

# **The Changing Features of Public Administration in Ethiopia : The Challenges**

## **Introduction**

This article assesses the daunting challenges facing the changing patterns of Public Administration in Ethiopia. It seeks to outline the major determinants that have shaped Ethiopia's system of Public Administration. It is argued in the course of this exercise that Ethiopia's public Administration, as is the case of most developing countries, has had to assume the role of prime mover in the process of promoting sustainable human development. This article also demonstrates that despite attempts to subject it to political control; the Ethiopian Civil Service has manifested a fairly high degree of resilience in terms of asserting and defending its professional integrity. However, it is recognized that the detrimental impact of these 'external pressures' on the Public bureaucracy continues to constrain it from satisfactorily delivering basic essential services to the Ethiopian Public. It is accordingly emphasized that for the technocratic vision enunciated in Civil Service Program to attain fruition, it is imperative that the country's leadership accords the program the highest level of country's political support. Indeed, if the necessary political support for the reform initiative can not be speedily mobilized, it will not be possible to reconfigure the Civil service in a manner that will prepare it to innovatively deal with the complex challenges of the 21 st Century.

## **The Ethiopian Civil Service During the Imperial Era: An Overview**

The Civil Service is the operational arm of the government charged with the implementation and administration of public policy (Atkilt 1996 : 55). Like its counterparts in the rest of the world, the Ethiopian Civil Service undertakes similar tasks. The genesis of the "modern" civil service in Ethiopia dates back to 1907 when Menelik II initiated the formation of a few ministries with the aim of lending an orderly and efficient arrangement to the workings of government. In the subsequent years, the institution underwent a series of changes commensurate with a host of new needs and imperatives. Emperor Haile Selassie's Government, noted for a number of accomplishments shouldered the burden of persevering with the innovation of his predecessor.

The Emperor undertook a series of institutionalization and restructuring measures in the hope of bringing about an effective and efficient civil service governed by specified rules and procedures of a uniform nature. This was a landmark in the sense of creating an enabling environment to withstand the effects of new challenges, which came to the fore as a result of modernization drives that took full swing after Haile Selassie's return from exile. Despite several improvements regarding the operation of government mediated by periodic reforms, the Ethiopian Civil Service was fraught with problems that impeded the realization of expected outcomes. It is worthy to note that Public Administration under the monarchy suffered from irregularities that resulted from the rampancy of several ills. These included, among others,

cronyism, discretionary interventions, prevalence of political clientelism, and the taking effect of individual and group interests to the detriment of established rules and procedures.

Such malpractices militated against the smooth functioning of the Civil Service thereby reducing its prowess to gear development endeavors in the desired direction. Faulty practices that pervaded the modus operandi of the Public Administration realm incapacitated its potential to serve as a locus for realizing socio- economic progress. Growing public demands arising from exposure to aspects of modern life, increased awareness with regard to citizen entitlement and rights, and the quest for equal opportunities to access political and material resources and amenities, among others, necessitated making the relevant adjustments with regard to the undertakings of the public sector. Besides, the subsiding of traditional values and norms in the face of advancements, driven by the expansion of modern education, adoption of new life styles and consumption patterns, etc., presented new challenges to be reckoned with. Failure to adhere to established rules, unwarranted political interference affecting standard administrative procedures, and emphasizing political loyalty as the major criterion for appointments and promotions -all became the Achilles Heel of the Ethiopian Civil Service during the imperial era.

### **The Impact of the Dergue/Socialist Era on Ethiopia's Public Administration**

The Imperial era, gave way to the Dergue/socialist system, which was characterized by a concerted drive to radically redesign the administrative machinery in line with the socialist/central-planning ideological ethos of the new government. The rule of the Dergue was consequently marked by intensive mobilization and politicization during the first few years of its incumbency. According to Mehret and Paulos (2000: 11), the nationalization measures, along with the proliferation of new government institutions and corporations led to a tremendous expansion of the public sector. The swiftness of the transition, dictated by the imperatives of revolutionary transformation, did not allow the Civil Service adequate re-spite to ponder on means and ways of adjusting to the new situation. The fluidity of political developments marking the post-revolutionary years did not enable the Civil Service prepare itself for effecting corresponding changes. Deprived of the preliminaries necessary for smooth transition in terms of institutional, manpower and statutory adjustments, the sector was, nonetheless, expected to cope with the burdens entailed by its tremendous expansion. This constituted one of the most formidable challenges that the Civil Service encountered.

The other dimension depicting the predicament of the agency was that it was required to accommodate diverse claims and demands triggered by the syndrome of extensive politicization, mobilization, and (re) organization within the public realm. In the absence of pertinent changes, the Civil Service was required to expedite the implementation of new decisions within the context of old regulations. Moreover, the eviction of skilled and experienced top and intermediate level officials and civil servants, and their replacement with new recruits and political supplicants with a different profile, compounded the predicaments of Public Administration. As Mehret ( 1997) observed, the Dergue put the Civil service in disarray by fusing the institutions of party , state and government. It also encouraged the proliferation of parallel structures by appointing party functionaries to key decision-making

civil service positions. Hence duplication and fragmentation of public functions and the downplaying of merit and professionalism became the order of the day. The subsequent years characterized by the centralization of administration witnessed a situation where corruption, inefficient service delivery and increased neglect of due process of law in matters of public concern became a routine exercise. Given this bleak picture, the perpetuation of the Dergue regime was partly jeopardized due to its gross failure in delivering the "public good".

### **The Quest to Re-instate the 'Merit/Technocratic Principle' in Ethiopian Public Administration in the 'Post-Dergue Era'**

Upon its assumption of power in May 1991, the EPRDF came to grips with the deficiencies that featured as the hallmarks of the Civil Service. Dictated by the demands of the Structural Adjustment Programme and the zeal to usher in new arrangements in accordance with its drives and preferences, the EPRDF introduced a Civil Service Reform Programme. According to Atkilt (June 1996: 56), the adoption of the Structural Adjustment Programme focused on two major areas, namely, macro economic policy reform, and institutional reform. One outcome of this was the formation of the Inter-Ministerial Task Force entrusted with reviewing and restructuring the sector. Six sub-committees dealing with pay, position-classification, institutional restructuring, personnel directives and manuals, training, and efficiency and accountability were concurrently set up. Components of the Reform Programme were diverse. These included redeployment and retrenchment of redundant manpower, termination of automatic assignment of fresh graduates, lifting the ban on salary increments, raising the level of minimum pay, freezing unauthorised recruitment of civil servants, etc.

In the same fashion as its two predecessors, the EPRDF undertook a number of measures deemed instrumental to reverse previous arrangements that it considered undesirable. This was expressed in effecting a policy of transition from the old practice of single party hegemony to the multiparty system, and changing the centrally planned economic model to the market variant. Both signified the ushering in of a formally liberalised environment. The political dimension of the transition was expressed in changing the form of government (from unitary to federal) and instituting national/regional self-governments by way of devolving tasks and authority to the newly created sub-national entities. The economic side of the reforms manifested themselves in the denationalisation and deregulation of many public enterprises that were formerly under the custodianship of the state. The Civil Service was once again called upon to meet another set of new challenges accruing thereof.

Political decentralisation under the EPRDF entailed the need to address a series of new concerns. The creation of autonomous local government units led to the setting up of regional civil service bureaux. Notwithstanding the numerous advantages of devolved power, however, the new phenomenon was accompanied by a number of setbacks such as lack of experience, trained manpower, vision, and knowledge of pertinent rules, regulations and procedures on the part of newly enlisted civil servants and officials. In all levels of government, political considerations increasingly impeded the smooth running of the Civil Service in accordance with existing legal procedures. This resulted in the persistence of different forms of malpractice and abuse thereby replicating the practices of the Dergue era. These constitute the

features of current challenges that the Ethiopian Public Administration has to overcome in order to qualify as an agent of transformation.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it is important to caution that if the 'technocratic vision of an efficient, effective, transparently functioning Civil Service is to be fulfilled, then the tendency to tolerate shoddy performance on the part of senior public service managers, simply on account of their loyalty to the government of the day, must be eschewed. Without this real political commitment to the ideal of an innovative, results oriented and client centered Civil Service, the Ethiopian Civil Service Reform Program might fail to deliver on its most important objectives, thus giving way to public disenchantment and disillusion. It might therefore be prudent caution that in regard to Civil Service Reform, failure is simply not an option. In any country, be it on the African continent or beyond, when the Public Service, cannot satisfactorily deliver water and electricity supplies, reliable roads, public security etc., the people will inevitably demand far reaching changes in leadership at the level of national governance.

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