After a Change of Regime, How Can Administrative Paralysis Be Avoided?

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The most dangerous moment in a change of regime is often not the day the old regime falls, but the morning of the second day: whether offices open, whether wages can be paid, whether hospitals take patients, whether water and electricity can be supplied — once the administrative system stalls, what ordinary people immediately feel is not an abstract system, but a rupture in daily life: pensions they cannot collect, documents they cannot obtain, illnesses they cannot get treated.

The key to avoiding paralysis is to separate “regime” from “administrative system.” What changes is the ruler, not the entire civil service. The conclusion of Question 12 in this series has already explained: the democratic transition in the Taiwan region did not lead to the collapse of the state administrative system; the administrative machine can keep running through a change of regime. The mainland transition likewise needs this line: chiefs can change, institutions cannot stop, archives cannot be lost, wages cannot be cut off.

1. When the Regime Changes Hands, Administration Does Not Change Shifts

First, a rule must be established: political officials come and go with a change of regime, while career officials remain in post by law. Political appointees at the level of ministers and governors can be reappointed under the new order, but career officials who handle household registration, taxation, social security, medical care, and education should stay in place locally and continue to perform their duties. Otherwise, every change of regime will become a system-wide personnel earthquake, and the cost of the earthquake will be borne by all residents.

Connected with this is the “caretaker arrangement”: in the window when old and new hand over, a caretaker responsible person designated by legal procedure maintains the operation of institutions, with authority limited to daily administration and emergency handling, and must not use the opportunity to make long-term personnel appointments or dismissals, or major asset disposals. A caretaker is neither the new regime nor an extension of the old regime, but a bridge — and the function of a bridge is to let people pass, not to let people live on top of it.

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2. Retention, Vetting, and Wages: The Order of These Three Things Cannot Be Wrong

After career officials are retained, the second thing is vetting, but the scope of vetting must be narrowed: only serious violations are pursued for individual responsibility; there is to be no general purge. Treating ordinary civil servants wholesale as accomplices of the old regime is both unjust and will directly create paralysis — because no one will dare to sign, no one will dare to handle matters, and the whole system will freeze itself. Vetting must follow legal procedure, and its conclusions must be appealable. This is the basic stance of Question 14 in this series on transitional justice; this question cites it without expanding on it.

The third thing is wages, and it must be placed foremost. Civil servants' wages, teachers' wages, and medical staff's wages being paid on time is the most direct signal of administrative continuity. A transitional arrangement that cannot even pay wages, no matter how stirring its slogans, cannot make civil servants believe that the new order is worth their loyalty. The wage payroll roster, accounts, and disbursement channels should be listed as the first item in the handover checklist.

3. A "Cannot-Stop List"

The transition period should list in advance a cannot-stop list: household registration and document processing, medical rescue and public health, water and electricity supply, transport operation, schools opening, garbage collection, and public security calls. These matters are the local responsibility of local governments; the centre only coordinates and allocates funds, and does not carry out a comprehensive takeover. Question 18 in this series will discuss specifically the maintenance of local governments and basic public services; this question first establishes its premise: services do not stop, because responsibility lies locally, not in waiting for the centre's new team.

The list must also be paired with a handover procedure: an inventory of archives, seals, accounts, contracts, and unfinished cases must be counted face to face between the old and new responsible persons and confirmed by signature. A handover without a list is the same as no handover — later, every muddled account will become political ammunition for mutual blame.

4. The True Danger of Paralysis: A Power Vacuum

The most dangerous consequence of administrative paralysis is not inconvenience, but a power vacuum. A vacuum will not stay empty for long: local strongmen will act on their own in the name of "maintaining order," and a new strongman will centralize power in the name of "restoring efficiency" — this is exactly the local warlordization and power monopoly that Question 25 in this

series seeks to prevent. Preventing paralysis, at bottom, is also the first line of defence against a new monopoly.

For this reason, the transitional administrative arrangement also needs two things: first, information disclosure, so that residents know which services are normal, which are being restored, and to whom to complain; second, citizen supervision and appeal channels, so that people who are treated unfairly have a place to make their case. The continuity of the constitution and law (see the discussion of the uses of the constitution in Introduction Part 2) is the bedrock of all of this: the new order is not lawlessness, but exchanging one set of rules for a better set of rules and continuing to operate.

Administrative continuity ultimately converts into political trust: when residents see documents handled as usual, wages paid as usual, and complaints answered by someone, only then will they believe that the new order is not another change of dynasty, but rules worth obeying. Trust is not propagandized into being; it is accumulated by offices opening on time every day. Once such trust is established, the transition period's other reforms have a social basis for being carried out; conversely, once administration stalls, even the best constitutional text will be treated as empty talk.

Further Reading

History of the Republic of China and Constitutional Reconstruction — 40 Questions | 中华民国历史与宪政重建四十问 (https://freechina.live/governance-public-policy/third-republic-governance-blueprints/roc-history-constitutional-reconstruction/)

Question 12: Why Did Taiwan's Democratic Transition Not Lead to the Collapse of the State Administrative System? (https://freechina.live/?p=22007)

Question 14: What Experience and Limitations Does Taiwan's Transitional Justice Have? (https://freechina.live/?p=22008)

Introduction Part 2: What Use Is a Constitution, After All? (https://freechina.live/?p=21234)

Question 17: Why Can Rebuilding Constitutional Order Not Rely Only on Taiwan's Existing Government? (forthcoming question in this series)

Question 18: Who Will Maintain Local Governments, Hospitals, Schools, and Basic Public Services? (forthcoming question in this series)

How to Prevent Local Warlordization and New Power Monopolies? (https://freechina.live/简体中文-simplified-chinese/如何防止地方军阀化和新的权力垄断？/)

References

History of the Republic of China and Constitutional Reconstruction — 40 Questions | 中华民国历史与宪政重建四十问 (https://freechina.live/governance-public-policy/third-republic-governance-blueprints/roc-history-constitutional-reconstruction/)

Question 12, “Why Did Taiwan’s Democratic Transition Not Lead to the Collapse of the State Administrative System?” (https://freechina.live/?p=22007) — the conclusion on the continued operation of the administrative system, cited by this question

Question 14, “What Experience and Limitations Does Taiwan’s Transitional Justice Have?” (https://freechina.live/?p=22008) — the stance on distinguishing individual responsibility, cited by this question

Introduction Part 2, “What Use Is a Constitution, After All?” (https://freechina.live/?p=21234) — the conclusion on legal continuity, cited by this question

Introduction Part 5, “Local Self-Government and Daily Life” (https://freechina.live/?p=21237) — the concept of local self-government, cited by this question

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