



Policy Brief

THE POLITICAL DYNAMICS OF BUREAUCRATIC TURNOVER

Abiha Zahra

(CGP # 07-394)

(This document is unedited author's version submitted to RASTA)

INTRODUCTION

Our research in the project on “The Political Dynamics of Bureaucratic Turnover”, funded by RASTA-PIDE explores one of the key issues in the domain of civil service reforms, which pertains to bureaucratic turnover, particularly in relation to political regime change. This study has found a symbiotic relationship between political and administrative careers, starkly prevalent at senior positions within the bureaucracy. Evidence suggests that political regime changes disrupt administrative continuity and therefore, undermine institutional stability and administrative performance. The brief presents empirical findings of my research while uncovering the political dynamics of bureaucratic turnover in Pakistan and outlines patterns of appointments and transfers which shape the state’s administrative efficiency and governance outcomes.

DATA AND METHODS

To study the dynamics of bureaucratic turnover empirically, we have gathered and organized a time-series dataset with information on Punjab and Sindh, and their respective capitals - Lahore and Karachi. This dataset includes information on three senior positions from the Pakistan Administrative Service (PAS) and the Police Service of Pakistan (PSP).. The data for all the six positions was gathered through contacts in the police and administrative offices combined with web scraping and websites. The data for the position of Commissioners and Inspector General Police was accessible online on the respective websites while for all other positions it was almost impossible to gather data without contacts and visits to the offices. The data was taken from the incumbency boards in the relevant offices and was coded against the political turn-over for the quantitative analysis. The exact position wise classification of the data can be found in table 1.

Table1: Overview of Six Positions in Numbers

| Cadre/Leadership | Total |
|-----------------------------|--------------|
| PAS | 810 |
| Commissioner | 38 |
| Deputy Commissioner (DC) | 115 |
| Assistant Commissioner (AC) | 657* |



Policy Brief

| | |
|---------------------------------------|--------------|
| PSP | 242** |
| Inspector General of Police (IGP) | 41 |
| Deputy Inspector General (DIG) | 86 |
| Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP) | 115 |

*Notes: *: This total takes into account appointees with missing data as well. **: The total figure for PSP is understated due to the unavailability of information on 4 districts of Karachi. The missing information was also unavailable in official (government) records.*

Source: Author's compilations.

The dataset pertains to all election cycles starting from the first caretaker setup in 2007 to the most recent elected political government in 2024 - the details are encapsulated in table 2. The total time period for the study spans between 2007 to 2025.

Table.2 Tenure of Political and Caretaker Governments (2007-2025)

| Government Name | Government Label | Tenure |
|---|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Caretaker Government under Mian Muhammad Soomro | Caretaker* Government 1 (CT1) | 16 November 2007 - 25 March 2008 |
| Pakistan People's Party (PPP) | Political** Government 1 (PG1) | 25 March 2008 - 24 March 2013 |
| Caretaker Government under Justice (retired) Mir Hazar Khan Khoso | Caretaker Government 2 (CT2) | 25 March 2013 - 4 June 2013 |
| Pakistan Muslim League - Nawaz (PML-N) | Political Government 2 (PG2) | 5 June 2013 - 31 May 2018 |
| Caretaker Government under Justice (retired) Nasir-ul-Mulk | Caretaker Government 3 (CT3) | 1 June 2018 - 18 August 2018 |
| Pakistan Tehreek e Insaf (PTI) | Political Government 3 (PG3) | 18 August 2018 - 10 April 2022 |
| Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) | Political Government 4 (PG4)*** | 11 April 2022 - 14 August 2023 |
| Caretaker Government under Anwaar ul Haq Kakar | Caretaker Government 4 (CT4) | 17 August 2023 - 4 March 2024 |
| Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) | Political Government 5 (PG5) | 4 March 2024 - Present |

*Notes: *: Represented by the orange line in the figures. **: Represented by the green line in the figures. ***: This political government was not preceded by a caretaker setup as political government 3 was ousted as a result of a 'vote of no-confidence' and consequently replaced directly by political government 4.*

Source: Author's compilations.

This study, based on 2 cities which are also provincial capitals - Lahore, Punjab and Karachi, Sindh having different administrative structure, gives interesting insights on politicization. We recognize that different administrative structures will make the comparison difficult, that is why we have also looked individually at positions in the two provinces. It could be seen as a beginning of empirical research on turnover and cross province comparisons.

Time series analysis techniques were applied to identify patterns and event-based (electoral cycles) variations. Political transition periods were coded as discrete events to temporally map turnovers against government transitions, which enabled clear comparisons across regimes. This approach helped us identify periods of stability (or lack of) over the long term whilst capturing acceleration patterns of volatility thus establishing correlations with political cycles.



Policy Brief

The empirical analysis under the project was supplemented by qualitative data to contextualize the claims of tenure data. Qualitative data was collected through in-depth interviews (around 16) with (retired) or senior bureaucrats who have served at these positions. Insights were combined with expert discussions (academics) as well as a policy seminar involving academics, policy practitioners and political representatives.

FINDINGS

The cross cadre comparison reveals a more heterogeneous tenure distribution for PAS than PSP. Tenure patterns for PSP demonstrate uniformity in terms of volatility (political exposure) and instability. Table 3 presents a statistical overview of all positions in both cadre.

Table 3: Cadre (PAS & PSP) and Geographical Comparison (Summary Statistics)

| Cadre | Position | City Province | Median Tenure (Months) | Mean Tenure (Months) | Turnover (%) |
|-------|--------------|----------------|------------------------|----------------------|--------------|
| PAS | Commissioner | Lahore, Punjab | 7.4 | 9.6 | 86.0 |
| | | Karachi, Sindh | 7.4 | 12.2 | 76.0 |
| | DC | Lahore, Punjab | 10.8 | 10.9 | 84.0 |
| | | Karachi, Sindh | 7.0 | 10.6 | 78.0 |
| | AC | Lahore, Punjab | 7.2 | 8.0 | 80.4 |
| | | Karachi, Sindh | 7.2 | 8.4 | 79.6 |
| PSP | IGP | Lahore, Punjab | 10.0 | 9.1 | 87.0 |
| | | Karachi, Sindh | 10.0 | 13.3 | 94.0 |
| | DIG | Lahore, Punjab | 8.2 | 8.9 | 86.0 |
| | | Karachi, Sindh | 7.1 | 8.5 | 82.0 |
| | SSP | Lahore, Punjab | 6.2 | 8.5 | 76.0 |
| | | Karachi, Sindh | 6.0 | 7.6 | 83.0 |

Source: Author's compilations.

The table 3 quantifies the institutional crisis prevalent in both cadres, especially at senior-most positions. Across the ranks, median tenures are very low, ranging between 6-10 months, which are far below the international best practice. This highlights systemic dysfunctionality and underscores the urgent need for minimum tenure legislation.

The following key points were a highlight based on our empirical analysis.

- ★ In both PAS and PSP, no position recorded a cross-regime survival rate above 24% and turnover rate was more than 76% for all of them. The data showed a range from extreme to moderate instability.
- ★ PAS vs PSP– PAS instability was uniform across all three ranks (Commissioner, Deputy Commissioner and Assistant Commissioner); no tier is shielded. In PSP, however, instability is rank-sensitivity. The Inspector General Police (IGP) and Deputy Inspector General (DIG)



Policy Brief

face extreme political exposure—leading to lower rates of cross-regime survival. Senior Superintendent Police (SSP) showed comparative shelter from political interference, more visible in Punjab.

- ★ Lahore (Punjab) vs Karachi (Sindh)—Our data showed that geographical differences are real but show heterogeneity across positions. The differences were evident at Commissioner level but almost absent at DC and AC level. Commissioner Karachi had an advantage in terms of stability. In the Police service, Sindh showed higher turnover trends with IGP positions as the most politically vulnerable.
- ★ Caretaker Regimes—The highest political exposure is concentrated at the caretaker transitions. Smaller periods marked with turnover and new appointments could also be attributed to incoming and outgoing political governments.
- ★ Political Governments— Among the three major political parties (PPP, PMLN and PTI) and PDM (a coalition government); political government 2 (2013-2018) with PMLN at federation and Punjab and PPP in Sindh, is the only political period that was comparatively near stable. PTI-PG3 produced the highest turnover in the time period under study while instability did not reverse in PG4 led by PDM.

The ability to determine appointment patterns bolster the transactional nature of appointments where political principals are bargaining for loyalty or ‘obliged service’ from bureaucratic agents, who in turn seek to bargain with politicians for their own varied incentives. Understand it as a utility function for bureaucrats with a bargain framework. Bureaucracy has longevity and politicians get to achieve their agenda through them. Political agenda completion depends on who to post and where. It is important to note that where are the officers going after turnover happens, what are their next steps, are they more lucrative?

Bureaucracy has now metamorphosed into a networked system where appointment, and therefore governance outcomes, are determined by alliances between political and bureaucratic actors. In this regard, local politicians play a critical role as they provide feedback loops and electoral linkages (from grassroots) to senior political principals and thus exert authority over appointments, especially at lower levels of administration. This is often justified as one reason why turnovers are relatively infrequent at lower positions (as compared to senior positions) of the bureaucracy - also evidenced by this research’s quantitative analysis. For instance, politicians are more likely to reach the senior most officials for getting their tasks done, leading to frequent transfers in case of misalignment. This further underscores the argument that stability does not indicate depoliticization.

Our analysis further showed that some political eras had greater stability than others, prominently in regions that are their strongholds. Insights from the interviews confirm that this is because these political parties have deep institutional memory and they already know which officers fit their political and networked expectations. This implies that stability of tenures is politically engineered.



Policy Brief

The opposite is true for new political players, as evidenced by turnover patterns for Pakistan Tehreek e Insaf (PTI).

CONCLUSIONS

The need for contextualizing the political dynamics of bureaucratic turnover appeared crucial since numbers do not explain all the underlying factors at play. Administrative structures and stability is shaped by 'politics' as a phenomenon which is beyond individual political actors or parties. Re-configuration of political parties, nested interests of other strong stake-holders, institutional memory of political and bureaucratic actors complicate the bureaucratic turnover which might not appear in the numerical data. Political dynamics of bureaucratic turnover makes us re-think politicization as a process that is not specific to political actors. This does increase the complexities in reforming the bureaucratic recruitment, transfer and appointments. Consequently, this reifies structural weaknesses and institutional ambiguity within the governance system by rewarding discretionary powers, patronage networks as well as rent-seeking behaviors.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Tenure Policy Reforms—Minimum 3 years:** There is a need to legally consolidate recruitment policies of civil servants, particularly, by introducing minimum tenure guarantees for at least key bureaucratic positions.
- 2. Restrict Posting Powers of Caretaker setups by Statute:** Each caretaker regime represented prominent bursts in our data which showed there was a spike in senior appointments in both Sindh and Punjab. This could be because of the outgoing government, incoming caretaker setup or incoming political government, but this consistent spike in short windows at senior level needs to be addressed.
- 3. Treat the IGP Sindh as a Priority Standalone Case for Reform:** IGP Sindh had the lowest cross-regime survival and 94% turnover over the period under review. This is categorically different from other positions studied and the severity of the problem, calls for urgent standalone reforms to examine the position and ensure legislative protection with a fixed term.
- 4. Investigate the Political Government 2 (2013-2018) Stability Condition for broader administrative reforms:** In comparative analysis, political government (PG 2) from 2013-2018 produced a sustained continuity. We recommend that the legal, administrative and political conditions should be studied to understand if the stability was purely political or there were other factors in play to design informed reforms.



Policy Brief

5. Automate and train systems of appointments and transfers with Artificial Intelligence (AI). AI can be leveraged to build integrated human resource (HR) data systems, and trained systems can flag any transfers made before the minimum tenure.

6. Open administrative processes to the public by standardizing data and making it available: There should be mandatory public reporting of all senior appointments, promotions, transfers and removals.