Opinion: Bangladesh's civil service is plagued by corruption—the country can't get back on its feet without major reform

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A quota system to reserve jobs in the civil service for specific groups, including descendants of war veterans, became the Achilles heel of

Bangladesh's authoritarian prime minister, Sheikh Hasina. Weeks of unrest, which started as student-led protests against the quotas, ultimately forced her to resign and flee the country.

Hasina's government caused considerable chaos over its 15 years in power, so the country's interim leaders have much work to do. But they must focus particular attention on the civil service, which [requires urgent reform](#).

The civil service recruitment examination process in Bangladesh has remained largely unchanged since British rule over the Indian subcontinent came to an end in 1947. However, it has been spoiled by corruption that starts even before recruitment begins.

Leaked exam papers are a common issue. In July, an [investigative report](#) by Bangladeshi news service Channel24 implicated officials from the body responsible for regulating civil service recruitment in these corrupt practices.

According to the report, several officials are alleged to have earned [huge amounts of money](#) by selling exam questions to eager candidates. In fact, cases have now been lodged against up to 90 people following a [police inquiry](#), including 31 who were specifically named. Some have since reportedly admitted to their involvement in this unethical racket.

There is substantial [evidence](#) of widespread corruption as civil servants [progress](#) through their careers. Bangladesh ranked 149 out of 180 countries in Transparency International's 2023 [Corruption Perceptions Index](#), a leading global indicator of public sector corruption.

Bribery is the most prevalent issue. Throughout Hasina's tenure, many civil servants [engaged in activities](#) such as sharing insider stock information and removing names from lists of those accused of

misappropriating funds. Her government kept penalties for corruption relaxed, and even changed the official rules to this effect.

In 2018, for example, the government introduced "reprimand" as a penalty for proven corruption. However, this has often been limited to a simple job transfer, a reduction in salary or a demotion. All equate to a slap on the wrist, given the punishment would be termination of contract in any other sector.

Tackling corruption

In our opinion, the interim government should adopt a zero-tolerance policy towards corruption and misconduct in public office, with stricter penalties enforced for those found guilty.

It should also actively promote the Right to Information Act of 2009. This Act, in theory, gives citizens the power to request information from public authorities.

Regularly providing information to the public, on subjects such as contracts and who is delivering them, could improve accountability within the civil service—if accompanied by a strict policy of no tolerance for public departments that ignore these citizen requests or provide misleading information.

Whistleblowers are a key line of defense against corruption and wrongdoing in public office all over the world. So, encouraging whistleblowing within civil departments in Bangladesh, perhaps through the introduction of rewards, should also be high on the interim government's priority list.

The Whistleblower Protection Act of 2011 offers those who report wrongdoing some legal protection from punishment and discrimination.

However, very little is known about its impact and ability to promote transparency, accountability and good governance in the public sector.

Another way to tackle corruption is to introduce digital tools such as e-procurement platforms. These platforms can reduce direct interactions between civil servants and suppliers. And evidence from Latin America suggests they minimize opportunities for bribery and corruption.

In 2023, Bangladesh established a public procurement authority which has now written to all government ministries, requesting that they implement the government's electronic procurement system in their respective divisions and departments. However, there is no fixed deadline on this.

Human resources (HR) departments will also play a crucial role in reforming the Bangladesh civil service. Over the past 15 years, many promotions in public office have been granted without merit, so succession plans must be properly maintained.

And HR departments should also ensure that regulations relating to the filing and disclosure of assets owned by government officers and employees are followed.

Following Hasina's resignation, the police force effectively collapsed. This left the country's capital, Dhaka, in a state of chaos with no law and order.

Students and paramilitary forces took on the responsibility of managing traffic, and patrolled the streets at night to protect small businesses from extortionists and looting.

Restoring law and order in Bangladesh will be a significant challenge for the interim government. But reforming the civil service must be a top

priority. The interim [government](#) needs to ensure that [civil servants](#) do not become mere instruments of the ruling party again.

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