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Book Review

Gresham's Law Syndrome: An Analysis of the Bangladesh Bureaucracy

By: Akbar Ali Khan. Dhaka: University Press Limited, 2015.

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Understanding the state of governance of a country requires a thorough and in-depth comprehension of public administration, its strengths, and weaknesses. Unfortunately, despite a growing number of studies on Bangladeshi politics, few scholars have examined the nature and scope of public administration with an open mind and analyzed it incisively. The exception in this regard is a study by Akbar Ali Khan, titled “Gresham’s Law Syndrome and Beyond: An Analysis of Bureaucracy”. Using an analogy of a well-known monetary principle – that “bad money drives out good money”-- Akbar Ali Khan, a former senior civil servant, has delved deep into the history and present state of public administration of Bangladesh. While most of the former civil servants take a walk down memory lane when talking about the civil service, Akbar Ali Khan has looked into public administration from an objective point of view, weaving his expertise in economics and history, as well as his experience into a passionate yet impartial narrative backed by a wealth of data. The book warrants our close attention and attentive reading because it has identified the problems of governance, located it within the history and functioning of public administration since its inception during the colonial period, and offered a comparative perspective with other countries.

The central argument of the book is stated in a few lines: “Outwardly, an elaborate structure of modern administration exists in Bangladesh. In reality, public administration in Bangladesh is incapable of performing effectively the basic functions of a state, such as maintaining law and order, protecting human rights and administration of justice” (p. 30). The book, then goes on to explain why public administration in Bangladesh has miserably failed to perform its duties. The author borrows Gresham’s Law from economics and uses the framework aptly to explain the shortcomings. The author tells us that Gresham’s law is manifested at two levels. “First, at the political level, the loyalists are patronized in violation of the spirit, if not of the letters of the constitution. Secondly, at the micro level, the rules, norms, [and] practices of the government are twisted and violated to patronize the partisans in bureaucracy” (p. 30). On its face, these are not a revelation. Neither are they something any observer of Bangladesh will disagree with, nor will any citizen find it hard to believe. But what makes the study exemplary are three-fold – the methodical rigor of the study, the penetrating explanation of the pathway of this incremental degradation over the past five decades, and the meticulous details of each point made. The author promised us a journey and took us along by holding our hands while describing every detail on the way.

Nine chapters of the book, which follow the introduction, address three aspects of the public administration of Bangladesh: the history of public administration, how the quality of public administration has deteriorated over time, and what needs to be done.

In the first chapter, the author has drawn our attention to the distinction between appearance and essence. There could be, and often there are, more than meets the eye. In case of developing countries, bureaucracy is an institution which falls into this conundrum. The author argues: “Outwardly, the structures and paraphernalia of the

government in developing countries are indistinguishable from those of the industrial countries. They differ not in appearance but in effectiveness” (p. 21). The author explains this view using the concept of “isomorphic mimicry.” Isomorphic mimicry “is the tendency of governments to mimic other governments’ successes, replicating processes, systems, and even products of the ‘best practice’ examples. This mimicry often conflates form and function, leading to a situation where ‘looks like’ substitutes for ‘does’; i.e., governments look capable after the mimicry but are not actually more capable” (Matt Andrews, Lant Pritchett, and Michael Woolcock, *Building State Capability: Evidence, Analysis, Action: The Seduction of Isomorphic Mimicry*, 2017). Thus, the appearance remains the same – they look like the state they are imitating, but act far less like a state let alone the state it is mimicking and perform far less than what is expected of a state.

What prompts such mimicry has been an issue of debate and discussion in the past decades in the field of political science and among policymakers around the world. The notion of state failure, which gained salience in the late 1990s, faced severe criticisms in the past decades. The “Failed State Index” has been changed to “fragility index” and now investigates state capacity rather than listing the failed states. Akbar Ali Khan also delves into state capacity. Whether the penchant for the mimicry is a result of the state formation process is an open question. In many instances colonial and post-colonial states have been founded based on the image of the states in the West, ignoring the history of state building in Europe. The need to embed the state within society has not received much attention. Robert H. Jackson’s (2011) seminal work *Quasi States: Sovereignty, International Relations and the Third World* has shed light on the demands imposed on the third world states although these states do not possess the capacity to deliver. These discussions, although they may not be directly pertinent to exploring the state of public administration in Bangladesh, would have enriched the theoretical framework adopted for the book and benefit the readers. Besides, we must be cognizant of the fact that when the author is talking about state capacity, he is referring to the administrative capacity of the state, not the capacity of the state to penetrate the society, which Joel S. Migdal described as one of the four capacities of the state (*Strong Societies and Weak States: State-Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World*, 1988), or the legitimation capacity underscored by Shaoguang Wang (“The Rise of the Regions: Fiscal Reform and the Decline of Central State Capacity in China”, in *The Waning of the Communist State Economic Origins of Political Decline in China and Hungary*. Andrew G. Walder (ed), (1995) and I have discussed this elsewhere (*Undying Issues: Critical Debates about Contemporary Challenges*, 2018).

The historical roots of bureaucracy in South Asia, discussed in Chapter 2, places the discussion of Bangladeshi public administration in the larger context. The continuity between pre-, colonial and post-colonial administration, especially the relationship between the bureaucracy and the citizens/subjects, is both interesting and eye-opening. While the British colonial rulers allowed and even encouraged corruption at the lower levels of bureaucracy, there was a sense of incorruptibility at the top echelon of the IAS. Discussion on the Pakistan period points to an issue – who should be in the administration rather than what the structure looks like - which seems yet to be resolved in contemporary times when it looks at contemporary Pakistan. Chapter 3 takes stock of public administration at the independence of Bangladesh and can also be considered as the historical background of the central arguments made through the subsequent chapters. The chapter informs us that despite the emergence of Bangladesh through a war, in the author’s version “a revolution” (p. 73), the public administration structure was a mere replication of the Pakistani state (p. 88). Looking back 50 years later, today one can ask what political considerations went into the decision. The author tells us what happened, but leaves us with the question – why the leaders of the new state shied away from completely revamping the administrative structure.

Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 – which deal with the quota system, recruitment mechanism, performance evaluation system, and compensation structure – show the maladies of public administration in Bangladesh, but these discussions make it evident to a reader how a lack of innovativeness of the political leaders contributed to the erosion of capacity of the administration and made the entire structure dysfunctional. That the deterioration took place in an incremental manner under successive administrations – civil and military, elected and unelected -- is mind boggling and agonizing, but it also reaffirms that the nation lacked a vision for the future. Bangladeshi politicians remained more concerned about history while the capacity to build a structure to steer the nation to a better future was corroding on a daily basis. The quota system, which was finally scrapped in 2019, thanks to the dogged efforts of the youth activists, was made a “political and emotive issue” snubbing the recommendations of almost all committees which were appointed for reforming the civil service.

Perhaps the best summary of Chapter 6, on the performance issue, is the following: “mechanism for identifying the poor performers and the incapacity of the government to punish delinquents has rendered the Bangladesh Civil Service into a sanctuary for inefficiency and corruption. On the contrary, meritorious performance in the Bangladesh Civil Service goes unrecognized. Performance is rated on the basis of vague and imprecise personality traits. This has rendered performance appraisal process into an instrument of cronyism” (p. 229-30). Khan’s indictment of the process is worth mentioning: “It has denigrated into a sterile exercise in that it cannot discriminate between the bad and the good and the efficient and inefficient in Bangladesh administration” (p. 229).

In Chapter 7, the author explores the “deficiencies and distortions” of the compensation policies and ties it with the previous chapter’s discussion on performance evaluation. In his opinion, “the present salary structure in Bangladesh is indifferent to performance. As a result, the present salary structure in Bangladesh public service encourages the laggards and discourages the star performers” (p. 257). The pay structure, since the publication of the book in 2015, has changed and various incentives have been added. As reported in the press in June 2020, in the past decade the public service employees’ salary and benefits have increased by a staggering 221% (Prothom Alo, 20 June 2020). However, the question remains whether the increase has addressed the structural problems of compensation noted by Khan. Besides, it is alleged that the increase has been driven by political considerations, especially to ensure loyalty to the incumbent than rewarding merit, and that it has adversely affected those who are in the private sector, especially in low-income jobs.

The politicization of administration is a key factor in the continuous deterioration of the civil service in Bangladesh according to Chapter 8 titled, “The Vicious Cycle of Politicization.” The sensitivity around this question cannot be overstated, particularly in the context of Bangladesh. Akbar Ali Khan unequivocally stated, “Given the preponderance of the rule of law in the country, the constitutional and legal provisions should have been enough to forestall the politicization of civil service in Bangladesh. In reality, Bangladesh has witnessed in the last four decades rapid escalation in politicization in Bangladesh” (p. 269). The author has noted that unlike many other countries, Bangladeshi civil administration is yet to become “fully politicized” but “highly politicized” (p. 281). “Legally, it continues to be a non-political merit-based administration. Though, informally, most of the legal restrictions on politicization are bypassed through government’s illegal and extralegal initiatives” (p. 281). When speaking of the government, he indeed means the ruling party. This is what many have described as “partyarchy” (Sultan Mohammed Zakaria, Mohammad Shahidul Islam and Mirza Hassan, “Partyarchy and Political Underdevelopment in Bangladesh”, *The State of Governance Bangladesh 2013: Democracy, party, politics*. 2014). Khan’s assertion that the initiative for politicization didn’t always come from the politicians alone but prompted by the bureaucrats too who “resorted to political cronyism to further their interests” points to a serious problem. It is also clear that authoritarianism has fueled this trend throughout the past five decades.

“Gresham’s Law Syndrome and Beyond” is a testimony to the hollowing out of the administrative structure of Bangladesh over the past five decades. It has also called for a rejuvenation of a fundamental element of the Bangladeshi state. Akbar Ali Khan, in painstaking detail, documented what is wrong and by doing so he has also implicitly and explicitly laid out what needs to be done to reverse the course. But after reading this perceptive study, we are faced with a series of questions, as any thought-provoking book provokes. The questions we must confront are whether reforming the administrative structure is sufficient to steer the nation to a better future? The corrosion of civil service did not take place in isolation. Is it the lack of a vision that did it, or is it personal aggrandizement which is to blame? Does it require an overhauling of the state which began its journey 50 years ago with promises of equality, human dignity, and social justice? Who will do it? It is a folly to hope that the beneficiaries of this spoiled system will have the political will to do it or bear the political cost of it. Of course, this book was neither intended to raise nor answer these questions, but we will do a disservice to the author if we do not raise these questions after reading it.