



Review Article

Human Resource Management in Afghanistan's Civil Service Commission (Republic Era): Challenges and Strategic Solutions

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ABSTRACT



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This study critically examines Human Resource Management (HRM) in the Civil Service Commission of Afghanistan (ACSC) from the Republic era (2001–2021), an era characterized by structural, political, and socio-cultural complications that undermined public administration efficiency. The civil service was bedeviled by routine challenges of politicized hiring, poor institutional capacity, institutionalized corruption, and entrenched gender disparities. These issues were compounded by poor performance management systems, a dearth of formal training programs, and overdependence on foreign assistance, which skewed the labor market and undermined local HR capabilities.

Analysis in this research is based on the Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) and New Public Management (NPM) paradigms. SHRM focuses on linking human resources to the long-term objectives of an organization, a crucial strategy to develop a professionalized, responsive, and accountable civil service. Concurrently, NPM espouses efficiency, transparency, decentralization, and performance-based accountability principles—fundamental ingredients of public sector reform, particularly in fragile or post-conflict environments. These frameworks inform the analysis of institutional reactions to HRM issues, policy reform tactics, and their enforcement across Afghanistan's civil service environment.

Against these systemic vulnerabilities, the report identifies key strategic reforms to re-vitalize the civil service. Foremost among them were the establishment of the Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission (IARCSC), computerized and merit-based recruitment procedures, and the introduction of capacity-building schemes in cooperation with international development partners. Further initiatives were focused on gender disparities through human resource policies encouraging equal remunerations, anti-harassment schemes, and increased flexibility in the workplace.

Using a qualitative, desk-based method, the study builds on credible secondary evidence to thematically review trends and results in HRM reform. The results show that although these interventions produced modest improvements in transparency and administrative effectiveness, deeply rooted political interference and institutional vulnerability were the main obstacles to lasting change. In conclusion, the research finds that effective and sustainable HRM reform in Afghanistan demands a holistic, long-term strategy based on meritocracy, institutionalization, gender equality, and local capacity building, irrespective of extended external donor reliance.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Overview of HRM Challenges and Reform Efforts in the Republic Era

Human Resource Management of the public service of Afghanistan in the Republic period was confronted with huge challenges emanating from political instability, institutionally weak structures, and socio-cultural intricacies. The civil service is responsible to the provision of critical public services, grappled with recruitment inefficiencies, capacity development, staff retention, and performance management. Among the main issues was politicization of public service recruitment, which killed

merit-based promotions and hiring, resulting in demotivation and lack of professionalism in civil servants (Barakzai, 2024).

Additionally, inadequate investment in training and development schemes also impeded the capacity of governmental sector workers to adjust to changing administrative requirements and technological innovation. Gender imbalance was a second major issue, with women encountering structural obstacles to recruitment and career advancement within the civil service. Cultural expectations and security issues further held back women's participation, thereby decreasing workforce diversity and inclusiveness (Ahmed & Shahidzai, 2019).

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Corruption and accountability lapse in HR practice only served to aggravate the issues. There were no transparent performance appraisal mechanisms and ill-defined job descriptions that resulted in demotivated workers and poor performance delivery (Yusufzada, Xia, & Xia, 2019).

Furthermore, the role of foreign donors in driving HR policies tended to lead to disparate, incoherent, and unsustainable strategies. Government leadership turnover and an irregular policy enforcement framework undermined institutional memory and fostered a reactive over a strategic HRM approach (Hakimi, 2004).

To meet these challenges, strategic responses were formulated and partly enacted. The establishment of the Civil Service Commission (CSC) was intended to standardize recruitment procedures and uphold merit-based recruitment (Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Services Commission (IARCSC), n.d.).

Capacity building schemes, aided by external agencies, attempted to build professional skills of public servants through directed training and capacity-building exercises (SIGAR, Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2021).

Encouraging gender inclusiveness needed specific policies to eliminate structural obstacles, including the introduction of flexible working environments, equal pay, and anti-harassment. Moreover, enhancing the accountability mechanisms through computerized HR systems and performance-based appraisal frameworks was essential to enhance transparency and enhance the level of motivation and A long-term, all-encompassing strategy centered on meritocracy, inclusiveness, and institutionalization is still required for lasting improvements in Afghanistan's civil service HRM.

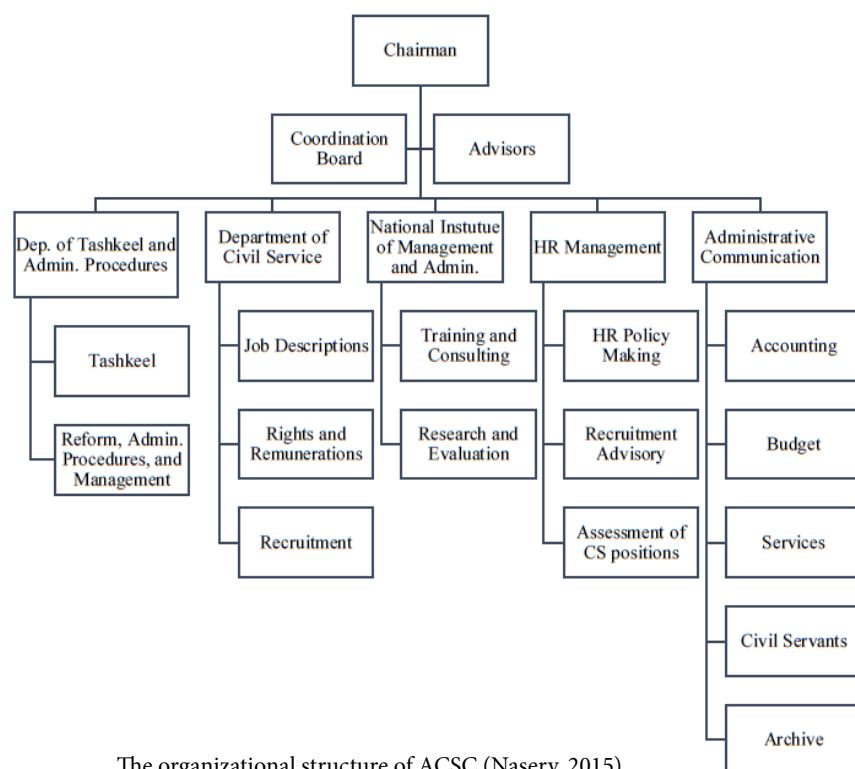
formed with the name "Independent Civil Administration Commission" as an independent budget entity. The prime intentions behind the commission were to head the formation of a strong administration, appointment of civil servants on the basis of merit and capabilities, defining the central civil services, and coordinating the matters pertaining to civil servants. According to the article 2 of Head of Transitional Government of Afghanistan's Decree Number 25 dated 10 June 2003 its title was modified to "Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission and from today the IARCSC commenced its operations".

According to article 1 of the above-mentioned decree, formulating, organizing, directing and implementation of countrywide reforms and according to article 3 of this decree

matters such as determination, nomination and recommending the appointment of senior level civil servants; examination and approval of the public service institutions application on recruitment are regarded as the responsibilities and tasks of the IARCSC Article 6 of this decree declares that ministries and government departments should abide by the decisions of IARCSC (Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission (IARCSC) | DEVEX, n.d.).

Importance of Civil Service Commission in Afghanistan

The Afghanistan Civil Service Commission was created to lead public administration reforms. Its core aims were to implement merit-based recruitment, regularize job classification, and build the capacity of civil servants. Between 2008 and 2011, there were major attempts to reform the civil service, including the introduction of a new pay and grading system to enhance efficiency and accountability. These reforms were intended to establish a clear and efficient public sector that would be able to



The organizational structure of ACSC (Nasery, 2015)

1.2 Historical Overview of the Afghanistan Civil Service Commission (ACSC)

The Civil Service Commission was first mandated under the Bonn Agreements. According to Interim Government of Afghanistan's Decree Number 257 on 23 May 2002, CSC was

provide basic services to the Afghan people (Public Administration International).

But the ACSC was confronted with several challenges, such as political interference, security issues, and bureaucratic resistance to change. Nevertheless, the commission was instrumental in establishing the foundation for a professional and responsive civil

service, which was necessary for the governance and development of the country during the republic era (Hashimi & Lauth, 2016).

This program aimed to establish a motivated, merit-based, performance-oriented, and professional civil service that is not corrupt, thus increasing the transparency and efficiency of public services (Nasery, 2015).

Moreover, Capacity Building for Results program hired experts to enhance performance and curb corruption in key government ministries. This program aimed to professionalize key ministries, thus increasing governance and social development (World Bank Group, 2021).

2. HRM Challenges in the Afghanistan Civil Service Commission

2.1 Capacity Gaps and Skill Deficiency

During Afghanistan's republic era (2001–2021), the public administration faced a critical shortage of technical and managerial expertise. Many civil servants lacked professional training, and corruption further exacerbated governance inefficiencies. Strategic planning was weak, and recruitment often favored political connections over merit. A study on Afghanistan's civil service highlighted the lack of institutional capacity and poor policy implementation due to inadequate managerial skills (Yusufzada, Xia, & Xia, 2019).

Despite these challenges Afghanistan civil service commission faced, the lack of trained professionals, especially in education and healthcare, was acute in rural and conflict-affected areas of Afghanistan. Security issues, poor infrastructure, and low rewards meant that professionals shunned such locations. For example, rural hospitals had a critical shortage of trained doctors and nurses, resulting in huge segments of the population being denied basic healthcare services. It was reported that the government had difficulty in recruiting and retaining qualified staff in such high-risk areas (Cordesman, 2019). Furthermore, Afghanistan's public sector depended significantly on foreign aid to operate. Donors financed around 90% of the nation's public spending between 2006 and 2010. Although this support assisted in rebuilding institutions, it bred dependency and distorted labor markets. Most qualified professionals preferred employment with international organizations because of higher pay, undermining the government's capacity to recruit skilled staff. The World Bank cautioned that this aid-based economic model was not sustainable and called for local capacity-building programs (World Bank, Afghanistan Issues Note: Managing the Civilian Wage Bill, 2018).

2.2 Political Interference and Corruption

An in-depth review of Afghan public service reforms underscored that political intervention, corruption, and nepotism fueled a complicated situation that inhibited the change of the patrimonial public service system to a performance- and merit-based professional organization (Nasery, 2015). The United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA) cited that corruption penetrated every element of life in Afghanistan, deterring the country's path to becoming independent and destabilizing government institutions' legitimacy (UNAMA, 2017).

2.3 Gender Inequality and Inclusion Barriers

Despite efforts to increase women's participation, women were still underrepresented in leadership roles. In 2004, women had occupied 3.9% of senior staff jobs at the central level. Though the percentage improved to 20.6% in 2017, it was reported that most of those jobs were in grade 7 and 8 posts, which are usually not part of the regular civil service. This indicates that women

remained underrepresented in decision-making positions (Nasery, 2015). Notably, institutionalized patriarchal values and societal expectations were major obstacles to improve the women in the public service. Work-family conflict, nepotism, absence of merit-based systems, and inadequate support networks presented major constraints to the career advancement of women. Additionally, social phenomena such as the "Queen Bee Syndrome" in which older women disidentify with or fail to support younger women further hindered the creation of supportive spaces for female professionals (Hamidi, Widiningsih, & Nurasa, 2024).

Despite these challenges the large-scale migration of educated women during times of war, combined with dominant social and cultural barriers, hindered the efficacy of reforms for enhancing of the female representation in governmental jobs. Although Gender Units were introduced in every ministry, the government was not able to reach its target of 30% representation of women, reflecting the sluggish pace in realizing gender parity (Nasery, 2015).

2.4 Organizational Structure and Bureaucratic Barriers

The Afghan civil service was also marked by fragmented and replicated structures, leftovers of the former centrally-planned economic system. Numerous public institutions remained in existence without good reason in a market economy, resulting in overlapping functions and inefficiency. This fragmentation made reform more difficult, as restructuring involved navigating through a complicated network of existing bureaucratic administrative units (IMF, 2023) (SIGAR, What We Need to learn: lessons from twenty years of Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2021).

3. HRM Reforms and Strategic Solutions

The Afghan administration launched a computerized testing process to increase transparency and merit-based hiring in public service positions in order to stop corruption, bribery, and favoritism. The system has two applications, one for filling online job application forms and another for computer-based testing, created by Afghan experts. Candidates now have the freedom to apply and fill out forms from anywhere across Afghanistan, making it unnecessary for them to visit Kabul. In the past, powerful people manipulated the hiring process by hiring friends and relatives at the expense of more qualified applicants. The new process offers instant test results, discourages human intervention, and ensures equitable hiring in the long run, thereby preventing corruption (Sulaiman, 2019).

3.1 Strengthening transparency

The implementation of a computer-based testing system, and e-governance programs in Afghanistan brought down corruption, nepotism, and bribery at the level of civil service recruitment to a



Computer-based testing system. (Sulaiman, 2019).

considerable extent. These reforms, combined with digital delivery of services, anti-corruption legislations, and increased monitoring, enhanced the transparency of hiring and government

functioning. Afghanistan's position on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index also climbed, which indicated improvement in curbing corruption. Programs like national procurement digitization, payment of salaries via banks and mobile money, and competitive, merit-based recruitment have enhanced efficiency, minimized human intervention, and built public confidence in government institutions.

3.2 Anti-corruption initiative

The Afghan government has made notable efforts to counter corruption by enforcing significant reforms in the legal and justice system. Corrupt bureaucrats, ranging from low-level government officials to top ministers and generals, have been brought to court, breaking the tradition of immunity for powerful people. A system of monitoring is being created to monitor officials and confiscate ill-gotten property. Over 170,000 senior government officials, including those dealing with revenue collection, procurement, and the judiciary, have had their assets registered, leading to greater accountability and less corruption within government institutions (Sulaiman, 2019).

3.3 Strengthening Civil Service through Global Partnerships

The Afghanistan Civil Service Commission (ACSC), with the assistance of other international organizations and cooperating countries, undertook various short-term and long-term capacity development programs upgrade the skills and efficiency of civil servants. The programs were geared towards enhancing administrative, managerial, and technical capacities to improve public sector performance. Major contributors were international agencies like the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the World Bank, and the European Union, and bilateral assistance from nations like the United States, Germany, and Japan. Training workshops, professional workshops, and scholarships were organized to empower civil servants with contemporary governance best practices, ethical judgment, and computer literacy. Long-term activities involved leadership development, gender mainstreaming, and anti-corruption measures to ensure a transparent, merit-based, and accountable civil service. These joint efforts contributed significantly towards the development of institutional capacity, good governance, and improved service delivery within Afghanistan's government institutions.

Short term Programs:

The USAID-supported Afghanistan Civil Service Support (ACSS) program trained some 16,000 civil servants in Kabul and 26 provinces from February 2010 through March 2011. The training focused on five fundamental subjects, such as financial management and procurement, with the goal of enhancing immediate skills in these key areas (Office, 2011).

Long term programs:

Capacity Building for Results (CBR) Program: Initiated to assist ministries in hiring high-capacity personnel into key positions at salaries near market rates, the CBR program sought to minimize the use of external consultants and develop sustainable internal capacity. The program emphasized holistic reform plans, such as training for selected civil servants and assistance for continued public administration reforms (World Bank, Afghanistan Capacity Building for Results Facility (CBR) (P123845), 2016). Setting up of Training Institutions: Steps were taken to set up institutions addressing the training requirements of civil servants on every level. For example, the Afghan Civil Service Institute (ACSI) was established to offer ongoing professional development to guarantee a sustainable method of building capacity within the government institutions (UNDP, 2008).

4. Research Methodology

The research uses a qualitative, desk-based method to investigate [HRM in Afghanistan's Civil Service Commission (Republic Era): Challenges and Strategic Solutions], based on secondary data from Books, Academic Journals, Official Websites, Institutional Reports, and International Publications.

4.1 Data Collection

Literary references included Books, peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, accredited universities and credible organizational publications (WORLD BANK, SIGAR, USAID, UNAMA, UNDP & IARCSC), chosen for their credibility and applicability. Official statistics and databases are also sources of empirical evidence.

4.2 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed thematically for patterns, trends, and reforms in areas of the role of HRM to evaluate effectiveness by synthesizing multiple findings.

4.3 Research Validity and Shortcomings

Credible sources alone were employed to ensure validity. But being dependent on prior literature has some limitations as a result of potential biases. Further research can employ primary data like interviews to corroborate these findings, this qualitative research seeks to extend current knowledge and provide practical suggestions for policymakers, researchers, and practitioners (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

5. Findings

The study points out that HRM in Afghanistan's Civil Service Commission (ACSC) during the Republic period was plagued by major challenges arising from political interference, corruption, and institutional inefficiencies. Merit-based recruitment, which ought to have been the cornerstone of the civil service, was frequently compromised by nepotism and political favoritism, resulting in demotivated personnel and undermined professionalism. Gender disparity was also a significant concern, with women underrepresented in leadership positions because of socio-cultural impediments, lack of motivation, and structural hindrances. In addition, poor training and capacity development initiatives lowered the effectiveness of civil servants' response to changing administrative requirements. Low pay and security issues further discouraged competent professionals, especially in the countryside, aggravating gaps in delivery of services across regions.

However, the findings also indicate some strategic reforms taken by the government to overcome these issues. The founding of the Independent Administrative Reform and Public Service Commission (IARCSC) was pursued to facilitate greater transparency by using computerized, merit-based recruitment processes and e-governance. Training programs, funded by international donors including the World Bank, USAID, and UNDP, gave civil servants training on the management of finances, procurement, and anti-corruption measures. Efforts were also directed at expanding women's involvement through flexible work environments, equal remuneration, and anti-harassment guidelines. Nevertheless, in spite of these reforms, enduring HRM improvement needed to be more profoundly institutionalized, fortified accountability procedures, and steadfastly enforced in order to limit political interference and support long-term capacity building within Afghanistan's public service system.

6. Conclusion

Afghanistan's Civil Service Commission (ACSC) experienced severe HRM issues throughout the Republic period, like political interference, nepotism, corruption, gender disparity, and a shortage of capacity-building. Recruitment was not transparent, which eroded professionalism and confidence in public institutions, while socio-cultural obstacles inhibited women's career development and opportunities for leadership.

While the reforms of computerized recruitment, anti-corruption efforts, and foreign-based capacity-building programs brought partial improvement, they were not enough to eliminate deeply ingrained problems. It takes a holistic, long-term strategy of meritocracy, inclusiveness, accountability, and local capacity building to achieve sustained improvements. A transparent, professional, and robust public service will only be realized if foreign aid dependence is reduced and reforms are institutionalized for the reinforcement of Afghanistan's governance and public administration.

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