Examining Political Commitment and Accountability in a Public Service Delivery Reform (PSDR) in Ethiopia

Like many countries in Africa, the initial reform attempts of the Ethiopian government were largely driven by internal economic crisis such as acute budget deficit, and the global push for structural adjustment influenced by the neo-liberal ideology of "less state, better state" translated into mainstream donor policies mainly by WB and IMF.

In 1994, the current government has established a civil service reform task force to diagnose the problems in the Ethiopian civil service. In 1996, the task force had presented its findings to the government. The main findings include: lack of clear national service delivery policy; attitudinal problems; insufficient recognition of citizens' rights; lack of accountability; excessively hierarchical organizations; more concern on inputs than tangible outputs; lack of consultation with clients; lack of complaint handling mechanisms; and financing difficulties. In response to this, the current government of Ethiopia (EPRDF) has initiated three phases of reforms.

The 1st phase (1991-1996) was the initial attempt focusing on restructuring, retrenchment and redeployment programme. The government initiated its 2nd phase (1996-2003) in the form of comprehensive Civil Service Reform Programme (CSRP) that included five major sub-programmes: top management system reform, human resource management reform, expenditure management reform and control reform, ethics reform, and Public service delivery reform (PSDR). Of particular interest for this paper is the public service delivery reform (PSDR) sub-programme. In May 2003, the Government has launched the 3rd phase reform agenda in the form of the five-year Public Sector Capacity Building Program (PSCAP) that took forward all the sub-components of the CSRP.

Introducing a reform is an essential step to enhance the Ethiopian civil service. However, key to the successful implementation of any reform depends on sustained political commitment and the adherence to accountability principles between the politicians and the service providers.

1. Political Commitment for the PSDR in Ethiopia

Increasingly, there is recognition that public service reform cannot be treated merely as technocratic exercise, but as part of political process and it demands explicit political support over an extended period (Corkery et al. 1998:13). The PSDR in Ethiopia was said to enjoy a full and enthusiastic political support at the top level specifically by the prime minister and his deputy (Asmelash, 2000:36). Although personal enthusiasm at the top may serve as a driving force towards implementing the reform, sustainable political support should be reinforced by practical move towards creating and institutionalizing a shared enthusiasm at all levels in the implementing institutions as well as the public at large. Therefore, political support should be evaluated based on how the reform was formulated; how it was aided by sound policy and clear strategies; how its implementation was institutionalized; how the dichotomy between policy making and service delivery has been clear; how chief executive positions have been staffed; and the extent to which the government is practically committed to create suitable working conditions in the implementing institutions.

1.1 The PSDR Policy Design: A viable policy can be viewed as the first step to realize democratic approach for it can be used as a tool to reflect government intentions, to address public concerns, and to create awareness among public institutions and the public. Nonetheless, the policy on PSDR in Ethiopia was issued in 2001 five years after the recommendation of the task force for PSDR policy and the introduction of the reform, and three years before the end of the second phase (CSRP) of the reforms.

Ideally, reform should have a broad measure of support from the public, interest groups and the media; the politician has a role to play in selling reform to different interest groups. (Corkery et al. 1998:14). Unfortunately, the Ethiopian reform design process, as a platform for action, had not institutionalized mechanism for discussing or debating the reform proposal between government and the various implementing institutions, business and civic organizations (Berhanu, 1999:30). It also appeared from an interview that the various middle-level officials of the ministries and other actors and stakeholders have not been actively and adequately involved in the drawing-up of the reform projects and the modalities of their implementation (Paulos, 2000:19). As opposed to its influential role in the actual policy

design, the Ethiopian civil service has been identified as merely executer of policies designed by the government (Government of Ethiopia, 2002:78). This is contrary to the importance of participatory reform design as a tool to reach consensus for reform involves the enforcement of systemic changes in power relations against resistance (Therkildsen, 2001:33).

Moreover, public exclusion in political and bureaucratic decision making may indicate lack of public appreciation of the role of government and the importance of fairness, consistency and adherence to democratic principles (Kaul, 1998:3). It seems for this reason Batley (2004:54) argued that reform in service delivery organizations in Africa was of little interest to users or citizens as it largely remained within the bureaucratic (covert) rather than the public arena (overt political process). It is not the public, the legislature or interest groups that define reform initiatives, but small groups concentrated in the executive (Ibid). Indeed, a small group of task force had initiated the reform in Ethiopia. More surprisingly, the reform recommendations of the task force have not been presented for discussion and reviewed by the council of ministries (Asmelash, 2000:36). In this regard, the Ugandan approach for diagnosing the problems of the civil service and to formulate a realistic vision for the civil service employed a participatory (democratic) approach by interviewing 25,000 civil servants (Langseth, 1995:370). However, although it is possible to piece together a sense of vision and mission of the Ethiopian civil service from different reports, there has not been clearly articulated vision to guide the Ethiopian civil service (Asmelash, 2000:35). Apparently, it can not be surprising if the reform in Ethiopia might not gain strong public support, particularly from the bureaucracy.

1.2 Institutional Mechanism for Implementing PSDR: As Corkery remarks, political commitment must be backed up by the existence of a lead agency with sufficient prestige and authority as well as the necessary intellectual and technical capacity to lead and coordinate the implementation of a reform (Corkery et al., 1998:16). The civil service reform task force has also suggested the need to establish such a unit to guide the reform programme. Firstly, a small unit was established within the PMO to serve this purpose until the Civil Service Reform Programme Office (CSRPO) has been established in 2001. The first unit was criticized as very small to gain sufficient visibility, prestige, and authority to make it credible in the public sector (Asmelash, 2000:36).

The major objectives of the existing leading agency CSRPO include designing and implementing enabling policies and legislative frameworks; building customer oriented service delivery culture; advance modern personnel management systems; promote sound finance and material resources management; and training and development of civil servants. As indicated in this leading agency's brochure, this office has been mainly supported by WB and UNDP and staffed with only 17 personnel. Therefore, one wonders if this very small office can properly undertake the above massive objectives entrusted to it. The risk of inadequate government's own budget to the office was also hinted by the Department for International Development (DFID) freeze of its support after the 2005 election. Thus, this implies that the important roles entrusted to the office may be over if the donors stop their support for any reason. Overall, the CSRPO seems to inherit the fate of its former counterpart as invisible, incapable and lacking credibility.

1.3 Dichotomy between Policy Making and Service Delivery: Even though the split between policy making and service delivery may be criticized as normative and linear, but it is important to avoid excessive political interference and arbitrariness and to reinforce democratic principles. In Ethiopia, policy making and service delivery have not been distinct tasks and that there has been political interference in matters of routine managerial decisions which may frustrate the autonomy of administrators (See Paulos, 2000:19). According to Asmelash (2000:36), the civil service has been highly politicized and de-professionalized, implying its integrity highly compromised. In this respect, in the aftermath of a political faction in EPRDF in 2001 the Prime Minister Meles himself (in a TV talk) had been observed declaring that, "there has been a curtail problem of mixing political and non-political activities and that it need be demarcated-giving managerial freedom and autonomy to administrators".

The danger of politicization of the civil service becomes severe in a multi-party democracy where only neutral and professional civil service ensures the continued instrumentality of the civil service to implement the reform under any ruling party. Nonetheless, the dichotomy between policy making and service delivery may be deceptive due to the possibility for policy makers to use it as a means to avoid responsibility and to shift accountability to the

implementers. It seems for this reason that in Ethiopia it becomes a common practice for politicians to superficially show a concern about the malpractices of politicians and some top bureaucrats only during political conflicts. This has been so in order to detain their opponents in the name of corruption as a revenge for their explicit political stand against the authoritative leaders. The situation after the political faction in EPRDF 2001 was a case in point.

1.4 Recruitment of Chief Executives: Olowu (1999:3) argued that critical to the civil service are those operating at the higher levels of echelons of the civil service; these people must not be only proficient but must set the spirit tone for the public service. Thus, strong attachment to meritocracy ensures the most competent are holding the leadership levels that will be responsible for accountable-performance and to provide quality advices to politicians (Ibid). Unlike the experience of New Zealand however, in Ethiopia, chief executive positions have not been opened for competition making them non-political posts. People for managerial posts are selected by politicians and appointed by the prime minister perhaps based on their strong ties and loyalty to the politicians even though they may not be formal political members. Paulos (2000:19) confirmed the prevalence of political patronage in appointment and promotions, and ministerial interferences in matters of administration. In Ethiopia, politicians and top bureaucrats are principally the same; almost all top bureaucrats are political appointees. For this reason top officials have been granted arbitrary rights and obtain exemptions from prevailing law. This in turn may advance high state capture and the violation of democratic principles. Thus, there has been minimal political commitment in adhering to democratic values by ensuring fairness and meritocracy in recruiting competent top bureaucrats for successful implementation of the reform.

1.5 Incentives to Facilitate Working Conditions: Political commitment beyond rhetoric should also be supported by practical actions to facilitate the working conditions of the implementing organizations. Looking at the practices of pay, it had been a public debate that the government has officially and indiscriminately banned annual salary increments for employees in the civil service for reasons of poor performance of the civil service. But performance was not at the first place standardized. The salary increment was allowed after three years following the previous May 7, 2005 election that has demonstrated maximum

opposition from the civil servants. This is strictly against the new public management's recommendation for the style of motivation relative to rewards for output. Here, it emerges that public choice theory seems manifested through clientelism for vote politicians being motivated mainly to stay in power.

In this line, in July 2006, the government has also banned a privilege previously allowed to Ethiopian students studying in abroad such as MA and PHD students to import duty-free vehicles and other movable personal belongings that was meant to reduce brain drain. One may wonder if such policy seems sound in a reforming civil service where the salary scale and other benefits are very low. This has made evident that the government has little interest to motivate the competent class.

Observation on the Governance Mode: Given the above annotations, no wonder the government and its bureaucracy seems well insulated from the surrounding social structure and the implementing institutions with regard to the reform design and implementation. The actual decision making power is still concentrated on the politicians mainly the executive-lacking input from the public (no/little support) and hence its results- unpredictable. There has not been forum for policy debate for consulting different actors, political interference has been excessive, and patronage in appointment has been a common practice etc. There has not been also much difference between politicians and top bureaucrats in Ethiopia. The state and the ruling party are principally the same. This form of government shares the major features of a neo-patrimonial form of state where power is vested on a group of few people who are individually connected and who revolve around the click of the prime minister. Thus, Evans's (1992:149) embedded bureaucratic autonomy that characterizes developmental state seems far from reality in Ethiopia. Therefore, political commitment in action to the reform has been generally poor in Ethiopia and it emerges that it has been influencing performance of public institutions negatively.

2. Accountability in the PSDR in Ethiopia

The WB (2004:47) report measures the effectiveness of accountability in terms of five features that capture essential dimensions about the role of the principals (citizens and politicians) and their respective agents (politicians and providers). Given the self interested

behavior of both politicians and civil servants and the inherent problems of the principal-agent relationship, the state of accountability between the politicians and public organizations inevitably affects the implementation of the reform. Generally, the effectiveness of a clarified accountability as a solution for this problem can be analyzed depending on: the extent to which autonomy has been delegated to the providers and whether the expected results have been explicitly specified; the extent to which government resources and incentives have been in place; how objectively and consistently the politicians control the organizations and strictly enforce measures; and how citizen-customers have been empowered (WB, 2004; Das, 1998; Corkery et al. 1998; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2000).

2.1 Delegation: Normatively speaking, the policy document of the PSDR is well written comprehending many issues. It calls public institutions to perform numerous activities irrespective of their poor capacity and inadequate resources. Of course, policies are often good on paper. The problem lies in the implementation. In practice, the accountability relationship between the government and the implementing institutions has not been based on clearly specified results. The relationship is merely broad, long-term, and sometimes vague; in one word "compact" (WB report, 2004:48). For instance, one can see how public institutions have been derived their mandate and main responsibilities from a single proclamation of the council of ministers which has not been essentially followed by specific directives that clarifies the contract between the government and the implementing institutions. The delegation of decision making autonomy to public institutions has also been only rhetoric and was challenged by excessive political interference as discussed elsewhere.

2.2 Performing: Lack of clearly specified results coupled with patronage in appointing top bureaucrats may undermine performance of the civil service. In this respect, top bureaucrats have been often excused for their shoddy performance as their appointment has been mainly based on their personal ties to the politicians. Under such circumstances, the public choice theory seems to fit best; the ministers and the appointed top bureaucrats can form coalition to advance mutual benefits. The prevalence of maximizing mutual benefits between the politicians and top bureaucrats can be partly explained by the high expenditure for purchasing luxurious European style office equipment and very expensive automobiles such as Land Cruisers and Mercedes Benz. One can wonder if he/she is really in that very poor

country, observing many such 4-coded government automobiles in a single traffic light stop in Addis Ababa.

2.3 Reporting and Enforcement: The Ethiopian government's directive for customer complaint handling requires all public institutions to distribute reports at least once a year to the central leading organ of service delivery (CSRPO), to major work units and employees in the institution, to service users and other concerned organizations. Ideally, the CSRPO has been empowered to ensure that reports are prepared and distributed by institutions in accordance with the procedures stipulated in the directive, and to take appropriate measures based on the reports. However, an expert in the CSRPO has informed me by telephone that reports from institutions were coming only in the early times of the establishment of the CSRPO, and no more report is currently flowing to it. Thus, the policy essentially seems a dead letter.

The failure of the CSRPO to ensure the flow of reports from all institutions, and to control and enforce measures should also be viewed in relation to its small size and inadequate capacity. Therefore, the advocacy of result based performance management may not work effectively in such a situation. The CSRPO'S relationship with the already existing traditional ministries to which public institutions are normally accountable has not also been clearly defined, and there seems confusion on its jurisdiction of responsibility.

2.4 Customer Empowerment: It is about empowering the citizen to be a credible customer who is benefited by the process of the public sector (Ayeni, 2001:3). The empowered consumer is well informed and can be used as invaluable source of feedback in the public market. Nonetheless, although customer empowerment is important for achieving clarified accountability, at first it depends on the context of the reform itself. Based on the analysis so far, the reform seems to suffer from ill political and accountability context. In fact, the policy directive on 'customer complaint handling' is of little use as it lacks strict management and follow-up to ensure that all public institutions are implementing it. In practice, it seems up to the organization to make use of it or not.

Perspectives on the State: In Ethiopia, poor citizens together with inadequate customer empowerment have made the accountability situation inherently weak to influence service providers. Consequently, public dissatisfaction reached its peak and the voice of citizens appeared to gain strength in the previous election on 7th of May 2005 that has shaken the ruling party. Indeed, it was not therefore surprising that the current ruling party lost momentous public confidence in the previous election. The election was followed by public strike and state massacres to reverse the shock.

When accountability is weak, corruption will grow and professional ethics eroded (Klitgaard, 1997:494). Cognizant with this, the result of a survey on corruption in Ethiopia revealed that corruption has become a serious problem facing the Ethiopian society in general, and its economic as well as political life in particular (Government of Ethiopia, 2001:255). The strength of the institutional structure of the Ethiopian state in terms of ensuring strict accountability of public service providers seems insufficient. The government has failed to ensure better services as per the hope people had in the early years when the ruling party (EPRDF) has come to power. Hence, the failed state model seems to explain the current government of Ethiopia.

Conclusion

It emerges that political commitment in action, and accountability relationships between the government and public service providers have been the challenges for the reform in Ethiopia, and have been influencing organizational performance negatively and invariably. The reform-dynamics in Ethiopia can be understood by applying public choice theory where politicians have been largely motivated to stay in power by appointing managers of their kind, and top bureaucrats promoting their self interest. Shoddy performance of the appointed top bureaucrats have been exempted from strict sanctions as long as they have not question the eternal power of the politicians. This shows the prevalence of ideological fixation as a tool to curtail democratic freedom in the Ethiopian civil service. As a result, both the carrot and the stick have been predominantly ineffective to drive the reform to the desired results.

Apparently, it is not surprising for social injustice to burgeon in Ethiopia given the neo-patrimonial[1] state and its supply-driven bureaucracy that strives to maintain the status quo.

Consistent with the idea of Manning (2001:305), the Government in Ethiopia seems less capable and less motivated characterized by high state capture, administrative corruption, little administrative competence and non participatory governance. In such a situation, technocratic reforms offer little promise. Therefore, being optimistic, this calls for transforming the largely neo-patrimonial type of state in Ethiopia by the type of Evans's (1992:149) developmental state with a bureaucracy enjoying embedded autonomy that is capable of using citizens' responses as in-built self correcting mechanism within the social structure by working together with the citizens, for the citizens.

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[1] To understand the neo-patrimonial nature of the current government of Ethiopia, one can see the composition of the central committee of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) which is the cornerstone of EPRDF (the ruling party). Surprisingly, out of the 45 members of the central committee in TPLF, at least 25 of them are said to be members of extended family, either by blood or by marriage, securing the majority vote to pass any decision. To be realistic and fair, the central committee of TPLF shall be rather called family committee, as it does not actually represent any segment of the Tigray people.

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