INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES BULLETIN
ISSN: (E) 3007-1917 (P) 3007-1909
Volume 4, Issue 3, 2026

EVOLUTION OF BUREAUCRACY IN PAKISTAN: FROM COLONIAL LEGACY TO MODERN GOVERNANCE

Khizar Jawad

Assistant Professor, Department of History & Pakistan Studies, FC College University, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan

khizar.jawad@gmail.com

Corresponding Author: *
Khizar Jawad
DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19333489

Received	Accepted	Published
31 January 2026	14 March 2026	30 March 2026

ABSTRACT

This article examines the evolution of bureaucracy in Pakistan from the late colonial inheritance of the Indian Civil Service to contemporary debates on digital governance, specialization, accountability, and service delivery. It argues that Pakistan's bureaucracy cannot be understood simply as an administrative machine; it is a historically layered institution shaped by colonial ideas of order, postcolonial state-building, military interventions, centralizing constitutional arrangements, and repeated but only partially successful reform efforts. At independence, Pakistan inherited a small but disproportionately powerful administrative apparatus that quickly became the backbone of a fragile state. Over time, however, bureaucratic dominance was reshaped by political populism, the 1973 administrative reforms, Islamization, militarization, devolution, donor-led governance reforms, and the pressures of a more demanding and digitized society. The article shows that while the language of reform has shifted from control to service delivery and from generalist administration to results-based management, deep continuities remain in personnel systems, career incentives, center–province relations, and the culture of secrecy and hierarchy. It concludes that Pakistan's bureaucratic future depends less on episodic commissions and more on rebuilding the administrative state around constitutional federalism, empowered local government, professional specialization, open competition for senior posts, interoperable digital systems, and credible accountability mechanisms that protect neutrality while rewarding performance.

Keywords: *bureaucracy, Pakistan, colonial legacy, civil service, governance, administrative reform, devolution, public administration*

INTRODUCTION

The evolution of bureaucracy in Pakistan is central to understanding the country's larger political development. In Pakistan, the bureaucracy has never been merely an implementing arm of government. It has been a state-bearing institution, a mechanism of territorial control, a site of elite reproduction, and often an arbiter between elected politicians, the military, and the judiciary. Scholars of Pakistan have therefore treated the bureaucracy not as a peripheral administrative category but as one of the principal institutions through which the postcolonial state was constituted and governed (Alavi, 1972; Kennedy, 1987; Shafqat, 1999). Any serious account of modern governance in Pakistan must begin with this institutional history.

At independence in 1947, Pakistan inherited a bureaucratic structure designed not for

democratic responsiveness but for imperial order. The colonial civil service had been organized to collect revenue, maintain law and order, and mediate between the imperial center and local society. Its authority rested on hierarchy, distance from the population, procedural rigidity, and close alliance with coercive arms of the state (Islam, 1989; Saeed, 2013). The early Pakistani state adopted this apparatus because it lacked both organizational alternatives and political stability. The result was a paradox that would define much of Pakistan's administrative history: a weak state in terms of social legitimacy and institutional reach, but a strong bureaucracy in terms of formal authority and elite status (Alavi, 1972; Burki, 1999; Husain, 2018).

This article argues that the evolution of bureaucracy in Pakistan is best understood as a movement through successive layers rather than as a clean transition from "colonial" to "modern." Colonial structures were never simply replaced; they were repurposed, adapted, and selectively challenged. Military regimes strengthened bureaucratic centralism even as they claimed to rationalize it. Civilian governments criticized bureaucratic elitism but frequently used transfers, appointments, and patronage to subordinate it. Reform commissions regularly promised merit, specialization, decentralization, and accountability, yet the core incentives of the system remained surprisingly durable (Shafqat, 1999; World Bank, 1998; International Crisis Group, 2010; Abbas, 2023).

The paper proceeds in eight parts. It first outlines a conceptual framework for analyzing bureaucracy in a postcolonial setting. It then traces the colonial roots of Pakistan's administrative order and explains how the bureaucracy came to dominate the early state. Subsequent sections examine the bureaucratic trajectory under Ayub Khan, the rupture associated with the 1973 reforms, the transformations under Zia-ul-Haq, the oscillations of the democratic interludes, the effects of devolution and public management reforms after 1999, and the contemporary turn toward digital governance and performance language. The final section identifies the institutional conditions under which Pakistan might move from inherited bureaucratic rule toward genuinely modern governance.

Conceptualizing Bureaucracy in a Postcolonial State

Classical public administration often associates bureaucracy with Weberian rational-legal authority, specialization, merit recruitment, continuity, and rule-bound action. In idealized form, bureaucracy is supposed to provide predictability, institutional memory, and neutrality, especially in polities marked by partisan competition (Weber, 1978; Peters, 2010). Yet postcolonial bureaucracies do not emerge on a blank slate. They inherit administrative technologies forged under empire, where accountability flowed upward to the ruler rather than downward to citizens. This historical asymmetry matters because institutions built for extraction and control do not automatically become developmental or democratic after independence (Alavi, 1972; Islam, 1989; Migdal, 1988).

Hamza Alavi's influential account of the postcolonial state remains especially relevant to Pakistan because it foregrounds the "overdeveloped" character of the bureaucratic-military apparatus inherited from colonialism. In such a state, the administrative machine enjoys relative autonomy from dominant social classes because it was constituted before those classes acquired mature political organization. The bureaucracy, together with the military, thus becomes more than an instrument; it becomes a power center in its own right (Alavi, 1972). Pakistani history bears out this proposition. Administrative elites often acted not only as implementers of policy but as co-authors of political order, particularly in phases of constitutional instability and weak party organization (Burki, 1980; Kennedy, 1987).

A second useful lens comes from comparative scholarship on administrative reform. Reform in developing states is frequently presented as a technical exercise, but in practice it redistributes authority, status, and rents. Personnel rules, promotion systems, district administration, and local government design all determine who governs, from where, and in whose interests. This

is why reforms that appear managerial on paper often generate intense political resistance (Polidano, 2001; Haque, 2007; Huque, 2005). In Pakistan, proposals for lateral entry, cadre restructuring, delegated financial powers, or empowered local governments have repeatedly collided with entrenched bureaucratic and political interests (World Bank, 1998; National Commission for Government Reforms [NCGR], 2008; Husain, 2012).

A third conceptual point concerns the distinction between bureaucracy and governance. "Modern governance" is often associated with networks, digital systems, citizen feedback, one-window operations, regulatory agencies, and measurable service outcomes. But these innovations do not abolish bureaucracy; they reconfigure it. They shift the emphasis from command-and-control routines to coordination, analytics, and public-facing responsiveness. The challenge in Pakistan is that governance innovations have frequently been layered over an unreformed administrative core. As a result, new institutions coexist with old habits: data dashboards alongside paper files, service centers alongside opaque personnel systems, and digital platforms alongside politicized transfers (Muhula, 2019; Planning Commission & UNDP, 2019; Husain, 2018). The central analytical question is therefore not whether Pakistan has moved beyond bureaucracy, but what kind of bureaucracy is being produced by contemporary governance reforms.

Colonial Origins: The Steel Frame and Its Administrative Logic

Pakistan's bureaucracy originated in the late colonial apparatus of British India, especially the district-centered administrative order anchored in the Indian Civil Service (ICS), the police, and revenue administration. The ICS was often described as the "steel frame" of empire because it fused legal authority, fiscal extraction, information gathering, and magisterial discretion into a remarkably durable system of rule (Islam, 1989; Kennedy, 1987). The district officer or deputy commissioner symbolized this arrangement: one official embodied the state's presence in local society, oversaw revenue and law-and-order functions, supervised local bodies, and exercised quasi-judicial authority.

This colonial design had several lasting consequences for Pakistan. First, it privileged the generalist administrator over the specialist. The civil servant was valued for loyalty, command, and procedural mastery rather than deep technical expertise. Second, it produced vertical accountability. Officers were trained to respond to superiors and file-based procedures, not to deliberative politics or social accountability. Third, it embedded a culture of distance. Bureaucratic prestige depended in part on insulation from the populace, not partnership with it. Fourth, it normalized administrative centralism: local institutions existed, but effective authority remained concentrated in the district and provincial hierarchy (Islam, 1989; Saeed, 2013; Zafarullah, 2001).

Colonial continuity was not accidental. Pakistan inherited laws, codes, manuals, land records, and personnel practices that had evolved over decades. In the midst of Partition, refugee settlement, fiscal scarcity, and the absence of an established capital, the new state had little capacity to redesign the administrative order from first principles. The immediate need was survival, and the bureaucracy delivered continuity where political institutions were still fragile (Burki, 1980; Talbot, 1998). This gave the civil service an early claim to indispensability. Administrative competence, however uneven, became a source of institutional legitimacy.

Yet the colonial legacy also imposed structural limits. A bureaucracy designed to rule subjects is poorly equipped to treat citizens as rights-bearing participants in governance. The district officer could coordinate relief or maintain order, but the same office was less suited to participatory development, municipal autonomy, or sectoral specialization. Colonial institutions also reproduced social hierarchies through English-language elitism, credential filtering, and exclusionary recruitment patterns (Kennedy, 1987; Saeed, 2013). These traits survived independence more robustly than nationalist rhetoric suggested.

The endurance of colonial administrative law reinforced this continuity. Revenue

administration, police organization, service rules, and magisterial arrangements retained their inherited logic even when personnel identities changed. As later reformers repeatedly discovered, the bureaucratic order in Pakistan was not merely a staffing pattern but a dense legal and procedural architecture. That architecture made change difficult because every attempt to alter authority relations had to confront rules, norms, and organizational memories rooted in colonial governance (Islam, 1989; Husain, 2012; NCGR, 2008).

State Formation and Bureaucratic Ascendancy, 1947–1958

The first decade after independence elevated the bureaucracy from a powerful administrative corps to a principal pillar of state formation. Pakistan faced extraordinary structural constraints: a divided territorial geography, weak party organization, refugee rehabilitation, contested constitutional arrangements, limited industrial and fiscal capacity, and a severe shortage of experienced personnel. Under these conditions, senior civil servants assumed wide discretionary authority in both policy and administration (Burki, 1980; Jalal, 1995; Shafqat, 1999).

This ascendancy was reinforced by the weakness of representative institutions. The Muslim League, which had mobilized support for Pakistan, lacked a deeply rooted organizational machine in many parts of the new country. Cabinet instability and constitutional delays increased dependence on senior officials, who offered continuity and procedural command. Governors general, especially Ghulam Muhammad and Iskander Mirza, drew heavily on bureaucratic networks, and the bureaucracy's alliance with the military became more visible as political institutions faltered (Jalal, 1995; Kennedy, 1987; Talbot, 1998). In effect, administrative authority migrated upward into the core of the state.

The Civil Service of Pakistan (CSP), which emerged out of the ICS legacy, became the most prestigious arm of the new administrative order. Its members occupied key positions in the secretariat, district administration, and policy process. Their ethos combined paternalism, elitism, and a strong sense of institutional vocation. Many officers saw themselves as guardians of national interest in a volatile environment, a self-image that both sustained professional confidence and justified distance from electoral politics (Kennedy, 1987; Shafqat, 1999). The bureaucracy's claim to neutrality was thus inseparable from a claim to superior judgment.

This period also cemented the central role of the district officer. District administration linked the center to the periphery through land revenue, law and order, coordination of departments, and supervision of local bodies. The deputy commissioner embodied state authority in everyday life, often more tangibly than ministers or legislators. This administrative centrality helped maintain cohesion but also weakened the institutional development of local democracy and horizontal accountability (Cheema, Khwaja, & Qadir, 2005; Wilder, 1999).

The bureaucratic ascendancy of the 1950s should not be romanticized as a golden age of clean administration. While discipline and procedural formality were stronger than in later decades, the system remained socially exclusive, hierarchic, and structurally insulated from popular input. East Pakistan's growing grievances also exposed the limits of centralized bureaucratic rule, as administrative cohesion at the center coexisted with a widening crisis of political representation across the federation (Alavi, 1972; Talbot, 1998). By the time the first military coup occurred in 1958, Pakistan had already developed a bureaucratic polity in which elected institutions were too weak to command the state machinery on their own.

Ayub Khan, Developmental Authoritarianism, and the Bureaucratic-Military Nexus

The Ayub Khan era (1958–1969) deepened the institutional linkage between bureaucracy, military rule, and centralized development planning. Martial law did not displace the bureaucracy; it relied on it. Ayub's regime sought administrative discipline, policy coordination, and developmental legitimacy, and senior civil servants were indispensable to all three. The result was a bureaucratic-military nexus that rationalized authoritarian rule in the language of

modernization, planning, and efficiency (Burki, 1980; Kennedy, 1987; Shafqat, 1999; Jawad & Shabbir, 2024b).

This period is often associated with stronger planning institutions, technocratic policymaking, and the image of a capable administrative state. The Planning Commission gained prominence, development administration was valorized, and the regime's controlled political system minimized overt partisan interference in routine administration. In comparative perspective, Ayub's regime resembled other postcolonial modernizing states where bureaucratic capacity was mobilized for economic management without corresponding democratic deepening (Husain, 2018; Jalal, 1995). For some observers, this produced a high-water mark of administrative coherence.

But the apparent strength of the system masked deeper contradictions. First, development remained centralized and top-down. The bureaucracy translated national plans into local interventions, yet participation from below remained limited. The Basic Democracies system created local bodies, but these were tightly managed and often functioned more as instruments of regime legitimation than as autonomous democratic institutions (Wilder, 1999; Cheema et al., 2005). Second, bureaucratic authority remained generalist and command oriented, even in increasingly technical sectors. Third, the partnership with the military normalized an administrative culture in which order and compliance outweighed deliberation and accountability.

The 1962 Cornelius Commission and related discussions on service reform recognized some structural problems, including pay, morale, and the need for modernization. Yet reform remained bounded by the broader logic of centralized authoritarianism. Administrative changes were intended to strengthen the state, not democratize it (Shafqat, 1999; Abbas, 2023). Purges and disciplinary actions also conveyed an enduring lesson to civil servants: reform could be used as an instrument of political control over the bureaucracy itself.

Ayub's developmental state also widened regional disparities and sharpened East Pakistani resentment. Administrative centralism that appeared efficient from the center looked exclusionary from the periphery. The bureaucracy's role in sustaining a heavily centralized federation contributed to the political alienation that ultimately destabilized the regime and, more profoundly, the Pakistani state itself (Alavi, 1972; Talbot, 1998). Thus, even at its most coherent, bureaucratic strength did not resolve the crisis of legitimacy. It managed development but could not substitute for representative federal politics.

The 1973 Administrative Reforms: Democratization or Controlled Disruption?

The post-1971 crisis transformed debates on bureaucracy. After the secession of East Pakistan, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto sought to reassert civilian supremacy and weaken the entrenched elite character of the civil service. The 1973 administrative reforms were therefore both ideological and political. They attacked the CSP's exclusive status, abolished service classes, emphasized egalitarianism, and attempted to reduce the dominance of elite cadres over the state apparatus (Kennedy, 1987; Shafqat, 1999; Husain, 2018; Jawad & Shabbir, 2024a).

The reforms had several major components. They removed constitutional protections that had insulated civil servants, restructured occupational groups, abolished the CSP as a distinct elite service, and proclaimed a more unified civil service system. Bhutto also curbed the traditional powers of the deputy commissioner and emphasized the primacy of elected authority. In normative terms, these changes could be read as an effort to democratize an elitist administrative machine and bring it under political control (Burki, 1980; Abbas, 2023). In practice, however, the reforms also opened new avenues for politicization.

The central problem was that the reforms weakened bureaucratic autonomy without building durable meritocratic alternatives. Security of tenure declined, promotions and postings became more vulnerable to political discretion, and the erosion of elite cohesion did not necessarily produce broader professionalism. Instead, it often generated uncertainty and encouraged adaptive behavior among officers

seeking survival in a more politicized environment (Kennedy, 1987; Shafqat, 1999). The old bureaucratic hierarchy was disrupted, but no equally credible performance-based order replaced it.

The reforms also reveal the ambiguity of anti-elitist rhetoric in administrative politics. The CSP deserved criticism for exclusivity, paternalism, and disproportionate power. Yet dismantling its privileges did not automatically produce a citizen-centered service. Rather, the absence of clear career systems, objective evaluation, and functional specialization reduced morale while enhancing informal influence. Subsequent decades would repeatedly show that a bureaucracy made more politically dependent is not necessarily made more accountable to the public (Husain, 2012; World Bank, 1998).

Still, the 1973 reforms were historically significant because they ended the myth of an untouchable bureaucratic elite. They inserted bureaucracy into mass politics and made explicit what had previously been masked by the language of neutrality: that administrative structure is deeply political. If the earlier order had privileged bureaucratic domination, the post-1973 phase risked the opposite distortion—bureaucratic subordination to personalized political power. Pakistan's later governance problems emerged, in part, from never fully resolving this tension between autonomy and accountability.

Zia-ul-Haq, Islamization, Militarization, and Administrative Reconfiguration

General Zia-ul-Haq's rule (1977–1988) did not reverse the post-1973 administrative order so much as rework it. The bureaucracy remained central to governance, but its relationship to ideology, the military, and patronage changed. Zia's regime expanded the role of the armed forces in civilian administration, encouraged a more conservative ideological environment, and presided over a political economy in which patronage, informal networks, and selective institutionalization all expanded (Shafqat, 1999; Siddiqa, 2007).

One recurring theme in the literature is the militarization of civil administration. Zia introduced quotas and channels through which military officers could enter civilian posts, and the symbolic boundary between bureaucratic and military authority became more porous. This affected morale within the civilian services and altered career expectations among officers recruited through competitive examinations (Shafqat, 1999; International Crisis Group, 2010). The bureaucratic field became more crowded, but not necessarily more professional.

At the same time, the regime's Islamization project influenced administrative culture. Scholars differ on the depth of this transformation, but there is broad agreement that the ideological climate of public institutions changed. Formal and informal expectations regarding conduct, public symbols, and official discourse acquired new religious idioms (Burki, 1999; Jalal, 1995). Yet Islamization did not fundamentally democratize governance. Rather, it re-legitimated centralized authority through a moral idiom while leaving many underlying incentive structures intact.

This period also entrenched patterns of selective politicization. Because party politics was constrained, influence often flowed through personalized networks, regime loyalty, and patronage channels rather than through transparent democratic oversight. The bureaucracy learned to navigate authoritarian politics not only through obedience but through strategic alignment with the dominant power configuration. This adaptive style would persist into later democratic periods, when officers increasingly read political signals and adjusted loyalties accordingly (Kennedy, 1987; Shafqat, 1999).

By the late 1980s, Pakistan's bureaucracy had thus moved far from both the colonial ideal of aloof command and the early postcolonial image of disciplined state-building. It remained powerful, but its authority was more fragmented, its morale more uneven, and its relationship with law, politics, and public service more ambiguous. The institutional residue of Zia's period included deeper military influence, weaker civilian party institutionalization, and a more informalized administrative culture—conditions that complicated later attempts at professional reform (Siddiqa, 2007; Husain, 2018).

Democratic Interludes, Donor Agendas, and the Crisis of Governance, 1988–1999

The return to electoral politics after 1988 did not produce a stable equilibrium between politicians and bureaucracy. Instead, rapid government turnover, coalition politics, and personalized competition intensified struggles over appointments, transfers, and administrative control. The bureaucracy was neither restored to insulated professionalism nor fully transformed into a developmental service apparatus. Rather, it became an arena of contestation in which politicians, civil servants, and other power centers sought leverage over one another (Shafqat, 1999; Wilder, 1999).

This period is crucial because it generated the modern discourse of "governance crisis." Public dissatisfaction with corruption, delay, and administrative arbitrariness rose markedly. Reformers emphasized service delivery, accountability, and efficiency, while critics argued that political interference had hollowed out institutional norms. The old district-centered administrative hierarchy still existed, but its authority was increasingly undermined by politicized postings, weak monitoring, and fragmented coordination across departments (World Bank, 1998; Shafqat, 1999). In other words, Pakistan retained many of the formal trappings of bureaucratic control without the same level of organizational coherence.

Donor institutions and policy advisors became more visible in administrative reform debates during the 1990s. Structural adjustment, public expenditure concerns, and governance agendas pushed issues such as pay reform, downsizing, transparency, and civil service restructuring onto the policy agenda. The World Bank's framework for civil service reform in Pakistan diagnosed weaknesses in wage policy, accountability, performance, and skills and argued for a more comprehensive approach than episodic tinkering (World Bank, 1998). These diagnoses were often persuasive, but implementation remained politically contested.

A key lesson from the 1990s is that administrative reform could not be isolated from broader political economy. Downsizing, merit reform, or delegated authority affected patronage channels, intergovernmental relations, and the distribution of rents. As comparative scholarship suggests, reforms framed as managerial are often resisted because they alter real power structures (Polidano, 2001; Haque, 2007). Pakistan illustrated this pattern vividly. Governments announced change, but unstable political horizons discouraged sustained implementation.

The language of governance also began to shift in this period from control to citizens. There was more discussion of transparency, responsiveness, and public service. Yet this discursive change ran ahead of institutional reality. File-based secrecy, discretionary authority, and cadre-based identity remained deeply embedded. The bureaucracy was criticized more openly than before, but critique did not automatically produce redesign. By 1999, Pakistan had a large administrative apparatus, a thick repertoire of reform proposals, and growing public frustration, but no settled model of modern governance (Shafqat, 1999; World Bank, 1998; Husain, 2018).

Devolution, New Public Management, and Hybrid Governance after 1999

The military government of Pervez Musharraf introduced one of the most ambitious restructurings of the administrative state through the Devolution Plan of 2001. The reform sought to bypass provincial political intermediaries, empower elected local governments, and reconfigure district administration. It also resonated with wider global trends in public sector reform, including decentralization, managerialism, and performance-oriented governance (Cheema et al., 2005; Wilder, 2006; Husain, 2008).

The devolution reforms altered the historic position of the deputy commissioner by separating magisterial and administrative functions and strengthening district coordination arrangements under elected nazims. In theory, this marked a profound shift away from colonial district administration toward local accountability. It also aimed to make service delivery more responsive by relocating authority closer to citizens (Cheema et al., 2005). In practice, outcomes were mixed. In some contexts, the reforms increased local access and disrupted entrenched bureaucratic

monopolies. In others, they generated confusion over roles, weak fiscal capacity, and conflict between elected local actors and provincial bureaucracies.

The mixed results reflected structural tensions. Local government was empowered without being fully protected constitutionally, provincial buy-in remained uneven, and fiscal and personnel control often continued to flow upward. Bureaucratic cadres adapted selectively. Some officers embraced coordination roles, while others resisted the erosion of traditional district authority. When political support weakened, many devolution gains proved reversible, underscoring how fragile administrative reform becomes when its institutional anchors are shallow (Wilder, 2006; Husain, 2018).

This period also saw the expansion of a hybrid governance architecture: autonomous agencies, regulatory bodies, public-private arrangements, e-governance initiatives, and donor-supported sector reforms. Pakistan thus moved away from the image of a unitary secretariat state toward a more fragmented administrative landscape. Agencification promised flexibility and specialization, but it also created new coordination problems and sometimes reproduced old hierarchies under new labels (Khan, Siddique, & Ullah, 2019; Jamil et al., 2019).

New public management ideas entered policy discourse more forcefully during these years. Performance contracts, citizen facilitation, one-window services, and managerial autonomy were increasingly discussed. Yet the translation of these ideas into Pakistan's context was uneven. Managerial language coexisted with weak appraisal systems, frequent transfers, and politicized appointments. Sectoral experiments in health, education, procurement, and service commissions showed localized gains, but the deeper civil service value chain—recruitment, training, career progression, compensation, and accountability—remained only partially aligned with performance goals (World Bank, 2019; Bandiera et al., 2021; Khawaja & Khalid, 2022). The result was not a transition from bureaucracy to post-bureaucracy, but the layering of managerial reforms onto a historically durable administrative core.

After the Eighteenth Amendment: Federalism, Fragmentation, and the Search for Modern Governance

The Eighteenth Amendment of 2010 transformed Pakistan's constitutional landscape by deepening provincial autonomy, yet its administrative implications have remained contested. Federalism changed the distribution of formal responsibilities, but bureaucratic culture, personnel systems, and center-oriented habits adapted only slowly. Many governance functions shifted to provinces, while capacities for policy design, implementation, and monitoring remained uneven across the federation (Husain, 2018; Muhula, 2019).

This phase sharpened a long-standing contradiction: Pakistan's constitutional order moved toward devolution, but its bureaucratic incentives often remained centralized. Provincial secretariats expanded in importance, but local governments remained weak or discontinuous in many provinces. Civil servants continued to rotate across positions in ways that discouraged specialization and local accountability. In social sectors especially, provinces carried greater responsibility without always having integrated data systems, career structures, or procurement capacity robust enough to support sustained results (Planning Commission & UNDP, 2019; Husain, 2022).

The modern governance agenda in this period has been shaped by three overlapping pressures. The first is service delivery. Citizens increasingly judge the state through education, health, policing, land records, taxation, and municipal services rather than through abstract claims of administrative order. The second is digitization. Governments have sought to use information technology to reduce discretion, speed transactions, and improve traceability. The third is expertise. Complex policy domains—from climate risk to energy regulation and urban management—require specialized knowledge that traditional generalist structures do not reliably supply (Muhula, 2019; Husain, 2018; Abbas, 2023).

There are visible successes. Digital land records, procurement reforms, citizen facilitation centers, right-to-service mechanisms, and improved tax administration in some sectors indicate that

bureaucratic modernization is possible. Experimental evidence from Punjab shows that altering authority structures and incentives can improve procurement performance, suggesting that organizational design matters greatly in Pakistan's administrative setting (Bandiera et al., 2021). Studies of service commissions and post-devolution innovations in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa likewise show that when institutional mandates, incentives, and political support align, responsiveness can improve (Khawaja & Khalid, 2022).

Yet these gains remain uneven and reversible. Digital tools do not by themselves overcome politicized personnel management. Agencies may perform better than line departments, but fragmented islands of excellence can weaken whole-of-government coordination. Donor-supported innovations often struggle to survive leadership change. Above all, the absence of stable, empowered local government continues to undermine the promise of citizen-centered governance (Husain, 2022; Dawn, 2025). Pakistan's administrative evolution has therefore reached an inflection point: modern governance instruments are proliferating, but the underlying bureaucratic settlement remains unresolved.

Enduring Continuities: Why Reform So Often Falls Short

A historical view reveals several continuities that explain why Pakistan's bureaucracy changes in form more readily than in function. The first continuity is the persistence of hierarchy as an organizing principle. Whether under colonial rule, military government, or democratic regimes, authority has tended to flow vertically, with decision rights concentrated near the top and responsibility diffused below. This discourages initiative, slows coordination, and makes lower tiers risk averse (Islam, 1989; World Bank, 1998; Husain, 2018).

A second continuity is the dominance of the generalist ideal. Pakistan's most prestigious services historically rewarded broad administrative command rather than sustained domain expertise. This made sense in a district-centered system but is increasingly maladapted to a policy environment defined by regulation, technology, climate resilience, health systems, and complex urban governance. Reform proposals advocating a national executive service, lateral entry, or domain-based career tracks are therefore attempts to correct a structural problem, not merely to import fashionable management ideas (NCGR, 2008; Husain, 2020; Abbas, 2023).

A third continuity is the ambiguous relationship between autonomy and accountability. Pakistan's bureaucracy has oscillated between excessive insulation and excessive politicization. Officers have at times been too protected from public scrutiny and at other times too vulnerable to arbitrary transfer or political pressure. Both conditions weaken performance. Modern governance requires a middle path: enough professional autonomy to apply rules and give candid advice, but enough transparency and evaluation to prevent unaccountable power (Peters, 2010; International Crisis Group, 2010; Husain, 2012).

A fourth continuity is the weakness of local government. Across regimes, local bodies have been used instrumentally—either to bypass provincial elites or to extend patronage—rather than entrenched as a durable constitutional tier of governance. This has left district and municipal administration suspended between formal decentralization and practical control by higher bureaucratic levels (Wilder, 1999; Cheema et al., 2005; Husain, 2022). Without local accountability, citizens experience the state mainly as a distant administrative hierarchy.

Finally, reform failure reflects the politics of implementation. Many commissions have correctly diagnosed problems in recruitment, training, appraisal, compensation, and business processes. Their recommendations often fail not because the analysis is poor, but because implementation threatens entrenched interests and lacks sustained political sponsorship. Pakistan thus suffers less from a shortage of reform blueprints than from the absence of durable coalitions for institutional change (NCGR, 2008; Planning Commission & UNDP, 2019; Abbas, 2023).

From Bureaucratic Rule to Modern Governance: A Way Forward

If Pakistan is to move from inherited bureaucratic rule toward modern governance, reform must proceed from historical realism rather than administrative wishful thinking. The objective should not be to abolish bureaucracy but to redesign it for a democratic, federal, digitally networked state. That requires changes in structure, incentives, and constitutional practice.

First, Pakistan needs a more differentiated civil service architecture that prizes specialization without destroying the integrative functions of the state. Senior policy and implementation posts should be increasingly aligned with domain expertise, while recruitment and promotion systems must reward learning, mid-career training, and demonstrated competence rather than seniority alone (Husain, 2012; Husain, 2018). Open competition for selected senior positions, carefully regulated lateral entry, and stronger technical cadres can help address the mismatch between old administrative habits and modern governance demands.

Second, personnel management must be stabilized. Frequent transfers are among the most corrosive features of Pakistan's administrative system because they undermine institutional memory, weaken accountability, and encourage short-termism. Minimum tenure protections, transparent posting criteria, and electronic personnel records linked to performance histories are essential. Performance appraisal must move beyond confidential and ritualized reporting toward clearer objectives, periodic review, and evidence-based assessment (World Bank, 1998; Husain, 2020).

Third, local government must be treated as a core administrative reform, not a side issue. Service delivery takes place locally; therefore, modern governance is impossible without empowered districts and municipalities that have predictable finances, professional staff, and clear authority. Provincial bureaucracies should shift from direct control toward regulation, oversight, and support, while local administrative cadres should be strengthened rather than treated as residual appendages (Cheema et al., 2005; Husain, 2022; Dawn, 2025).

Fourth, digitalization must be systemic rather than cosmetic. Digitizing old paper routines without changing processes merely accelerates dysfunctional procedures. Pakistan needs interoperable platforms for land, taxation, procurement, pensions, and citizen services, supported by legal frameworks for data sharing, privacy, auditability, and grievance redress. Business process reengineering must accompany technological adoption (Planning Commission & UNDP, 2019; Husain, 2020).

Fifth, accountability institutions must distinguish corruption control from political intimidation. Anti-corruption drives that operate through selective pressure can paralyze decision-making and further politicize the bureaucracy. More credible accountability would combine independent audit, procurement transparency, reasoned disciplinary procedures, asset disclosure, and judicially reviewable decisions. The aim should be a bureaucracy that is answerable for performance and integrity, not fearful of every signature (Dawn, 2020; International Crisis Group, 2010).

Finally, reform must be sequenced and politically owned. Pakistan's history shows that commissions without coalitions do not transform institutions. Reform is more likely to endure when it links political leaders, bureaucratic reformers, provincial governments, local representatives, and citizens around visible service gains. Practical demonstration effects—better procurement, faster land records, cleaner municipal transactions, more stable school management—can build constituencies for broader change. Modern governance will not emerge from one grand decree; it will emerge from repeated institutional choices that align the bureaucracy with constitutional federalism and citizen-facing performance.

Conclusion

The evolution of bureaucracy in Pakistan is a story of both endurance and adaptation. From the colonial district officer to the contemporary civil servant navigating dashboards, donors, media scrutiny, and citizen service platforms, the institution has changed substantially. Yet its deepest characteristics—hierarchy, centralism,

generalist dominance, ambiguous accountability, and periodic politicization—show remarkable continuity. This is why the transition from colonial legacy to modern governance has remained incomplete.

Pakistan inherited a bureaucracy capable of preserving order in moments of state fragility, but that very inheritance constrained democratic development. Subsequent reforms alternated between curbing bureaucratic dominance and relying on bureaucratic capacity. Military regimes strengthened central control; civilian regimes often sought political supremacy without institutional redesign; reform commissions generated sophisticated diagnoses but rarely altered the incentive structure at scale. The result has been a bureaucracy that is too important to ignore, too entrenched to bypass, and too unreformed to meet contemporary expectations fully (Alavi, 1972; Kennedy, 1987; Husain, 2018). A modern Pakistani state will still require a strong bureaucracy, but it must be strong in a different way. It must be professional rather than merely prestigious, specialized rather than reflexively generalist, constitutionally federal rather than informally centralized, digitally integrated rather than file bound, and accountable to citizens rather than only to superiors. The real question is not whether Pakistan should move beyond bureaucracy, but whether it can create a bureaucracy compatible with democratic governance. Its future depends on whether administrative authority can finally be reconciled with representation, expertise, and public trust.

REFERENCES

Abbas, N. (2023). Administrative reforms in civil services: An analytical study on Pakistan. *International Journal of Business and Social Science, 14*(1), 57–67. https://doi.org/10.30845/ijbss.v14n1p6

Alavi, H. (1972). The state in post-colonial societies: Pakistan and Bangladesh. *New Left Review, 74*, 59–81.

Bandiera, O., Best, M. C., Khan, A. Q., & Prat, A. (2021). Allocation of authority in organizations: A field experiment with bureaucrats. *Quarterly Journal of Economics, 136*(4), 2195–2242. https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjab029

Burki, S. J. (1980). *Pakistan under Bhutto, 1971–1977*. Macmillan.

ChatGPT 5.2 AI software program was used to correct the language and grammar.

Burki, S. J. (1999). *Pakistan: Fifty years of nationhood*. Westview Press.

Cheema, A., Khwaja, A. I., & Qadir, A. (2005). Decentralization in Pakistan: Context, content and causes. In P. Bardhan & D. Mookherjee (Eds.), *Decentralization and local governance in developing countries* (pp. 257–284). MIT Press.

Cheema, A., Khwaja, A. I., & Qadir, A. (2006). Local government reforms in Pakistan: Context, content and causes. *Harvard Kennedy School Faculty Research Working Paper Series*.

Chughtai, U. A. (2021). Background of civil services reform. *Global Management Sciences Review, 6*(4), 53–61.

Crisis Group. (2010). *Reforming Pakistan's civil service* (Asia Report No. 185). International Crisis Group.

Dawn. (2020, December 6). Civil service rules. *Dawn*.

Dawn. (2024, October 31). Reforming the civil service. *Dawn*.

Dawn. (2025, May 16). Civil service reforms cannot succeed without local governments. *Dawn*.

Express Tribune. (2024, October 20). Civil service reforms: Breaking the cycle of failure. *The Express Tribune*.

Government of Pakistan. (1973). *Administrative reforms, 1973*. Cabinet Secretariat.

Government of Pakistan. (2001). *Devolution plan, 2001*. National Reconstruction Bureau.

Government of Pakistan, Establishment Division. (2008). *National Commission for Government Reforms report*. Government of Pakistan.

Haque, M. S. (2007). Theory and practice of public administration in Southeast Asia: Traditions, directions, and impacts. *International Journal of Public Administration, 30*(12–14), 1297–1326. https://doi.org/10.1080/01900690701229434

Hood, C. (1991). A public management for all seasons? *Public Administration, 69*(1), 3–19. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9299.1991.tb00779.x

Huque, A. S. (2005). Explaining the myth of public sector reform in South Asia. *Asian Journal of Political Science, 13*(2), 97–117. https://doi.org/10.1080/02185370508434262

Husain, I. (2005). Key issues in managing Pakistan's economy. *BIS Review*. Bank for International Settlements.

Husain, I. (2008). Rationale, principles and proposed approach. *Lahore Journal of Economics, 12*(Special Edition), 1–22.

Husain, I. (2012). *Reforming the government in Pakistan*. Vanguard Books.

Husain, I. (2018). *Governing the ungovernable: Institutional reforms for democratic governance*. Oxford University Press.

Husain, I. (2020). *Civil service reform*. IBA Karachi / Government Reform Papers.

Husain, I. (2022). Reforms: Institutional impediments (Part I). *The News International*.

Islam, N. (1989). Colonial legacy, administrative reform and politics in Pakistan. *Public Administration and Development, 9*(3), 269–282. https://doi.org/10.1002/pad.4230090304

Jalal, A. (1995). *Democracy and authoritarianism in South Asia*. Cambridge University Press.

Jawad, K., & Shabbir, G. (2024a). Bureaucratic dynamics in transitional governance: A comparative analysis of the Ayub Khan and Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto eras. *Pakistan Social Sciences Review*.

Jawad, K., & Shabbir, G. (2024b). The role of higher bureaucracy in shaping policy culture in Pakistan: A case study of Ayub Khan's era (1958–1969). *Journal of Development and Social Sciences*.

Jamil, I., Askvik, S., & Hossain, F. (Eds.). (2019). *Civil service management and administrative systems in South Asia*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-90191-6

Khan, I. A. (2010). Public sector institutions, politics and outsourcing: Reforming the provision of primary healthcare in Punjab, Pakistan. *Journal of International Development, 22*(4), 424–438. https://doi.org/10.1002/jid.1574

Khan, M. Z., Siddique, M., & Ullah, Z. (2019). The effect of structural factors on managerial autonomy of public organizations: A study of agencification in Pakistan. *Business & Economic Review, 11*(3), 125–152. https://doi.org/10.22547/BER/11.3.6

Khawaja, S., & Khalid, S. (2022). Retooling governance for improving public service delivery: Case study of right to public services commission, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. *Governance, 35*(2), 565–583. https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12607

Kennedy, C. H. (1987). *Bureaucracy in Pakistan*. Oxford University Press.

Manning, N., Nickson, A., Porter, D., & Ren, T. (2004). *Reforming public institutions and strengthening governance*. World Bank.

Migdal, J. S. (1988). *Strong societies and weak states*. Princeton University Press.

Muhula, R. (2019). *Pakistan@100: Governance and institutions*. World Bank.

National Commission for Government Reforms. (2008). *Reforming the government in Pakistan*. Government of Pakistan.

Peters, B. G. (2010). *The politics of bureaucracy* (6th ed.). Routledge.

Planning Commission & UNDP. (2019). *Public sector reforms in Pakistan: Stock take*. Government of Pakistan and United Nations Development Programme.

Polidano, C. (2001). Why civil service reforms fail. *Public Management Review, 3*(3), 345–361. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616670010020509

Qureshi, N. M. (2024, April 22). Reform bureaucracy to save Pakistan. *The Express Tribune*.

Rana, A. W. (2018). *Civil service reforms in Pakistan*. Pakistan Institute of Development Economics.

Rasul, I., & Rogger, D. (2018). Management of bureaucrats and public service delivery: Evidence from the Nigerian civil service. *Economic Journal, 128*(608), 413–446. https://doi.org/10.1111/ecoj.12418

Saeed, A. (2013). Governance system of Pakistan: Continuation of colonial policies. *Journal of Political Studies, 20*(1), 199–218.

Savoie, D. J. (2015). *What is government good at?: A Canadian answer*. McGill-Queen's University Press.

Shafqat, S. (1999). Pakistani bureaucracy: Crisis of governance and prospects of reform. *The Pakistan Development Review, 38*(4 Part II), 995–1017. https://doi.org/10.30541/v38i4IIpp.995-1017

Siddiqa, A. (2007). *Military Inc.: Inside Pakistan's military economy*. Pluto Press.

Talbot, I. (1998). *Pakistan: A modern history*. St. Martin's Press.

Task Force on Civil Service Reforms. (2020). *Institutional reforms: Civil service reform reports, Vols. I–II*. Government of Pakistan.

Turner, M., Imran, M., & Jamil, I. (2015). The importance of context when reforming public organizations: Pakistan puts a 'TOE' in the water. *Public Organization Review, 15*(2), 261–278.

UNDP Pakistan. (2020). *Pakistan national human development report 2020*. United Nations Development Programme.

Weber, M. (1978). *Economy and society* (G. Roth & C. Wittich, Eds.). University of California Press.

Wilder, A. (1999). *The Pakistani voter: Electoral politics and voting behaviour in the Punjab*. Oxford University Press.

Wilder, A. (2006). *Decentralisation, local governance and administrative reform in Pakistan*. Asian Development Bank.

World Bank. (1998). *A framework for civil service reform in Pakistan*. World Bank.

World Bank. (2002). *Pakistan development policy review: A new dawn?*. World Bank.

World Bank. (2004). *Devolution in Pakistan: An assessment and recommendations for action*. World Bank.

World Bank. (2019). *Pakistan@100: Shaping the future*. World Bank.

Yousaf, M., Ihsan, F., & Ellahi, A. (2016). Exploring the impact of good governance on citizens' trust in Pakistan. *Government Information Quarterly, 33*(1), 200–209. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.giq.2015.06.001

Zaidi, S. A. (2005). *Issues in Pakistan's economy* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.

Zaidi, S. A. (2023). *A new economic history of Pakistan*. Cambridge University Press.

Zafarullah, H. (2001). Public management for good governance: Reforms, regimes, and reality in Bangladesh. *International Journal of Public Administration, 24*(13), 1379–1403. https://doi.org/10.1081/PAD-100105944