Reform and the Crisis in Zambia's Public Administration: A Critical Appraisal

Introduction

This concise Think piece seeks to broadly trace the background to Zambia's much-lauded Public Service Reform Program (PSRP) that was launched in 1993. More importantly, it is inevitable that an interim assessment of the PSRP should be undertaken to determine whether the program is on course in terms of achieving the objectives for which it was put in place. The paper will conclude by asserting that the PSRP appears to be implemented largely to impress the Breton Woods institutions so that Zambia can enlist more resources from the donor community within the framework of the country's socially painful Economic Reform Program. It therefore appears that the more ethically driven vision of an efficient, well remunerated, and morally upright Public Service has been quietly abandoned in favor of satisfying the fiscal cut-back benchmarks promulgated by the IMF and the World Bank. The process of Administrative Change symbolized by the unveiling of the PSRP seven years ago, might in fact paradoxically be judged as a costly debacle which could devastate the morale of an already demoralized Public Service.

Public Administration in Zambia: An Historic Overview

The Republic of Zambia, which attained self-rule from Great Britain in 1964, was known as Northern Rhodesia. Public Administration in the newly independent Zambia as in the cases of all former Anglo and Francophone dependencies, was entrusted with two interrelated missions. These were:

i) To maintain law and order on the part of the subservient population in the colony, and.

ii) To facilitate the extraction of economic resources from the dependency and to deliver such resources to the colonial Metropolitan power.

The machinery of Public Administration as inherited from the Metropolitan Colonial power, Great Britain, was therefore not oriented to perform the role of central agent for the promotion of social and economic development. The imperative urgency of uplifting the living standards of the majority of the population therefore necessitated a rapid expansion of the public bureaucracy. Indeed, it was necessary for the country to build schools, roads, clinics/hospitals and other social and economic infrastructure in order to put in place an enabling environment for Sustainable Human Development in the country. The National Institute of Public Administration (NIP A), which was previously known as the Government Staff Training College, was accordingly tasked with the duty of training Development oriented civil servants to be deployed in all comers of the Republic to play the role of 'front-line' agents of Central Government.

Back-Ground to Administrative Reform in Zambia
The phenomenal growth of Public Administration in Zambia was paralleled by a proliferation of State Owned Enterprises whose main function was to implement Government's economic policies whilst paying due regard to social justice and equity. This situation not only led to a steep rise in the number of employees hired by the Public Sector (Government and SOEs), but made the task of efficiently managing this expanding sector increasingly unwieldy. Hence, the ethical norms and administrative procedures that had been inherited from the British civil service were gradually eroded.

Another factor that gradually led to the erosion of professionalism in the Public Service was the decision to politicize senior appointments in the era of the Second Republic (1973-1991). The rationale for this policy was that for the Zambian Public Service to efficiently and effectively carry out the instructions of its political masters in the Single Party State of the Second Republic, it was absolutely necessary that Permanent, Deputy/Under and Assistant Secretaries should be loyal servants of the ruling single Party.

The Impact of Economic Decline on the Performance of Zambia's Public Administration

The dramatic growth of Public Administration and the SOE sector in Zambia, in the context of ensuring Basic Needs Satisfaction to all parts of the country, was by and large made possible by the availability of enormous foreign exchange reserves due to favorable world market prices for Zambia's Base Metals; namely Copper, Zinc and cobalt in the 1960s and 1970s.

Hence, inefficient industries that were established under the country's Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI) strategy were not only protected from external competition, but also given huge subsidies to under-write their loss making operations. Additionally, subsidies were made available to the Health and Education sectors to ensure that the majority of the disadvantaged population would be able to benefit. However "it was the subsidies on essential commodities such as fuel, bread/wheat, sugar and the country's principle staple, Maize Meal which constituted the most serious drain on the fiscal resources of the national treasury.

In 1973, the country's honeymoon with booming Copper prices suffered a severe jolt when the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) instigated a sharp rise in world petroleum prices. This 'external shock' had the effect of suddenly and massively raising the amount of foreign exchange that the country would have to earmark, to finance urgently needed petroleum imports.

The 'petroleum shock' was compounded by a steep and sudden nose dive in the price of copper, the country's principal earner of foreign revenue. The Government suddenly realized that it could no longer manage to subsidize the staple food and noted that the cost of maintaining the provision of free social services to the people of Zambia in the form of schools, hospitals etc. could no longer be sustained. The Zambian Government was therefore forced to seek its first stabilization agreement with the International Monetary Fund in 1975. During the talks that led to the conclusion of the package, the Breton Woods institutions
cautioned Zambia's leaders that the Public Service had grown uncontrollably huge and was exerting onerous strains on the Public Treasury. Indeed, it was pointed out that the onset of the Single Party State in 1973, had led to a proliferation of bureaucratic posts, as the Party bureaucracy was expanded in order to tighten its grip over government departments to entrench the supremacy of the party over government's administrative machinery. Since the ruling Party was not a profit making institution, the cost of paying for the expanded political bureaucracy was inevitably borne by the Ministry of Finance.

The Road to the Public Service Reform Program (PSRP)

In 1918, in response to calls for a reduction in the costs of running the Public Service, the Government set up an Administrative Committee of Inquiry to examine ways and means of curbing the high cost of running the Civil Service as well as enhancing efficiency and effectiveness in the delivery of basic services. The main recommendation of the Committee was that, in order to inject cost effectiveness in the management of the Public Service, the Party's bureaucracy should hence forth be delinked from the Public Treasury. The Committee further recommended a freeze in the hiring of new entrants into the Civil Service pending a thorough job and performance appraisal in the entire Public Service bureaucracy. The Government balked at implementing these measures for fear of triggering a violent social backlash and the Committee's Report was left to gather dust on the shelves of the Office of the Secretary to the Cabinet.

In 1983, the Government was once again advised by IMP/World Bank to seriously tackle the question of the bloated Public bureaucracy. In response, the Government once again appointed an Administrative Committee of Inquiry to probe conditions of service in the Public Service with a view to recommending measures that would make it leaner, better motivated and more responsive to the aspirations of the general public. This Committee discovered that the Public Service had in fact become even bigger and more alarming was the fact that no Permanent Secretary really knew how many civil servants were on the government payroll. Indeed the problem of 'ghost workers', has been a perennial worry for the top management of the civil service. It can only be estimated that government has been defrauded of massive sums of money that have been paid to workers who have been separate, from the Public Service through natural attrition or other causes, but are maintained on the pay roll by dishonest bureaucrats. Naturally, these bureaucrats have gained handsomely by dividing the 'loot' which for official accounting purposes is 'paid' to these fictitious public servants. It was also noted that there was no rational link between the performance of the bureaucracy and the escalating volume of resources that was expended in running the Civil Service on annual basis.

The Public Service Reform Program: An Overview

Following the landmark general election of 1991, which ended the era of the Single party System of Government, the new Government of the Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) wholesomely embraced the orthodoxy of Structural Adjustment, which the previous socialist inclined government had resisted. Immediately upon assuming office, the
new government set up the Zambia Privatization Agency and mandated it to privatize the huge Parastatal Sector which had experienced a prolific growth in the Single Party era.

In a parallel policy movement intended to curry favor with the IMF/World Bank and other donors, the Government announced its steely determination to drastically downsize the Civil Service in order to make it more client driven as well as enhancing Basic Needs delivery to the general population. Hence in 1993, at an elaborate ceremony which brought together all Permanent Secretaries, the Republican President, Mr. F.J.T. Chiluba officially inaugurated the Public Service Reform Program (PSRP).

The PSRP has three major objectives;

i) To make the Zambian Public Service leaner (through a targeted retrenchment program) so that the costs of running it can be made more manageable

ii) To improve Human Resource Management through Performance related incentives for a smaller and better remunerated work force, and

iii) Decentralize and devolve administrative power away from Central Ministries in Lusaka to the field stations/ and local government structures.

Appraisal and Forward Look

Implementation of PSRP has been the responsibility of the Public Service Management Division in Cabinet Office, the nerve center of Zambias Public bureaucracy. In the first instance, Officials in the Management Development Division of Cabinet Office complained that bureaucrats in many Ministries and Departments did not understand at all why they reported for work everyday. When asked whether they knew anything about Ministerial/Departmental Strategic Plans', Mission, Statements', Work plans or Performance Targets', most middle and lower level bureaucrats professed an unbelievable degree of ignorance.

Hence, since 1993, most Ministries and Provincial Administrations have been restructured and interviews have been held in order to fill in posts under new structures. However, it is rather surprising that rather than opening up vacancies to both internal and external applicants, the upper Management of the Civil Service has restricted interviews only to internal candidates. Furthermore, it has been alleged that some job descriptions have been tailored to suit the profiles of certain preferred candidates.

This state of affairs raises serious questions regarding the ethical dimensions of the PSRP. After all, senior Permanent Secretaries at numerous seminars have repeatedly stressed that apart from its concern with administrative efficiency, the PSRP is inspired by the ethical vision of transparency in policy formulation and application of the Merit Principle in appointments at all levels of Government. In respect of decentralizing real administrative power away from Lusaka, the Decentralization Policy document which has been under
discussion at numerous 'High Level Seminars for Senior Public Service Managers' is still under wraps. It is therefore necessary to wait for the Policy Document to be officially launched before analysis intended to disentangle 'conference hall rhetoric' from concrete policy can be undertaken.

Though Government has demonstrated a level of enthusiasm for the goal of downsizing the bureaucracy, which has even caused apprehension among World Bank/IMP technocrats who are camped at the Ministry of Finance, not much thought has been given to the issue of providing retrenched Civil Servants with appropriate separation packages. Hence it is not uncommon to read in the national news about families who have been turned destitute, because the family breadwinner who was retrenched well over seven years ago, has died without having received his or her separation package. This means that when Government Ministers and Permanent secretaries wring their hands in glee as they report to their foreign technocratic advisers regarding Zambia's, admirable' performance in meeting 'economic benchmarks' they deliberately overlook the horrendous social costs of these rather dubious achievements.

Seven years after the launch of PSRP has not produced any noticeable improvements in the performance of the civil service. It is difficult to imagine how a middle or lower level functionary can make ends meet, when salaries are not paid sometimes for as long as three months. What demoralizes these lower placed civil servants is the entrenched habit of Permanent Secretaries and their Deputies to undertake unnecessary foreign and in land tours simply in order to accumulate huge Daily Subsistence Allowances (DSA). In October 2000, the Government unveiled the Public Service Management Capacity Building Project(PSCAP) within the framework of PSRP .This program ostensibly seeks to build management capacity among middle level civil servants as part of a long term management succession planning strategy. However, skeptical sources at Cabinet Office have already reported that a large proportion of the budget of this Project has been set aside for 'High Level' Seminars at which hefty sitting allowances will be paid out to Permanent Secretaries/ Deputy Permanent Secretaries and Directors.

In this scenario of high level seminars held in luxury game lodges, or the very popular Siavonga pleasure vicinity on the shore of Lake Kariba, it is very difficult to discern a genuine commitment on the part of the administrative/bureaucratic elite to fulfill the noble vision enunciated in the 1993 PSRP Launch Document. When all is said and done, one could be forgiven for arriving at the cynical conclusion that PSRP is largely a symbolic facade being flaunted around liberally for the purpose of pleasing donors so that they can continuously release the resources that enable the country's administrative/ bureaucratic elite to sustain its predilection for 'conspicuous consumption'.

Reference

Tordoff, W., Administration in Zambia, (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1979)