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Minister–civil servant friction: A comparative analysis of political–administrative cohesion

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Abstract

The friction between ministers and IAS officers is a worldwide phenomenon, and this friction stems from the degree of neutrality and impartiality a country is cultured with. The higher the degree of administrative neutrality and impartiality the more chances of friction between the civil servants and ministers are there. Whenever some higher civil servant finds some minister or an MP interfering with some matter in his administrative area, the duel starts between the two. The MP believes that the area belongs to his constituency and an IAS officer or a deputy commissioner argues that the area belongs to the administrative area of which he is in charge. Often, such friction ends with the transfer of the IAS officers if the MP or minister belongs to an influential party in power. Apart from America and China, almost all countries of the world have the culture of political neutrality and impartiality of the civil services. Earlier, America had the tradition of the spoil system; that is, the posts of higher civil services were stuffed by the supporters of the party that came to power and these administrative cadres were to vacate the posts when another party came to power in the next election. Though the spoil system is no more in America, the tradition of the political appointment of higher civil servants is still there to some extent. Therefore, where there is less division in politics and administration, there is less chance of friction between the civil servants and ministers because the higher officers themselves are political appointees in this case.

Keywords: Neutrality, impartiality, civil servant, friction

Introduction

Civil servants possess their own jurisdiction for functions whereas a minister or an MP has a defined area for developmental activities. The scope of an IAS officer's role in implementing government directives or policies overlaps with the jurisdiction of an MP or an MLA elected from. Consequently, a deputy commissioner may encounter obstacles in addressing administrative issues within their jurisdiction due to the involvement of MLAs and MPs elected in the area. At times, a minister or an MP may invite friction by interfering in matters that fall under the authority of a deputy commissioner in the respective area, which may coincide with the constituency from which the MLA or MP has been elected. IAS officers, being highly educated and dignified public servants, may feel hesitant when MPs or MLAs interrupt into administrative matters. In such situations, MLAs assert the power granted to them by the people's consent while IAS officers uphold the legitimacy of their roles along with the dignity and elevated status they hold.

The higher administrative officers are bound by the duty of implementing the policies framed or made in the executive branch. Civil servants are to abide by the directions meted out to them for implementation. An IAS officer can never do away with the orders of the govt and at the same time they cannot criticize the policies sent to them for implementation. If it is so then why the IAS officers would not protest the interference of the ministers with the administrative affairs of an area that comes within the administrative jurisdiction of a Deputy Commissioner. As politics and administration have their sphere of action demarcated by the legal framework, one should not trespass on other.

The relationship between political executives and career civil servants has been widely examined in public administration. The literature consistently highlights that friction between ministers and civil servants emerges from institutional design, expectations of neutrality, the politicisation of bureaucracy and role conflict.

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Literature Review

The early understanding of politics–administration relations can be traced to Woodrow Wilson (1887) ^[22], who argued for a clear separation between politics (policy formulation) and administration (policy execution). Wilson’s dichotomy, though criticised later, laid the foundation for debates on bureaucratic neutrality and political influence.

Subsequently, Weber’s (1946) model of rational-legal authority emphasized a professional, meritocratic bureaucracy insulated from political pressures, reinforcing the principle of neutrality and impartial service delivery.

However, scholars such as Appleby (1949) and Waldo (1948) argued that complete separation is unrealistic because administration is inherently political. This recognition paved the way for modern scholarship that conceptualizes the relationship as complementary rather than dichotomous (Svara, 2001) ^[20]. Neutrality and professionalism are central to modern civil service systems. Peters (2021) ^[16] notes that bureaucratic neutrality is necessary for maintaining legitimacy in democratic governance.

In the Indian context, Maheshwari (2014) ^[14] asserts that neutrality and anonymity are the cornerstones of the IAS structure. However, scholars such as Gupta (2015) and Puri and Verma (2018) ^[18] argue that neutrality has eroded due to rising political assertiveness, patronage networks, and discretionary powers of ministers—especially over transfers and postings.

A major theme in global literature is the impact of political appointments on bureaucratic autonomy. In the United States, the spoils system historically allowed the party in power to appoint loyalists to administrative posts (Lewis, 2008) ^[13]. Although civil service reforms professionalized senior-level political appointments continue, reducing friction between political leaders and top officials because administrative elites are aligned with political preferences (Nigro & Kellough, 2014) ^[15].

Conversely, countries like India, Canada, and the UK operate under a meritocratic structure, which increases the possibility of conflict when politicians exert pressure on neutral bureaucrats (Aucoin, 2012) ^[2]. Hood and Lodge (2006) ^[10] argue that tensions arise when ministers expect loyalty while bureaucrats expect protection from political influence.

In China, where the bureaucracy is deeply embedded within the Communist Party, friction is minimal not because of efficiency but because administrative neutrality is not expected. Political control is structurally embedded. This contrasts sharply with India’s model, where neutrality remains an institutional expectation.

Another recurring theme in the literature is role conflict. Elected representatives derive authority from democratic legitimacy, while bureaucrats derive legitimacy from legal-rational norms. This dual legitimacy often leads to confrontations in areas like land administration, law and order, and development programs.

Indian studies highlight that MPs and MLAs often claim constituency ownership, while IAS officers assert statutory jurisdiction, resulting in repeated friction. Scholars such as Gupta (2015) show that these conflicts intensify when ministers interfere in routine administrative matters or attempt to influence postings, procurement, and regulatory decisions.

Transfer and posting powers are identified as a major cause

of conflict in India. Iyer and Mani (2012) found that frequent transfers undermine bureaucratic performance and create vulnerability to political pressures. Wade (1985) and Kritika & Verma (2019) document how politically motivated transfers weaken morale and discourage professionalism.

Cases such as the transfers of Ashok Khemka, Durga Shakti Nagpal, and Anupam Choudhury exemplify how resistance to political interference leads to administrative retaliation. These incidents are widely cited in the literature as indicators of the costs of maintaining neutrality in a highly politicized environment.

Heady (2001) ^[9] and Peters (2021) ^[16] emphasize that political–administrative friction varies across governance systems. In Westminster systems (e.g., UK, India, Canada), bureaucratic autonomy is strong and so is the friction. In presidential systems with political appointments (e.g., USA, Brazil), friction at the top is less, but administrative continuity suffers. In authoritarian systems like China, friction is structurally suppressed because bureaucracy is an instrument of the ruling party.

Theoretical Framework: Politics–Administration Interface

Classical public administration theory—especially Woodrow Wilson’s (1887) ‘politics–administration dichotomy’—advocates a clear separation between policymaking and implementation. Although contemporary scholarship acknowledges that these boundaries are blur in practice (Svara, 2001) ^[20]. Administrative neutrality continues to be upheld as a normative ideal across most democratic systems (Puri & Verma, 2018) ^[18].

Ministers articulate political goals and try to gain the public support on their side while civil servants are expected to carry out decisions fairly. Attempts by ministers to influence operational matters override procedural norms or pursue partisan outcomes and often trigger friction between the two actors (Kaufman, 1956) ^[12]. However, when ministers attempt to influence operational matters, allocate resources on partisan grounds or override administrative procedures, tensions naturally arise. These tensions are not personal but institutional—rooted in divergent role expectations and accountability structures. Understanding these dynamics is critical to preserving a functional relationship between government officials and civil servants. Efforts to mitigate these tensions can lead to a more collaborative environment, fostering better decision-making and ultimately enhancing public trust in government institutions.

Neutrality and Impartiality as Structural Sources of Conflict

Neutrality is the cornerstone of civil service professionalism (Nigro & Kellough, 2014) ^[15]. Civil servants are mandated to treat all citizens equally, remain apolitical, and uphold administrative continuity irrespective of political change (Peters, 2021) ^[16]. These obligations often put them at odds with ministers seeking to advance constituency interests or reward political supporters (Aucoin, 2012) ^[2]. This tension highlights the delicate balance civil servants must maintain between their professional duties and the pressures exerted by elected officials. Navigating this complex landscape requires a steadfast commitment to impartiality and a profound understanding of the ethical implications of their role in governance.

When political actors demand preferential treatment or interfere in executive procedures, administrators resist to protect institutional integrity (Hood & Lodge, 2006) ^[10]. This resistance is frequently misinterpreted as disobedience, thereby escalating tensions (Dwivedi & Gow, 1999) ^[6]. The conflict, therefore, is structural: administrative neutrality directly collides with political expediency. This clash complicates decision-making processes and undermines public trust in governmental institutions. As a result, fostering a culture of transparency and accountability becomes essential to bridging the divide between political objectives and administrative duties.

The conflict is therefore not merely behavioural but embedded within the constitutional mandate of administrative neutrality.

Overlapping Jurisdictions and Competing Legitimacies

Much of minister–civil servant friction arises from overlapping jurisdictions. The same geographic territory is simultaneously a political constituency and an administrative district. Ministers argue that electoral accountability requires active involvement in local administrative matters, whereas civil servants view such involvement as encroachment on legal authority (Bevir, 2010) ^[4].

This duality becomes contentious especially in areas relating to:

- land and revenue administration (Maheshwari, 2014) ^[14] ^[14], law and order (Fukuyama, 2013) ^[8],
- resource distribution and welfare delivery (Peters, 2021) ^[16], and administrative postings and transfers (Kapur, 2020) ^[11].

Civil servants rely on institutional authority and professional norms, while ministers rely on the legitimacy derived from popular mandate. This coexistence of two valid but competing claims creates enduring systemic friction (Aberbach *et al.*, 1981) ^[1].

Objectives

The primary aim of this article is to examine the nature, causes, and implications of friction between ministers and civil servants, with a particular focus on the Indian administrative context and comparative insights from other governance systems. The specific objectives are:

1. To analyse the structural and institutional factors that contribute to friction between ministers and higher civil servants, particularly IAS officers.
2. To examine the role of administrative neutrality and impartiality in shaping minister–civil servant relations across different countries, including India, the United States, China, and Westminster-style democracies.
3. To understand jurisdictional overlaps between elected representatives and career bureaucrats and how these overlaps generate role conflict and administrative tension.
4. To explore key cases of conflict between civil servants and political leaders in India to illustrate the manifestations and consequences of such friction.
5. To compare systems with merit-based civil service appointments (e.g., India, UK, Canada) and systems with political appointments (e.g., USA, China) to determine how appointment mechanisms influence political–administrative cohesion.

6. To assess the implications of political interference, transfer politics, and bureaucratic autonomy for administrative morale, public service delivery, and democratic governance.
7. To offer recommendations for improving political–administrative coordination while safeguarding the neutrality and effectiveness of the civil service.

Discussion

The nature of work in the civil service is characterised by neutrality. Neutrality is the fundamental principle upheld in the functioning of the civil service. A civil servant is required to serve the ruling party without bias throughout their tenure; that is, they cannot oppose the decisions or orders of the ruling party in favour of the opposition. Doing so may result in expulsion from service. A public servant must not favour or discriminate against a client based on caste or religion when providing services. They are obligated to serve all individuals equally, regardless of caste, creed, language, colour, or sex. Furthermore, they are instructed and bound to serve the public without regard to any political affiliations they may have. Democracy does not endorse the idea that the ruling party will neglect those who do not support them, nor that such individuals will receive inferior service compared to the supporters of the ruling party. Consequently, a District Commissioner must serve the residents of their district with care and neutrality. However, Members of Parliament or ministers elected from within the jurisdiction of a Deputy Commissioner often attempt to interfere in matters concerning constituents from their party, which can conflict with district administration and create friction between IAS officers and ministers. A deputy collector is typically very conscious of their role and the limits of their responsibilities and is thus unafraid to challenge such interference.

Ministers often engage themselves in partisan activities within their electoral constituencies whereas civil servants typically maintain a non-partisan stance. Senior officials rarely accept ministers' involvement in a deputy commissioner's jurisdiction. To enhance their image in their constituencies, ministers interfere in various matters, which creates tension between the two groups. This trend is particularly evident in cases related to land dealings and law and order, where ministers unlawfully intervene, circumventing the authority of higher-ranking civil servants. For instance, the Haryana government transferred Ashok Khemka, a District Magistrate, for his refusal to approve a land deal involving Robert Vadra. Similarly, in 2013, an IAS officer named Nagpal was suspended by the Uttar Pradesh government for protesting against the activities of the sand mining mafia in Noida. More recently, in 2022, Mr Anupam Choudhury, the Deputy Commissioner, and Mr Raktim Baruah, the Additional Deputy Commissioner of Hojai district, were suspended by the Assam state government on charges of civilian harassment.

The friction between higher civil servants and ministers in India is greater than that of America. The underlying reason for this disparity lies in the appointment processes for higher civil servants. The Union Public Service Commission primarily appoints these officials in India whereas political appointments fill higher civil service positions in America. Despite the absence of the spoils system in America, the tradition of political appointments for higher civil services continues.

In the United States, there is less friction between ministers and senior officers in the administration as these officers are politically appointed and, consequently, tend to be less neutral in their administrative functions. They also have less job security as they can be removed from their positions as soon as the government changes. Thus, the tenure of higher officials depends upon the ruling party's staying in power. In contrast, higher civil servants in India enjoy complete job security. They are recruited at a relatively young age and typically serve the government until they attain the age of 60 or 65.

While Indian higher civil service maintains a high degree of neutrality, its counterpart in America is not required to exhibit the same level of impartiality. As a result, American higher civil servants are less likely to experience friction with ministers, given that they are appointed by those very ministers. In the American administration, ministers and high officials often collaborate seamlessly minimizing the potential for conflict between them. However, it's noteworthy that American political appointments for higher services have significantly decreased compared to the era of the spoils system.

In China, the higher civil services are loyal to the Communist Party of China, which is synonymous with the Chinese government. There is no distinction between the Communist Party of China and the Chinese government. In contrast, Indian civil servants are expected to remain politically neutral serving the government without questioning its policies. India has a plethora of political parties and therefore, civil servants must adhere to the directives of whichever party is in power. In China, however, there is only one party which maintains a perpetual rule eliminating any separation between the party and the government.

Higher civil servants in China do not strictly adhere to the principle of neutrality as their Indian counterparts do. In India, educated youth with diverse ideas and ideologies are recruited into the higher civil services from various regions, necessitating their loyalty to the ruling political party. In contrast, the Communist Party of China cultivates both the general populace and educated youth within a singular culture. It can be asserted that there is only one prevailing culture, that is, the culture of Communist Party of China.

As a result, young individuals recruited into the higher civil services in China are not required to exhibit the same level of neutrality expected in India. Consequently, the issue of friction between higher civil servants and ministers does not manifest as intensely as it does in India.

The Hong Kong government perceives the concept of political neutrality among civil servants as a 'myth', attributing it to the inaccuracies frequently evident in governmental policies. While the Hong Kong government may dismiss the notion of political neutrality in the civil service, it resolutely upholds the principle of "impartiality," which essentially serves the same function as political neutrality.

The Civil Service Commission, an independent body akin to India's Union Public Service Commission, is responsible for recruiting UK civil servants. These public servants uphold impartiality and neutrality, similar to the civil service in India. However, unlike India, only some permanent government employees in the UK are classified as civil servants; it is more accurate to refer to them as public servants, as is the case in India.

Given that the UK civil service maintains this impartiality and neutrality, there tends to be greater friction between ministers and civil servants compared to the United States, where political appointments have diminished the neutrality of administrators, and China, where a singular culture and ideology of the Communist Party predominate.

Dominic Raab, the Deputy Prime Minister of the UK, faced accusations in 2023 for his perceived oppressive behaviour towards senior civil servants. If the allegations against him prove to be true, he declared his resignation. Following the confirmation of these allegations, he resigned from his political position. During Boris Johnson's government, several senior permanent secretaries (civil servants) were either dismissed or compelled to resign for failing to adhere to the principles of political neutrality and impartiality.

France's civil service operates under a legal code that mandates public officials to act with integrity, honesty, objectivity, and impartiality. Civil servants in France cannot allow personal opinions to influence government decisions or policies. They are required to implement government policies without question, regardless of their personal views or preferences about the ruling party. Civil servants must prioritise their public service obligations over personal interests, and they are prohibited from using public resources for personal gain. It is evident that the French civil service is as stringent as that of India. These strict principles of political neutrality and impartiality can lead to friction between civil servants and ministers. Such friction may arise from governmental instability, which is common due to the frequent dismissal of prime ministers and the collapse of governments, as reported by BBC, YouTube, and NBC News.

Budget disputes in France create tension between the two parties. When former Prime Minister Michel Barnier implemented austerity measures, such as spending cuts and tax increases, it led to direct conflict between ministers and civil servants. The situation was exacerbated by large demonstrations from the general public, whose grievances needed to be addressed and managed by civil servants. Senior civil servants consequently protested against the government.

Conclusion

To conclude, this is a brief overview of the political impartiality and neutrality of senior civil servants and ministers in several countries, including India, the United States, the United Kingdom, China, and France. Almost all of these countries' civil services are politically neutral and impartial, with the notable exceptions of the United States and China. This commitment is essential for maintaining public trust and ensuring that government policies are implemented fairly and effectively. Preserving these principles amidst shifting political pressures remains an ongoing challenge as political landscapes evolve. Stricter adherence to these principles results in less friction between the two. However, some argue that complete political neutrality can hinder the ability of civil services to respond effectively to the changing needs and priorities of society. In certain cases, a degree of political engagement may be necessary to ensure that public policies reflect the will of the electorate and address pressing social issues.

Minister–civil servant friction is an inherent feature of administrative systems that uphold bureaucratic neutrality. It arises from overlapping jurisdictions, competing claims to

legitimacy, divergent role expectations, and the structural tension between political responsiveness and administrative impartiality. Comparative evidence suggests that systems with high bureaucratic autonomy and neutrality experience greater friction, while those with politicized administrative cadres experience fewer visible conflicts but reduced administrative independence.

Understanding the dynamics of this friction is crucial for strengthening political-administrative cohesion, enhancing accountability, and ensuring effective governance. Addressing it requires clearer legal demarcation of roles, strengthened institutional safeguards for civil servants, and a renewed commitment to the norms of neutrality and democratic responsibility.

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