

Quest for Apolitical Civil Service in Ethiopia: Regimes in Spotlight

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Abstract

This study examines paths of the Ethiopian civil service structure since its emergence to the present. The analyses cover significant changes that took place from the time by when Emperor Menelik II established the first ever Council of Ministers in 1908. Historical research design is employed to make a meaningful sense of the past, informing the present and casting insight into the future. Exploring into practices of different regimes in promoting political neutrality of the civil service is the central theme of this inquiry. Despite legislative provisions that claim for neutrality, political partisanship prevails all across the regimes of the past and the present alike. It is common among politicians to promise de-politicization of the civil service system particularly during their election campaigns. Afterwards, regimes usually drag the civil service system into partisanship than neutrality in an attempt to safeguarding their ideological orientation and power consolidation. The study employs a historical method of inquiry to navigate through developments taking place in the past. Results reveal that all subsequent governments of Ethiopia fall short of institutionalizing apolitical system of the public service and work towards encroaching meritocratic space, of course with varying extent. Adoption of ethnic politics, by and large, exacerbates partisanship all across the system. In effect, the system is characterized by growing loss of public trust, inefficiency, poor quality service delivery, ineffective redress mechanisms, corruption, and breaching the essence of accountability.

Keywords

Civil service reform, service delivery, political neutrality, governance, organizational efficiency

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Introduction: The Changing Face of Public Service

Present day public administration evolved through and benefited from different theories that shaped public administration practices all along its way to this point in time. The central focus of the theories lies on employees, management, organizational structure, standard operational system or a combination of these important factors. Earlier thinkers and management theorists such as Frederick Winslow Tylor (Principles of Scientific Management), Max Weber (Theory of Bureaucracy), Henri Fayol (14 Principles of Management) & Peter Drucker (Management Principles) are considered to be foundations for contemporary development in management

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thoughts and practices. The fact that human society is always in a dynamic state, its institutions should also keep pace with the changing circumstances in order to prove their relevance in the face of the emerging needs.

The shift from Weberian Bureaucracy to the New Public Management sphere denotes public dissatisfaction with the *status quo*. The essence of Weberian Bureaucracy, with all the criticism attached to it, is to ensure efficiency, predictability, equality and meritocracy in public service delivery. The six principles of bureaucracy as coined by Max Weber are 1) defining organizational hierarchy, 2) setting out division of labor, 3) laws and guidelines, 4) decisions free of personal prejudice, 5) meritocracy, and 6) professional orientation (Indian Institute of Commerce, 2026). Though these principles still characterize the way of public organizations function, advances in the 21st century demand more to what is there. New public management has emerged as a response to the once upon dominant theory of bureaucracy.

The new public management theory as a successor of Weberian bureaucracy gained attention as a change initiative with its definition of public service. Janet and Denhardt (2007: xi) underscore that upholding democratic values, citizenship, and serving the public interest as a *sine qua none* for the field of public administration. These authors argue to the extent that “civil servants deliver democracy” while assuming their position in public organization than mere provision of service. Thus, civil servants are there to create value for citizens, not customers.

Kapucu (2006: 886) conceives new public management as “deliberate policies and actions to alter organizational structures, process, and behavior” towards public sector efficiency and effectiveness. As for Kapucu (*ibid*) the new public management is taken as a substantial shift towards a post Weberian era, a dominant management theory until 1960s. For Lane (2000:3) new public management is a “paradigm change in how the public sector is to be governed”. The public sector is known for rendering service to citizens. Its governance means the way through which public services made accessible, equitable, predictable, responsive and timely. Continuous improvement of service quality, effectiveness and efficiency is the underlying purpose of existence for public organizations.

This nature of the civil service sector necessitates it to be apolitical and impartial. This study, therefore, explores how the different regimes in Ethiopia did and do abide by the principle of bureaucratic neutrality. The paper tries to compare political systems of the country from the inception of modern bureaucracy in Ethiopia until the present. The work is intended to bridge the knowledge gap regarding civil service neutrality in the course of Ethiopian political history and governance practices.

Background: The Ethiopian Past at a Glance

Ethiopia is known to be one of the ancient civilizations in history. The country’s self-rule and government practices went back to even earlier than period of the birth of Christ (BC) if not “since time immemorial” as asserted by (Andargachew,1990:18). Plausibility of Ethiopian ancient history is also evidenced through the finding of earliest human fossils of Lucy (*Australopithecus afarensis*) of 3.2 million year-old and Ardi (*Ardipithecus ramidus*) of 4.4

million years of age (Wren, 2009; and Pattison, 2021). If management is there in shaping human activities, by analogy, Ethiopian can be considered not only the origin of human kind but also a source management practices. **Even for that matter, Yotor** (Jethro), Moses' father-in-law, who advised Moses to establish a hierarchical system of judges (Exodus 18: 13-26), was an Ethiopian. His advice was all about management hierarchy and effective span of control.

Indisputably, Ethiopian state has been globally recognized or even earlier than since the first century AD due to the Aksumite civilization (Ofcansky and Berry, 1993). In ancient times, governments design their own means to reach out their subjects both to impose a levy on land and trade along with rendering law enforcement and judicial services.

Despite long history of government in Ethiopia, modern civil service of the country traces its foundation to the mid-19th century attempt by Emperor Tewodros II. Formerly known as Dejazmach Kassa Hailu of Quara, later opted a crown name of Emperor Tewodros II. History recognizes Tewodros due to his reform and restoration of central authority which was ravaged by era of princes² that lasted from 1769 – 1855 (Abir 1968; Bantalem 2015). Guided by his vision of having a unified and strong country, Tewodros II had tried to introduce several reforms in military; education; land tenure; slavery abolition; trade and transport facilitation.

Military reforms taken by Tewodros II mainly evidenced through instilling military discipline among members of his army and unrelenting drive to have power over arms. Tewodros founded the first vocational school in Gafat which is also identified as the first industrial village in the country (Tesfaye 2017) to enable the youth to acquire literacy and some technical skills. His strong pursuit for knowledge was expressed through sending a batch of Ethiopians to England and France to study useful trade. These measures were reflections of his keen interest in changing the course of Ethiopian education. Tewodros' nationalization of the land in excess of the clergy's requirements and redistribution among tribute paying peasants makes him a pioneer of land reform. He took steps into declaration to abolish slavery; facilitation of trade; transportation (road construction initiatives and fleet on Lake Tana), (Fantahun 2016; Bahru 2002; Tadese, Pankhurst, and Shiferaw 1990). However, the King's path to political and socio-cultural reforms were greeted with stiff resistance mainly from the clergy and his political rivals alike.

In a modern history of Ethiopia, the political power re-centralization and territorial reintegration projects have begun during the reign of Emperor Tewodros II (1855 - 1868). Similar measures were pursued by Emperor Yohannes IV who ruled Ethiopia from 1872 - 1889³. The reign of Emperor Yohannes IV was mainly characterized by ensuring territorial integrity of Ethiopia albeit internal frictions. In effect, he managed to reintegrate the Red Sea coast port towns of Massawa and Arkiko. These coastal towns had been "switching their allegiances between the Ethiopian kings and the rulers of the Ottoman and Egyptian empires since the 16th

² A period before the rise of Tewodros (Kassa Hailu) to power is known as Zemene Mesafint (Age of Princes/local lords) where the entire country was divided into the rule of local lords than a central government.

³ The period between 1868 –1872 that marks the two events of death of Tewodros and coronation of Yohannes was duration of conflict between self-proclaimed rule of Tekle Giorgis of Lasta and Mircha Kassa of Tigray (later Emperor Yohannes IV).

century” (Andargachew, 1990: 21). Emperor Yohannes fought his last battle at a place called Metema with the Mahdist forces and martyred in 1889, the time that led to Menelik’s succession.

Research Design and Methods

This study employs historical research method. The design is set to be instrumental to carry out an in-depth analysis of the past, drawing some lessons to the present and sharing insights for the future. The method helps to visualize a contextual link between the past and the present for it scans through the situation about a phenomenon of research interest across different periods. Historical method involves a synthesis of data through the lens of time in order to make meaning of the past and carry the lesson to the current. The central point of the paper is to investigate the how of civil service neutrality during different regimes in Ethiopia along with the country’s adoption of modern public administration system. Owing to navigating through development of modern bureaucracy to the Ethiopian context, the journey is long enough in terms of time (1908 – to date). Issues evolving since then need to be examined using historical method that can give us a vivid portrayal of the past with implication to the present.

Historical research as a family of qualitative study has defined steps to follow in order to ensure quality and reliability of findings. The process of investigation and data interpretation involves mutually reinforcing and iterative procedures. The steps put forward in the process of the inquiry are the following.

- Step 1:** Identifying a topic amenability to historical method
- Step 2:** Conducting a background literature review
- Step 3:** Refining the research idea on the basis of the review
- Step 4:** Ascertaining appropriateness of the method to the topic of the research interest
- Step 5:** Identifying and locating primary and secondary data sources
- Step 6:** Evaluating the authenticity and accuracy of source materials
- Step 7:** Conducting data analysis and developing a narrative exposition of the findings

Box 1: The steps put forward in the process of the inquiry

The study mainly relies on secondary sources of data such as official reports and studies conducted regarding the civil service sector of the country. Primary sources such as the 1955 Revised Constitution of Imperial Ethiopia, the 1987 Constitution of People’s Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and the 1995 Constitution of Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia were consulted for similarities and differences with regard to civil service loyalty citizens or otherwise. The 2025 Civil Servants Proclamation is also examined for its way of handling the issue of the civil service neutrality.

Adoption of Modern Civil Service during the Reign of Emperor Menelik II

The victory of Adwa at the dawn of the twentieth century marked a new chapter in the world history. The unprecedented triumph over the European colonial power at Adwa energized anti-colonial resistance movements in Africa and across the Caribbean. Following the historic victory of Adwa, Emperor Menelik took initiative towards modernizing Ethiopia. Establishing the first Council of Ministers in January 1900 EC4 (1908 GC) (Bekele and Vanderlinden (n.d); 413; Vogel 2005; and MoCS, 2012:1) can be taken as a stepping stone for modern public administration in the country. The Emperor's decision was made in view of providing public services in an organized and contemporary manner.

The drive for cabinet formation emerged as a way of “ensuring orderly and efficient arrangements for the workings of government” (Getachew and Common, 2006: 5). Since this period was known for worldwide application of the Weberian theory of bureaucracy, the initiative to design public services in an organized and professional manner seems to originate from the then dominant practice of Max Weber's pillars of a bureaucratic organization. The six pillars are outlined as Hierarchical Structure of Authority; Division of Labor and Specialization; Formalized Rules and Standard Operating Procedures; Impersonality and Impartiality; Meritocracy and Career Orientation; and Managerial Dedication and Professionalism (Nickerson, 2026; and Sager and Rosser, 2021).

The list of Ministerial offices and their respective officeholders were identified as follows (Bekele and Vanderlinden, 1965: 413).

Table 1: Ministerial Offices and their Respective Officeholders

Ministry	Minister
Ministry of Justice	Afenigus Nessibu
Ministry of War	Fitawerari Habtegiorgis Dinegde
Ministry of Pen	Tsehafe Tizaz Gebereselassie
Ministry of Interior	Liqe Mequas Ketema
Ministry of Finance	Bejrond Mulugeta
Ministry of Commerce and Foreign Affairs	Nagadras Hailegiorgis
Ministry of Agriculture and Industry	Kentiba Woldetsadiq
Ministry of Imperial Palace	Azaj Metaferia
Ministry of Public Works	Kengazmach Mekonnen Tewondbelai

Source: Bekele and Vanderlinden (1965: 413)

⁴ Ethiopian calendar differs from the Gregorian in both dates of the New Year commencement and number of calendar years. Ethiopia celebrates its New Year on 10th or 11th (the dates shift every four year) of September in Gregorian calendar that marks the first day of the month of Meskerem (Amharic equivalent of the month of September). The Gregorian calendar reads seven years ahead of the Ethiopian does between September 10/11 and 31st of December every year. The difference reaches 8 years between January 01 and 31st of August in each calendar year.

A landmark achievement as it may sound, the initiative to modernize Ethiopian public administration gained impetus from this point onward in modern history of the country. Emperor Menelik II, who reigned from 1889-1913, culminated the central power consolidation work which was in action by his predecessors (Tewodros II and Yohannes IV). Thus, it was imperative for him to create a system that suits to his government's aspiration for modernization and advancement. Besides envisioned by modernizing and strengthening his country, lessons from the victory of Adwa believed to be instrumental for Emperor Menelik in pursuing the European path to development in order to ensuring his country's independence. Introducing a modern civil service, thus, considered to be an order of the day instead of handling government activities in an outmoded traditional pattern.

Periods of Lij Eyasu (1913 - 1916) and Queen of Kings Zewditu (1916 - 1930) were characterized by tracking similar paths introduced by their predecessor. Empress Zewditu as a sovereign reigned for about 15-year time until her unanticipated death in 1930. However, Ras Teferi Mekonnen has been behind nearly all government activities as Regent and heir apparent of Zewditu's rule. This period is believed to help the later Emperor Haile Selassie I in furthering and sustaining his insights of modernizing the then feudal Ethiopia.

Civil Service during the Imperial Rule of Haile Selassie I

Emperor Haile Selassie wore two alternate hats of power as Regent and apparent heir Ras Teferi (1916 – 1930) and the King (1930 – 1974) whose rule lasted for close to three generations in age cohort presumption. A number of changes in terms of creation, reorganizing and restructuring the government bureaucracy have been carried out during the reign of Haile Selassie I. Adoption of a modern constitution in 1931 (as amended in 1955) was among the significant modernization measures taken by the government of Emperor Haile Selassie I.

In this regard Mesfin (2008) and (Henok, 202:306) credit the reign of Haile Selassie I for promulgation of Laws and issuance of directives that govern the Ethiopian civil service system. The foundational institutional frameworks and legal instruments enacted include but not limited to the following.

- The establishment of the Imperial Institute of Public Administration in 1952⁵ with objectives of providing training for civil servants, consulting and research
- The Public Service Regulations No. 1, 1961;
- The Order to Provide for the Creations and Functions of the Imperial Ethiopian Central Personnel Agency No.23/62; and
- The Public Service Position Classification and Scale Regulations No.2/1972, among others.

⁵ This is a big leap forward in modernizing the civil service system of the country. The training is meant for a continuous professional development of civil servants. Consulting services were taken as provision of professional support to institutions in order to design and implement functional organizational structure. Research was considered for gaps identification and recommending remedial actions for problems in the civil service. It was a great vision towards professionalization of the civil service some 74 years ago.

The institutions and laws governing their functions underwent several amendments and substantive revision to fit into the realm of the changing political landscape in the country. Despite changes in ideological orientation of subsequent governments, these laws are believed to lay foundation for the current day civil service role definition and functioning.

Emperor Haile Selassie was tutored by a French teacher as a child. He made extensive official visits to the European countries in a capacity of Regent and apparent hire. Also the emperor spent about five years of exile in Britain during the Italian war of aggression (1935 – 1941). Given his familiarity with the European system of government, therefore, one can safely guess that why the emperor opted for introducing similar civil service structure in Ethiopia as a means of realizing his drive for socio-cultural and political changes that he envisaged happening.

Civil Service during the Marxist Regime

Regime changes may take either a violent takeover or peaceful power transfer through popular election or even a sort of negotiation between contestants. No matter which modality applies, change in government usually signals public dissatisfaction with the incumbent. In a way of gaining acceptance, the new government engages itself into reforms of various scale and scope in the domain of public administration. The civil service sector cannot escape undergoing such changes during a change in government.

The Marxist regime, as its name implies, declared allegiance to the leftist block of the Cold War era in the interest of fetching socialist ideology. After ousting the Emperor and assassinating high ranking officials of the Imperial regime, the Dergue radicalized the power relationship in Ethiopia through an open declaration of Marxism-Leninism as its principle. The transition from the polarized system of a Monarchy to Socialism was intensely a different experience to the Ethiopian context. In its 17 years in power, the Dergue had introduced various reforms in the civil service sector including partly decentralizing service delivery practice through establishing cooperatives operating under the ownership of mass organizations. Mass organizations like Urban Dwellers' Association in township and Farmers' Association in rural context helped in the effort of reaching out residents through basic services provision and market stabilization by creating access to consumer goods.

The Marxist regime was also known for its “nationalization measures, along with the proliferation of new government institutions and corporations led to a tremendous expansion of the public sector” Getachew and Common (2006: 5). Despite the Dergue’s radicalization of the country’s political system, however, Vogel (2005:51) has to say that “the concept of stability of the civil service that Haile Selassie had initiated endured in some measure despite the subsequent 17-year socialist regime”. In a similar stand with Vogel, Paulos cited in Henok (2018:71) also underscores that there was no dramatic shift regarding the civil service sector during Dergue as saying “except for the introduction of a few reform measures, the civil service operated under the different orders and decrees issued during the reign of Haile Sellassie”. The departure point between the Dergue and its predecessor regime is ideological orientation. The Imperial regime was pro-west while the later rule showed allegiance to the Eastern bloc of the Cold War era.

Civil Service in Post 1991 Ethiopia

May 1991 in Ethiopian history marks not only a power transfer from the Marxist autocrat administration to an ethno-nationalist EPRDF⁶. The regime change has also characterized by adoption of a federal form of government as opposed to the long practiced unitary arrangement in the country. This exercise virtually necessitated a system overhaul of the public administration practices in general and that of the civil service system in particular. As an entry point for a massive reform ambition, the EPRDF led coalition has established a taskforce⁷ comprises of national experts assisted by international consultants (Mesfin, 2001: 374) with a mission of undertaking a diagnostic assessment on the state of the country's civil service system.

Informed by the comprehensive assessment findings of the taskforce in 1996, the government embarked on enormous changes in the civil service sector under the name "Civil Service Reform (CSR)". The reform was spearheaded by the then Ministry of Capacity Building. Contents of CSR are presented here below along with their respective purposes to achieve and sub components thereto.

As exhibited in Table 2, Expenditure Management and Control (9 Projects); Human Resource Management (8 projects); Service Delivery (5 projects); Top Management System (6 projects); and Ethics (7 projects) constitute the five broader components of the Civil Service Reform Program. Various tools of implementing the reform have been introduced in view of changing the face of the civil service sector which was not able meet the ever changing needs of citizens and other service recipients. Total Quality Management, Result Based Performance, Business Process Re-engineering, Balanced Scorecard, the Citizen Charter, and Kaizen are some of the management tools introduced to the Ethiopian context for civil service performance improvement. Besides being prescribed by authorities with political power, none of these instruments were proposed by experts in the field or institutionalized at all. Kaizen⁸ is an exception in this regard. Kaizen Institute is founded in Ethiopia and advancing its philosophy mainly focusing on industrial activities. The rest of the tools, though managed to gain temporal popularity due to their top down nature, currently they are in the state of extinction.

Reform should not be perceived as something which comes to the scene at a certain point in time and cease to exist at another. The civil service sector worldwide is in a continuous development. There cannot be a continuous development without a continuous improvement. Fragmented activities like adopting one tool or the other when facing service delivery challenges cannot go beyond getting a temporary relief. Institutionalizing reforms and keeping them yielding in a desired outcome highly hinged on a comprehensive policy that guides the practice.

⁶ An acronym for Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front

⁷ Establishment of the taskforce took place in November 1994 as Mesfin 2008) specifies.

⁸ Kaizen, a continuous performance improvement tool that is originated in Japan, aims to eliminate waste and redundancies through standardizing programs and processes. The founder defines Kaizen as "continuing improvement involving everyone – managers and workers alike" Available at: <https://www.kaizen.com/what-is-kaizen>

Table 2: Components, Objectives and Projects of Civil Service Reform Program

No	CSRP Components and Objectives	Projects Under Each Component
1	<p>The Expenditure Management and Control Objective: To ensure that both Federal and Regional Governments employ standardized financial practices that are governed by a comprehensive and complete legal framework</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Financial legal framework 2. Public investment program 3. Budget reform 4. Accounting reform 5. Cash management reform 6. Financial information systems 7. Internal audit 8. External audit 9. Development of accounting and auditing profession
2	<p>The Human Resource Management Objective: To design, test, develop, and introduce a more efficient and effective human resource management policies, system and procedures to assist Federal and Regional government institutions build their capacities for implementing new HRM policies, systems and procedures, and to establish the legal framework for the realization of HRM objectives</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Job evaluation and grading 2. Performance appraisal and time management 3. Recruitment, selection, transfer and promotion 4. Remuneration and conditions of service 5. Human resource planning 6. Human resource management information system 7. Human resource development 8. Records management
3	<p>Service Delivery Objective: To strengthen the capacity of the civil service organizations to deliver services to end users in a fair, open, accountable, effective, and efficient manner</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Organization and coordination of related services 2. Establishment and strengthening of the central body 3. Service delivery performance improvement program support 4. Awareness creation and dissemination of good practices 5. Establishment of an award system
4	<p>The Top Management System Objective: To familiarize and equip top officials and managers in the Federal and Regional government institutions with effective management tools for annual and strategic planning, so that they could effectively develop and implement policies, and carry out their leadership responsibilities</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Strategic planning and management 2. Top management development 3. Policy development and management 4. Performance management 5. Reorganization of Prime Minister's Office and Council of Ministers 6. Review of legislated mandates of public institutions
5	<p>Ethics Objective: To ensure a greater understanding and commitment to proper conduct in executing government business, and safeguarding the use of public property</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Establishment of central organ 2. Preparation of code of ethics 3. Capacity building of the police, prosecutors and courts 4. Capacity building of the media 5. Ethics education 6. Survey on corruption 7. Preparation of regulations on the protection of whistle-blowers and witnesses

Source: Adapted from Mesfin Taffesse (2008)

In addition to policy backup and institutional arrangement for reform management, other conditions that lead to success should also be given due attention for they are as important as the change itself. These things are dealt with under a sub section “Why Civil Service Reforms Fail to Exhibit the Desired Effect”.

Defining Features of the Ethiopian Civil Service

The civil service system plays an indispensable role in operationalizing government policies. Cognizant of this very fact, new governments usually tend to introduce a change in the sector from the outset. The change to be introduced claims ensuring system efficiency, effectiveness, productivity and enhancing citizen satisfaction. Besides, civil service reform has a spillover effects on the way of the entire public sector organizations discharging their duties and responsibilities. Government reputation comes from nowhere if the civil service sector lacks credibility by and trust of citizens.

Underlining of an essential role of the civil service to government functioning Repucci (2014: 207) writes that the civil service “touches not only on government’s very purpose for existence but also on some of its most sensitive, protected areas. The civil service is the backbone of the state, supporting or undermining the entire system of governance”. Given this very nature of the civil service, its reform becomes among the top priority issues to all incoming governments particularly when the change in government happens due to citizen dissatisfaction and its resultant public uprising. In spite of this reality, however, there are accounts of promises fall short of addressing the core of public distrust. There are also times whereby the new government finds itself trapped into similar failures of the past. Naturally civil service needs to be apolitical arm of a government.

Subsequent governments in Ethiopia share same predicament of emphasizing political loyalty over meritocracy and professionalism in the civil service. Evidently, the reign of Menelik II was portrayed as political loyalty and interference resulted in jeopardy of the civil service (MoCS: 1). There was no exception to the time of Emperor Haile Selassie I as long as civil servants’ neutrality and merit based placement are concerned (Getachew and Common, 2006: 5). Similarly, Henok (2018:71) criticizes the Marxist rule in Ethiopia for building its image in the civil service where professionalism and impartiality of the civil servants get deteriorated and invasive encroachment of space for politically neutral experts.

Building up on the preceding claim by Henok (*ibid*), Getachew and Common (2006:5) characterize the Marxist rule as a system of “appointing party functionaries to key decision-making civil service positions. ...and downplaying of merit and professionalism”. Despite being known for massive reform ambitions, the EPRDF regime does not scape to be guilty of politicising the civil service system of the country. For Henok (2020: 320) “recruitment into the Ethiopian public sector has largely shifted from the principles of meritocracy ... toward factors such as nepotism, political patronage, and ethnicity”. Furthermore, Gebre and Melesse (2014:98) in their study on depoliticizing the civil service in Tigray regional state argue that meritocracy does not go beyond expressing the legislative intention. These authors conclude that political interference in civil servant recruitment; selection and promotion, among others, have opened up the way to politicization of the civil service. Study conducted in Adama and Hawassa city administrations reveals that 68% of civil servants in Adama and 82% in Hawassa were members of the ruling political party (Bersisa, Terefe, and Goitom: 2016:64). Besides political

interferences, I also fully concur with Berhanu and Vogel's position as saying "for Ethiopia and its ethnic-based government, the character, function and capacity of bureaucracy pose unique questions in terms of achieving bureaucratic neutrality" (Berhanu and Vogel, 2001:6). Since ethnic federalism contends about "they and us", partisanship acquires its legitimacy from state constitutions that subscribe for discriminatory treatment of citizens on the grounds of their ethnic origin.

Zelalem (2019: 47) also testifies that civil servant promotion and training opportunities and benefit entitlement in Addis Ababa are given on the basis of the ruling political party affiliation than consideration of merit. Undermining meritocracy will also lead to evasion of accountability and poor service delivery by office holders due to corruption as 78% of respondents during another study do testify (Arsema *et al.* 2020:22). As far as the issue of corruption is concerned, Ethiopia ranks 87th from among 180 countries with a far below average score of 39 points out of 100 (Transparency International 2021). According to the Federal Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission (2021: Xii) household survey participants underscored that they forced to pay bribery because of that "there is no other way to obtain a service". This is a typical situation whereby governments usually fail to win public trust and lose legitimacy.

Politico-social changes can take place in different times and for different reasons. But remaining unchanged amid of waves of change is a sheer paradox. In some cases, there is also a possibility of changing to the worst. Missing expectations of this nature eventually lead to public dissatisfaction, annoyance and demand for a regime change at its any cost. Changed regime with unchanged practice perpetuates a scenario of political cynicism if not growing rival public attitude.

It is true governments come to power with a different thing to do than their predecessor does. The utility of their agenda should be weighed against changing the lives of citizen. Parochial self-interest or that of the ruling elite can take a nation nowhere in terms of democratization and development. In this regard, Berhanu and Vogel (2001:7) citing Ethiopia as a case in point argue that:

Requisite to Ethiopia's continuance as a nation is the open and straightforward discussion of the mechanisms of governance and civil service reform. The application of policies reached through consensus building, representation and integrity is necessary to assure that the government's actions are on behalf of a nation, not a party.

In sum, the more regimes changed in Ethiopia, politicization of the civil service survives the change and remains intact with those of who grab the political power. Ensuring loyalty of the civil servants to the ruling class, through indoctrination, party patronage and partisanship of civil servants, and eventually undermining the merit principle are the defining features of the sector since its advent. When principles of merit, neutrality and professionalism are violated, civil servants heavily rely on the political system that hires and fires on the basis of political loyalty than caring for public interest. This practice in turn becomes a breeding ground for rampant corruption which ultimately leads to the downfall of the system.

Civil Service Neutrality under Different Regimes

History of written constitution in Ethiopia is not as old as the country's history of civilization. The first of its kind written constitution came to being in 1931 shortly after the enthronement of Teferi Mekonnen as His Majesty Haile Selassie I following the untimely death of Empress Zewditu Menelik. In 1955 the second constitution has come to force. The 1955 constitution was an amended version of its predecessor the one that was introduced in 1931. Facilitating the way to welcome the Eritrean federation and later reunion with Ethiopia was the principal reason of the constitutional amendment. Addressing expectations of the international community was also considered as one of the urging reason for amendment of the 1931 constitution. Despite a little bit less than a century experience of having a written constitution, Ethiopia is known for its disruptive constitutional trend due to abandonment of the previous constitution and making one's own by political elites that ascend to power. That might sound a critical juncture to aspire for a popular constitution which transcends the ruler's term in office, ideological orientation and advancing their parochial interests.

This sub-section, however, presents quick and brief comparative accounts of civil service neutrality in reference to provisions across different legal regimes. The Imperial Constitution of 1955, Peoples' Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Constitution of 1987, and the 1995 Constitution of Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia along with other legal instruments and policy provisions are sources of data for comparison.

Civil Service Neutrality under the 1955 Imperial Constitution: Besides introducing a written form of constitution, Emperor Haile Selassie has laid foundations for a modern legal system in Ethiopia through the enactment of the six important legal codes⁹ (Getachew 2022: 188) some of which are in force even to date. Civil service neutrality under the 1955 constitution seems to be out rightly disregarded due to the socio-political order of the day. In legal enactment, a preamble serves as a point where the overall intention of the legislature is reflected. In reference to the 1955 constitution, the very first statement of it reads as "WHEREAS, twenty-four years ago, at the beginning of Our Reign, We granted to Our faithful subjects and proclaimed a Constitution for the Empire of Ethiopia¹⁰" (The 1955 Revised Constitution). Imagine the grantor of the constitution who is considered to be "The Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah Haile Selassie I Elect of God, Emperor of Ethiopia". This assertion, more than anything else, tells us that the king is bestowed with unquestionable divine authority under the Ethiopian sky. Thus, there was no room for neutrality than loyalty.

Civil Service Neutrality under the 1987 Socialist Constitution: This is a very short lived constitution. It came to force on 12 September 1987¹¹ and banned in May 1991 the time by

⁹ The major legal codes enacted during the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie I include but not limited to the following. The Penal Code (1957), the Civil Code (1960), the Commercial Code (1960), the Maritime Code (1960), the Criminal Procedure Code (1961), and the Civil Procedure Code (1965)

¹⁰ The 1955 Revised Constitution of Ethiopia as proclaimed on 04 November 1955 in Addis Ababa, retrieved on 30 April 2026 from www.chilot.me

¹¹ The Constitution of People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Proclamation No. 1 of 1987, Negarit Gazetta, Vol. 47, No. 1, Addis Ababa, 12 September 1987.

which the socialist government being ousted. No matter what, the 1987 constitution was openly partisan in its making alike its predecessor. The difference between the two lies on the power center of gravity. The former assumes the king as a source of all powers. The later ostensibly shifts the power center to the “working people¹²” at least on paper. The first paragraph of the preamble begins its statement by saying “We, the working people of Ethiopia” to define its departure point from the 1955 constitution.

For the 1987 constitution “transforming Ethiopia into a socialist society” is at its very heart. To this end, Art 6 (1) and (2) unequivocally present that the “Workers’ Party of Ethiopia” is a vanguard party and it constitutes the “guiding force of the state and the entire society”. This is simply legitimization of political affiliation and party loyalty over civil service neutrality. The later practice of forced recruitment of civil servants into party membership is a living demonstration of eroding civil service neutrality.

Civil Service Neutrality under the 1995 Constitution cum Proclamation No. 1353/2025: The 1995 constitution¹³, under its Art 55 (3) authorizes House of People’s Representatives to enact Labor Code. Naturally, labor proclamation governs the relationship between employees and employers out of the sphere of the public sector. In practice, however, affairs pertaining to public servants are handled by a separate legal instrument called Civil Servants Proclamation. To this effect, the “Federal Civil Servants Proclamation No. 1353/2025¹⁴” recognizes non-interference [Art 5 (1¹⁵)], impartiality and independence [37 (1) (c & d¹⁶)] and merit [Art 29 (1) (a¹⁷)] principles of the civil service. These provisions of the proclamation are worthy of praise at least at theoretical level of argument. It is a good start to have such a law. But the real success comes out of its proper implementation. However, one can hardly be sure about maintaining civil service neutrality amid of ethnocentric political tradition and competitive rather than cooperative showground.

In sum, all sovereign power resided in the Emperor as enshrined in the 1955 constitution. The 1987 constitution shifted the sovereign power to the “working people” of Ethiopia. The 1995 constitution confers the sovereign power onto the “nations”, nationalities and people. Any of the attributions, however, did not help the country to have a kind of “living tree” constitution that is

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Proclamation No. 1/1995 which came into full force and effect since 21 August 1995

¹⁴ Proclamation No. 1353/2025 Federal Civil Servants Proclamation, Federal Negarit Gazette No. 13, 9th January, 2025

¹⁵ Art 5 (1) To perform his/her duties and responsibilities being governed by law without being influenced or interference by any political ideology, party system or rules.

¹⁶ Art 37 (1) (c) Employees other than political appointee’s shall be free from politics, religion or other organizations influences, carry out the professional work for which they are hired and made contractual agreement in accordance with the Government laws and following the merit system; 37 (1) (d) Put forth a great effort to create a civil service where job opportunities and promotion are not offered on political bias and serves the public under the winning party formed Government by the general election

¹⁷ Art 29 (1) (a) Execute recruitment, promotion, transfer and deployment on the basis of competition and competency or merit based system of employment;

progressive and responsive to new developments in due course. The civil service sector is no exception in this regard.

Why Civil Service Reforms Fail to Exhibit the Desired Effect?

Not all change initiatives bear the desired fruit. Some fail while others succeed. Even there is a possibility of coming up with “changing to the worst” whereby restraining forces supersede the driving forces. As an insider to the change process, I would summarize challenges of reform undertaking in Ethiopia to the following seven illustrative (not exhaustive) factors.

1. **Top-down reform agenda without effective strategy to gain support from below:** A change initiative usually comes from above with a rare situation to be proposed from below. In either case, however, leader ownership is an essential condition for a change to productively move forward. Organizational leaders are critical drivers and sponsors of change. But they do not do everything on their own. They must secure support from employees. Employee support emerges from a shared understanding about “the why of change”. There is also a competing question of “what is there in it for me?” In a situation where these questions are acceptably addressed, people may tend to show pseudo compliance than genuine commitment to change.
2. **Leadership temptation and abrupt shift towards variety of reform tools at a time:** Result Based Performance Management, Total Quality Management (TQM), Management by Objectives (MBO), Business Process Reengineering (BPR), Balanced Scorecard, Kaizen and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) are the reform instruments that we tried to implement. But none of these change tools have institutional backing except Kaizen. Ethiopian Kaizen Institute is founded in collaboration with Japan International Cooperation Agency (JAICA) and government of Ethiopia is serving as a national center for the implementation of Kaizen.
3. **Impatience to pilot testing and “one-size-fits-all” kind of thinking:** Social, cultural, technological and environmental contexts may determine success of the reform tools opted. Tools developed elsewhere may need some sort of adjustment to the new environment. Otherwise, they usually fail to bring about the desired end. Most of the above specified instruments were imported and tried to be implemented in the form of campaign so far as the Ethiopian context is concerned. Rather, they could have been tested in small scale before embarking on larger coverage in order to contextualize with local realities.
4. **Lack of sustainable change management strategy and continuous improvement design:** Organizational change has three stages to successfully get through. The conventional steps include planning, implementation and consolidation stages. Kurt Lewin describes these stages as Unfreezing, Changing and Refreezing¹⁸. Failure at any of these stages may lead organizations to a wasteful exercise than positive outcome. In a very simple analogy,

¹⁸ Burnes, B. (2019). *The Origins of Lewin's Three Step Model of Change*. Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, 56 (1), pp. 32-59. Copyright © The Author, 2019. Reprinted by permission of SAGE Publications. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021886319892685>

planning stage is having a location map to navigate through. Implementation stage is a point where a plan put to work. Consolidation stage is about making the change an institutional common practice. However, a practice once changed should not be construed as “changed forever”. Useful adoptions might soon turn out to be obsolete due to the ever changing ways of doing things. Thus, organizations need to have a continuous improvement plan to maintain their position ahead.

5. **Declaring change before having adequately detailed plan for change:** Undertaking change requires meticulous planning. Unless the change starting and end points are clarified *ab initio*, the likelihood of defining it the way everyone perceives it will be certainly there. Change and resistance to it do coexist all the time. Careful planning and showing the benefits of change in comparison with the cost of remaining unchanged is one of the important initial steps in overcoming some restraining challenges due to lack of clarity of the change agenda.
6. **Introducing change without requisite requirements in place:** Effective change management demands five fundamental components. The components are a) Vision: a clear end state in view; b) Skills required for the new way of doing things; c) Incentive; d) Resources: Human, material, technological, information and time; and e) Action plan: A tool for progress tracking. When anyone of these five elements is missed, a change takes a different direction than its natural course. Absence of *vision* leads to confusion. Lack of *skills* nurtures anxiety. Absence of *incentive* results in gradual change. Lack of required *resources* creates frustration. Absence of proper *action plan* encourages a false start. And there won't be a real change where anyone of these critical success factors is missed out.
7. **Politicization of change:** Change initiatives would be given political meaning from both leadership and employee sides. When change initiatives are politicized, their initial purpose would eventually be defeated. Politicization from the leadership side leads a change to become an instrument of partisan treatment in search for political alignment than meritorious assessment. When change is politicized from employee side, it would be considered as threat that is to be resisted in any manner possible, tacit or express. Generally, politicization of change ends up with derailment and goal displacement than improving process and increasing progress.

The Need for a Comprehensive Policy Response

In this ever changing world, nothing is immune of change except the change itself. Countries that brace for positive changes in a planned and prepared way are much more beneficial of worthwhile developments in their social, economic and political arena. Ethiopia has gone through a number of reforms aimed at changing the face and fate of the nation from poverty stricken to a better of condition. Civil service reforms have also been introduced to this end. The fact that the reforms had no solid policy foundations, their outcomes seem to be of ephemeral effects than lasting significance.

Most of the reforms introduced to Ethiopia were initiated by the ruling elite. Thus, the reform agendas are set out in a way to commensurate with the political supremacy needs of those of who hold the steering wheel of political power. Reforms of this nature are doomed to be short lived ones that do not cross the ideological borders or even die while their adopters are in power. Yet, even though the initiative for civil service reform comes from the political actors, they need to be professionally led for the benefit of citizens that transcend changes in a political system. In a situation where the civil service system is depoliticised and professionally managed public services are rendered without disruption and any compromise in standards even during an event of deadlock to form a coalition government in democratic countries.

Continuity and predictability of civil service are as important as a continuous improvement of the sector to respond to the evolving demands from the public. Thus, it becomes imperative to adopt a comprehensive policy with purposes of:

- (a) Establishing a professional and politically neutral civil service which provides public services promptly and efficiently in response to the needs of the nation, free of bias, corruption and misuse of power, but loyal to the requirements of the government;
- (b) Defining the institutions that are empowered to manage civil servants or to monitor their management when carried out by the ministries/agencies;
- (c) Providing for selection of civil servants on merit after fair and open competition;
- (d) Providing for equality of opportunity for entry and promotion in the civil service and for a career in the service;
- (e) Creating a regime of duties for civil servants directed to producing quality, continuity and impartiality in, and accountability for, the performance of their functions; and guarantees a range of rights, benefits and other conditions of employment that will attract high quality civil servants.

OECD (1996:8)

The focus of such a policy may include but not limited to regulating the way of entry to the civil service system; conditions of service; duties, responsibilities and discipline of the civil servant; rights of the civil servant; training and workforce development; and provisions for a continuous improvement. This is supposed to give policy framework and government recognition of the civil service sector as a politically neutral and professional arm of ensuring good governance.

Conclusion

Efficient, transparent, responsive, accountable and non-partisan civil service is essential to nurture and sustain democratic governance and eventually it creates value for citizens. Ethiopia's bold move towards transforming the country and introduction of modern government structure goes back to the dawn of 20th century. Yet, public service delivery system of the country increasingly lags behind achieving a desirable outcome despite its considerable chronological age of inception.

The world is changing from time to time and generation to generation. No social system remains unchanged in the face of these ever-transforming trends. Without changing our way of doing things, there won't be any kind of considerable progress towards improving public satisfaction. Of course, changes cannot take place free of cost. Dimensions of the cost of change are mostly estimated depending on the nature and magnitude of the change. No matter how huge or marginal the cost of change might appear, attempts to remain unchanged are much more expensive than the change itself.

Theories of public administration that are directly related to the civil service system have been changing since the emergence of the concept of Weberian Bureaucracy by Max Weber (Lunenburg, 2017) and Sager and Rosser, 2021). Prominence of this theory became under criticism for its questionable stance on individual's rational objectivity in making organizational decisions following years of its worldwide acceptance and application. New Public Management theory (Lane, 2000) was introduced as a remedy to the weakness attributed to Rational Bureaucracy. The latter emphasizes on goal achievement through individual authorities and organization placing a particular attention on results and customers (Fiala and Sovova, 2019). New Public Management is also under academic and practical scrutiny due to the 21st century development of such concepts as e-government (Curtin, Sommer, and Vis-Sommer, 2003; Grönlund and Horan, 2004) and the Government of the Future (OECD, 2000).

Regardless of adopting one theory or the other, a meaningful public administration demands creation of a capable state and accountable government. State capacity is demonstrated through institutionalizing the rule of law and establishing professional, non-partisan and robust civil service systems that work to realize citizen satisfaction rather than serving the will of the political elite whose terms are limited by consensual or natural reason. Countries may experience better or worst forms of government. None of the two forms prove to be timeless. Administrations change through democratic elections or a violent means depending on their culture of coming to power. Political power switches between different groups through the course of time as history testifies. Yet, public interest remains intact in spite of the political identity of those who assume power. This does not necessarily mean that politicians have no stake in policies they adopt and implement. But, the heart of their policies ought to hinge around public interests rather than trying to portray their image as an indispensable entity.

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