



Non – compliance to audit observations

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The Royal Audit Authority's report on civil servants indulging in fictitious tours raises serious questions on the professionalism and integrity of the bureaucracy.

Civil servants claiming allowances without travelling or inflating their claims is not new. The audit report only confirms how widespread the practice is and that it has become a norm. From sweepers, messengers and drivers to those holding specialist positions and those in between, civil servants at almost every level appear to have claimed more than what they are entitled to or work for. This rarely leaves anyone to file a complaint against such practices.

The audit authority found that civil servants in the agriculture, health and economic affairs ministries and Paro, Punakha, and Thimphu dzongkhags claimed travel and daily allowance (TA/DA) amounting to Nu 1.110 million without actually travelling or travels for which the allowance was inadmissible during the financial year 2016-17.

The amount shoots to Nu 18.017 million when other lapses in travel and daily allowances are included. Besides table tours, it includes payment of regular TA/DA for the travels within 10km radius, accompanying the head of government and head of ministry and payment of DA at higher rates by inflating position levels.

It is an irony that the agriculture sector, which has been seeing a decline in budget allocation over the Plan periods, incurred the highest in-country travel expenditures, accounting for 45 percent of the total expenses among the ministries. And the sector is still struggling to make the country self sufficient in food.

Although the audit authority continues to point out lapses in the management of public resources, its observations appear to go unheeded. When the Parliament deliberated the water shortage issue in Thimphu, the thromde had implemented only one of its 15 recommendations. The issue of recovering audit irregularities is also the same story. With such low compliance to audit observations, it should not be a surprise to see abuse of public resources occurring annually. Whether audit observations impact the annual performance agreement targets and ratings of the agencies is yet to be seen. But such utter disregard to audit findings is a grave concern. It shows weak monitoring and weaker accountability mechanisms in the bureaucracy.

Responses from the agencies to these recent audit findings are revealing. Except for the finance ministry and Paro dzongkhag administration, response from others are mere acknowledgments of the report. The agriculture ministry states it has no comments on the audit observations while Punakha dzongkhag administration thanks the audit authority and says that it will make due changes wherever possible. Thimphu dzongkhag administration appears offended that compared to others, audit observations were more detailed for the dzongkhag and that this may give a wrong impression to an outsider going through the report. It urges the audit authority to produce similar reports for other dzongkhags.

We are getting terribly good at getting our concerns and priorities misplaced. Agencies are not worried about the problems pointed out in their sectors but are anxious in seeking consolation on observations made for others. It is time the audit authority ensures that agencies do not take their observations lightly and hold concerned civil servants and heads of institutions accountable.

Claiming allowances through table tours and manipulation is not something to be proud of for the civil servants. It is an embarrassment.