

WAFAQI MOHTASIB: ENHANCING OUTREACH AND ACCESSIBILITY

BY: SYED MUHAMMAD ILYAS

Accessibility and outreach have been recognized as the most essential characteristics of any Ombuds Institution, according to the UN Resolutions. Mindful of this aspect, the Institution of the Wafaqi Mohtasib is attaching a great deal of significance to providing administrative justice to the people speedily and absolutely free of cost, virtually at their doorsteps, in line with the provisions of Article 37(d) of the Constitution.

Popularly known as the poor man's court, the Institution of the Wafaqi Mohtasib is doing a Yeoman's service with regard to speedy and free of cost resolution of the public complaints against mal-administration. Set up on 24th January, 1983 through a Presidential Order to diagnose, investigate, redress and rectify any injustice done to a person through mal-administration, it has, over the years, established itself as a premier agency of administrative accountability, committed to speedy redressal of public complaints.

The term mal-administration has been defined in the President's Order establishing the Institution as a decision, process, recommendation and it includes an act of omission or commission which is contrary to law, rules or regulations or is a departure from the established practice or procedure. Neglect, inattention, delay and inefficiency in the administration or discharge of duties and responsibilities on the part of any Agency or any of its employees also fall in the category of mal-administration. Mal-administration and bad governance are two sides of the same coin. Both breed in an environment of favoritism, discrimination and corruption where merit is the first causality.

Addressing mal-administration, therefore, is a means to ensuring sanctity of human rights and achieving the ultimate goals of good governance and the rule of law. The Office of the Wafaqi Mohtasib has proved to be a boon for the people. During the last 41 years of its existence, it has resolved the complaints of more than 2.1 million households. What is most significant is the fact that one does not need to hire a lawyer or to pay any kind of fee to get his or her complaint redressed through this office.

Initially, it had only four Regional Offices respectively at all the provincial headquarters of the country. Today, besides the Head Office at Islamabad, it has 17 Regional Offices and 04 Complaints Collection Centers, covering almost the entire the length and breadth of the country. Opening of new offices in the AJK and GB are also under active consideration. This office received and processed a record number of complaints during the year 2023, numbering at 194,106, which is a 18% higher than the preceding year. Out of these 193,030, complaints were disposed of, which is 22% higher than the previous year.

Greater reliance on IT tools has helped in remarkably increasing the institution's outreach. It can be gauged from the fact that the complaints received online during the outgoing year 2023 recorded an increase of 47% over the figure of 2022. The office has one of the latest IT facilities, depicting state of the art technology at the WMS. It is fully cognizant of the fact that the registration of complaints through the mobile apps/WhatsApp etc is on the rise as it provides ease of use and facility to the general public. Moreover, the Institution's revamped website with Urdu rendering of essential.

Information is yet another source facilitating the public, especially those who are not familiar with the English language. To facilitate the petitioners further, online hearing facilities are also available to the public. A helpline # i.e. 1055 is also there for seeking any relevant information and status of their respective complaints.

The Institution widened the scope of its activities relating to the complaint resolution by launching a project in January 2016 by the name of Outreach Complaint Resolution abbreviated as OCR. The field visits of the Investigation Officers on pre-announced dates and their interaction with the local/district administration, Press and media in presence of the officials of the administration have contributed significantly in this regard, thereby generating greater awareness about the Wafaqi Mohtasib's Office. As an extension of the OCR system, the Wafaqi Mohtasib and authorized Officers are also holding "Khuli Katcheries" for on-the-spot resolution of the complaints of the aggrieved citizens. This forum is available to all and sundry to raise any issue of public importance and to get administrative justice on the spot.

The OCR project was launched to provide speedy redressal of the complaints at the doorsteps of the people. During 2023, the Regional Offices at Bahawalpur, D.I.Khan, Gujranwala, Hyderabad, Lahore, Multan and Sukkur undertook OCR visits to various remote areas and helped resolve 3149 cases. The Khuli Katcheries mechanism is being followed in a fairly regulated manner in the remote areas of the country. During 2023 alone, Khuli Katcheries were held in 19 remote districts including Karak, Hangu, Bannu, Kohlu, Turbat, Shangla, Dargai and alike.

The OCR and Khuli Katcheries are proving to be very beneficial to the general public since the mechanism is instrumental in redressing public complaints in a prompt and hassle-free manner, mostly on the spot. These are especially suitable for people belonging to the remote and far-flung areas of the country, where access to justice is rather difficult. The OCR visits of the Investigating Officers are also used for greater interaction with the media, which helped in raising awareness about the public regarding the availability of the quasi-judicial forum and its easy accessibility for resolving their complaints against the federal authorities without any cost or services of a lawyer.