

Merit-based Recruitment in Afghanistan; Achievements and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews and analyzes the achievements and challenges of the merit-based recruitment process in Afghanistan. The research is basically a library (qualitative) and historical research in nature that includes other reports published and researches conducted during the period 2006 to 2018. The conclusion is withdrawn from analyzing the findings of those research articles and reports. The findings of this research show that the efforts to improve the merit-based recruitment of personnel in the government especially of high-ranking posts were vigorous, and to some extent notable progress has been made over the last few years though there still exists dissatisfaction and criticism over the role and functioning of the Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission (IARCSC). Nearly 24 percent of the labour force is unemployed while there are still thousands of posts vacant in the government. Among the employed, only 13 percent of the working population of Afghanistan can be considered to have decent employment. The rest are either unemployed, underemployed (in need of more work), or vulnerably employed (low job security, poor working conditions etc.). To generate jobs, and employ people into the civil services the Afghan government needs to undertake comprehensive economic and administrative reforms. Political interventions especially in senior civil service appointments have made the merit-based recruitment's credibility under question. The politically destabilized environment and weak security conditions have paved the path for the practice of favoritism, nepotism and patronage system in recruitment. Hence the merit-based recruitment is lacking transparency and consistency. There are still incidences of recruitment through personal network ties. And thus the commission (IARCSC) responsible for the recruitment and monitoring of civil services is unable to achieve its objectives of merit-based appointments especially for the high-level positions. In addition, weak institutional capacity, and lack of authority in spending the funds provided by the international donors are other obstacles that have hampered the performance of the commission (IARCSC).

1. Introduction

The merit-based recruitment is a process that promotes the hiring of government employees on the basis of their knowledge, skills and abilities and not merely on the basis of their connections with political parties, ethnic groups or any other source of power. Open competition eliminates discrimination and bias on the basis of religion, ethnicity, language, gender and etc. Moreover, merit-based recruitment promotes healthy competition and encourages the new generation to equip themselves with profound knowledge and skills required in the industry. Merit selection ensures that selection is based only on a person's ability to perform the work. And merit selection aims to choose the best person for the job, resulting in a quality workforce (Australian National University, 2018).

Merit-based recruitment in the Public Administrative Reforms was considered to be the cornerstone in Afghanistan because it is only qualified personnel who can promote effectiveness and efficiency in the administration. Furthermore, merit-based recruitment can also reduce the gap between the government and the citizens.

The Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission (IARCSC) established in 2002 is the main body responsible for carrying out the merit-based recruitment for senior civil service positions and monitoring appointments of other positions in ministries and government independent agencies.

Experiences from other developing countries show that merit-based recruitment reforms are time and money consuming as well as problematic to implement. In the case of Afghanistan, despite the common problems that exist some extra challenges such as simultaneous and at a large scale restructuring of government machinery, creation of new laws, rules, regulations, procedures & ToRs (Terms of References) for various functions of various levels created chaos and confusion. Thus this was considered to be merely an ideal paper work whose implementation was out of the scope of the commission (IARCSC).

This focus of this paper is mainly on the achievements and challenges of the merit-based recruitment in Afghanistan.

2. Objectives of the research

The main objective of this paper is to review and analyze the achievements and challenges of merit-based recruitment process in Afghanistan.

3. Research Methodology

This is a library (Qualitative) and historical research in nature which relies on secondary data only. The secondary data involves desk research comprising of books, research articles, reports and newsletters published during the period 2006 to 2018. The conclusion is withdrawn from analyzing the findings of these research articles and reports.

4. Independent Administrative Reforms & Civil Service Commission (IARCSC)

The Independent Civil Service Commission established in May 2002, was a requirement of the Agreement signed during the Bonn Conference. The purpose of the establishment of Independent Civil Service Commission was to lead the government's process for Public Administration Reforms.

In June 2003 by two presidential decrees, its responsibilities were amended and extended and the Commission was renamed as the Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission (IARCSC). Today the Commission (IARCSC) comprises; Civil Service and Management Department, a Civil Service Secretariat, a Civil Service Institute, an Independent Appointments Board, an Independent Appeals Board, a Provincial Affairs Department, and a Program Design and Co-ordination Directorate.

In addition, the Commission (IARCSC) currently has seven regional offices, 34 provincial offices, and 27 training centers across the country. The main responsibility of the commission (IARCSC) includes building a functional, transparent, effective, accountable, responsible, apolitical, and impartial public administration in Afghanistan.

After the inauguration of the National Unity Government in 2014, based on Presidential Decree (Number 82 on 6th September 2015) and Cabinet Resolution (Number 21 on 5th September 2015) the Civil Service Law was amended. The new law shifted the recruitment of higher level servants (Grades 1 and 2) from the commission (IARCSC) to ministries and independent government agencies. With the same decree the commission (IARCSC) was conferred a monitoring and observatory role in the recruitment process. Subsequent to the enactment of the Decree Number 82, a proposal by the Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG) to the President resulted in Presidential Order (number 1629 issued on 9 November 2015) which tasked the commission (IARCSC) to carry out the recruitment process of deputy governors and district chiefs through its Civil Service Appointments Board (IARCSC, 2018).

Today the commission (IARCSC) as a legal body is responsible for the appointments of grades 1 and 2. And the ministries and other independent government agencies carry out the appointments of grade 3 and below. In addition, the commission (IARCSC) is responsible to monitor the

appointments process of grade 3 and below in the ministries and other independent government agencies.

5. Achievements

Despite many obstacles and challenges the commission (IARCSC) In the year 2012, established Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Committees in 22 ministries, implemented pay and grading systems in 11 ministries and agencies, trained over 2,000 civil servants, and held a national conference to promote the role of women in civil service institutions.

The Civil Service Institute a body of the commission (IARCSC) in the year 2013 trained over 5,000 Afghan civil servants in computer skills, English language proficiency, management, finance and accounting. Furthermore many Afghan Civil Service Personnel are sent to other countries for capacity building trainings. In the same year, 32 deputy governors and 17 provincial governors and in 2014, 213 district governors (more than half of the total number (407) of district governors) were appointed on the basis of merit (UN Report, 2014) by the commission (IARCSC).

Furthermore, various reforms such as E-recruitment, Human Resources Management Information System (HRMIS), Computer-based exam, Facilitating Center-provinces Communication through Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) and the creation of One Stop Shop are also undertaken by the commission (IARCSC) as instructed by the president of Afghanistan Mohammad Ashraf Ghani (IARCSC Annual Report, 2018). In addition, to achieve gender equality in the government, the recruitment process has been made flexible for the women. To women applicants a positive discrimination score of 5 was conferred in the second stage (the oral exam) of the recruitment process in the past. But this score is going to be awarded in the first stage (written exam) from now onwards. The new policy also reduced the requirement of working experience as one of the criteria for women which will encourage and make women applicants eligible for civil service positions.

The Appointment Board of the commission (IARCSC) initiated mass recruitment exam that includes procurement positions in government ministries and agencies, electronic tazkera (national identify card) authority, commercial attaché positions in the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, teachers and low-ranking civil servant positions in government ministries and agencies, among others. So far in the three mass recruitment exams over one million applications have been processed and assessed.

A total of 249,496 civil servants in senior level as well as lower levels in national and sub-national levels have been recruited by the Appointments Board of the commission (IARCSC).

After the Presidential Decree Number 81 that transferred the recruitment to the ministries, the Appointments Board of the commission (IARCSC) during the year 2017-2018 has overseen and monitored the following number of recruitments.

1. 110 senior level positions under the P&G (Pay & Grading) system
2. 264 CBR (Capacity-Building for Results) positions
3. 70 district chiefs and 3 deputy governors
4. 32,826 lower level positions (8851 national, 23,960 sub-national)
5. 15,826 teachers

6. Challenges

Beside lack of a strong political will for the merit-based recruitment, the commission (IARCSC) faces daunting challenges of dependency on donors' aid, weak security conditions, lack of transparency and individuals' interferences in the recruitment process and improving the structures of ministries and independent government agencies. There are a number of ministries and independent agencies whose functions overlap. The overlapping of these ministries and independent agencies functions has spoiled the relations among them and hampered the development of the country as a whole. Furthermore, low level of competency and commitment of civil servants is another major challenge.

Ministry of Health alone has 13,562 employees of whom 3,485 have Grade 12, 23 are illiterate but hold management positions (Tolo News, 2018). In addition, the interference among the directorates of the health ministry, between health ministry and international organizations, lack of monitoring of activities of hospitals and health services, and not addressing hospitals employees and patients' problems are some of the other challenges that need to be addressed in the Ministry of Health.

Administrative corruption, nepotism, favoritism and political interference in the recruitment process are still country-wide practiced. In addition, high-security threats, weak and aid-dependent economy and unstable political environment are some of the major challenges that make the commission (IARCSC) vulnerable and ineffective in the implementation of merit-based recruitment and administrative reforms.

Almost 24 per cent of the labour force is unemployed (Central Statistics Organization, 2018) while there are still thousands of posts vacant in the government. Among employed only 13 percent of the working population of Afghanistan can be considered to have decent employment. The rest are either unemployed, underemployed (in need of more work), or vulnerably employed (low job security, poor working conditions etc.), (Central Statistics Organization, 2018). Nearly more than two million workforces are jobless (Tolo News, 2018).

7. Analysis and Conclusion

The nearly 40 years of conflict has destroyed almost every foundation especially the human capital in Afghanistan. Today the inadequate presence of competent and committed personnel for the key positions in the public sector has slowed down the progress towards development and prosperity. Poor management, lack of transparency, accountability and ambiguous policies have hampered coordination among ministries, independent government agencies and the

international donors. As a result the aid provided by the international donors didn't make any significant change.

Besides, most of the international donors have allotted their pledged funds in unnecessary areas. And a very limited amount of the funds have been spent on the fundamental projects. Most of the programs and projects were designed to provide capacity-building trainings to the government employees. They paid handsomely per diems which led to spoiling employees' attitude and behavior. Moreover, most of these funds were spent through international NGOs, bypassing the Afghan government, in areas where donors' interests were met.

Administrative corruption, nepotism, favoritism and political interference in the recruitment process are still country-wide practiced. The legal framework for the merit-based recruitment is in place but the recruitment process, especially with high-ranking appointments, remains vulnerable to political interventions and bargains though the Civil Servants Law of 2008 introduced open competitive recruitment with posts required to be tied to their objectives and merit-based criteria (World Bank, 2018). In addition, high-security threats, weak and aid-dependent economy and unstable political environment are some of the major challenges that make the commission (IARCSC) vulnerable and ineffective in the implementation of merit-based recruitment and administrative reforms.

Alongside other problems and challenges, prior to the merit-based recruitment, no proper communication was made to publicize and spread awareness of the program to all the ministries and employees. Some ministries didn't even understand the importance and implication of merit-based recruitment program. The program was interpreted as to losing patronage and the power to control. Lacking skills, knowledge, and attitudes within the public sector, low pay, no promotion and demotion on the basis of performance were also some of the reasons for the slow progress.

The previous researches show that both the commission (IARCSC) and political leadership are more or less equally responsible for the slow progress of the merit-based recruitment in Afghanistan. Moreover, the donors were also responsible as they had their own rules and regulations for spending their money. They didn't give the commission (IARCSC) autonomy of using these funds according to its priorities, goals and objectives.

The country is undergoing a major political, economic, and social change which Afghanistan alone can't manage and indeed need worldwide attention and assistance. International donors' commitment for continuous financial and technical support is vital and what is more important is that individual donor has to subordinate their interests to the general interest of the commission (IARCSC) and reforms in Afghanistan.

The commission (IARCSC) also needs to recruit its own as well as other civil servants for different ministries and independent government agencies through open competition. The exercise of merit-based recruitment in reality which needs

a strong political will is crucial for the implementation of the overall public administration reforms. Moreover, the government needs to make sure national fiscal sustainability in order to free and empower the commission (IARCSC) in decision making and implementation. The creation of a strong centralized government that can fulfill its promises, deliver justice, boost economic growth and is accountable, responsive and transparent will ensure the success of merit-based recruitment in Afghanistan.

Furthermore, vigilant attention has to be paid to improve security. The recent emergence of ISIS besides the Taliban is another major threat to the Afghan government to which the government hasn't paid much attention. Additionally, Public Administration and Policy faculties recently established in the five major public universities of Afghanistan situated in Kabul the capital, Kandahar, Nangarhar, Herat and Mazar-e-Sharif provinces should be strengthened and given high priority. The graduates (professional administrators and policy-makers) from this discipline will better formulate, implement and evaluate developmental programs and projects of the government.

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