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Bureaucratic Red Tape and Service Delivery: Root Causes and Solutions

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ABSTRACT

Bureaucratic red tape affects service delivery in Pakistan, and this research identifies its basic causes, systemic feedback loops, and economic implications. Root cause, SWOT, stakeholder, and cost-of-inaction studies show how procedural complexity, institutional fragmentation, politicisation, and inadequate accountability impair governance and fuel corruption. The research offers short-term digitalisation and transparency, medium-term structural integration, and long-term institutional restructuring to expedite procedures, improve accountability, and restore public confidence. The reduction of red tape is said to improve citizen services, investment, and socioeconomic development.

Keywords: Bureaucratic red tape, service delivery, governance, civil service, administrative procedures, regulatory inefficiency, corruption, public trust erosion

INTRODUCTION

Bureaucratic “red tape” refers to excessive or complex administrative procedures and regulations that hinder efficient decision-making and service delivery. In Pakistan, red tape has become a serious impediment to governance, leading to widespread public frustration. A well-functioning civil service is supposed to be the linchpin of effective governance and ensure timely, accessible public services. Unfortunately, Pakistan’s bureaucracy has seen a decline in efficiency and

public trust in recent years. Surveys indicate that public confidence in bureaucratic effectiveness is at an all-time low – 86% of Pakistanis perceive corruption to be widespread in government. ¹Signs of bureaucratic decay are evident in weakened institutions, political interference, and rising citizen frustration. Excessive bureaucratic red tape – manifesting as delayed responses, convoluted procedures, and endless paperwork – has led to mounting frustration among the people. This report examines how such red tape affects service delivery in Pakistan, analyses the root causes through multiple analytical lenses, and proposes solutions to improve public service outcomes.¹

Scope of the Study

This study focuses exclusively on the Pakistani context, examining bureaucratic red tape and service delivery within the country’s legal-institutional framework. While overbearing bureaucracy is a global issue, Pakistan’s historical and institutional context makes its challenges unique. The scope includes federal, provincial, and local government service delivery mechanisms across sectors (e.g. health, education, utilities, municipal services), highlighting how bureaucratic processes affect citizens’ everyday interactions with the state. Pakistan’s administrative system is a legacy of colonial-era structures and has expanded over time into a “sprawling and redundant administrative system” that dominates large swathes of the economy.² By limiting scope to Pakistan, we account for local laws, governance culture, and socio-political factors that contribute to red tape. The analysis will draw on recent Pakistani news, reports, and expert opinions to ensure relevance to current conditions. The goal is to identify systemic issues and solutions within Pakistan’s own institutional and policy context, rather than comparing with other countries.

Statement of the Problem

Pakistan’s public bureaucracy has evolved into a labyrinth of over-regulation, duplication, and caution-driven governance. Complex documentation, multiple verification steps, politicised appointments, and lack of performance-linked rewards characterise the present system. These features result not only in delayed services and citizen dissatisfaction but also in economic losses, erosion of institutional legitimacy, and perpetuation of corruption. Despite the presence of numerous reform initiatives—ranging from e-governance drives to Right to Public Services laws—implementation gaps and structural rigidity continue to thwart results. Unless addressed holistically, red tape will remain a bottleneck against Pakistan’s socio-economic transformation.

Legal, Institutional and Policy Frameworks in Pakistan

Pakistan’s governance structure and laws provide the backdrop against which bureaucratic red tape and service delivery must be understood. Key legal, institutional, and policy frameworks include:

¹ <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2528162/a-deteriorating-bureaucracy#>

² <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/1324171-reform-or-redundancy#:~:text=Pakistan's%20state%20already%20dominates%20over,actual%20reform%20to%20symbolic%20structures>

- d. Weak accountability and perverse incentives (red tape enabling corruption)
 - e. Insufficient capacity and resources leading to inefficiency
 - f. Slow adoption of technology and innovation, maintaining old inefficiencies⁹
 - g. Lack of citizen-centric culture and transparency.
2. SWOT Analysis: I applied a SWOT analysis to Pakistan's bureaucratic apparatus in the context of service delivery.

Synthesis: Findings from these methods were triangulated to form a comprehensive picture. The root cause analysis pinpoints why red tape persists; the SWOT outlines what internal/external factors help or hinder change.

3. Stakeholder Mapping

STAKEHOLDER	INFLUENCE	INTEREST	ROLE
Senior Bureaucrats	High	Medium	Status quo defenders
Reform Committees	Medium	High	Policy Innovation
Citizens	Low	High	End user with little voice
Politicians	High	Mixed	Patronage vs reform dilemma
Technocrats/IT Technologies	Medium	High	Reform enablers
Accountability Institutions	High	Medium	May create decision-paralysis

4. Cost of Inaction (COI) Analysis

IMPACT AREA	METRIC/PROXY	ESTIMATED COST
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⁹ <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2528162/a-deteriorating-bureaucracy#>

Economic Delay	Avg 3 months delay in issuing business permits	Estimated 1.5-2% GDP loss annual due to regulatory inefficiency in business start-up processes
Bribe Economy	Transparency International est 48% of citizens paid bribes for services	Estimated Rs 800 billion/yr in cost of red tape (adjusted via CPI 2025)
Investment Deterrence	Pakistan ranks 108/132 on WEF Global Innovation Index 2024	Billions in FDI deferred annually due to bureaucratic burden
Administrative Overhead	Duplicate paperwork and staff time	At Least 15- 20% of departmental budgets lost to redundant approvals and delays
Public Trust Erosion	-	Decline in Institutional legitimacy

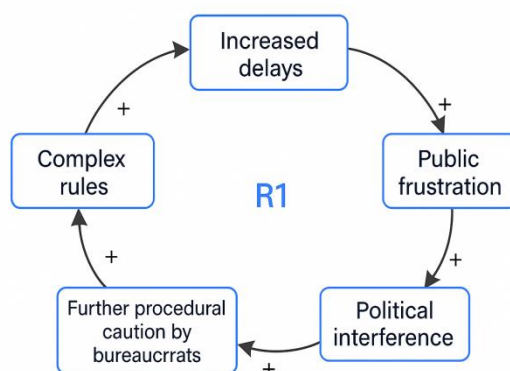
5. Systems Thinking Approach: Causal Loop Analysis

This framework helped to understand how interconnected variables reinforce or balance systemic dysfunction.

Core Loops Identified:

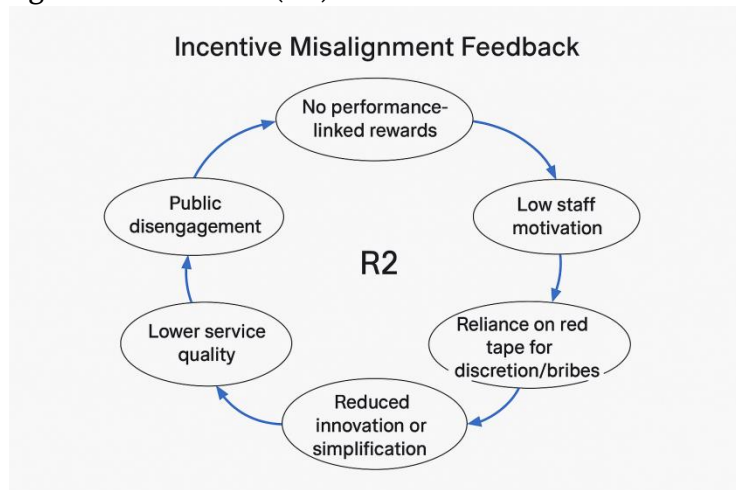
A. Vicious Cycle of Delay and Distrust (Reinforcing Loop R1):

Vicious Cycle of Delay and Distrust (Reinforcing Loop R1)



• Complex rules → Increased delays → Public frustration → Political interference → Further procedural caution by bureaucrats → Even more delays

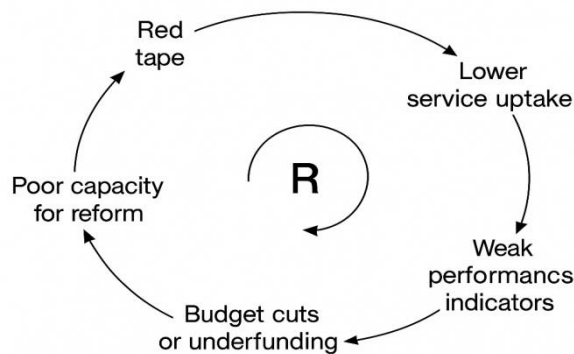
B. Incentive Misalignment Feedback (R2):



- No performance-linked rewards → Low staff motivation → Reliance on red tape for discretion/bribes → Reduced innovation or simplification → Lower service quality → Public disengagement

C. Underinvestment Spiral (R3):

Underinvestment Spiral (R3)



- Red tape → Lower service uptake → Weak performance indicators → Budget cuts or underfunding → Poor capacity for reform → Increased red tape

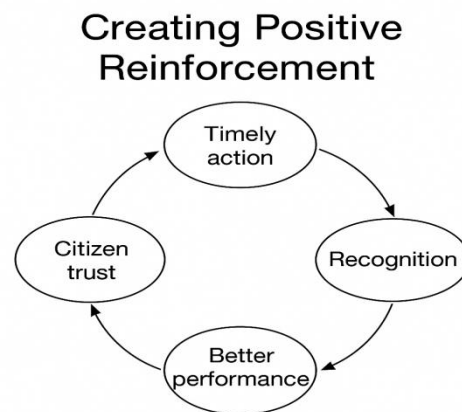
Systems Insight:

Delay-Begets-Delay



To fix red tape, it's not enough to simplify processes alone. These feedback loops

must be broken via:



- *Creating positive reinforcement: timely action → recognition → better performance → citizen trust*
- *Institutional redesign to rebalance authority and accountability*

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, cutting bureaucratic red tape in Pakistan is a challenging but achievable task. It requires attacking the problem from all sides: rewriting rules, restructuring institutions, upgrading technology, and reorienting culture. Some changes will yield quick wins. Other changes, like instilling a new culture of accountability and service, will take time but are vital for long-term improvement. The benefits of success would be enormous: citizens would get faster and fairer services (boosting public trust), businesses would face less hassle (improving the investment climate), and the government's own development projects would execute more smoothly.

Hence, Pakistan must “improve the business environment and streamline the public sector” – essentially, cut the red tape that holds back potential.¹⁰

Recommendations:

In the shorter term, during the next six months, measures must prioritise the improvement of service delivery and the assurance of transparency. The worldwide implementation of digital one-window service portals, spearheaded by the Ministry of Information Technology and Telecommunication (MoITT), Punjab IT Board (PITB), National IT Board (NITB), and provincial IT ministries, would diminish the need for in-person visits and expedite the delivery of transparent services. The simultaneous implementation of the Right to Public Services (RTC) Act, governed by chief secretaries and departmental leaders with defined timetables, would enhance responsiveness and mitigate delays via legal responsibility. A *performance* dashboard, overseen by the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit (PMDU), Cabinet Division, and province Planning & Development Departments, will enhance public

¹⁰ [https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2025/04/23/pakistan-structural-reforms-needed-to-turn-economic-stabilization-into-sustained-inclusive-growth-says-world-bank#:~:text=Najy%20Benhassine%2C%20World%20Bank%20Country,"](https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2025/04/23/pakistan-structural-reforms-needed-to-turn-economic-stabilization-into-sustained-inclusive-growth-says-world-bank#:~:text=Najy%20Benhassine%2C%20World%20Bank%20Country,)

awareness and promote inter-departmental accountability. Furthermore, provincial administrative bodies had to promulgate time-sensitive directions for the ten most anticipated public services to achieve prompt successes and foster public confidence. To enhance public involvement, PMDU and Ombudsman Offices will use automatic complaint tracking and SMS notifications to accelerate resolution and minimise the need for frequent follow-up visits.

In the long run, spanning six to eighteen months, changes have to focus on structural integration and enhanced coordination. The Cabinet Division and pertinent legislation ministries shall consolidate overlapping departments and authorities to eliminate redundancy and enhance operational efficiency. MoITT, NADRA, FBR, and Boards of Revenue should digitally integrate key national databases, including those of NADRA, tax agencies, and provincial property records, to apply the "once only" concept and minimise duplication. Performance assessments in the civil service, governed by the Establishment Division and provincial Planning and Development agencies, should be connected to performance metrics to incentivise objective achievement. Established service delivery approaches, shown by Punjab's e-Khidmat centres, have to be duplicated nationally to enhance one-window efficiency. Additionally, target-orientated Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) ought to be integrated into Performance Evaluation Reports (PERs) by the Establishment Division, FBR, and provincial Services & General Administration Departments (S&GAD) to transition evaluations from procedural adherence to outcome-focused performance.

In the long run, beyond eighteen months, the emphasis must be on institutionalising quality and sustainability. Revisions to the Civil Servants Acts, initiated by legislators and the Establishment Division, must include meritocratic promotions and stringent accountability measures, thereby diminishing entitlement culture and cultivating a performance-oriented environment. The creation of a National Executive Service and lateral entry channels, supervised by the Cabinet Committee on Institutional Reforms, would draw elite technocrats and enhance specialised capabilities inside the government apparatus. The implementation of AI-driven grievance redressal systems, with escalation processes by PMDU, NITB, and provincial IT boards, would promote technology-enabled governance, reduce human discretion, and improve the citizen experience. Local governance reform must include the institutionalisation of District Delivery Units (DDUs) with quantifiable KPIs, so helping provincial and local governments to address issues more effectively within the community. A central Reform Performance Audit Unit, overseen by the Auditor General and the Reform Delivery Unit of the Prime Minister's Office, would provide evidence-based assessment and adaptive modifications, therefore maintaining reform momentum over time.