District	40	20	10	10
Freedom Fighters	30	30	30	30
Women	10	10	10	10
Tribal	-	-	5	5
Disabled	-	-	-	1
Total	100	100	100	100

Source: Adopted from Uddin & Chowdhury 2016

It is observed from the above table that for nearly 46 years quota has subverted merit for appointments to civil service. While the government had consistently upheld the quota system, Administrative Reform Commissions appointed from time to time have always criticized it and recommended its gradual abolition. Regarding upholding of quotas in civil service contrasting opinions can be found from the academic literatures. Jahan (2017) examined the quota-merit interface in Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) and recommended that 85% of the posts should be based on merit and

the rest (15%) should be allocated through quota. Uddin and Chowdhury (2016) opined that class-based preference system is essential for ensuring representation of minorities and for annihilating the prejudicial system. The reasons behind underrepresentation under quota were due to the design flaws of the system. According to Khan (2015), one of the most elaborate and complex quota systems in the world had been devised for a singularly homogeneous country like Bangladesh, while this system is needed to protect well-defined minorities in heterogeneous societies. Quotas have corroded the homogenous character of the state by initiating new avenues of political corruption and discrimination, eventually tampering with the nation-building process (Zobair 2017). The appointments under the quota system became the subject of massive political maneuvering, impeding the meritorious from entering the civil service. Quotas in BCS have generated unbalanced representation and infringed on talents.

Historically quotas over merit have been a deciding factor of recruitment to civil service, consequently fostering rampant cronyism. There was a wide-spread perception that the quota system has deteriorated the quality of civil service and many of the anomalies and inefficiencies of the PSC could be directly attributed to the complicated quota system (Khan 2015). It is to be mentioned here that, the quotas for class-1 and class-2 posts (9th to 13th grades) have been discontinued in Bangladesh from 2018 due to mass movement of mostly public university students against such discriminatory and antithetical practices. Nonetheless, the question still remains: will the abolishment of quota system stimulate a meritorious and exemplary civil service? According to Zafarullah (2010), affirmative action can ensure social inclusion and social justice if it deviates from partisan politics and purposeful discrimination. Undoubtedly Quota in Bangladesh has resulted in cramped social justice. However, true representative and meritorious civil service system is difficult to erect until tangible development in education system is ensured in peripheral areas. An integrated and practical-based education system is an important tool for building capable and competent civil servants (Sidorchuk et al. 2019)

RECRUITMENT POLICY AND PROCESS IN BANGLADESH CIVIL SERVICE

The recruitment and selection process of civil servants has been and is significantly molded by the Constitution, as well as governed by the policy pronouncements of the government from time to time in the form of executive orders (Khan & Zafarullah 1983). The constitution stated that there should be equal opportunity for all citizens in public service recruitment. The government also introduced the quota system based on these constitutional provisions to create special opportunities for disadvantaged groups.

It is worth noting that recruitment policy was first introduced by an executive order in 1972 called Interim Recruitment rules 1972. Before 1979 no competitive

examination for BCS, in present sense, was held and the induction of personnel in the BCS was regulated by ad hoc arrangements. The first full-scale recruitment rules, BCS (Recruitment) Rules 1981 was framed for the re-cruitment of various cadre officers to the BCS, and the first BCS examination was held in 1982. Currently, for direct recruitment at the entry level the Bang-ladesh Civil Service (Age, Qualification and Examination for Direct Recruit-ment) Rules 2014 is being followed. Three recruitment methods are followed in the civil service: direct recruitment through open competitive examination, promotion, and transfer or deputation (Ali 2007). Recruitment at the entry lev-el to 26 cadres is done through direct recruitment, which only has been ad-dressed in this paper.

The current recruitment process is that the Ministry of Public Administra-tion (MOPA) gathers the number of vacant posts from ministries and govern-ment bodies and transmits the aforesaid vacancies to the PSC. After getting the requisition, the PSC advertises the number of vacant posts through daily newspapers and invites applications from the eligible candidates. The PSC then conducts BCS examination for selecting the most suitable candidates.

EXAMINATION SYSTEM

In British colonial rule, written examinations were the cornerstone in assessing candidates for civil service positions. The English Model of recruitment system was adopted in independent Bangladesh with some crucial amendments. Cur-rently, BCS examination system is threefold, consisting of MCQs (preliminary examination), written examination and interview or oral test (final stage). The flowchart below shows the examination system of BPSC:

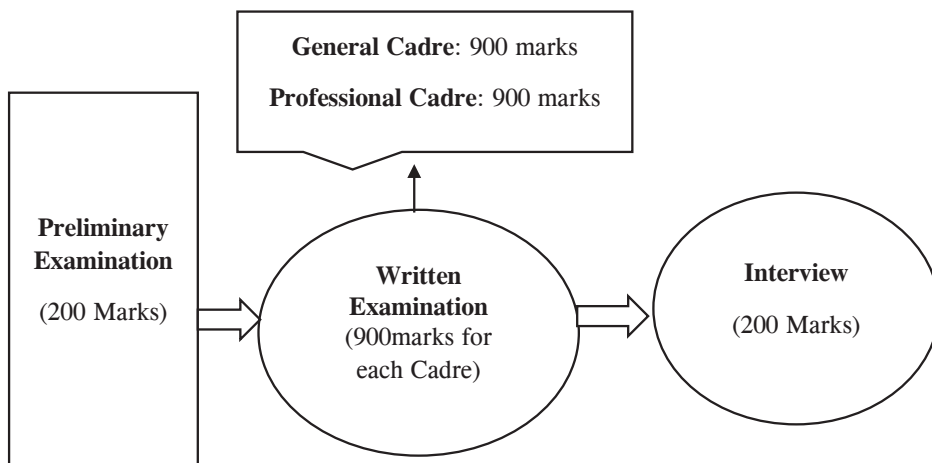


Figure 1: Consolidated from Literature Review

The candidate who secures 50% marks in preliminary examination is considered eligible for the written examination. Similarly, to qualify for the written examination, candidates must secure 50% marks in total and 30% marks in each compulsory subject. The merit list is prepared based on written examination and interview marks, and final selection list is made and sent to the MO-PA. Candidates then go through medical check-up for physical fitness and need police clearance report. The MOPA issues appointment letters after getting the final approval of the President.

The present structure and nature of BCS examination is facile and offers little room for critical and creative thinking (Zafarullah & Khan 2005). According to a report of the World Bank (2006), "The questions are descriptive rather than analytical and exploratory. Therefore, it fails to test whether a candidate possesses good analytical ability or whether he/she can learn from real life experiences and apply in his/her job or whether he/she can lead and manage changes". Though PSC incorporated various changes in the syllabus and outmoded examination system the changes seem merely cosmetic. The 200 marks for viva-voce encourage subjective biasness (Khan & Ara 2005). Moreover, the examination process is rickety. According to the report of Prothom Alo (2022), anomalies were found in the evaluation of BCS examination scripts due to laxity of the examiners. The result of 41st BCS took nine months to publish due to lack of qualified and standard selection of examiners. Therefore, the modernization of examination system is pivotal to infuse professionalism, to secure merit-based recruitment and to keep the process of selection above censure and skepticism. The government has recently placed the draft of Public Service Commission Bill 2022 in the parliament consolidating punishment for ostensible perpetrators in BCS examination (The Daily Star 2022). The bill is a stepping stone to remove several inconsistencies prevailing in the BCS examination if enforced stringently and dispassionately.

ROLE AND PERFORMANCE OF THE PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION AS A RECRUITING AGENCY

In Bangladesh, as the main recruiting agency of the government, PSC is the curator of merit-based recruitment. As a constitutional body, the function of PSC is to select the suitable persons and give recommendations for appointments to the concerned ministry or departments. Nevertheless, there exist gap between practice and constitutional mandates of PSC due to political clout (Zafarullah & Khan 2005). It is widely believed that PSC is a weak organization and has not always managed the recruitment process very well (World Bank, 2006). Allegation of examination irregularities such as the leakage of BCS question papers, changing or replacing examination scripts, changing marks, sending list by high-ups to viva board members, bribing for extra ordinary marks in viva and selection on political consideration has been reported by the media and Transparency International, Bangladesh (TIB) which have damaged PSC's credibility (TIB 2007). Many political regimes in the past have downgraded the role of

PSC by using it as a weapon to make ad hoc appointments of preferential candidates. The civil service management in Bangladesh is afflicted with number of issues like lack of professionalism and career orientation, unresponsive to societal demands and lack of integrity, transparency, and accountability in performing its affairs.

PSC appeared to be a well-established institution with high degree of integrity during the British period. However, in Bangladesh, during autocratic and democratic regimes the PSC became ill-fated with the nation's expectations. The PSC is the authorized curator of merit-based recruitment to civil service but over the past the performance of PSC reveals a dismal picture due to political compulsion placed on it. There are allegations of recruiting candidates inclined to the ruling party to establish a partisan control over the civil service (Jahan 2012). This is usually done by appointing party loyalists to posts of chairman and members of PSC (Jahan & Monem 2014). Existing literature suggests that most often pressure from political elites, force members and chairs of PSC to ignore professional ethics and to bend before political pressure as they are appointed based on political affiliation to the party in power. The avarice to remain in power by the respective political regimes has resulted in an impaired bureaucracy.

PSC seems to fit into the category of an independent constitutional body with advisory status, but its power and functions are quite restricted (Khan & Ara 2005). In practice PSC needs to liaise with the MOPA and the Ministry of Finance (MOF) over any decision for administrative and financial purposes which undermines its independence. A study by Mozumder and Rahman (2007) on the role of central recruiting agencies of Japan (National Personnel Agency) and Bangladesh (Public Service Commission) exhibit that the recruitment process in Japan is swift, transparent and need-based in comparison to Bangladesh. Besides, UPSC in India although is an advisory body like PSC but it upholds the power in making government answerable to the parliament if it rejects the advice of the commission. Moreover, despite having the reservation policy in practice the civil servants in India are highly independent, competent and capable as bureaucracy is above political kinship and manoeuvring.

In the opinion of Khan (2013), the bureaucracy in Bangladesh displays the value of poly-normativism where old administrative values and apparatus co-exist with modern standards. Despite the transition from preferential recruitment to merit based recruitment the innate deficiency in bureaucracy not only turned bureaucracy into a dysfunctional institution but has also undermined equal employment opportunity (Khan 2015; Siddiquee and Faruqi 2010). It is high time the government enacted a comprehensive law by addresses the pit-falls of PSC and brings dynamism to the functions of PSC.

CONCLUSION

The administration is a complex entity and the art of managing it depends on proficient civil servants. And for this it is needed to recruit a competent pool of civil servants.

Governments in the past have tried to streamline the civil service system but failed to thrive in a vigorous recruitment and selection process. It was seen that on a good number of occasions recruitment rules were relaxed on the plea of meeting urgent situations without following any uniform criteria which had an adverse impact on the quality of civil servants so recruited. An effective recruitment must be based on an effective career planning system which is absent in BCS. The written accounts on BCS over the last fifty years indicate the innate deficiency in the civil service system due to erroneous recruitment and selection procedures and political considerations in the recruitment process. Currently the recruitment system apparently is in support of a merit-based system but it is not the panacea of the problems the civil service is going through. The selection system itself must be restructured and made more scientific, objective, and valid through re-modeling the traditional examination method and revising the curriculum of BCS examination. It is highly incumbent to develop a firm, uniform and substantial recruitment and selection policy and process for the sake of administrative efficiency and effectiveness and for weeding out all the paradoxes.

In 2011, India brought changes in their preliminary examination system by introducing Civil Service Aptitude Test (CSAT) to evaluate analytical, problem-solving and reasoning skills and aptitude of the candidates (Srirangam 2022). This test certainly replaced the traditional system of memorising the content of the syllabus. Bangladesh can also introduce a test like CSAT to make the preliminary examination procedure creative and compulsive. Moreover it is also imperative to develop the education system so that quality examiners can be hired and proficient individuals can apply for the civil service job. It is high time that the government should enforce Civil Service Act 2018 for more objective selection of candidates, to remove all forms of discrimination and to nurture the values of integrity and diligence. To stimulate good governance practices in civil service, ameliorating and strengthening the role of PSC as a recruiting agency is crucial for developing capable and adaptable civil servants to deliver quality public services. A strong political commitment is needed for bringing about substantial changes in the human resource management system in general and recruitment and selection system in particular to reduce the gap between principles and practices. Lastly, it can be said that responsive, flair and savvy civil servants are a precondition to build the right form of civil service capable to meet 21st century challenges.

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