Can We Build Robust Public Administration Institutions in the Global South?: The Twenty-Seventh Newsletter (2025)



Youssef Abdelké (Syria), *Red Figures*, 1994.

Dear friends,

Greetings from the desk of **Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research**.

A decade ago, I was a fly on the wall during a trade negotiation between the United States and a small country in Southeast Asia. What interested me was not the substance of the negotiation, the deliberations around an issue of minor concern to world affairs but of great concern to this one country, but the disproportionality between the personnel at the negotiating table.

The delegation from the United States that arrived at this nondescript office in Geneva, Switzerland, was considerable in two respects: first, it had an overabundance of lawyers and associates, and second, they came armed with a large number of binders that had all the paperwork for their case, replete with labelled page-holders so that they could dive directly into the points they needed to make in the discussion. The contingent from the Asian country, on the other hand, was sparse: it was made up of a lone representative from its United Nations office in Geneva who was neither a trade specialist nor a lawyer and who came armed only with a manila folder holding a few sheets of paper. The negotiations reflected this unevenness, with the US trade representatives running circles around the junior Asian bureaucrat. I went to have a coffee with this bureaucrat afterwards. He was rattled. He felt robbed.



Ian Banja (Kenya), *Hand to Mouth*, 2021.

A few years ago, a mid-level official from an East African country told me that he had signed a loan agreement with an Asian bank without having the skills to understand the loan document or the time to read it from start to finish. Around the same time, an official from a ministry in Latin America told me that they outsource their analysis of trade documents to a foundation linked to a non-profit organisation from the United States. In other words, their negotiations are based on the briefs provided by this foundation and not their own analysis and assessment. These examples could easily be multiplied, the stories recounted vaguely so as not to embarrass colleagues and countries that have been put in very difficult circumstances by neocolonial structures.



Paul Ndema (Uganda), *No African Pope*, 2015.

It is hard to quantify the impact of such institutional imbalances, largely because there is no international agency that collects data on government officials in general or on negotiators in particular. Among the sparse data that exists in this arena is the World Bank's **Worldwide Bureaucracy Indicators Dashboard**, which shows that roughly 18.6% of the total working population in the Global North is employed by the government, while in the Global South that number is closer to 10%. An International Labour Organisation **study** on Africa shows us that the numbers are much lower in many countries, below 3% in African countries such as Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Madagascar, Mali, and Tanzania. While there is no granular data on the number of trade negotiators or trade lawyers in the government, for instance, the above is a reasonable picture of the general disparity between the state capacity in the North and South.



Dalton Paula (Brazil), *Reisado*, 2009.

The scale of this disparity is incredible (the exceptions are socialist state projects, such as China and Vietnam, where government officials remain well trained and in larger numbers – making up about **a fifth** of the workforce in China). Many of the reasons for this inequality are obvious, but they are worth listing at any rate:

1. Most public administration schools in the Global South have seen enormous budget cuts induced by the International Monetary Fund's debt-austerity policies, impacting, for instance, the ability to train teachers and create syllabi that are both up to date and relevant to the specific national conditions in which these future public servants will have to operate.
2. Alongside the austerity measures imposed on public administration schools, there has also been a steady closure or contraction of state planning commissions and research departments. These are the institutions that would normally provide government cadres with an intellectual orientation toward their country's position in the international economy and the immediate tasks for a national development programme. The lack of such institutions leaves cadres without a clear mandate or direction.
3. There has been an attrition of general patriotic and anti-colonial sentiment among government employees who are underpaid and undertrained. This psychological warfare brought about by neoliberalism and cultural imperialism means that newer generations of public servants are both unable to argue the case for the well-being of their people and are prone to inducements of different kinds (including **corruption**). An increased sense of individualism among the population has also led to careerism and the accumulation of personal wealth and privileges at the expense of national interest.

4. As state-run institutions have been closed or shrunk, Western-funded non-governmental organisations have emerged to provide 'technical assistance'. These programmes are often staffed by people who are trained in foreign universities, have a class background that is not necessarily aligned with the vast majority of the population, and have a limited understanding of the historical and sociological developments in their country. Moreover, the agendas of these institutions are designed by their foreign benefactors who are often driven by their own self-interest.



Ayotunde Ojo (Nigeria), *Stale Wine*, 2022.

The attrition of public administration schools, combined with the lack of political will within governments to assert the sovereignty of their societies, has allowed the ambitions of multinational corporations and

international financial institutions to set the direction of these countries. This lack of capacity and political clarity has meant that states in the Global South routinely surrender to the well-developed agendas of foreign institutions that are often much clearer about what they want. The need to build administrative capacities in the Global South goes hand in hand with the broader need for a **new development theory** for the South so that we may be able to define our own agenda, against that of the neocolonial interlopers.

Sitting in that meeting in Geneva some years ago, watching the US officials and their lawyers walk circles around the junior Southeast Asian official, I thought of Nizar Qabbani's 1967 poem 'Footnotes to the Book of the Setback', written shortly after the Palestinians' defeat in the Six-Day War. The poem, published in Damascus, Syria, was subsequently banned and smuggled into countries across the Arab world. Two lines from the poem ricocheted around my mind:

> Our enemies did not cross our borders.
> They crept through our weaknesses like ants.

We must strengthen our weaknesses.

Warmly,

Vijay