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# AFRICA REFORM AGENDA: BUREAUCRATIC ORGANISATIONS AS PRIORITY IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

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To say that individual African countries' bureaucratic organisations are in abysmal decay is simply stating the obvious. African bureaucratic organisations are in total decay! In this short paper, we argue that in the ongoing public service reform and given the unwholesome socio-economic and political problems thereof, bureaucratic organisations should be given first consideration in view of the indispensable and pivotal position they occupy in socio-political and economic systems of any country. In particular, bureaucratic organisations are connecting threads between and among the three arms of government and other governmental agencies. This is perhaps why they have been part of the day-to-day vocabulary of public affairs. Bureaucratic organisations constitute a central theme in the study of administration and are dominant institutions in contemporary society. The trend towards bureaucratic organisations has greatly accelerated with increasing democratisation of nations and their commitment and drive toward modernisation and reform for redefining their economic fortunes in an age of globalisation. The enormous size of modern nations and the organisations within them is also seemingly responsible for the spread of bureaucratic organisations. The problems posed by complexities of governance and

administration of public and private enterprises led to bureaucratisation. As a result government in developing countries pay particular attention to the reform and/or establishment of bureaucratic organisations in the development of their nation's public administration. This study, therefore, attempts to examine whether or not the reform of bureaucratic organisations should be the first priority in the development of a nation's public administration. Theoretical and empirical illustrations are provided where necessary as evidence to any claims and arguments.

## Conceptual Issues: Public Administration and Bureaucratic Organisations

Administration literally is the coordination and execution of policy, while a system of administration is an arrangement of offices concerned with translating policy into directives to be executed at the frontline of an organisation. Public administration, generally speaking, is an instrument of administration of the affairs of the state. Public administration according to Rosenbloom (1986) is therefore the use of managerial, political, and legal theories and processes to fulfil legislative, executive and judicial governmental mandates for the provision of regulatory and service functions for the society, as a whole or for some segments of it thereof. This means there are different kinds and patterns of public organisations. According to Hughes (2003:17) the traditional model of public administration can be characterised as a formal control through political leadership, based on a strictly hierarchical model of bureaucracy, staffed by permanent, neutral and anonymous officials, motivated by the public interest, serving any governing party equally, and not contributing to policy but merely administering and executing those policies decided by the politicians. Public administration from these conceptualisations is seen as an activity conducted by bureaucratic organisations and the latter represent the nerve centre of governance and development.

A distinguishing feature of public administration is the political character of its services. Public

administration emphasises an organisation's culture and its mode of accountability. Efficiency in public administration is a question of the *appropriateness* of its culture to the *goals* it pursues and to particular *method(s)* of accountability, and of

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the effectiveness with which individuals are socialised into acceptance of its normative and realistic order (Beetham, 1996).

In any nation, public administration matters. There is a massive amount of activity involved in governing (Blau & Page, 1956) - for example, in translating laws and decrees made by politicians into action and in delivering public programmes to citizens. Legislatures and political executives may pass all the laws they wish, but unless those laws are administered and executed effectively by the public bureaucracy, little or nothing will actually happen. Without the administrators in the bureaucracy little would happen in government. That is why public administrators comprise the bulk of government employment and activities. The principal activity of public administration is implementing

laws and policies, but there are also a range of other important activities carried out in public organisations (Peters & Pierre, 2007). One is that bureaucracies make policy and, in essence, make law. The laws passed by legislatures are often general and require elaboration and implementation by bureaucrats (Kerwin, 1999; Denhardt & Denhardt 2003). The central role of bureaucratic organisations in policy making and implementation, and generally in governance, raise the critical question of whether its reform or even total re-establishment should be the first priority of any government in the development of public administration. In the next section, attempt is made to discuss bureaucratic organisation in light of its features and functions, *vis-à-vis* examining the extent to which its establishment may be the first priority of any government in the development of its public administration.

### **Bureaucracy and Bureaucratic Organisation**

Olsen (2007) describes bureaucracy as a specific way of organising public administration in democratic societies. He interprets its internal organisation as composite, organised according to competing principles and authority claims based upon formal position, rules and knowledge. An ideal type of bureaucracy according to Weber (1978) signifies a distinct organisational setting, the bureau or office: formalised, rule-bound hierarchical authority, standardisation, and specialisation with a clear functional division of labour and demarcation of jurisdiction. Weber (1947) constructed a model of

bureaucracy with the following main features:

- Each office has a well-defined sphere of competence with duties clearly marked off from those of other offices;
- Offices are ordered in a hierarchical pattern and each lower office is under the supervision and responsibility of a higher one;
- Authority is restricted to official duties; beyond these, subordinates are not subject to their superiors; there is a complete segregation of official activity from private life. In other words officials conduct their activities in a spirit of formalistic impersonality without hatred or passion, and of course without affection or enthusiasm;
- Officials hold office by appointment (rather than by election), and on the basis of a contractual relationship between themselves and the organisation;
- Employment in the bureaucratic organisations is based on technical qualifications and is protected against arbitrary dismissal. It constitutes a career. There is a system of promotions according to seniority or achievement, or both. These means that officials are selected on the basis of objective qualifications: these are acquired by training, established by examination, diplomas or both;
- Officials are entirely separated from the means of administration, hence they

cannot appropriate their positions;

- Activities are regulated by general, consistent, abstract rules; the generality of these rules require the categorisation of individual cases on the objective criteria;
- Official duties are conducted in a spirit of impersonality without hatred but also without affection;
- A bureaucracy frequently has a non-bureaucratic head. While bureaucrats follow rules, he sets them. While bureaucrats are appointed, he usually inherits his position, appropriates it or is elected to it (See also Gerth and Mills, 1958:196-8).

The above features suggest that the effectiveness of bureaucracy, its capacity to coordinate large-scale administrative tasks, and its efficiency are the expected results of the various features outlined (see also Blau, 1956; Sani, 1999).

In his examination, Weber (1978) sought to identify the most basic features common to modern systems of large-scale administration. Bureaucratic administration, according to Weber, is characterised by: hierarchy (each official has a clearly defined competence within a hierarchical division of labour and is answerable for its performance to a superior); continuity (the office constitutes a fulltime salaried occupation, with a career structure that offers the prospect of regular advancement); impersonality (work is conducted according to prescribed rules, without arbitrariness or favouritism, and a written record is

kept of each transaction); and expertise (officials are selected according to merit, are trained for their function, and control access to the knowledge stored in the files). Together these features constitute Weber's definitional model of bureaucracy - the criteria that a system of administration has to meet for it to be properly called bureaucratic. All organisations will be termed bureaucratic in so far they conform to the general *Weberian* criteria of hierarchical rule-governed administration, etc. (Beetham, 1996). Weber believes that the defining characteristics of bureaucracy were also necessary conditions for administrative or organisational efficiency and effectiveness.

In many jurisdictions bureaucratic organisations are usually authorised by constitutional rules (Bekke *et al.* 1996). Bureaucratic organisations include: civil service (civilian personnel working with the armed forces, armed forces personnel serving government in a civilian capacity, the judiciary, employees of local governments and public corporations, schools and university teachers, police and other agencies) (*ibid.*).

Weber's perspective to bureaucracy is universally acceptable. The claim is because it derives its concepts and measures from a central set of normative concerns, which is the exercise of political leadership in bureaucratic systems. And then, it allows us to consider the normative implications of the development of bureaucracy and its environment for the nature of democracy and public influence in

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political systems (Lane, 1987). However, this claim has been widely criticised. Critics' studies suggest that adherence to bureaucratic norms can hamper efficiency as much as it promotes it. This is because, the principles of bureaucratic organisation are more ambiguous than Weber realised, producing significant dysfunctional effects; consequently the more they become accentuated, the more rigorously the principles are applied. Each has its distinctively pathological manifestation. Adherence to rules can lead to inflexibility and red tape. Impersonality produces bureaucratic indifference and insensitivity. Hierarchy discourages individual responsibility and initiatives. Officialdom in general promotes officiousness (Beetham, 1996). Some argue that unless the members of the

organisation have the freedom and initiative to deal with operating problems as they come up, efficiency will suffer (Blau & Page, 1956). The bureaucratic orientation is usually conservative. Thompson (1969) stated that the bureaucratic orientation is politically minded. It is more concerned with internal distribution of power and status than with the accomplishment of the organisation's goals. It converts the organisation into a political system concerned with the distribution of extrinsic rewards. It also breeds time-servers rather than innovators. It encourages administrators to be risk-averse rather than risk-taking, and to waste scarce resources instead of using them efficiently. It produces inertia, lack of enterprise, red tape and mediocrity (Hughes, 2003).

The performance of bureaucratic organisations has in short been criticised as being too big, too powerful, hierarchical, rule-bound, indifferent to results, inefficient, lazy, incompetent, wasteful, inflexible, unaccountable, inhumane, and ill-suited to cope with the tasks, purposes, and circumstances of contemporary democracies, economic efficiency and individual freedom (Olsen, 2007). Bureaucracy seems to be known best for its failures. As a result there have also been several prescriptions for its replacement and reform. Bureaucratic organisations in developing countries provide demonstrable evidence of such failures. They are besieged by socio-political and economic problems. Even this paper is theoretical and represent only an attempt to justify prioritising bureaucratic organisation in Africa's reform agenda; however, it may not

be out of place to cite one commentator about the character of bureaucratic organisation. Thus Nwafor (1983:273) notes that:

*... At the place of work (in bureaucratic organisations) where people of diverse ethnic stocks work together, there are potential and even open evidence of unbridled nepotism and clannishness. Recruitment, promotion and other benefits that should be on individual merits are debased into channels for exhibiting ethnic chauvinism and bigotry. We prefer people from one village or clan who are relatively mediocres to competent people who happen to be different from us in terms of their ethnic origin.*

This is to say that over-blown size, ethnicity, incompetence, nepotism, regionalism, mediocrity, corruption, mass purge, lack of adequate resources for training and politicisation and so on have made bureaucratic organisations susceptible to all manner of management malpractice and unethical behaviours, with attendant demonstrable consequence of inefficiency and failure (see also Sani, 1999). Public administration has simply been personalised, ethnicised and/or regionalised. However, despite this undesirable and unviable organisational arrangement, democracies still give birth to bureaucracies and bureaucrats. They first of all aim to establish this large institutional order as their major instrument of social change to be able to govern properly. This paper shall examine

below the reason for this attitude notwithstanding.

### **Bureaucratic Organisations as Priority in the Development of Public Administration**

The relationship between bureaucratic organisations and the development of a nation's public administration is a crucial one. Theorists seem to agree that bureaucratic organisations and institutions might affect decision makers' strategies or how they want to achieve their goals (March & Olsen 1996; Peters, 1999). Bureaucracy has been said to inevitably accompany modern mass democracy (Gerth & Mills, 1970:24). A system of bureaucratic organisation in the modern state is viewed as inescapable. Meier and O'Toole (2006) see public administration as discipline and mainly view bureaucracy as a legitimate form of governance, imbued with values upholding due process, balancing competing political interests, protecting minority rights that are public spirited in their orientation.

Historically, many public servants and public organisations, operating within the traditional bureaucratic model, have played a vital role in fostering economic and social development and sustaining democratic institutions (Kernaghan *et al.* 2000). Economic and political development requires a complex network of institutional arrangements, which includes a high quality bureaucracy, as measured by adherence to meritocratic standards in promotion and recruitment and by effective means of detecting and

detering improper practices (Levi & Sherman, 1997).

In the sphere of government, a network of ministries has developed, such as agriculture, finance, health, education, commerce and industry, and so on. All of these are to some extent organised along the lines Weber described as the numerous 'parastatal' bodies (e.g. development corporations). These bureaucratic organisations have an important role primarily because they are the arm of government that intervene in the rural areas (Wallis, 1989; Du Gay, 2000). According to Wallis (1989), there are several government-led activities towards development in the rural areas which employ bureaucratic resources and are therefore comprehensively implemented through the bureaucratic

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organisations concerned. The respective bureaucratic capacity in place determines what will get done, when it will get done, and how well it will get done. The greater the capacity of the bureaucracy to implement complex economic and social development plans, the higher the development of that area. This, however, also applies to the development of the urban areas. This could be a reason for the establishment and reform of

bureaucratic organisation as the first priority in the development of a nation's public administration by African governments.

In administrative states, the bureaucracy functions provide a linkage between political bodies and the people. As administrative complexity deepens, civil servants gain more responsibility for interpreting and applying public policies, and their potential impact on the quality of citizens' lives increases (Anton, 1980; Dorgan, 1975). Bureaucracy has been argued to achieve objectives such as the desire to ensure fairness, justice and equality in the treatment of citizens - a crucial qualitative feature of modern government that we largely take for granted. And as Parker (1993:62) suggests, 'the bureaucratic revolution', in the sense of an office-ridden, form-ridden, regulation-ridden existence is largely inevitable as long as we want modern, democratic, positive government. As Weber (1968:1393) observes, 'in a modern state the actual ruler is necessarily and unavoidably the bureaucracy in the public administration.' Bureaucracies are seen as crucial determinants of the degree to which a country makes social and economic progress - or fails to do so. Their inevitability for development performance is evident in the role of bureaucracy during the period of rapid growth in East Asia. Bureaucracy is believed to be a key ingredient of the "miracle" (Hyden *et al.* 2003). This means that there are good examples and lessons to learn from the character and activities of East Asian countries' bureaucratic organisations.

At the same time, a substantial

literature argues that the weakness of bureaucracy in Africa helps explain the poor development performance of many countries on the continent (Hyden *et al.* 2003). Because institutions are the vehicles that carry policies, the existence of good institutions is a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for the implementation of good policies (Tanzi & Pellechio (1997). Public administration generates and implements prescriptions that define how the game has to be played: who is legitimate to participate, what are the acceptable agendas, which sanctions to apply in case of deviations, as well as the process by which changes should occur. The way people think, interpret facts, act and cope with conflicts are influenced and simplified by public administration. Therefore, whenever bureaucracies cannot properly implement these, the result is poor development performance which has characterised most developing, especially African, countries till date (Peters & Pierre, 2007).

Similarly, Bhagwan and Bhushan (2000) argue that the development of public administration is tantamount to the development of administrative machinery and process suited to the task of national development. Only through an effective administrative system can the goals of socio-economic development and nation-building be achieved. Similarly, the government, being the principal planner, financier, promoter and director of national development depends on bureaucracy for its functioning. Therefore, the role of bureaucracy as an agent of socio-economic change becomes important in development

process. Eisenstadt (1963) observes that bureaucracies in developing countries:

*... helped to maintain the framework of a unified polity as well as the capacity to absorb varied demands and to relate them effectively. Not only were they important instruments for unification and centralisation, but they enabled the rulers to implement continuous policy. In addition, they also served as important instruments for mobilisation of resources, taxes, business licenses and manpower and political support.*

Bureaucracy in public administration is very essential for the politicians in the legislature for planning a programme of social action and for its actual implementation. In a nation's public administration, public resource allocation would be impossible without the existence of bureaucracy. Budgetary provision of goods and services implies a structure of bureaucracy making and implementing decisions as to which goods and services are to be supplied and in what amounts to various groups of citizens-consumers. Similarly, it may be established that public resource redistribution depends on the existence of administrative personnel to handle transfer payment tasks in accordance with a publicly enacted system of rules (Lane, 1987). In the welfare state, the role of bureaucracies is extensive as a

considerable part of total resources is allocated over the budget (Dunleavy, 1985).

Among the many functions of a bureaucracy is the management of regulation-induced scarcity, by which we mean the allocation of property rights or government services through regulation (Levi and Sherman, 1997). Development requires an appropriate property-rights regulation that promotes productive use of resources, but regulation can only be effective to the extent that bureaucratic organisation can ensure compliance. For example, merit-based bureaucracy with appropriate property-right structure fosters economic growth in developing countries (Evans & Rauch 1999) and contributes to poverty reduction (Henderson *et al.* 2003).

Public services adopt hierarchical bureaucratic structures. Even efforts toward reforms and transformation of public sector management are driven primarily by the state bureaucracies in the nation. Public bureaucracy is a necessity in order to pursue and maintain the path of economic liberalisation - and thus perhaps the efforts to reform it through good governance in most developing African democracies. Public bureaucracy is required for governments to successfully ride the rising tide of borderless economic activities (McLaughlin *et al.* 2002) in an age of hyper globalisation.

The above-mentioned points might justify why African governments take the reform of bureaucratic organisations as their first priority in the development of their nations' public administration. Kettl (2006), however, concludes

that despite the various criticisms, bureaucratic organisation has endured due to its functional necessity and perhaps “because society has yet to discover anything that works better in coordinating complex action”.

On the contrary, Meier and O’Toole (2006:347) have stated that whereas bureaucracy is indeed

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capable of responding effectively to elements in the democratic public, bureaucracies at times pursue their own values contrary to the interests of citizens and political leaders. For

this reason, the importance of other elements of public administration has become a matter of debate among academic and policy communities. This is because the features of a bureaucracy necessary to promote compliance and development are related to institutional design. Meier, (1997) emphasised that bureaucratic organisations perform best and can contribute the most to the policy-making process when: there are clear goals by electoral institutions; they are allocated adequate resources; and they are given the autonomy to apply their expertise to problems. Coupled with their interaction and the proper functioning of other notable institutions, they could contribute to outstanding progress in the development of nations. The challenge to all Africans and indeed other developing countries is to pursue their public service reforms in accordance with the dictates of contemporary democratic values and norms, and taking into account their individual countries socio-economic and political contextual realities.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The role of bureaucracy is critical to all areas of the development process and is portrayed as more favourable in a well-functioning democracy. Although it is a necessity in the development of a nation’s public

administration, it can also be a danger to it. Bureaucracy does not solve any problems of itself because bureaucratic organisation is not a panacea and the answer to all challenges of public administration. Followed by the dramatically changing environment within which public administrators work, bureaucracies seem inadequate to meet the new and anticipated challenges facing the public sector. Public administrations presently face different challenges, command different resources to undertake all kinds of tasks under various circumstances. Bureaucratic organisation, therefore, is just part of the overlapping or supplementary forms of administration and government. The solution, however, is not abandoning the reform of bureaucratic organisations, but rather utilising them contingently and complementing them with other work arrangements, more in tune with social, economic and political realities. Thus, a bureaucratic organisation without taking account of other aspects of public administration is insufficient. Bureaucratic organisations are only an instrument; their interaction with other elements of public administration is to record success in a nation’s public administration and contribute to general development. ■

**Notes:**

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