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Keywords: Good Governance, Public Service, Transparency, Accountability, Bureaucratic Corruption, Pakistan

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Good Governance in Pakistan's Public Service: Assessing Transparency, Accountability, and Bureaucratic Challenges



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Abstract

Good governance has become a focal point of good administration of the populace, and sustainable development, especially in developing nations, where institutional weaknesses tend to discredit the state's capacity. This paper analyses the concept and reality of good governance in the Pakistani public service with special reference to transparency, accountability, and bureaucratic corruption. Regardless of the numerous governance reforms and introduction of accountability mechanisms, Pakistan has been grappling with poor service delivery, poor institutional control, and deteriorating trust in the institutions of the state. Qualitative research design was used in the collection of data, which was conducted based on semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and secondary governance indicators. The results indicate that policy systems that promote good governance are formally present, but there is inconsistency in their execution because of political interventions, poor accountability systems, and the presence of bureaucratic cultures.

Keywords: *Good Governance, Public Service, Transparency, Accountability, Bureaucratic Corruption, Pakistan*

Introduction

Good governance has turned into a label in modern public administration influencing the discourse on the capacity of the state, the effectiveness of the institutions, and democratic legitimacy in the entire world. Good governance has been highlighted by international organizations like the United Nations, World Bank, and OECD as the key to sustainable development, poverty eradication, and quality services to the population (World Bank, 2022; UNDP, 2023). States that have governance structures based on transparency, accountability, participation, and rule of law are generally believed to be necessary in ensuring that the operations of the public institutions are not run in the interest of a select few political or bureaucratic elites.

In the developing world, implementation of good governance principles has been however an unequal and a contentious aspect. Reform initiatives are often rendered ineffective due to weak institutions, political instability, administrative corruption, and the lack of mechanisms of accountability (Fukuyama, 2018; Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock, 2017). Pakistan is a very interesting example in this respect. Although it has a vast bureaucratic system that was established during the colonial rule and several waves of bureaucratic reforms, the Pakistani public service is still struggling with the same issues of ineffectiveness, corruption, and mistrust.

The Pakistani public service is the key component of policy formulation and implementation, service delivery, and interaction of citizens and the state. However, it can also be faulted on the grounds of bureaucratic rigidity, political interferences, and lack of transparency in decision making (Khalid et al.,



[2023](#); Mazhar and Goraya, [2020](#)). Not only have these issues undermined the performance of institutions but they have also helped in reducing the trust that the people have on government institutions. Mechanisms of transparency and accountability, though formally entrenched in legal and administrative systems are weak in reality because of lax enforcement, biased accountability, and lack of institutional independence.

Over the past years, there has been an accelerated governance challenge in Pakistan as a result of economic pressures, crisis in governance and mounting citizen dissatisfaction. According to reports by Transparency International ([2023](#)), Pakistan has always ranked at the bottom of countries with corruption problems especially in the institutions of the public sector. Although efforts to reform e-governance, accountability bodies, and decentralization measures have been implemented, they have not had a significant and consistent effect on enhancing governance performance (Imran & Nordin, [2018](#); Fani and Naqvi, [2023](#)). This leaves very essential questions concerning the efficacy of the current governance systems and the institutional obstacles that inhibit the actual reform.

It is against this background that this paper aims to investigate the concept of good governance in the Pakistani context of the public sector through three correlated aspects namely transparency, accountability, and bureaucratic corruption. The paper takes the empirical and institutional approach to governance, in contrast with the normative view of governance, and examines how the principles of governance are put to work in institutions of the public sector. Using qualitative evidence and regional and international experience, the proposed study will identify the main gaps in governance and come up with a context specific model of enhancing the governance of the public services in Pakistan.

This study is relevant to the current literature on governance in three significant aspects. Firstly, it gives a revised empirical evaluation of the governance practice in the Pakistani public service based on recent scholarly and policy based evidence. Second, it combines institutional realities and the governance theory, which emphasizes the disconnect between the official regulations and the real life in the administration. Third, it provides practical policy recommendations that can enhance the transparency, accountability, and service delivery to help continue the process of the governance reform in Pakistan.

Literature Review

Good governance has been transformed to a set of normative ideal to a functional structure that is employed to lead the public sector reforms in both the developed and the developing states. In the modern literature, the concept of good governance is a multidimensional phenomenon such that it includes transparency, accountability, participation, effectiveness, equity, and the rule of law (UNDP, [2023](#); World Bank, [2022](#)). Instead of seeing the institutional design alone, more recent literature points out the importance of viewing the governance as a dynamic process that implies the interaction of state institutions, political actors, and citizens (Fukuyama, [2018](#)).

In institutional performance and legitimacy, good governance is closely related with the administration of the society. According to scholars, the quality of governance has a direct impact on policy implementation, delivery of services, and trust that citizens have in government institutions (Andrews et al., [2017](#); Tasleem, Muhammad, & Tasleem, [2023](#)). Transparency makes decisions transparent, accountability makes the leaders accountable, and participation empower democratic participation. All these principles lead to the improvement of the administrative efficiency and the prevention of discretionary use of power among bureaucratic systems.

Nonetheless, the literature on governance has recognized an increasing number of studies on the fact that formal subjugation of governance principles to governance does not necessarily reflect in effective practice. In many developing nations, there is a constant disconnect between governance norms and institutional reality which is commonly referred to as isomorphic mimicry meaning that reforms may be on paper but not existing in practice (Pritchett, Woolcock, and Andrews, [2013](#); Tasleem & Muhammad, [2025a](#), [2025b](#)). This observation applies especially to Pakistan whereby the process of governance reforms is often associated with lax implementation and partisan institutions.

Accountability and transparency are considered to be the pillars of good governance. Transparency will also help decrease information asymmetry because the government actions will be seen and comprehended

by citizens, and accountability will guarantee that the representatives of the population, in their turn, will be held responsible regarding the decisions they make and the performance they have (Heald, 2018). Based on empirical research, it is consistently established that the increased the level of transparency, the lower the level of corruption and better the results of service delivery (Cucciniello et al., 2017).

However, in the developing countries, transparency efforts are usually subject to structural and political limitations. Open data portals and freedom of information legislation is possible, but their efficiency is not supported because people do not know about it, bureaucracy does not want it, and enforcing it is difficult (Fox, 2015). The institutions of accountability such as audit organizations and anti-corruption entities are often susceptible to political influence, selective enforcement and lack of independence.

This has been experienced in Pakistan. Despite the formal promotion of transparency and accountability by the provisions of the constitution, the laws regarding the right to information, and accountable agencies, their application is still inconsistent (Khalid et al., 2023). Research shows that cherry-picking and politicization of oversight agencies undermine trust among the population and strengthen the feeling of injustice among the populace in the service (Mehmood et al., 2023).

One of the most recurrent challenges to good governance within the public administration is the bureaucratic corruption. Corruption misuses official position in favour of personal benefits, which distort the policy results, decrease the quality of the provided services, and destroy the legitimacy of the institution (Transparency International, 2023). The literature on governance presents several factors leading to corruption in bureaucracies which include low pay in the public sector, discretionary power, lack of effective monitoring mechanisms and political patronage.

In Pakistan, corruption is usually institutionalized in the administrative system, especially in service delivery areas of land administration, policing, and government procurement (Javaid, 2010; Mazhar & Goraya, 2020). Empirical evidence shows that complicated bureaucratic practices and high regulatory restrictions provide the possibility of rent-seeking behavior, whereas lax rules reinforce a culture of impunity.

Recent studies highlight that anti-corruption policies based on punitive actions only cannot be effective. Reforms of sustainable governance need institutional fortification, moral capacity-building, and involvements among citizens (Klitgaard, 2021; Tasleem, 2025). Such a change is consistent with the principles of governance that focus on prevention, transparency, and systemic reform, in addition to the reactive enforcement.

The existing literature on comparative governance provides rich information on the relationship between institutional design and political commitment and the output of governance. New Zealand and Singapore are examples of nations that have well-developed accountability systems, which are characterized by merit-based bureaucracies and stable political leadership representing the key factors that promote better performance of the public services (Quah, 2019; Gani and Scrimgeour, 2016). The case of the Right to Information Act of India and digital governance projects in Bangladesh would serve as examples of transparency reforms that can be used to empower citizens and enhance administrative responsiveness in South Asia.

Nevertheless, researchers warn against the unconditioned basis of transferring policies directly to the situations. Government reforms should be made in line with the local political, social, and institutional realities to work (Grindle, 2017). In the case of Pakistan, the comparative lessons imply that enhancing the institutional autonomy, lessening the political interference and increasing the citizen observation mechanisms are more important than simply enacting new governance laws.

Table 1
Core Dimensions of Good Governance in Public Services

| Governance Dimension | Key Features | Expected Outcomes |
|----------------------|---|--|
| Transparency | Open information, access to records, clear procedures | Reduced corruption, increased public trust |
| Accountability | Oversight bodies, audits, legal enforcement | Improved institutional integrity |
| Participation | Citizen engagement, consultative decision-making | Enhanced legitimacy and responsiveness |
| Rule of Law | Fair and impartial legal frameworks | Predictability and justice |
| Effectiveness | Efficient resource use, performance management | Improved service delivery |

Theories and Analytical Frameworks of Governance

The good governance in the public services are analyzed using several theoretical viewpoints. Principal-Agent Theory is among the most extended theories in explaining failure in governance in bureaucracies. This theory states that when the monitoring and accountability mechanisms are weak, public officials (agents) can act in the interests of the citizens (principals) and seek their own personal or political interests (Besley, 2020). Agency problems are compounded by information asymmetry and weak checks and balances especially in a setting such as Pakistan, where corruption and inefficiency thrive.

New Public Management (NPM) brought in market-based systems, measurement of performance and autonomy of management to enhance efficiency of the public sector. Although NPM reforms have improved the service delivery in certain developed economies, critics claim that they have had less impact in developing countries because of poor institutional capacity and politics (Hood, 2019; Andrews et al., 2017). In Pakistan, performance-based evaluations and other partial NPM principles have not generally led to lasting improvements in governance.

Recent literature focuses on collaborative and network forms of governance, which focus on the coordination between the government agencies, civil society, and the private sector (Ansell and Gash, 2018). These strategies emphasize consensus-making and collaboration as well as collective responsibility. According to scholars, this type of models could be better adapted to complex governance conditions such as that of Pakistan where centralized control has traditionally compromised inclusiveness and institutional trust

Methodology

In this study, qualitative research design is adopted to investigate the good governance practices in the Pakistani public service. The qualitative approach is particularly appropriate in research in the field of governance due to the possibility to deeply study the processes in the institution and the perceptions of the stakeholders as well as consider the dynamics of the situation that cannot be sufficiently framed by the quantitative indicators only (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Tasleem, Na'eim Ajis, & Abidin, 2020). Corruption, transparency, and accountability are governance matters deeply rooted in administrative culture and political systems; as such, their perception is the matter that needs to be interpreted and understood through the prism of contextuality. The study has an exploratory and explanatory design as it is not only describing the governance practices but it also explains the institutional and political processes that influence them. The combination of the stakeholder views and document analysis helps the study to gain the perspectives of the stakeholders as well as formal governance structures and their application in the Pakistani institutions of the public sector.

To be able to provide depth and triangulation, data were gathered by means of several qualitative methods. The primary data was collected using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, whereas the secondary data was based on the policy documents, governmental reports, and academic literature. Key informants were interviewed in semi-structured interviews and they have been identified through purposive sampling, as they are senior officials in the public, policy experts, academics and

members of civil society organizations dealing with governance and reform of the public sector. The interview guide aimed at transparency mechanisms, accountability structure, bureaucratic behavior and challenge of governance reform. This open ended format enabled the respondents to expound their experiences but kept them thematically consistent across interviews.

The interviews were supplemented by focus group discussions that were used to derive group perceptions of government and collective experiences of governance of both the users of the public services and the mid-level administrators. The focus groups were between six and ten people each and were informed by structured questions which referred to services provided, level of administrative responsiveness, cases of corruption and expectation of reforms. The discussed issues contributed to discovering the general trends and the differences in the perspectives of the stakeholders, which enhanced the analytical value of the research. Moreover, the review of documents was done extensively, to put the empirical findings into perspective. They were policy frameworks, governance reform reports, accountability laws and international governance assessments that were reviewed to determine the coverage of the formal rules to real practices in the Pakistani system of the public service.

Thematic analysis was applied to analyze the collected qualitative data due to its popularity as a method of investigating a recurring pattern and explaining the dynamics within an institution (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Transcripts of interviews and focus groups were coded in a systematic manner to bring out the important themes to do with transparency, accountability, corruption, political interference, and institutional capacity. Inductive coding strategy was used which enabled themes to emerge out of the data as opposed to predetermined themes. These themes were later put in broad analytical categories in accordance to the research objectives of the study. A few interviews were also undertaken using narrative analysis to get detailed descriptions of the governance experience, especially those that described institutional constraints and attempts to reform. Interview, focus group, and documentary triangulation increased the credibility and the validity of the findings, as it minimized bias and made sure that the conclusions were backed with more than one type of evidence.

The ethical principles were followed to the letter during the research. Each participant was briefed on the objective of the research, that their participation was voluntary and that they could leave at any point. Data collection was done in an informed consent and all data was secured under restricted access with all personal identifiers removed and transcripts in a safe place. The reduction of the possible risks to the participants was considered especially with respect to the public officials who could encounter possible professional consequences of sharing their critical views. The research was ethically sound because it followed the concepts of neutrality, respect, and cultural sensitivity.

A number of methodological strategies were adopted in order to improve reliability, validity, and general trustworthiness. Triangulation of the methods enhanced reliability through mutual validation of the results of various sources of data. Inter-coder reliability was ensured by the fact that more than one researcher was involved in coding, which minimized subjectivity. The analysis was empirical, ensuring reflexivity to recognize and lessen the possible researcher assumptions. Together, these help in the credibility, dependability and confirmability of the study hence the findings being a true representation of the realities in governance in the Pakistani public service.

Findings and Discussion

According to the empirical evidence of this work, it is clear that good governance practices in the Pakistani context of the government service are still lopsided and mostly symbolic, not substantive. Although there are formal systems of governance that focus on transparency, accountability, and anti-corruption, a weak institution, political interference, and bureaucratism be it in form of bureaucratic norms hamper its enforcement. These results are consistent with the recent governance literature, which emphasizes the disconnect between the de jure and de facto in the countries of the developing world (Andrews et al., 2017; Fukuyama, 2018).

One of the strongest themes that came out through interviews and focus group discussions was the low level of transparency in the decision making in the public sector. The majority of the respondents, including the people in office and those receiving services, found government processes a mystery especially in matters relating to procurement, assignments and transfers and approval of service delivery. Though rights to information such as through digital portals and laws on right to information exist on paper, the access to information is still limited because of bureaucratic obstruction and low digital literacy, as well as selective

disclosure. This result is in line with previous literature which indicates that transparency efforts in Pakistan tend to be more of a compliance instrument than one of citizen empowerment (Khalid et al., 2023).

There were also weak accountability mechanisms whose enforcement was not consistent. As pointed out by the respondents, accountability institutions often work at will of the political interest thus leading to selective accountability. Although the internal audits, parliamentary control, and anti-corruption bodies should ensure that the public officials are checked on a regular basis, the level of implementation is inconsistent and reactive. There was a lot of mention by many interviewees that accountability processes are likely to be directed at the lower-level officials, and senior bureaucrats and actors who have political connections usually escape attention. This supports the claim that accountability in the absence of institutional independence does not prevent misconduct (Mehmood et al., 2023).

The most severe nature of governance became bureaucratic corruption that influenced the performance of the services to the people. The respondents always responded that bribery, favouritism and rent seeking practices are inherent in administrative practices, especially in service delivery areas, including land administration, policing and licensing. Low wages, arbitrary power, and procedures were found to be among the major causes of corruption. These observations are supported by recent empirical evidence that shows that corruption in Pakistan is not an incidental occurrence, but a systemic phenomenon, which has been supported by loosely monitored and political patronage networks (Transparency International, 2023).

Notably, the research study has discovered that corruption has a direct negative effect on the quality of services, as well as, on the trust that people place in the government. Citizens claimed that there were delays and added unofficial expenses and disproportional treatment in availing of the services in the government. Institutional sides of governance, this undermines institutional legitimacy and deteriorates the social contract between the state and citizens. As is proposed in governance literature, continuing corruption changes public institutions into rent-seeking organizations and not service-providing organizations (Klitgaard, 2021).

Regardless of these difficulties, these findings also provide areas of governance enhancement, especially with digital governance efforts. Other programs like land record computerization and internet complaint systems were commonly perceived as good redistributing face-to-face contacts and arbitrary mistreatment. Their influence is, however, uneven since they cannot cover a large area, infrastructure discrepancies, and opposition of conservative bureaucratic players. This is an indication of comparative evidence that technology in itself cannot enhance governance without similar institutional and cultural changes (Heald, 2018).

In comparison, governance experience in adjacent nations (India and Bangladesh) was frequently cited by respondents citing that greater administrative responsiveness has been brought about by stronger mechanisms of citizen oversight, especially, the Right to Information framework in India. These comparisons indicate that the problems faced by the governance of Pakistan are not exclusive but are caused by the inability of the country to implement and the nature of the institutions that are politicized much more than lack of a reform agenda.

Table 2

Key Governance Challenges and Their Impacts

| Governance Issue | Institutional Cause | Impact on Public Service |
|-------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Limited transparency | Restricted information access | Reduced public trust |
| Weak accountability | Political interference | Impunity for misconduct |
| Bureaucratic corruption | Discretionary authority, low pay | Poor service delivery |
| Inefficient procedures | Excessive red tape | Delays and rent-seeking |
| Uneven reform impact | Capacity and resistance | Partial governance gains |

Conclusions and Recommendations

This research was aimed at investigating the good governance practice in the Pakistani public service in terms of transparency, accountability and bureaucratic corruption. The results indicate that the issue of governance in Pakistan is not in terms of the lack of rules, institutions, or even lack of law but in areas of poor implementation, politicization, and institutional autonomy. In spite of governance reforms, the

institutions of the public sector have remained faced by a cloud of decisions making, a form of selective accountability and deep rooted bureaucracy that erodes service delivery and trust by the citizens.

The review substantiates the fact that the transparency efforts in Pakistan are purely formal and decorative. Even though there are laws on right-to-information, digital portals and reporting mechanisms, their success is limited due to bureaucratic resistance, limited access to information and low awareness of the people. Thus, transparency is yet to become a useful instrument of citizen control or institutional education. This supports the point that weak governance has been triggered by lack of transparency and enforcement as well as cultural change. Correspondingly, accountability systems were observed to be poor and unevenly distributed. The accountability institutions are often driven by politics meaning that they selectively enforce them, thus compromising their effectiveness. A culture of impunity is encouraged by placing the responsibility of accountability on the lower-tier officials yet the senior bureaucrats and politically connected actors are not held accountable. The results herein point out that accountability mechanisms should be institutionally autonomous and procedurally coherent in order to be effective keepers of bad conduct.

The greatest obstacle of good governance in the Pakistani public service was found to be bureaucratic corruption. Corruption was discovered to be endemic and not accidental and was embedded in the administrative routine and strengthened through discretionary power, cumbersome processes and ineffective checking systems. Corruption does not just reduce the quality of service but also undermines the quality of service provided as well as the trust that citizens place in the government, compromising the credibility of institutional structures as well as the whole system of governance.

Depending on the findings, the study proposes a multi-dimensional governance reform plan that would be specific to the institutional context of Pakistan. First, the transparency reforms should shift towards legal compliance to sound disclosure and accessibility to citizens. The discretionary abuse can be mitigated and more efficient oversight of the government achieved by simplifying administration processes, intensifying digital governance programs and increasing enforcement of the right-to-know.

Second, the accountability institutions must be enhanced by legal frameworks to guarantee the independence of the institutions and security against political influence. The performance-based evaluation system, free audit and parliamentary oversight have to be consistent throughout the bureaucratic ranks. It must be corrective and preventive instead of selective and punitive accountability.

Third, the solution to bureaucratic corruption lies in systemic reform and not acts of actions. Incentives towards corrupt behavior can be alleviated by reducing discretionary powers, streamlining service delivery processes and enhancing the public sector compensation structures. There is need to have ethical training, integrity-building initiatives and accountability of leaders so that a culture of professionalism can be developed in the public service.

Fourth, governance mechanisms must embrace citizen participation using consultative policy process, grievance redressal systems and social accountability tools. The involvement of the civil society and users of services in the keeping of the accountability of the public services will help to increase bottom-up accountability and institutional responsiveness.

To conclude, it is possible to have good governance in the Pakistani public service but this needs political will, institutional change and cultural revolution. The paper has been added to the governance literature by offering a context-dependent and empirically based analysis of governance issues in Pakistan as well as giving policies suggestions that could be adopted to enhance transparency, accountability, and performance of the public services. The current analysis can be further extended in the future by comparative quantitative analysis or sectoral governance analysis to advise better on reforms.

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