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## Transforming institutions and governance to build forward better towards 2030

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#### Written statement by International Institute of Administrative Sciences

##### *Agenda item 8: Public Sector Workforce matters*

Many challenges or threats to democratic governance have been enunciated, chief amongst these leadership, the rule of law, quality of governance, corruption, .... I will argue here that democratic governance that matters is one that delivers the goods to citizens. The goods are both material and immaterial, the bulk of which is what the public administration delivers. In this, I include education, health, security, food and all other essential services delivered by the State to its citizens.

The UN Secretary General in his common agenda address of 2021 "... noted that people needed to see results reflected in their daily lives, including through updated governance arrangements, to deliver better public goods and usher in a new era of universal social protection, health coverage, education, skills, decent work and housing, as well as universal access to the Internet by 2030 as a basic human right"

There are of course higher-level deliverables of democratic governance like freedom of speech and other fundamental rights which can exist by themselves for a while but are quickly compromised if not accompanied with a wide-ranging array of other deliverables, most notably those of Public Administration.

Political leadership is often blamed for the failure of democratic transitions. While this could be true, it is generally done for the wrong reason, that is inappropriate public policies, political infighting, lack of vision, incompetence, etc. This is not to say that these are not determinant factors but even with a good configuration of all of these exogenous factors, transitions could still fail because they depend more on internal public sector resources, chief amongst these the human resources. This is where visionary politicians should look to change first. Public administration will prove to be a formidable force of resistance and even destruction if it is not embarked early in the democratic transition odyssey.

“A new world of human resources management will have to be institutionalized at this time of environmental, political and socioeconomic strain.”

The problem with the legacy institutions, including the workforce management has to be tackled at the onset of the democratic transition. Indeed, beyond the Public Administration superstructure and infrastructure lies the glue that carries the ill-functioning of public administration, namely its workforce. “Public sector human resources account for about 32 per cent of paid employment, according to the Worldwide Bureaucracy Indicators database of the World Bank.” This critical mass is determinant not only for the inner working of government and public service but for the entire economy. If it is not directed towards a good outcome for society, it will become inevitably destructive. Indeed, many democratic transitions have failed or at least did not yield the expected results because not only it failed to reset the objectives, processes, and deliverables of public service but more importantly the functioning of its “human software.”

Public Administrations in most developing countries become overtime a parochial stratus of society with its own interests and privileges. Its natural reaction is to resist changes that could unsettle the existing situation. Furthermore, and as democratic transitions unfold, usually within a context of a weakened state and incompetent political elites, or to be kinder, inexperienced elites, it becomes a player of its own, undermining the State’s newfound social mission of serving the citizen, ensuring inclusiveness, transparency, etc. The power game between the political sphere of the State and its administrative sphere will ultimately decide the fate of democratic transitions. Either the State delivers the goodies to its citizens which will reinforce the positive fallouts of democratic transitions, or it fails to do so, and democracy fades away. Unfortunately, it is more generally the latter outcome than the former. Invariably, this happens because politicians fail to tame public administration and reset its values and inner working.

Easier said than done one would argue but very much feasible. On the organizational front, digitalization and decentralization are key structural reforms that could do that. Digitalization enables the disruption of legacy processes and the creation of new ones that are more transparent, inclusive and accountability prone. It also provides the workforce with an opportunity to redevelop its capacity within a more capable state. Decentralization is a way of increasing access to public administration outside of central government. New leadership that is more committed to public service can come from that route as well. It also enables the meaningful participation of all stakeholders in public policymaking so as to better align policies with people’s needs, most notably at the local level.

Within the existing workforce and beyond the structural reforms that can be undertaken, new values must be forged to lessen existing insular cultures.

“Resilient governments also need to build capacities, mindsets, expertise, skills and tools for strategic anticipation and risk management. Such skills differ from those required to deal with an ongoing crisis and refer to the ability to anticipate future shocks. The workforce involved

in such an endeavor has a long-term orientation avoiding a focus on operational routines and procedures. “

Public servants at all levels can buy into this cultural change through a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. Intrinsically, and beyond the corrupt few, people like to be part of major positive changes that yield positive outcomes for society. They like to perform more effective and efficient jobs. It valorizes their jobs and gives them greater job satisfaction. They also cherish working within more digitalized processes that makes their work smarter. Extrinsically, the significant changes to their work environment should be accompanied with proper human resource planning wherein they benefit from the better performance of public administration and benefit from proper career planning through the professionalization of the public administration workforce.

“Placing human resources development at the core of sustainable development and developing short-, medium- and long-term strategies to effectively enhance human resources capacities and achieve educated, skilled, healthy, capable, productive and adaptable workforces are the foundation for achieving sustained, inclusive and equitable economic growth and development (see General Assembly resolution 74/236)

A better workforce is the key ingredient to the quality of government and effective policy making. During times of crises and turbulence like the Covid-19 or the uncertainties surrounding the Russia-Ukraine war and their fallouts in terms of threat to food security worldwide, a capable workforce embedded within resilient and flexible public institutions will be like an army to defend the people against the potential damages of crises. Public sector capacity consists at its core of a capable workforce. A capable workforce cannot exist without the right leadership which is itself competent and legitimate.

“Robust governance demands flexible and agile public institutions, programs and workforces that can transform and adapt in turbulent times. Closed bureaucracies shaped by large, compartmentalized and insulated hierarchies, careers and positions, standardized routines and public service production, control-fixated administrative systems and a legalistic zero-error culture challenge innovation and scalable solutions that provide governance robustness.”

Transitions that fail are generally terminated by military coups or authoritarian populist regimes who come through elections. The reversal of the democratic process and backsliding of democratic institutions will be welcomed by the “Administration’s people” who will see in this a resumption of the stable situation that they have enjoyed before the democratic transition started. Of course, usually democratic transitions are the result of economic deteriorations cause by this same administration and going back to a stable situation is no longer feasible because history is irreversible.

In essence, an impartial Weberian bureaucracy premised on the professionalization of jobs, merit-based compensation, accountability, and commitment to public service is the only route for a country’s development and welfare and for the sustainability and resilience of the State and its institutions and ultimately democracy. Democracy cannot flourish with a dysfunctional administration. It will quickly descend into corruption and oligarchy. An

administration that cannot serve the people well will serve itself first and become a liability to society. When crises come around and resources become even scarcer, public administration will turn against the people to salvage its own interests.

While the focus of the administrative and policy literature has been on creating the type of public administration that can withstand major crises, I would argue that it is more urgent to look at current public administrations especially in the developing world and see whether they have the foundation and the workforce to operate effectively during non-crisis times. Are they Weberian to start with because some are more akin to anarchic constructions of loosely defined objectives, procedures and resources than professionalized bodies of public service delivery? I have seen public administration that have no organizational charts, no job descriptions, no performance evaluation, no streamlined processes except for legal lexicons that prescribe operations haphazardly. Any attempt to talk about workforce management in such a context is simply foolish.

The International Institutes of Administrative Sciences will hold its annual conferences this year around the key role played by the public administration workforce in leaving no one, no place behind hence aligning with a core theme of the CEPA discussions.