

Federal Ombudsman—The Poor Man's Court

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THROUGHOUT the human history, the Office of the Ombudsman has existed in one form or the other in various societies. It has, over the years, emerged as an essential feature of every modern society as it embodies the broad principles mainly adherence to the rule of law and upholding will of the people, upon which the edifice of democracy is raised. Today, the institution of Mohtasib exists in over 140 countries of the world including Pakistan as the principal watchdog of public administration.

Broadly speaking, it protects the citizenry by acting as a strong bulwark against administrative excesses as well as acts of maladministration by the public service agencies. It also has a vital role in the promotion and protection of human rights and civil liberties. Pakistan witnessed establishment of this vital institution in 1983 through a Presidential order, which was later amended and broadened by an Act of the Parliament in 2013 which not only enhanced its powers but also imparted it with financial and administrative autonomy.

With 20 Regional Offices and 04 Complaint Collection Centers, today it covers almost the entire length and breadth of the country. It functions as a truly poor

man's court since it requires neither any fee nor the services of any lawyer as the dispensation of justice is absolutely free. Moreover, the procedure is short and simple. Multiple means are available to the public to lodge their complaints including the website, mobile phone or even a simple letter through post. The complainants can join the investigation process/hearings through skype or other online applications and unlike the conventional court system, the complaint is disposed of within the prescribed limit of 60 days.

This office received and processed a record number of complaints in 2023 i.e. 194,106 which is 18% higher than the preceding year. It is noteworthy that 88% complaints were disposed of within the prescribed time limit of 60 days. The incidence of complaints recorded in the 3rd quarter of the current year is nearly 14% higher than the same period last year. It manifests the growing public trust in the efficiency and viability of this institution as well as holds a promise for the future. The satisfactory disposal of increasing number of complaints is undoubtedly the result of hard work, dedication and commitment of its employees and series of initiatives including the Informal Resolution of Disputes (IRD), Outreach Complaint Resolution (OCR) and the Khuli

Katcheries besides the inspection visits to various public service agencies. In addition, a system of strict monitoring, follow up and verification of the implementation of every decision is in place and an impressive implementation rate of 85.4% was recorded in 2023.

During the current year, the Investigation Officers visited remote and far flung areas of the country and resolved 2210 complaints on the spot. This measure greatly enhanced the outreach and accessibility of this office and ensured free and expeditious relief to the general public. Time and again, the heads of the federal agencies have been instructed to address the grievances of the poor and marginalized segments of the society, following the highest standards of public service, efficiency and propriety in the discharge of their official responsibilities.

The Wafaqi Mohtasib Office in Pakistan stands out as a premier agency for administrative accountability with an accumulated experience and knowledge of over 41 years. This institution was established with the explicit mandate to diagnose, investigate, rectify and redress public grievances against maladministration by the government agencies. Its mandate flows from Article 37(d) of the Principles of Policy enshrined in Chapter 2 of the Constitution

of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, which entrusts the state with the responsibility to ensure provision of inexpensive and expeditious justice to the public.

The Wafaqi Mohtasib (Ombudsman)'s institution, has perfected its complaint handling mechanism comprising registration, investigation, appraisal, review and implementation of its decisions/findings. It is now fully capable of (i) resolving complaints of mal-administration in large number; (ii) reaching out to the complainants for redressal of grievances at their doorsteps; (iii) informal resolution of disputes; (iv) inspection of various federal government agencies to improve service delivery; and (v) undertaking studies/reports to ascertain the root causes of corrupt practices and recommending appropriate steps for their eradication.

Encouraged by the accomplishments of the past four decades, the Office of the Wafaqi Mohtasib under the stewardship of Mr. Ejaz Ahmad Qureshi remains committed to pursuing the goals and objectives as enshrined in the President's Order No. 1 of 1983. The trust and confidence of the general public that the institution has earned over the years, inspires it to serve not merely a complaint office but an architect of good governance.