

## Strengthening Bangladesh's Public Service Commission

### 1. Context

1.1 Bangladesh's Public Service Commission (PSC) is a constitutionally mandated custodian of merit-based recruitment to the civil service. In practice, however, it is perceived to be a weak organization that has not always well-managed the recruitment process. Since the 1990s the media has reported politicized appointment of its members. Recently there have been allegations of examination irregularities, including leakage of question papers of the civil service examinations.

1.2 The management of the PSC and its role in civil service recruitment has departed from comparative administrative practice. This note argues that the PSC's independence from micromanagement by the executive, and its improved management of the civil service examination are critical for its credibility to uphold the merit principle. It lists short- and medium-term actions that could help in restoring the PSC's intended role and functions.

### 2. Role of Public Service Commissions

2.1 PSCs are common in administrative traditions where the appointed executive is meant to be permanent, politically neutral and unaligned to any particular political party or group of elected officials. A PSC forms a critical piece of the public sector's good governance framework by providing a check and balance between the government's interest and its employee's interests. In recruitment, which is an important element of civil service management, the PSC protects the government's interest by selecting the best among available candidates for a particular position. It protects the employees' interests by preventing patronage considerations from determining the choice of candidate. Apart from this central role in recruitment, PSCs oversee whether or not the executive is managing civil servants according to law, and in compliance with policies set by the Government. As in the case of recruitment, PSC's oversight prevents the executive from making partisan and arbitrary decisions in civil servants' promotion and punishment.

2.2 Because PSCs typically advise and oversee the executive, they tend to remain independent of it and at arms length from it. Some PSCs do not report to either the Cabinet or to any minister, but directly to Parliament. Others that are within the executive are set up outside the line structure of ministries and departments.

### 3. Independence of Bangladesh's PSC

3.1 Bangladesh's administrative tradition of a career-based civil service makes the PSC's impartiality all the more important. While elected governments come and go, the appointed civil service remains the same. For citizens to believe that their Government is acting for their general benefit and not to favor a few, their perceptions about civil servants' merit, neutrality, and ability to stand up against the elected executive's improper directions—and thus the PSC's ability to enforce this—are very important. Unfortunately, Bangladesh's Public Service Commission does not enjoy much credibility. Although a constitutionally mandated body, it is treated as an attached department of the Ministry of Establishment with which it needs to liaise for administrative purposes. Since the 1980s, many administrative reform commissions, beginning with the third Martial Law Committee, have strongly argued for the PSC's independence and that the Government invariably accepts its recruitment recommendations. Other administrative reform commissions have suggested enhancing the status of chairman and members of Public Service Commission in the warrant of precedence; and staffing the Commission's secretariat with its own staff, rather than with officers borrowed from the civil service.

3.2 Regularizing employees who were previously employed in projects and paid from the capital budget is currently among the PSC's functions. The Commission cannot be expected to play its impartial oversight role if one of its own tasks is to regularize the Government's somewhat irregular employment practices!

3.3 Transparency about how the PSC arrives at its recommendations and what resources are available to it can provoke questions and discussion about its performance, and ultimately enhance it. Towards this, the Commission is required to submit an annual report to the President by 1 March of the following year, and it generally does so. But, this has turned out to be a ritualistic process with no discussion in Parliament on the Public Service Commission's performance.

#### **4. PSC's Management of Civil Service Recruitment Examinations**

4.1 Since Bangladesh has a career-based civil service, the PSC's effective management of the recruitment function is vital. The same set of officers continues to move up the civil service to occupy the government's top positions, so it is important to get the best possible talent to start with. This can happen only if the civil service examination is a useful tool to identify that talent. For several years now, the examination has not only been considered badly managed, but is also inadequate for identifying the talent required to perform government functions. The 27th civil service examination conducted during 2005-06 was supposed to have rectified some of these anomalies, but the changes introduced were only cosmetic—changing only the weight of subjects and the interview within the total. The test overall remains similar to the Indian civil service examination of 150 years ago. While India has moved ahead with updating its examination, Bangladesh has not.

4.2 The syllabus and questions of PSC's civil service examination do not test analytical or managerial skills, or whether the candidate can draw lessons from experience or international examples and apply them to current work. The mathematics paper tests algebra elements, such as the Remainder Theorem, and geometry elements, such theorems on parallelograms and circles. It is unlikely for Class I officers to solve such mathematical problems in the course of their work in government. Additionally, the examination's content and format are geared to identifying talent for clerical and support functions rather than selecting leaders and change managers.

#### **5. Strengthening Bangladesh's PSC: Short- and Medium-term Actions**

The following short and medium-term actions could strengthen the PSC and demarcate its role. In the *short term*:

- PSC's independence, as laid down in the Constitution, could be made operational by separating it from the Ministry of Establishment and giving it autonomy to execute its own budget. In some countries this is achieved by allowing the PSC to directly charge all its expenditures to the Consolidated Fund.
- PSC's credibility to identify talent in a just and fair manner could be reinforced. Appointing Commission members from the private sector and civil society, instead of only retired civil servants, can help dispel the perception that only those who can be manipulated are appointed as the Commission's members. Five out of 8 members of Singapore's PSC are from the private sector. Whatever field they are selected from, PSC members need to be eminent persons in their own field who have displayed high integrity in their professional lives. In some countries, the President appoints PSC members on the basis of recommendations of a high-level committee that includes members of the Opposition party.

- While the PSC continues to be staffed by senior officers deputed from the civil service, only the most competent officers with proven records of high personal integrity could be deputed to the PSC.
- Actions could be taken to introduce efficiency gains at each stage of the recruitment process to make it more manageable. For example, to reduce the number of candidates, the government could lay down that only those with first- and second-class bachelor's degrees or master's degrees will be allowed to sit for the examination. Interviews could then only be granted to, say, the top 10 percent in the examination, and the number of interviewees could be restricted to three times the number to be recruited. Other easy fixes include improving the way candidates' documents are received and scrutinized, shortening the time between the preliminary and main written examinations, having a question bank, publishing exam results expeditiously, improving examination venues and logistics, and offering higher fees for those who grade the scripts.

In the **medium term**, there needs to be

- Capacity building of senior officers and staff to enable the Public Service Commission to fulfill its role. This could involve exchange visits and meetings with PSC members and staff in countries having similar administrative traditions. Intensive leadership training within the region or in East Asia could focus senior officers on the PSC's role as custodian of the merit principle instead of minor administrative decisions.
- Only after restoring PSC's credibility in the recruitment process, its oversight role, as the guardian of the merit principle in the public service in reviewing promotions and punishments, could be further developed.