

Analyzing the Effectiveness of Administrative Reform Commissions in Nepal's Civil Service

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Abstract

Nepal has attempted administrative reform repeatedly since the 1950s through seven Administrative Reform Commissions (ARCs) and various committees, yet progress has been limited. This study examines why reforms have failed to produce lasting change and how a system-based approach could improve outcomes. Drawing on key informant interviews with former chief secretaries, ministers, ARC chairs, academia, and governance experts, combined with documentary analysis of ARC reports, policy papers, and international case studies, the findings highlight recurring barriers: political instability, patronage and union influence, weak monitoring, and the repetitive, top-down nature of reform reports. The passage of the Federal Civil Service Bill in 2025 addresses long-standing legal gaps but is unlikely to succeed without stronger implementation routines. The report recommends creating a permanent Delivery Unit under the supervision of the Office of the Prime Minister and Council of Ministers, modeled on international experience, to translate reform recommendations into measurable annual results. By institutionalizing monitoring, stocktakes, and public reporting, Nepal can shift from hero-driven to system-driven reform, embedding change into everyday bureaucratic practice.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background of Administrative and Governance Reform

Administrative reform broadly refers to deliberate efforts by governments to improve the structures, processes, and performance of public administration in order to make it more efficient, accountable, and responsive to citizens (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). James Iain Gow defines it as, “a conscious, well-considered change that is carried out in a public sector organization or system for the purpose of improving its structure, operation or the quality of its workforce.” (Gow, 2012) Public administration reform goes beyond technical tweaks; it's about reconfiguring institutions to strengthen accountability, streamline decision-making, and enhance service delivery. In developing countries, such reforms are often tied to broader governance reform agendas, which aim not only to strengthen bureaucratic machinery but also to promote values such as transparency, participation, and rule of law. (Aliyu et al., 2021)

Reform is necessary because public administration forms the backbone of state functioning. A capable and accountable bureaucracy is essential for implementing policies, delivering services, managing resources, and maintaining political stability. When administrative systems become politicized, inefficient, or rigid, the state's ability to govern effectively is undermined. As the UNDP option paper notes, “*Access to quality public services depends in large measure on the skills and motivation of the public employees who provide these services or oversee their delivery*”.

1.2 History of Administrative Reform Commissions in Nepal

Table of Administrative Reform Commissions in Nepal

| Year | Commission | Lead | Position during ARC | Major Focus |
|-----------------------|--|----------------------|--|---|
| 1952 A.D. (2009 B.S.) | Administrative Restructuring Committee | N.M. Buch | Senior Officer of Indian Civil Service | To study existing organizations of public administration |
| 1956 A.D. (2013 B.S.) | Administrative Restructuring Planning Commission | Tanka Prasad Acharya | Prime Minister | To articulate the Civil Service Act and Rules to strengthen administrative system |
| 1968 A.D. (2025 B.S.) | Administrative Reform Commission | Bedananda Jha | Former Minister | To endorse the reform measures for making civil service effective and |

| | | | | |
|--------------------------------------|--|-----------------------|------------------------------------|--|
| | | | | competent |
| 1976 A.D. (2033 B.S.) | Administrative Reform Commission | Bhekh Bahadur Thapa | Former Governor | To make administrative systems more development-oriented |
| 1991 A.D. (2048 B.S.) | Administrative Reform Commission | Girija Prasad Koirala | Prime Minister | Redefining the role of government and providing a role for private sector in governance |
| 2008 A.D. (2065 B.S.) | Administrative Restructuring Commission | Pampha Bhushal | Minister of General Administration | To redefine administrative structure according to federal republic structure |
| 2015 A.D. (2071 B.S) and 2020 (2076) | High Level Administrative Reform Implementation and Monitoring Committee | Kashi Raj Dahal | Former Senior Bureaucrat | Making the civil service more accountable, efficient and transparent. |
| 2025 A.D. (2082 B.S) | High Level Governance Reform Commission | Khadga Prasad Oli | Prime Minister | To make public administration less costly, right-sized, accountable, and capable, and to advance the relations among the three tiers of government |

For more than seventy years, Nepal has grappled with the challenge of reforming its civil service and governance structures. Since the establishment of the Buch Commission in 1952, successive governments have repeatedly turned to Administrative Reform Commissions (ARCs) as the primary vehicle for change. These include the Acharya Commission (1956), the Jha Commission (1968), the Thapa Commission (1976), the Koirala Commission (1991), the Administrative Reform Suggestion Committee led by Kashi Raj Dahal (2013-14), and most recently, the High-Level Governance Reform Commission (2025) chaired by Prime Minister K. P. Sharma Oli.

Alongside these Administrative Reform Commissions, the state has also experimented with a series of other reform-related initiatives. These include:

- 25-Year Master Plan for Public Administration (1998)
- Corruption Control Recommendation Committee Report (1999)
- Report on Organizational Structure, Training, and Corruption Control (1999)
- Public Expenditure Review Commission (2000)
- ADB Governance Reform Program (2001–2005)
- Study Report on the Voluntary Retirement Scheme (2004)
- Taskforce Report on the Establishment of the Ministry of Human Resources (2005)
- Vision Paper for Civil Service (2006)
- Study Report on the Implementation of Rank-Based System in Civil Service (2008)
- Study Report on the Existing State of Motivation in Civil Service (2011)
- Home Administration Reform Action Plan (2021)
- Federal Civil Service Bill (2025)

Across these decades, the diagnosis of Nepal’s governance problems has remained strikingly consistent. Each commission has identified the politicization of the bureaucracy, overlapping institutional mandates, a centralized and rigid administrative structure, and outdated personnel management systems as the primary obstacles to effective governance. Likewise, their recommendations have been remarkably repetitive: downsizing executive offices, strengthening the Public Service Commission, linking promotions to performance, enhancing accountability frameworks, and adopting modern management practices.

Yet despite this long record of reform efforts, implementation has been the exception rather than the rule. Studies have shown that only a small fraction of the recommendations of past commissions were ever translated into policy or practice. For instance, while nearly every commission has advocated performance-based evaluation, Nepal continues to operate under a system where civil servants routinely receive perfect scores regardless of actual contribution. The persistence of this gap illustrates that the problem lies less in identifying what needs to change, and more in ensuring that change is delivered.

Several factors explain this enduring implementation deficit. First, reform in Nepal has historically been hero-driven rather than system-driven. Success often depended on the energy of a particular political leader or bureaucrat, meaning initiatives faltered when coalitions shifted or when governments fell. Second, the bureaucracy itself has exhibited weak ownership of reform. Protected by political patronage and unions, civil servants have little incentive to internalize changes that threaten entrenched privileges. Third, there has been a lack of institutional mechanisms to ensure continuity. Once a commission produced its report, it was typically dissolved, leaving no dedicated body to follow up, monitor progress, or hold actors accountable.

In April 2025, the Government of Nepal announced the formation of a new High-Level Governance Reform Commission, again under the direct leadership of the Prime Minister. Unlike its predecessors, this body has introduced a new modality: instead of waiting to deliver a final consolidated report, it adopts a “real-time implementation” model, whereby recommendations are executed immediately upon endorsement. This approve-and-implement approach is significant in two respects. However, the commission could not function

because of the lack of commitment of the Chairperson as the Commission met only two times over the span of four months and did not come up with a single outcome. The Commission could not function because its leadership lacked political will. Later it was de-facto dissolved after the resignation of the Prime Minister following the Gen-Z protest on September 8-9, 2025.

1.3 Administrative Reform in Global and South Asian Context

Administrative reform has been a global phenomenon, shaped by economic pressures, democratization, and the demand for efficient service delivery. In the United Kingdom, the Fulton Committee (1966–68) and the Next Steps reforms sought to professionalize management and separate policy formulation from day-to-day administration. In Asia, Malaysia's Performance Management and Delivery Unit (PEMANDU) institutionalized reform delivery by directly reporting to the Prime Minister, while South Korea's Governance Innovation Office sustained reform momentum across electoral cycles through a permanent body with monitoring authority.

In India, the First Administrative Reform Commission (1966–70) produced 20 reports on issues such as training, district administration, and financial control, while the Second ARC (2005–09) generated 15 volumes covering ethics, e-governance, and local governance. These reforms underscored the need for comprehensive and system-driven approaches rather than ad-hoc, personality-driven efforts. Pakistan has undertaken repeated efforts at civil service reform, from the 1973 Administrative Reorganization Committee to the National Commission for Government Reforms (2001) and most recently the 2019 Civil Service Reform Taskforce. While each initiative emphasized merit-based recruitment, depoliticization, and performance management, implementation has been limited, with political instability and patronage systems continuing to undermine progress.

Bangladesh has also seen multiple attempts to modernize its bureaucracy. Following independence, the Administrative and Services Reorganization Committee (1972) and later initiatives under the Public Administration Reform Commission (1997) and Strengthening Public Administration Reform (2000s) projects stressed downsizing, decentralization, and improved service delivery. However, scholars argue that entrenched politicization, weak accountability mechanisms, and lack of continuity have constrained reform outcomes. (Abdullah, 2020)

1.4 Rationale for the Study

Administrative reform in Nepal has historically followed a cycle of commissions, reports, and partial implementation. Over seven decades, multiple Administrative Reform Commissions (ARCs) have identified almost identical problems and offered sensible recommendations, yet political instability, bureaucratic resistance, and the absence of a permanent delivery mechanism have meant that reforms rarely move beyond paper. The most recent High-Level Governance Reform Commission was expected to build momentum, but with the resignation of the Prime Minister in the wake of Gen Z-led protests against corruption and poor services, that body has been de facto dissolved.

This political moment creates both a vacuum and a rare opportunity. The interim government and the elected government that will follow in 2026 will inherit not just a set of unfinished reform initiatives, but also a powerful public demand for real change. While street protests have targeted corruption and unresponsive

politics, the deeper problem lies in Nepal's bureaucracy, which continues to operate with outdated structures, politicised transfers, and weak accountability. Without tackling the way government is organised and how civil servants are recruited, trained, and managed, political promises of reform cannot translate into daily improvements for citizens.

It is therefore more urgent than ever to revisit the history of Nepal's Administrative Reform Commissions, to learn why their recommendations repeatedly failed to take root, and to propose a new model of system-driven change that can withstand political turnover. This study positions bureaucracy at the centre of the debate on governance renewal, arguing that real transformation in Nepal will only come when commissions are paired with permanent delivery institutions that keep reform alive across governments. For the interim administration and the new leadership that will emerge after elections, bureaucratic reform is not an optional agenda, it is the foundation for restoring public trust and meeting the aspirations of a generation that is no longer willing to accept "business as usual."

1.5 Statement of the Problem

Despite more than seven decades of administrative reform efforts, Nepal's governance system remains tangled in a cycle of diagnosis without delivery. Since the Buch Commission of 1952, successive Administrative Reform Commissions have consistently recommended downsizing executive offices, instituting merit-based recruitment and promotion, decentralizing authority, and introducing modern management practices. These prescriptions, while valid, have been strikingly repetitive. Reports from the 1950s echo almost word-for-word the recommendations of the 1990s and 2010s, revealing a persistent recycling of ideas rather than a sustained implementation of change.

The core challenge is that these reform agendas have rarely addressed the political, bureaucratic, and capacity barriers that obstruct implementation. Politically, reforms have been vulnerable to unstable governments, short-lived coalitions, and patronage systems where bureaucrats are rewarded for loyalty to parties rather than performance. Administratively, the bureaucracy has proven resistant to reform due to frequent transfers, union protection, and performance evaluation systems that reward everyone equally, regardless of contribution. In terms of capacity, most commissions failed to realistically assess the financial, institutional, and human resources needed to translate their recommendations into action. As a result, ambitious reform proposals were routinely drafted without sufficient grounding in evidence, feasibility, or follow-up mechanisms.

The consequence is a reform trap: familiar problems are identified, familiar solutions are proposed, and familiar failures ensue. This cycle has eroded public confidence in reform processes, reinforced a culture of cynicism within the bureaucracy, and left citizens frustrated with poor service delivery. Nepal's experience demonstrates that repeating prescriptions without addressing underlying incentives and accountability structures does not lead to systemic change. Instead, reforms remain paper exercises, producing voluminous reports but little transformation in practice. Without tackling the deeper issues of political will, bureaucratic ownership, and institutional continuity, even this new modality may reinforce rather than escape the reform trap. Understanding why past reforms failed, and how current efforts might avoid the same fate, is therefore the central problem this study seeks to address.

1.6 Objectives of the Study

In this context, the present research seeks to

- (1) To analyse the key factors behind the limited implementation of past administrative reform commission recommendations in Nepal, identifying patterns of success and failure across different political and institutional contexts.
- (2) To generate practical, evidence-based suggestions for the interim government and the newly elected government to be formed in 2026, aimed at improving real-time implementation and avoiding the recurring pitfalls of previous reform efforts.

By drawing on seven decades of reform history, examining patterns of implementation, and offering practical tools for monitoring and accountability, this study aims to support the commission in transforming political will into measurable administrative results.

1.7 Research Questions

1. To what extent have the recommendations of past Administrative Reform Commissions in Nepal been implemented, and what factors have contributed to implementation successes or failures?
2. How can the upcoming government design and implement reforms in a way that avoids previous failures and ensures measurable outcomes within its one-year mandate?

1.8 Organization of the Report

The report is organized into six chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the study, providing background, rationale, problem statement, objectives, and research questions. Chapter 2 reviews relevant literature, including theoretical perspectives, international experiences, and Nepal's ARC history. Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology, including Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), document review, and the analytical framework. Chapter 4 presents the findings, organized thematically around political, bureaucratic, design, implementation, and capacity challenges. Chapter 5 discusses the findings in light of literature and comparative cases, highlighting implications for Nepal. Chapter 6 concludes with key insights and practical recommendations for breaking Nepal's reform cycle and ensuring sustainable governance reform.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Theories and Concepts of Administrative Reform

Administrative reform means planned changes to how government organizations are set up and run so they work better, use money wisely, and serve people fairly. The classic starting point is Max Weber's idea of "bureaucracy." He described a public service with clear rules, a chain of command, written procedures, and people hired on merit. This design, he argued, creates predictability and fairness, even if it can feel rigid. (Roth et al., 1968) In the United States, Woodrow Wilson's 1887 essay pushed for a professional civil service separate from day-to-day politics. He wanted trained administrators to carry out policies efficiently and honestly. Together, Weber and Wilson shaped the early belief that strong, rule-based institutions and professional staff are the foundation of good administration (Wilson, 1887).

Reform ideas changed in the late twentieth century. Many countries faced tight budgets and growing doubts about large, rule-heavy bureaucracies. A new approach, often called New Public Management (NPM), argued that governments should borrow tools from business: set clear targets, measure results, give managers more freedom, split big departments into smaller agencies, and sometimes use competition or contracts to deliver services. Christopher Hood summarized these ideas and showed how they promised better performance but also came with risks (Hood, 1991). Peter Aucoin explained how reform arguments often swing like a pendulum between central control and managerial freedom and why each direction brings both gains and tensions (Aucoin, 1990). Later, Hood and Guy Peters noted that NPM had reached a "middle age," where contradictions like asking for both flexibility and tight control had to be managed carefully, not ignored (Hood, 2004) And Christopher Pollitt cautioned against assuming every country is converging on the same model. He found real similarities across reforms, but also deep differences driven by history, law, and politics (Pollitt, 2001).

Economists and organization scholars added micro-level explanations for why reforms are needed and why they sometimes fail. William Niskanen argued that, without checks, agencies try to grow their budgets because they hold more information than their political overseers (Niskanen, 1968). Agency (principal agent) theory explained how information gaps and misaligned incentives between politicians, managers, and frontline staff can lead to poor performance unless contracts, monitoring, or pay systems are designed well (Eisenhardt, 1989). But adding targets is not a cure-all. A well-known review found a "performance paradox": more indicators can push people to game the numbers or focus on what is measured rather than what matters (van Thiel & Leeuw, 2002). These insights help explain why some reforms look good on paper yet struggle in practice.

From the 1990s onward, reform debates shifted from "how to run a single department" to "how to steer a whole system with many actors." R. A. W. Rhodes called this the rise of "governance," where the state works through networks of agencies, firms, and nonprofits rather than command-and-control alone (Rhodes, 1996). Erik-Hans Klijn and Joop Koppenjan developed this network view, showing that public problems often require coordination among interdependent players with different goals. Managing such networks takes negotiation skills, trust-building, and process management, not just hierarchy (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2000). Stephen Osborne pulled these ideas together as "New Public Governance," which focuses on collaboration and co-production with citizens and civil society (Osborne, 2006). In this stream of work, "good reform" means building the capacity to work across boundaries.

Because NPM sometimes fragmented the public sector, another wave of reforms tried to knit things back together. Tom Christensen and Per Læg Reid described “whole-of-government” approaches that strengthen center-of-government coordination, align policies across departments, and focus on shared outcomes (Christensen & Læg Reid, 2007). Scholars also proposed a “Neo-Weberian State.” Instead of choosing between strict legality (old bureaucracy) or pure market logic (NPM), the idea is to keep Weberian strengths, rule of law, public service ethos, while adopting smart performance tools and service standards (Lynn, 2008). The message is balance: protect fairness and accountability, but also push for results and better user experience.

Digital technology changed the reform agenda again. Patrick Dunleavy and colleagues argued that modern IT allows governments to rebuild services around users, integrate information across agencies, and simplify end-to-end processes called “Digital-Era Governance” (Dunleavy et al., 2006). Helen Margetts and Dunleavy later described a “second wave” driven by the web, cloud, and data analytics, where governments create shared platforms (for identity, payments, data) and redesign services rather than just putting old forms online (Margetts & Dunleavy, 2013). In simple terms: digital reform is not an IT add-on; it changes how the state works.

A final set of studies looks at “how to make reforms stick.” One influential view warns against copying “best practices” without local fit. Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock call this a “capability trap,” where organizations adopt modern-looking forms that do not solve real problems. They propose “problem-driven iterative adaptation” (PDIA): start from a concrete local problem, try small steps, learn, and expand what works while building coalitions that authorize change (Andrews, Pritchett, & Woolcock, 2012). This approach is practical and realistic: it accepts that politics, incentives, and uncertainty are part of reform, so learning and adaptation must be built in.

Putting the pieces together, three simple lessons stand out. First, there is no one “right” model. Strong public services usually blend Weberian fairness and due process, selective NPM-style performance tools, network skills to work across organizations, and digital platforms that simplify services. The right mix depends on local problems and capacity (Hood, 1991). Second, sequence and integration matter. Disaggregating agencies and piling on targets can sharpen focus, but can also fragment accountability; whole-of-government and digital-era reforms try to bring coherence back (Hood & Peters, 2004; Christensen & Læg Reid, 2007). Third, politics and learning drive success. Reforms last when leaders build coalitions, align incentives, and create space to test and improve solutions rather than importing a template and hoping for the best (van Thiel & Leeuw, 2002).

2.2 Review of Past Administrative Reform Commissions in Nepal

Nepal’s administrative reform story begins in the early 1950s, when outside and domestic experts laid the first foundations of a modern civil service.

N. M. Buch Commission (1952–53)

The first Administrative Reform Committee was established in 1952, soon after the fall of the Rana regime and the beginning of constitutional governance. The government was under Prime Minister Matrika Prasad Koirala, and since Nepal lacked strong local expertise in modern administration, the King invited N. M. Buch, an Indian civil servant, to lead the commission. The committee was tasked with providing a blueprint for a modern bureaucracy suitable for a new democracy. It recommended reorganizing ministries, cutting down unnecessary staff, improving coordination, and introducing clearer chains of command in government. It also emphasized decentralization to make the government more accessible to people, though at that time Nepal’s state was

heavily Kathmandu-centric. The report highlighted the need for merit-based recruitment through the Public Service Commission, but since the Commission itself was still very weak, implementation did not go far. Only a few structural suggestions were adopted, mostly at the central level, while most reforms remained on paper. Scholars argue that this limited impact was partly because Nepal was still very unstable and did not have the administrative backbone or resources to carry out deep reforms.

Tanka Prasad Acharya Commission (1956)

In 1956, Prime Minister Tanka Prasad Acharya chaired the Administrative Reorganization Planning Commission. This was a landmark in Nepal's administrative reform history because it was the first large-scale domestic effort to modernize bureaucracy. The Commission studied the growing demands of a modern state and proposed 13 key recommendations. Among them were setting up planning machinery for development, restructuring ministries to reduce overlaps, and improving staff training and accountability. It also recommended strengthening the Public Service Commission and giving it more independence to ensure that recruitment was merit-based rather than patronage-driven. Out of its 13 recommendations, 11 were implemented, making it the most successful reform initiative in Nepal's history. The fact that most of its proposals were adopted shows that the political leadership was willing to act, and that there was less resistance at the time compared to later years. Moreover, Acharya commission worked compartmentally where recommendations were approved one-by-one and the team started acting to implement immediately. Unlike other commissions, they did not wait the entire duration of the commission to get the final report and then start to act. For nearly a decade, the Acharya Commission's reforms shaped how ministries functioned and how staff were recruited. Its success is often contrasted with later commissions, which struggled with weak follow-up and political interference. This makes the Acharya Commission a benchmark against which all later reform efforts are judged.

Bedananda Jha Commission (1968)

The Jha Commission was formed during the Panchayat period under King Mahendra, when political parties were banned, and the monarchy controlled administration tightly. Bedananda Jha, a loyalist politician, was appointed to chair the commission. The main goal was to strengthen the bureaucracy so it could serve the partyless system effectively. The commission recommended rationalizing the number of ministries, improving efficiency through cost control, creating discipline within the bureaucracy, and strengthening personnel management systems. It also touched on decentralization, but in practice, this meant strengthening Panchayat bodies loyal to the monarchy. Implementation, however, was very limited. Only minor structural changes took place, while most recommendations were sidelined because the political priority was regime survival, not administrative efficiency. Scholars argue that the Jha Commission represents how reform efforts during the Panchayat period were shaped more by political loyalty than by governance needs. It set a precedent where reports were prepared but not translated into deep institutional change, and where civil servants were rewarded for loyalty rather than merit (Bhul, 2022).

Bhekh Bahadur Thapa Commission (1975)

The Thapa Commission was another Panchayat-era reform body, set up under King Birendra with Bhekh Bahadur Thapa as chair. By this time, the state had grown in size and costs, and there were rising concerns about inefficiency, corruption, and bloated administration. The commission recommended downsizing bureaucracy, reducing government expenditure, strengthening planning units within ministries, and reinforcing merit-based performance evaluation. It also proposed creating an Administrative Staff College to train civil

servants, which was eventually established in 1982. However, most of its ambitious proposals did not materialize. The authoritarian setting meant that the focus was more on ensuring control than empowering civil servants to perform better. (Ghimire & Ashraf, 2016) Very few downsizing measures were actually carried out, and patronage politics inside the Panchayat continued. The implementation of the Staff College was one visible outcome, but overall, the Thapa Commission, like the Jha Commission before it, became more of a political gesture than a genuine transformation tool. Later reviews note that corruption, “afno manchhe” culture, and union-like networks within the bureaucracy only strengthened in this period, undermining reform. (Bhul, 2022)

Girija Prasad Koirala Commission (1991–92)

Following the restoration of multiparty democracy in 1990, there was huge public demand to make the government more accountable and efficient. The Interim Government under Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala set up a High-Level Administrative Reform Commission, chaired by senior technocrat Bhekh Bahadur Thapa. Submitted in 1992, the commission produced one of the lengthiest reform documents in Nepal’s history, with 116 recommendations. These included reducing ministries from 21 to 18, downsizing civil servants to 77,000, unifying service structures, introducing lateral entry of professionals, and making promotions merit-based. It also stressed the need for greater transparency and anti-corruption mechanisms. However, despite the strong report, implementation was very poor. Only a handful of its recommendations were carried out, such as limited attempts at downsizing, which were later reversed. Ministries actually increased in number, and staff numbers rose again. Frequent government changes in the 1990s, political instability, and resistance from civil service unions made it difficult to follow through. This commission is often cited as an example of Nepal’s “reform trap,” where ambitious proposals are produced but not institutionalized (ADB, 2010).

Pampha Bhusal Commission (2008–09)

The Pampha Bhusal Commission was set up during a major political shift, from a constitutional monarchy to a democratic republic. Led by Minister for General Administration Pampha Bhusal under Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal’s government, its mandate was to restructure the bureaucracy to serve a new federal state. The commission even sent delegations to the Netherlands and Thailand to study how other countries had managed large-scale administrative restructuring. The aim was to design a bureaucracy that was more citizen-friendly, cost-efficient, and aligned with federal principles. However, before the commission could finalize and institutionalize its work, Prime Minister Dahal resigned in May 2009. With his resignation, the cabinet was recalled, and the commission lost continuity. As a result, its recommendations were never formally adopted. This makes it one of the clearest examples of how political instability directly disrupts administrative reform. (Ghimire & Ashraf, 2016) Scholars point out that the Bhusal Commission could have provided early guidance on federal restructuring, but because of discontinuity, Nepal entered federalism without a comprehensive administrative blueprint (KC & Kim, 2018).

Kashiraj Dahal Commission (2012 onward)

In the years after the peace process and with the drafting of a federal constitution underway, the government appointed Kashiraj Dahal, a respected senior Bureaucrat, to lead several high-level committees on administrative reform. These commissions recommended reducing the number of ministries, rationalizing overlapping agencies, cutting down unnecessary public holidays, and making postings and promotions more merit-based. They also prepared proposals for aligning the bureaucracy with the three-tier federal system that was being designed. Dahal’s commissions are frequently cited in later government decisions, such as debates about reducing federal ministries in 2018. Some of the recommendations were adopted and internalized by the

Constitution of Nepal in 2015. However, implementation was again partial. Political instability, frequent cabinet changes, and resistance from civil servants limited follow-through. Dahal’s work remains important because it directly addressed the federal context, but without a standing delivery mechanism, his recommendations, like those before, were only selectively adopted. (Bhul, 2022)

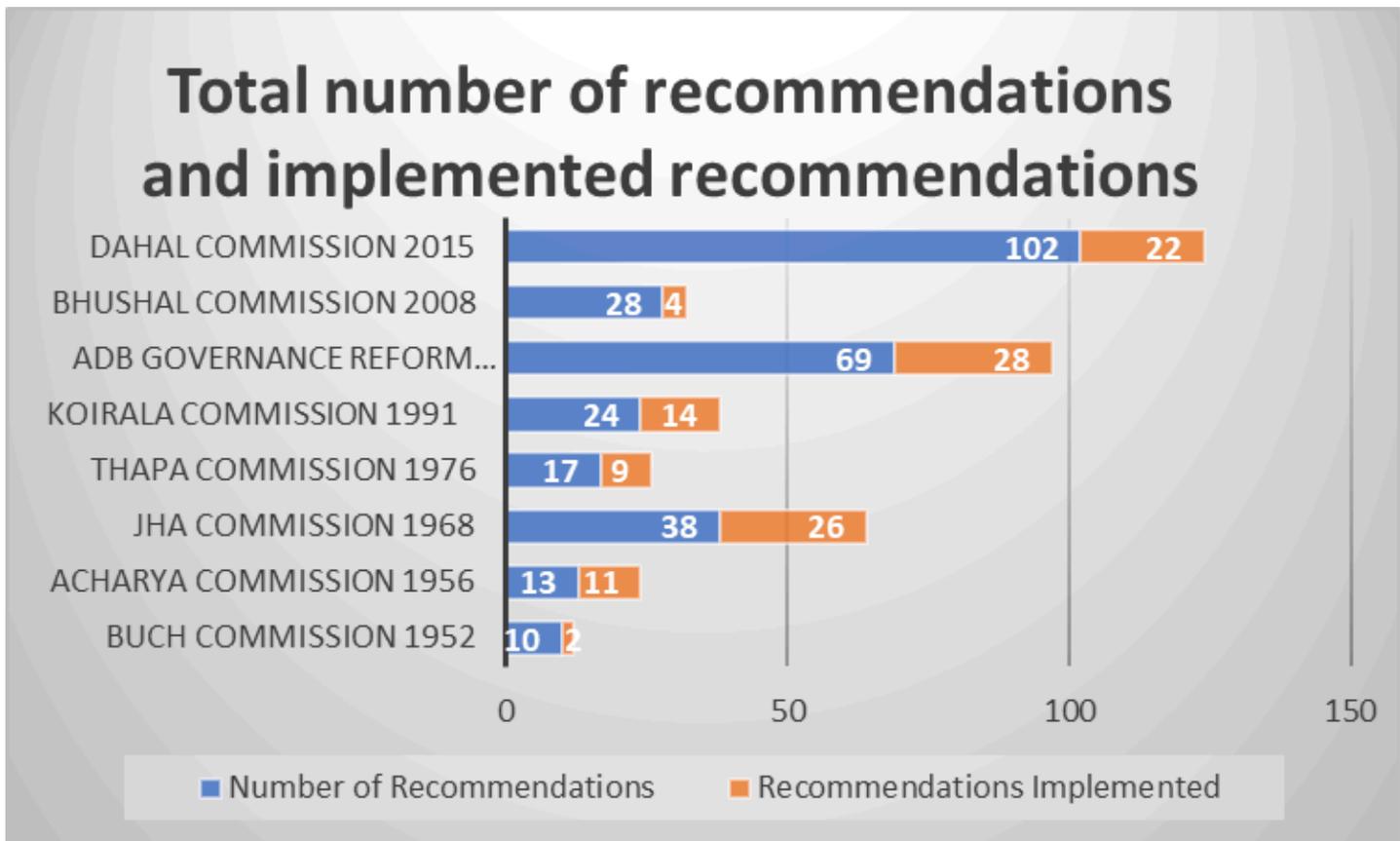


Table showing the rate of implementation of recommendations. Source: K.C & Kim, 2018.

2.3 Key Insights from International Experiences

2.3.1 India: Karmayogi Abhiyan

India’s Karmayogi Abhiyan (launched in 2020) is a national capacity-building program that uses the iGOT digital platform to map every government role to required competencies and provide continuous, personalized training. It aims to make India’s bureaucracy more skilled, accountable, and citizen-centric by linking learning directly to job performance and career growth. Karmayogi Abhiyan is a national program that starts with the job and then builds learning and management routines around that job. Each ministry first writes a FRAC map that lists the functions, roles, activities and the exact competencies needed for every position. This is a practical catalogue that turns a post into a set of skills to be learned and used on the job. Official guidance explains the FRAC steps and shows how ministries should do the mapping before they buy training or design courses. (IGot Karmayogi, 2025) After mapping, the ministry prepares an Annual Capacity Building Plan. The Capacity Building Commission reviews these plans, provides templates and an approach paper, and asks departments to treat the plan as a living document that links training to real tasks and outcomes. Civil servants then learn

through the iGOT Karmayogi platform, which brings together hubs for learning, competencies, career, discussions, networking and events, so that courses and credentials are tied back to the FRAC skills that a post requires. (IGot Karmayogi, 2025) The program has reached large scale, with the government announcing that registrations on iGOT passed one crore in May 2025. That scale matters because it shows that ministries are using the same platform and the same vocabulary for skills, which helps routine monitoring and follow through. For countries that rely on Administrative Reform Commissions, the Indian experience is relevant because a commission can set the blueprint while the FRAC to plan the platform cycle becomes the day to day engine that implements recommendations and keeps score across departments. India's own Second Administrative Reforms Commission produced topic wise reports on ethics, personnel, local government and more, and Karmayogi gives a way to carry those ideas into training, staffing and appraisal at scale.

2.3.2 Malaysia: PEMANDU

Malaysia created PEMANDU inside the Prime Minister's Department in 2009 to turn national priorities into projects with owners, milestones and public scrutiny. The work began with intensive delivery labs that ran for several weeks and brought officials, experts and stakeholders into one room to define the problem, agree on the interventions and write a schedule with monthly indicators. (World Bank, 2017) After the labs, the plans were shown at Open Days where thousands of citizens saw the targets and gave feedback, and the feedback was used to tighten the final roadmaps. (PEMANDU, 2010) The routine that followed was simple and disciplined. Delivery task forces met frequently, dashboards flagged red or amber issues, and a small centre team escalated blockages to ministers. The method was documented as eight steps that run from cabinet direction to labs, Open Days, published roadmaps, target setting, implementation, external audit and annual reporting. (World Bank, 2017) Reported results included a fall in Index Crime by almost one half between 2010 and 2016, which shows how a tight delivery rhythm can sustain focus beyond the launch year. For countries that use Administrative Reform Commissions, the Malaysian lesson is to pair the commission with a delivery arm that sets few priorities, writes measurable initiatives with named owners and then runs a steady cadence of reviews and public reporting so that agreed actions actually happen.

2.3.3 UK: PMDU

The United Kingdom created the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit to make sure a short list of national priorities really improved. The unit worked with the Treasury system of Public Service Agreements so that each target had a clear owner, a budget and a way to measure quarterly progress. (Clement, 2022) Departments wrote short delivery plans with trajectories for each quarter and senior leaders met for regular stocktakes led by Number Ten. At those meetings the conversation began with data, moved to the reasons for any gap and ended with a decision and an assigned follow up. The traffic light system of red, amber and green made the status visible at a glance and kept attention on the few priorities that mattered most. Independent histories describe the unit's set up and purpose and link it to the wider public service reform effort of the early two thousands. On results, multiple studies record that waiting times fell markedly in the 2000s, including the step down in maximum waits toward the twelve month and then the eighteen week referral to treatment standards, although performance later slipped in the next decade. The point of the process is that targets, funding and repeated stocktakes together can move stubborn service outcomes when they are kept at the very top of government. (Bevan & Hood, 2006) For countries that use Administrative Reform Commissions, the United Kingdom also shows the value of a commission that sets the direction and a delivery team that drives weekly follow through.

The Fulton Committee's inquiry in the late nineteen sixties created a push for stronger management skills, systematic training and a Civil Service Department, and it illustrates how a blue ribbon review can feed into long term capability building when the centre turns findings into routines.

2.3.4 Administrative Reform Commissions in other countries

Many countries create independent commissions to review the civil service and recommend reforms. Typical steps include a government mandate (terms of reference), a secretariat to gather evidence and hold hearings, reports with recommendations, and sometimes a dedicated implementation unit afterward. Their impact depends on political backing and follow-through.

How they've worked in practice:

- The United Kingdom's Fulton Committee (1966–68) was tasked with reviewing the structure, recruitment, and training of the civil service. It gathered wide-ranging evidence and concluded that the service lacked management skills. The committee recommended strengthening managerial capacity and establishing a dedicated Civil Service Department. The government acted on these proposals, resulting in a significant expansion of management training programs. Records from the House of Lords and the Fulton Report itself show a clear sequence from inquiry to recommendations and then to concrete system changes.
- In Canada, the Glassco Commission (1960–62) reviewed departments one by one and recommended decentralizing management, reducing central controls, and improving bilingual lawmaking and service delivery. Its approach linked findings directly to practical management fixes. Government publications and later retrospectives highlight how the commission shaped reforms in financial administration and service culture, marking an important shift in Canada's public management.
- Australia's Coombs Royal Commission (1974–76) consulted widely across government and the public on how Commonwealth administration should function. Its recommendations helped redefine roles, modernize procedures, and set the foundations for the Australian Public Service in the decades that followed. Later analyses note that the Coombs reforms had a long-term influence on the way ministers' offices interacted with departments and how policy advice was structured.
- New Zealand's Royal Commission on State Services (1962) produced reforms that culminated in the State Services Act of 1962. The commission emphasized reorganization and a stronger central personnel system. Academic literature records that this inquiry gave New Zealand a more coherent state service framework and improved the professional management of its bureaucracy.
- India's Second Administrative Reforms Commission (2005–09) produced 15 detailed reports on themes such as ethics, right to information, local governance, and public order. Its consultative process involved expert groups and wide stakeholder input. The reports are praised for their depth and relevance, but reviews, including those in the Economic and Political Weekly, stress that without sustained political will, even strong recommendations remain only partly implemented.
- Bangladesh's Public Administration Reform Commission (2000) focused on reviewing service rules and improving front-office performance. It recommended citizen charters and other accountability tools. However, later academic assessments found the results mixed, noting that while some innovations appeared, political instability and entrenched incentive problems prevented lasting change.
- In Pakistan, the National Commission for Government Reforms (2006–08) compiled a comprehensive set of proposals covering grading systems, human resource management, training, and devolution.

Research summaries show that while the commission diagnosed key problems effectively, implementation stalled due to lack of political consensus. Analysts argue that in Pakistan's context, politics rather than technical design has been the decisive barrier to sustained reform.

The international evidence points to one clear lesson. Real reform comes from routines that turn big goals into daily work. India shows how to start with the job, map roles to competencies, fund annual learning plans, and use one common platform so progress is visible and comparable. Malaysia shows how to convert priorities into specific initiatives through time-boxed labs, invite public feedback, and keep monthly delivery meetings and simple dashboards that expose delays and unblock them fast. The United Kingdom shows how a small team at the center can set a short list of national targets with budgets, require brief delivery plans with named owners, and hold regular stocktakes led from the top until performance moves. For countries that rely on Administrative Reform Commissions, the final step is to pair a good blueprint with a permanent delivery unit that owns the data, runs a steady review rhythm, publishes results, and protects merit and accountability. Do not copy labels or structures. Copy the cadence, the transparency, and the tight link from role to skill to output, then adapt these to local problems, capacity, and politics.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore why successive administrative reform initiatives in Nepal have struggled to move from recommendation to implementation. A qualitative approach is most appropriate because the research seeks to capture the perceptions, experiences, and interpretations of political leaders, senior bureaucrats, and governance experts who have been directly or indirectly involved in the reform process. Unlike quantitative surveys, which measure trends at scale, this design enables a deeper understanding of the complex political, bureaucratic, and institutional dynamics that shape reform outcomes.

The research is organized around two complementary strategies:

1. **Key Informant Interviews (KIIs):** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with former Chief Secretaries, Secretaries, politicians, governance experts, and academics. This allowed for flexibility in probing respondents' experiences while ensuring coverage of core themes such as reform design, implementation barriers, political will, bureaucratic incentives, and accountability mechanisms. KIIs are especially useful for capturing insider perspectives on sensitive governance issues that are not fully documented in official reports.
2. **Document and Report Analysis:** Primary and secondary documents were systematically reviewed, including reports of past Administrative Reform Commissions, government policy papers, relevant legislation, and academic literature. This provided both historical depth and triangulation, allowing interview findings to be compared against the official record and scholarly analysis. To contextualize Nepal's experience, the research incorporates comparative case studies of administrative reform from South Asia and other countries.

The study uses a thematic analysis framework, in which data from interviews and documents were coded and organized into themes such as political constraints, bureaucratic dysfunction, capacity limitations, and reform ownership. This design allows the research to move beyond descriptive accounts of individual commissions toward a more integrated explanation of why reforms repeatedly fail and what lessons can be drawn for the new initiatives.

By combining elite interviews with systematic document analysis, the research design balances empirical evidence (from those directly involved in reform) with textual evidence (from commission reports and secondary sources). This triangulation strengthens the reliability and validity of findings, while also providing a nuanced account of Nepal's reform trajectory.

3.2 Data Collection Methods

This study employed two primary data collection methods: Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and document and report analysis. Together, these methods ensured both empirical depth and historical breadth, enabling triangulation of findings and strengthening the overall validity of the research.

3.2.1 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)

Key Informant Interviews were used to capture the experiences, perceptions, and insights of individuals who have played critical roles in shaping or observing administrative reform in Nepal. Semi-structured interview guides were designed to allow flexibility while ensuring consistency across core themes, such as:

- The design and feasibility of past reform recommendations.
- Institutional and political barriers to implementation.
- Bureaucratic incentives and disincentives.
- Perceptions of the effectiveness of monitoring and accountability mechanisms.
- Lessons for the 2025 High-Level Governance Reform Commission.

A total of 15 interviews were conducted with former Chief Secretaries, Secretaries, Former Ministers, international governance experts, and academics. These respondents were selected purposely, based on their direct involvement in or close observation of reform processes. Interviews were conducted in a conversational style, ensuring that participants could reflect freely while also addressing the guiding questions. Notes and transcripts were coded thematically to identify recurrent patterns and points of divergence.

3.2.2. Document and Report Analysis

To complement the KIIs, the study also undertook a systematic analysis of primary and secondary documents. Key materials included:

- Reports of past Administrative Reform Commissions (1953–2025).
- Related government documents, such as the 25-Year Master Plan for Public Administration (1998), the Corruption Control Recommendation Committee Report (1999), and the Public Expenditure Review Commission Report (2000).
- Policy drafts such as the Federal Civil Service Bill and Home Administration Reform Action Plan (2021).
- Scholarly articles, policy briefs, and comparative studies on governance reform in South Asia and beyond.

Document analysis served two functions. First, it provided a historical baseline of the types of reforms proposed in Nepal over seven decades. Second, it enabled triangulation with interview data, helping to identify where respondents' perspectives converged with or diverged from official records and prior analyses. This process helped ensure that the study's findings were grounded not only in subjective accounts but also in documentary evidence.

3.3 Sampling and Respondent Groups

The study employed a purposive sampling strategy to identify respondents who possess deep knowledge and first-hand experience of administrative reform in Nepal. Given the elite nature of the subject matter, the focus was on individuals who have either directly participated in reform commissions, overseen reform implementation as senior officials, or studied reform processes as experts.

Purposive sampling was complemented by snowball sampling, whereby initial respondents recommended additional individuals with relevant expertise. This approach ensured that the sample included diverse perspectives while remaining focused on key actors in the reform process. This mix of respondents provided a balanced view of reform dynamics, capturing the perspectives of both decision-makers (politicians), implementers (bureaucrats), and observers (experts). Although the sample size was relatively small, the elite and specialized nature of the respondents ensured that the data generated was rich, nuanced, and highly relevant to the research questions.

3.4 Data Analysis Approach

The data generated through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and document analysis were examined using a combination of thematic coding and framework analysis. These approaches were chosen because they allow for both inductive identification of emergent themes and deductive organization of data according to the study’s research questions.

3.4.1 Thematic Coding

Interview transcripts and notes were first subjected to open coding, where recurring words, concepts, and patterns were identified line by line. Codes were then grouped into broader categories such as *political constraints*, *bureaucratic dysfunction*, *leadership and ownership*, *capacity limitations*, and *accountability mechanisms*. Through iterative comparison, these categories were refined into core themes that captured the systemic barriers to reform implementation.

To ensure reliability, codes were revisited multiple times to check for consistency and to guard against researcher bias. Extracts from KIIs were compared with documentary evidence to confirm or challenge emerging interpretations. This process allowed the study to move beyond individual anecdotes toward patterns that cut across respondents and sources.

Coding framework for Data Analysis

| Theme | Sub-Themes | Illustrative Sources |
|-----------------------|--|--|
| Quality of the Report | Evidence-based; Contextualization; recommendations Top-down | Commission Reports, Experts |
| Political Factors | Political will; Party patronage; Political instability | Politicians, Former Secretaries, Commission Reports |

| | | |
|---------------------------|---|--|
| Bureaucratic Dynamics | Incentives and disincentives; Union influence; Transfers | Bureaucrats, Politicians, Governance Experts |
| Institutional Design | Top-down recommendations; Repetition; Lack of follow-up body; Donor influence | Documents, Experts |
| Capacity Constraints | Financial resources; Human capital; Training gaps | Secretaries, Academics |
| Accountability Mechanisms | Performance evaluation; Monitoring systems; Oversight | Commission Reports, KIIs |
| Reform Outcomes | Partial success; Abandoned initiatives; Symbolic reforms | Documents, Politicians |
| International Study | Comparative lessons; Transferable practices; Delivery models | International Governance Experts, Academic Literature |

3.4.2 Framework Analysis

Building on the thematic coding, a framework analysis was applied to systematically organize findings against the research objectives and questions. A matrix was constructed with key themes (e.g., political factors, bureaucratic incentives, institutional design, resource capacity, monitoring and follow-up) as columns, and data sources (individual interviews, commission reports, policy documents) as rows. This enabled structured comparison across respondent groups and documents.

Framework analysis allowed the study to:

- Identify areas of convergence and divergence between political, bureaucratic, and expert perspectives.
- Trace how challenges and recommendations have been repeated across successive commissions and reports.
- Highlight gaps between diagnosis (what commissions recommended) and delivery (what was actually implemented).

3.4.3 Integration of Data Sources

The two methods complemented each other. KIIs provided insider perspectives on why reforms fail in practice, while document analysis offered a historical record of official recommendations. By triangulating both sources within the framework matrix, the study was able to produce a nuanced explanation of Nepal's reform stagnation and draw lessons for the ongoing 2025 High-Level Governance Reform Commission.

3.5 Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights into the challenges of administrative reform in Nepal, several limitations must be acknowledged.

First, the research relied on a relatively small sample of 15 Key Informant Interviews. Although respondents were purposely selected for their expertise and direct involvement, their views cannot be assumed to represent the entire spectrum of perspectives within Nepal's political and bureaucratic system. The findings therefore reflect depth rather than breadth. Second, the study is based largely on qualitative data. While this approach enables rich and nuanced understanding, it does not provide the kind of measurable generalizations that quantitative surveys might offer. The reliance on interpretive accounts also means that findings are influenced by the subjective experiences and recollections of respondents, which may carry personal or political bias.

Third, access to some official documents and commission records was limited. Several reports were either unavailable in the public domain or lacked detailed documentation of deliberations and follow-up actions. This restricted the ability to fully reconstruct the implementation history of every reform initiative. Fourth, the research was conducted within a limited timeframe, which constrained the number of interviews and depth of archival exploration that could be undertaken. Additional fieldwork, particularly with mid-level civil servants and provincial/local officials might have yielded further perspectives on reform implementation at operational levels.

Finally, this research was conducted during the tenure of the 2025 High-Level Governance Reform Commission, capturing perceptions at a particular moment when reform initiatives were still underway. However, by the final writing phase, Gen-Z led protests had culminated in the collapse of the government, shifting the political context and requiring the analysis to adjust its orientation toward the new administration rather than the commission itself. As such, the findings reflect a transitional period rather than long-term reform outcomes. Nonetheless, triangulation through Key Informant Interviews and systematic document analysis enhanced reliability, ensuring that key themes were cross-verified across multiple sources.

Chapter 4: Analysis and Findings

4.1 Political Drivers and Constraints

Political factors play a crucial role in shaping the effectiveness of reform commissions in Nepal. Despite the technical soundness of some reform efforts, the political environment often impedes their translation into tangible outcomes. This chapter analyzes the multifaceted political dimensions that hinder the implementation of reform commission recommendations, drawing on key informant interviews with former bureaucrats, politicians, governance experts, and academic literature on Nepalese governance.

4.1.1 Political Will and Accountability Deficit

One of the most significant barriers to reform implementation is the pervasive absence of political will. Political actors in Nepal frequently prioritize party loyalty, patronage networks, and personal political survival over institutional reforms that could generate broader public benefits. As one former bureaucrat interviewed for this study put it, *“No matter how good the recommendations are, once the government changes, everything stops. Parties care more about rewarding their loyal cadres than about sustaining reforms.”* Accountability mechanisms are largely vertical within parties rather than horizontal toward public or institutional mandates. Moreover, reforms often threaten entrenched interests and power relations, making politicians resistant to championing or even endorsing reform agendas. As mentioned by an interviewee, *“Leaders are accountable upward to their party, not outward to citizens.”* The culture of politicized leadership constrains reform ownership and weakens commitment to follow-through, resulting in a systemic gap between reform recommendations and political priority-setting.

4.1.2 Politicization of Reform Agendas

Reform commissions in Nepal commonly face politicization, with political figures dominating leadership and decision-making roles. While political leadership is essential for legitimacy and authority, excessive political control dilutes the technical rigor and impartiality needed for reform design and implementation. This was seen in the recent effort of the High-Level Commission of 2025 itself. Since the Prime Minister chaired the commission, they could hardly meet two times in 4 months to discuss reform agendas. And to add to that, the commission could not even start their mandate as the political leaders could not come to a decision on who the political nominees would be. Political agendas often overshadow evidence-based policy-making, resulting in fragmented, compromised, and sometimes contradictory reform recommendations. The involvement of the Prime Minister and cabinet ministers alongside technocrats creates complex power dynamics that hinder the strategic focus necessary for coherent reform advancement. Politicization also limits the inclusion of diverse stakeholder views, weakening reform legitimacy.

4.1.3 Short Political Tenures and Instability

Nepal's frequent government changes and short political tenures undermine the continuity required for effective reforms. Political instability results in episodic commitment toward reforms, where new governments deprioritize or reverse predecessor initiatives. This was evident in the Pampha Bhushal led commission. When the Minister was recalled, the commission could not gain momentum and Nepal lost a huge opportunity to prepare for the administrative change that comes with federal restructuring. The uncertain tenure discourages politicians and reform champions from assuming responsibility for long-term reforms, fearing political risk or loss of support. This volatility contributes to reform fatigue, hampers institutionalization, and disrupts ongoing

administrative adjustments. Sustainable reform requires political stability and leadership continuity, which remain elusive within Nepal's current political framework.

4.1.4 Party Patronage and Political Interference

The deep-rooted party patronage system in Nepal politicizes appointments and resource allocations crucial for reform execution. Political loyalty often supersedes merit in appointments to key administrative and reform commission positions. As one former ARC chair reflected, *“Political nominees were chosen not because of their expertise, but because the ruling party trusted their loyalty. That is how most commissions are staffed, and it undermines credibility from the very beginning.”* This arrangement shields personnel from accountability and incentivizes allegiance over competence, thereby resisting reforms that threaten established patronage networks. Political interference distorts institutional autonomy and compromises the meritocratic processes essential for effective governance reforms. The persistence of party patronage obstructs reforms intended to enhance transparency, equity, and efficiency.

4.1.5 Limited Stakeholder Engagement

Reform commissions tend to be elite-driven with limited engagement of broader political and social stakeholders such as civil society, marginalized groups, and local actors. This limited inclusivity restricts the political legitimacy and social acceptance of reforms. Engaging diverse stakeholders is essential for consensus-building and for addressing Nepal's complex socio-political cleavages. When asked how the consultation process was done, a former ARC member mentioned that they consulted with subject-matter experts, and when asked to see the list of experts, they were mostly elites with party-based loyalty rather than the local actors. (Shakya, 2009) Broad-based stakeholder involvement enhances transparency, accountability, and adaptability of reforms to local contexts. The prevailing narrow consultative processes limit reforms' appeal and political traction, reducing chances of successful implementation.

4.1.6 Electoral Considerations and Short-Termism

Electoral competition in Nepal fosters short-termism, where politicians prioritize policies and actions that yield immediate electoral advantages over long-term reform benefits. (K.C & Kim, 2018) Politicians shy away from reforms that might disrupt patronage networks or trigger unpopular outcomes, even when such reforms are critical for sustainable development. This electoral dynamic leads to superficial compliance with reform reports without genuine commitment to enact substantive changes. The focus on electoral gains results in cyclical policy shifts and hampers the development of a stable reform trajectory.

4.2 Bureaucratic Dysfunction and Resistance

If politics determines the initiation of reforms, the bureaucracy determines whether they are implemented. In Nepal, the bureaucracy has historically been viewed as both the subject of reform and a central actor in blocking it. Evidence from Key Informant Interviews and commission reports reveals several interlinked patterns of dysfunction and resistance.

4.2.1 Performance without Accountability

The civil service continues to operate under a system of automatic performance evaluation, where most officers receive perfect scores regardless of actual contribution. Supervisors have little authority to give low ratings, since doing so risks retaliation, including transfers or career stagnation. As one former secretary noted,

“Incentives are not tied to performance, they are tied to survival. If I provide actual markings to the staff that I supervise, they will complain to their political protectors and at the end, I will end up getting transferred from that department. It is safer for us to give 100/100 markings rather than risk my personal or professional loss”

This practice not only undermines reform goals but also entrenches a culture of mediocrity.

4.2.2 Union and Patronage Protection

Bureaucratic unions, closely aligned with political parties, provide a strong shield against reform measures that threaten entrenched privileges. Proposals such as performance-based promotion, voluntary retirement schemes, or restructuring of ministries have routinely faced pushback. This practice was also evident in the “cool-off” period debate ongoing on the Civil Service Bill. Union resistance is further reinforced by partisan patronage, making bureaucrats more loyal to party structures than to institutional hierarchies.

4.2.3 Frequent Transfers and lack of Institutional Memory

Another recurring dysfunction is the rapid turnover of senior officials. An interviewee mentioned that, *“on average, secretaries remain in a ministry for only a few months before being transferred, it is not quantified yet but my guess is the average of 4 to 5 months in a department”*. This instability prevents long-term planning, weakens institutional memory, and discourages ownership of reform initiatives. Several respondents emphasized that even well-intentioned bureaucrats are unable to follow through on reforms because they are moved before implementation begins.

4.2.4 Resistance to Change

Beyond structural issues, there exists an attitudinal resistance to change. Reforms are often perceived as externally imposed either by political leaders or international donors rather than arising from within the bureaucracy itself. This lack of ownership fuels passive resistance, where reforms are quietly ignored, delayed, or implemented superficially. As one senior bureaucrat admitted, *“When reforms threaten our existing comfort, bureaucrats find ways to delay or water them down.”*

A political leader interviewed highlighted this resistance vividly: *“When we were drafting the federal restructuring bill, not a single bureaucrat from the central ministries wanted to move to the provinces. Their lobbying was so strong that we had no choice but to add new vacancies and fill provincial ministries from outside. The bill itself had to be written in a way that protected their interests.”*

4.3 Quality of Reform Design

A central finding of this study is that the quality of reform design itself has often undermined the effectiveness of Nepal’s administrative reform efforts. While commissions have been consistent in diagnosing governance challenges, their recommendations have frequently suffered from weaknesses in evidence, feasibility, and originality.

One of the clearest limitations has been the lack of evidence-based recommendations. Reform design in Nepal has tended to rely on consultations with a small circle of senior officials and experts, while neglecting the voices of mid-level civil servants, local government officials, or service recipients. (UNDP, 2010) As a result, commissions have produced prescriptions that reflect elite perspectives rather than grounded realities. Instead of

systematic research or data-driven analysis, recommendations have largely been based on expert opinion, often repeating the insights of those who were involved in earlier commissions.

A second issue is the practice of not mapping resources of reform proposals. Many commissions have produced ambitious reform agendas without fully considering the state's financial, human, and institutional capacity to implement them. This evidence was supported by the report presented by the Administrative Reform Monitoring Committee, 2020. For instance, while proposals for ministry restructuring or digital governance were forward-looking, they rarely included cost assessments, timelines, or strategies for building technical skills. Additionally, when the Girija Prasad Commission suggested reducing the number of ministries and number of staff, it was not possible to implement the recommendation as there was no budget allocated for severance packages. Without this kind of feasibility planning, even well-intentioned reforms were left vulnerable to immediate collapse once political attention shifted elsewhere.

Third, reform design in Nepal has been characterized by repetition across decades. Similar recommendations downsizing ministries, linking promotions to performance, decentralizing authority, and strengthening accountability have appeared in reports from the 1950s through to the 2010s. (Shakya, 2009) The persistence of these recommendations indicates that Nepal's governance challenges are structural and enduring, but it also reflects a lack of innovation in reform design. Policymakers and bureaucrats have often come to see commissions as recycling old ideas rather than generating new solutions, contributing to widespread reform fatigue.

Finally, interviewees emphasized that reform design has frequently been influenced by donor-driven priorities. Ideas such as e-governance, results-based management, or transparency mechanisms often emerged from donor-funded technical assistance projects. *"Donors arrive with ready-made toolkits, and our ministries adjust the language of their reports to fit those templates. The problem is, once the funding cycle ends, the reform agenda disappears with it."* While such initiatives brought in global best practices, they lacked strong domestic ownership. Bureaucrats often viewed these reforms as externally imposed, leading to half-hearted implementation and eventual stagnation.

Taken together, these findings suggest that Nepal's reform problem is not simply about failed implementation. The quality of reform design itself has been weak, relying on elite consultations, repeating familiar ideas, overlooking feasibility, and lacking broad-based ownership. For future reforms to succeed, design processes will need to be more inclusive, evidence-driven, and carefully calibrated to the country's financial and institutional realities.

4.4 Implementation Gaps and Follow-through Failures

Perhaps the most striking pattern in Nepal's reform trajectory is the persistent gap between recommendation and implementation. Even when reform commissions have produced detailed reports, and governments have formally endorsed their proposals, the majority of recommendations have either remained unimplemented or been abandoned midway. Interviews and document analysis suggest that this failure stems from a combination of institutional, political, and bureaucratic weaknesses.

4.4.1 Absence of Institutional Continuity

A recurring feature of Nepal’s reform process is the dissolution of reform bodies once reports are submitted. Commissions and committees are typically temporary in nature, with no standing institution mandated to oversee the follow-through of recommendations. Without an implementation unit or monitoring mechanism, reports quickly lose relevance once political attention shifts. Several respondents described this as a “cycle of reinvention,” where new commissions repeat old ideas precisely because previous ones were never institutionalized.

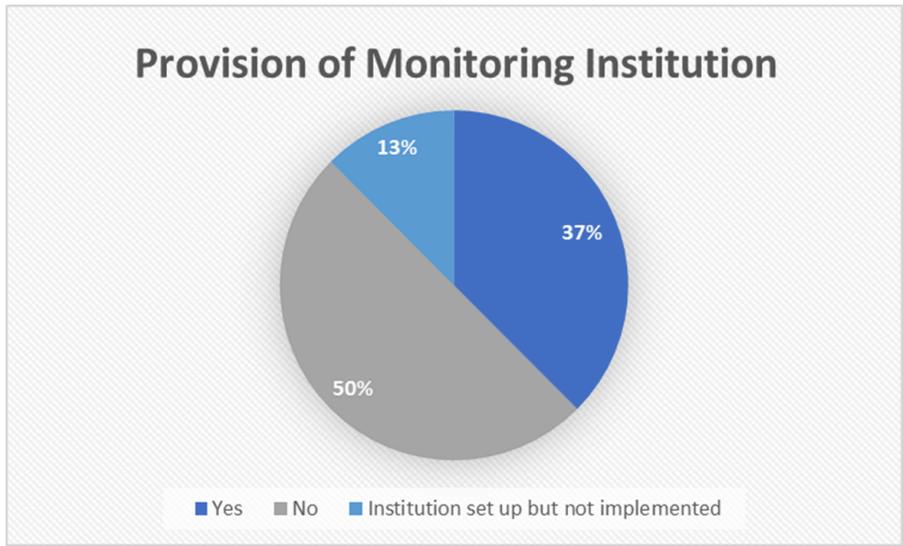
Weak Monitoring and Accountability

Even when reforms are formally adopted, the lack of robust monitoring mechanisms undermines implementation. Ministries and agencies rarely face consequences for failing to implement endorsed reforms. Supervisors are unable to penalize non-performance due to union and political pressures, and monitoring units within ministries are often understaffed or sidelined. As one former secretary noted, “*Once the report is tabled, nobody asks what happened next.*” This absence of follow-through creates a culture of symbolic compliance rather than substantive change. The table shows the provision of monitoring institutions:

| Reform Commission / Program | Year | Provision of Monitoring Institution |
|---|-------------|---|
| Buch Committee | 1952 | No separate organization for monitoring reform programs |
| Acharya Administrative Reorganization Planning Commission | 1956 | No separate monitoring unit |
| Jha Administrative Reform Commission | 1968 | No separate organization for monitoring reform programs |
| Thapa Administrative Reform Commission | 1975 | Provision of monitoring committee but not implemented |
| Koirala Administrative Reform Commission | 1991 | Administrative Reform Monitoring Committee (ARMC) led by Prime Minister; ARC led by Minister for General Administration |
| Governance Reform Program (ADB) | 2001–2005 | Governance Reform Coordination Unit (GRCU) at the Ministry of General Administration |

| | | |
|--|------|---|
| Administrative Reform Commission (Kashi Raj Dahal) | 2012 | Monitoring committee created to oversee implementation and follow-up of recommendations. The Monitoring Committee prepared a report and presented it in 2020. |
|--|------|---|

Source: K.C & Kim, 2018; ARMC Report 2020



4.5 Capacity and Resource Limitations

A further barrier to administrative reform in Nepal has been the persistent shortage of financial, human, and institutional resources required for effective implementation. Even when reforms are politically endorsed and technically well-articulated, they frequently stall because the state apparatus lacks the capacity to translate recommendations into practice.

4.5.1 Financial Constraints

Several key informants highlighted that reform initiatives are rarely accompanied by dedicated budgets. The interviewee mentioned that, *“Proposals for restructuring ministries, expanding digital governance, or introducing training programs require sustained investment, yet reform reports seldom include cost implementation plans.”* Ministries, already operating under tight fiscal ceilings, are unable to prioritize reform activities without earmarked funding. As a result, reforms often remain unfunded mandates, acknowledged on paper but ignored in practice.

4.5.2 Human Resource Gaps

The effectiveness of reform also depends on the availability of skilled personnel, yet Nepal’s civil service faces acute shortages of trained policy analysts, technocrats, and digital experts. The former Head of Nepal Administrative Staff College mentioned that, *“The staff college is overburdened with employees. They are tasked to train nearly 80,000 bureaucrats every 2 years for all three tiers of government. In addition to that, there is no specific training on reform related research or implementation.”* Commission reports and interviews

both noted that reform ideas such as results-based management or e-governance could not move forward because ministries lacked the technical expertise to operationalize them. In many cases, donor consultants filled this gap temporarily, but once projects ended, reforms stalled for lack of local capacity.

Another problem as mentioned by the interviewees with our bureaucracy is there is no mapping of skills and experience in appointing a staff to a department. The staff tasked to research and implement reform initiatives have no educational or prior experience regarding it.

4.5.4 Dependence on Donors

Capacity limitations have also fostered a heavy dependence on donor support. While donor-funded programs have introduced innovative ideas such as digital service delivery or performance management these initiatives have often lacked sustainability once external funding ended. (Ghimire & Ashraf, 2016) Respondents stressed that donor reliance creates a cycle where reforms are initiated but fail to be institutionalized within government systems.

4.5.5 Limited Provincial and Local Capacity

The federalization process has created further challenges. Although decentralization has been a common recommendation of reform commissions, provincial and local governments continue to face severe human and technical resource gaps. Without adequate staffing, training, or financial transfers, decentralization risks becoming a symbolic reform rather than a substantive shift in governance.

The analysis highlights that Nepal's reform efforts have often been over-ambitious relative to available resources. Political will and reform design are important, but without adequate financing, skilled personnel, and institutional strength, reforms cannot take root. Breaking this cycle requires not only technical fixes but also a realistic alignment between reform ambitions and the state's actual resource envelope.

4.6 Outcomes and Perceptions of Reform Initiatives

The ultimate test of administrative reform is whether it produces tangible improvements in governance and public service delivery. In Nepal, the outcomes of seven decades of reform attempts are mixed at best: while some incremental improvements can be identified, the dominant perception among respondents and scholars is that reforms have largely failed to deliver their intended impact.

4.6.1 Limited Successes

Despite widespread disappointment, certain reforms have produced modest but notable achievements.

- **Salary and Benefits Adjustments:** Several commissions successfully advocated for improvements in civil servant salaries and allowances, helping to maintain morale and retain talent in the public sector.
- **Institutional Awareness:** Repeated commissions have at least kept the issue of governance reform on the political and bureaucratic agenda, preventing it from fading entirely into neglect.

- **Incremental Process Improvements:** Some procedural reforms, such as modest enhancements in financial auditing practices and limited experimentation with digital systems, have left traces of improvement, even if unevenly implemented.
- **Federalization Momentum:** Although incomplete, decentralization debates and legislation following the 2015 Constitution have pushed reform discourse toward provincial and local levels.

4.6.2 Predominant Failures

By contrast, most respondents characterized Nepal’s reform history as a record of failure and stagnation.

- **Implementation Deficits:** The majority of recommendations, from merit-based promotions to ministry restructuring, were never implemented or were abandoned midstream.
- **Repetition Without Progress:** The recycling of recommendations across commissions created a perception that reforms are ritualistic exercises rather than genuine efforts at change.
- **Symbolic Over Substantive Reform:** Many reforms were announced for political signaling but lacked depth, continuity, or measurable results.
- **Weak Service Delivery Outcomes:** Citizens have seen little change in the efficiency, accessibility, or accountability of public services, despite decades of reform rhetoric.

4.6.3 Perceptions of Reform

Interviews revealed a deep sense of reform fatigue among both bureaucrats and politicians. Respondents expressed skepticism that commissions could ever achieve meaningful change, given the entrenched political and bureaucratic constraints. A former bureaucrat summarized this sentiment: *“Reforms come and go, but the system remains the same.”*

At the same time, there was recognition that reform remains politically necessary. Politicians continue to establish commissions to demonstrate responsiveness, and bureaucrats continue to engage with them, even if cynically. International partners also view reform initiatives as markers of state modernization, meaning reform discourse persists even when outcomes are limited.

The evidence suggests that while Nepal’s reform trajectory has not been entirely devoid of progress, the overall outcome is one of symbolism rather than substance. Small successes have been outweighed by the systemic failures of design, implementation, and accountability. More importantly, perceptions of reform as repetitive, donor-driven, and politically expedient have further eroded public and bureaucratic confidence in the process. Without altering these perceptions, even well-designed reforms risk being dismissed as yet another cycle in Nepal’s long history of administrative stagnation.

4.7 Cross-Cutting Patterns

The findings of this study reveal both divergences and convergences among key respondent groups: politicians, bureaucrats, and experts on the drivers, obstacles, and outcomes of reform. Comparing these perspectives with the broader literature on governance reform in Nepal and South Asia further highlights where local perceptions align with established critiques, and where they diverge.

4.7.1 Divergence of Views

- **Politicians:** Politicians generally emphasized the *need for reform* as a political commitment but framed it in terms of visionary leadership and symbolic responsiveness. They highlighted their role as initiators of commissions but downplayed responsibility for follow-through. Politicians tended to see reform failures as primarily bureaucratic.
- **Bureaucrats:** Bureaucrats, by contrast, stressed the constraints imposed by political instability, frequent transfers, and partisan patronage. While acknowledging internal dysfunctions such as weak performance systems, many bureaucrats framed these as consequences of political interference rather than self-driven resistance.
- **Experts and Academics:** Experts were more critical of both politicians and bureaucrats, highlighting weak reform design, lack of evidence-based approaches, and the absence of institutional follow-through. They pointed out that reforms were too often supply-driven, elitist, or donor-oriented, without adequate feasibility planning.

4.7.2 Convergence of Views

Despite these differences, there was broad agreement across groups on certain systemic weaknesses:

- All groups acknowledged that politicization of the bureaucracy undermines reform.
- All recognized that implementation gaps are the most persistent barrier, with recommendations rarely translated into practice.
- There was shared acknowledgment that reforms have been repetitive, with the same prescriptions resurfacing for decades.
- Each group also expressed frustration at the lack of accountability mechanisms to ensure reform delivery.

4.7.3 Alignment with Literature

These perspectives broadly align with findings from the wider governance reform literature in Nepal and South Asia. Scholars such as K.C & Kim (2018) and Poudyal (2021) have argued that reform failures stem not from the absence of ideas but from the lack of sustained implementation capacity and accountability structures.

Where the interviews diverged from the literature was in the attribution of responsibility: politicians blamed bureaucrats more heavily, while bureaucrats emphasized political instability as the root cause. The literature, however, generally portrays reform failure as the product of mutually reinforcing dysfunctions, where both politics and bureaucracy collude in preserving the status quo.

Taken together, these cross-cutting patterns suggest that while the language of reform is widely shared among political, bureaucratic, and expert actors, their attribution of responsibility differs. This divergence of views fuels the cycle of reform stagnation, as no actor fully assumes ownership of the problem. At the same time, convergence on core issues such as politicization, repetition, and accountability gaps indicates a shared recognition of what needs to change, aligning closely with the broader academic literature. The challenge, therefore, lies not in identifying problems but in bridging responsibility gaps and fostering joint ownership of reform solutions.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Why Have Reforms in Nepal Failed?

Reform in Nepal has not failed because problems were unknown. Many commissions and programs have identified the same issues again and again. The problem is that politics and incentives keep breaking the link between good ideas and everyday practice.

A review by the Asian Development Bank shows how unstable politics hurt reform. During one reform program, Nepal went through seven different governments. Ministries also kept transferring senior staff, which meant that reforms lost momentum. The program started well, but by the time the third phase came, progress had slowed so much that the final tranche was canceled. This stop–start pattern has been repeated across many reform efforts. Everyday practices are influenced by *afno manchhe* (personal networks), political influence, and even bribery. Studies describe how party-aligned unions push for transfers to lucrative posts and resist limits on partisan activity. Research also shows that politicisation is especially visible in the transfer system, where personal and political ties matter more than performance or merit. As a result, reforms that try to professionalize administration run into strong resistance.

The shift to federalism added another layer of difficulty. UNDP reports note that while the constitution gave direction, civil servants were reluctant to move to provinces, and the lack of a federal civil service law left recruitment, posting, and performance rules unsettled for years. This gap weakened many reform proposals. Only in 2025 did Parliament finally pass the Federal Civil Service Bill, though debate continues about how it will actually work. The protests by civil servants in mid-2025 show that buy-in from stakeholders remains a real challenge, even when laws are passed.

Integrity issues also block progress. Surveys on the quality of public services show that many citizens still see bribery, party interference, and personal relationships as necessary to get services. Nepal has adopted right to information laws and created the CIAA, but enforcement remains weak, which lowers the credibility of performance systems.

The recent passage of the Federal Civil Service Bill is progress, but history shows that laws alone do not change daily behavior. What Nepal has lacked is a permanent “center of government” system that chooses a few priorities, assigns clear responsibility, sets targets, reviews progress regularly, and protects merit-based postings. Without this, reforms will continue to be announced but not embedded into routine practice.

5.2 Why some commissions saw more implementation than others?

A clear pattern explains why some commissions in Nepal saw much more implementation than others. The Administrative Reorganization Planning Commission led by Tanka Prasad Acharya in the mid nineteen fifties benefited from a strong central authority and a narrow set of foundational tasks that the government could translate into laws and basic institutions. Contemporary and later analyses note that most of its proposals were carried out, with one source recording that eleven out of thirteen recommendations were implemented and that the spirit of the Acharya package shaped the next decade. This included the Civil Service Act of nineteen fifty six, stronger use of the Public Service Commission, and the creation of a training institute, all of which were

discrete steps that the centre could legislate and fund quickly. (Shakya, 2009) In other words, the commission asked for building blocks that had clear legal handles and did not require complex bargaining across many tiers of government or major downsizing battles.

By contrast, the commission chaired by Girija Prasad Koirala in 1991 operated in a very different context. It followed a democratic restoration with high political contestation, rising union activity, and frequent changes in cabinet and senior officials. Its recommendations were also politically and administratively harder to execute. They included reducing the number of ministries, cutting the size of the civil service, devolving more functions and resources to local governments, and expanding non-state delivery. Press and policy reviews agree that most of these proposals were not followed. Independent articles and later summaries emphasise that the package needed sustained political consensus, money, and a centre of government routine to hold the line for several years, none of which was present in that period. In short, the Koirala commission asked for system wide changes that needed long follow through across many actors, while the political and administrative conditions did not support that follow through.

Implementation capacity and delivery machinery also differed. The Acharya era essentially tied the reform to a small number of legal and organisational acts that could be executed from the centre. Later commissions often produced long menus without a permanent unit to drive delivery after the report. Evaluations of governance programs and reforms in Nepal repeatedly point to the same blockers. Governments turned over, senior staff were rotated, and monitoring arrangements were temporary. The Asian Development Bank validation for the governance reform program is blunt about slow execution under conditions of political and personnel churn, even when earlier milestones had been met. That pattern maps onto commission work as well. Where recommendations were paired with a clear owner, budget, timetable, and a standing review rhythm, progress was visible. Where they were not, recommendations sat in files. (ADB, 2009)

The nature of the recommendations matters in another way. Acharya era proposals created enduring anchors such as a civil service law and a training institute, so once adopted they kept working even when politics shifted. The Koirala package and later high level bodies leaned heavily on structural rationalisation and large shifts in roles and staff numbers. Those require repeated decisions over several budget cycles, consistent cabinet support, and strong change management in each ministry. With coalitions and short lived cabinets, the centre could not sustain this pressure. Commentaries and news coverage over the last few years make the same point about newer bodies. Even when a high level committee submits a blueprint, ministries can ignore it when there is no enforcement and no regular stocktake meeting from the centre. In a recent media report a well placed source explained that none of the recommendations of one high level administrative working group had been implemented, which echoes a long running complaint that Nepal forms commissions easily and implements slowly.

The federal transition later added a moving target that further separated design from delivery. For several years the absence of a federal civil service law left recruitment, posting, promotion, and performance rules unsettled across levels. That vacuum made it harder to carry out structural recommendations from earlier commissions. The passage of the Federal Civil Service Bill in 2025 now removes a major legal gap and can support the implementation of long pending items such as role clarity across tiers and stronger performance and ethics rules. Whether this moment turns into real follow through will depend on the next piece that has been missing since the 1990s, which is a small and permanent delivery team at the centre that selects a few commission

priorities, assigns owners and milestones, runs regular stocktakes, and publishes progress until new routines stick.

Put simply, commissions that asked for clear, foundational acts in a stable political setting and that had a way to lock changes into law saw higher implementation. Commissions that asked for complex, system wide changes during periods of instability and without a delivery engine saw much less. The evidence across seven decades in Nepal supports this explanation and suggests a practical way forward. (Shakya, 2009) Match the ambition of recommendations to the political and administrative capacity of the moment, pass the legal anchors early, and create a centre led cadence that turns a blueprint into monthly work until it becomes habit.

5.3 Hero-Driven vs System-Driven Change

Nepal has relied again and again on one-time commissions, ad hoc units, and the energy of a few senior champions. The ADB review of the Governance Reform Program shows the cost of this approach: seven governments came and went during a single reform cycle, and frequent personnel changes slowed execution. The second tranche was delayed for years, and the third was canceled even though early steps were completed. This is the classic hero trap, strong energy at the start, but once leaders moved on, ministry units lost people and momentum. Committees and efficiency units were created, but they were weakened by rapid staff turnover and a volatile political setting, exactly what happens when there is no strong center of government to protect routines.

Hero-driven reform also struggles when politics and incentives do not line up with change. A Nepal case study notes that weak political will, politicised transfers, and union pressure make it rational for officials to defend their positions and resist reforms that cut discretion or benefits (Shakya, 2009). It concludes that without broad political support, stakeholder participation, and real change management, reforms stay on paper. Senior postings remain vulnerable to political choice, which pushes civil servants to cultivate political ties rather than focus on performance.

System-driven reform looks different. It starts with a strong legal and policy base and then adds a delivery rhythm that can survive reshuffles. Nepal's federal restructuring papers outline these ingredients: a government-led roadmap with clear functions, milestones, and human resource strategies across three tiers. But they also note reluctance within the civil service, which is why a fixed routine of reviews and public reporting is needed to keep reforms on track. Another study of reform during political transition makes the same point: reforms lacked strong political backing and a permanent coordination body, so implementation slowed after 2006 even when there was consensus on what to do (K.C. & Kim, 2018). The lesson is clear: Nepal needs a system that does not depend on a single champion.

Moving from the hero trap to a system approach now means closing remaining rule gaps and setting a simple cadence of follow-through. The new federal civil service framework provides the legal base for recruitment, posting, promotion, and performance across levels. The next step is to create a small delivery team in the Office of the Prime Minister and Council of Ministers to keep a short list of reform priorities, assign owners, set quarterly targets, and run regular stocktakes with ministers and secretaries. Public dashboards and routine progress reports can keep attention on results even when leadership changes. Evaluations also show that stable teams, timely technical assistance, and practical change management matter.

Chapter 6: Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Summary of Key Findings

The findings of this study show that repeated attempts at administrative reform in Nepal have failed to translate into sustained change, not because the problems were unknown, but because politics, bureaucratic incentives, and weak reform processes kept breaking the link between recommendations and daily practice. Politically, reform has been undermined by instability and short-termism: governments change frequently, ministers rotate quickly, and senior officials are transferred before reforms can take root. Political loyalty and patronage networks often override merit in appointments, and party-aligned unions lobby hard for postings, creating strong resistance to reforms that might reduce discretion or benefits. Bureaucratically, incentives are stacked against reform. Civil servants resist changes that add work without rewards, or that threaten existing privileges, while politicisation of senior appointments encourages cultivation of political ties rather than professional performance. Frequent amendments to civil service laws and rules add instability and weaken the building of routine systems inside ministries.

The process and quality of reform reports have also contributed to the problem. Many Administrative Reform Commissions and related committees have produced recommendations that are largely top-down, repetitive, and poorly contextualized. Reports often copy international models without tailoring them to Nepal's political economy, and there has been no standing institution to track or enforce follow-up. As a result, even when committees and efficiency units were established, their work quickly lost momentum once champions moved on or political coalitions shifted. This pattern reflects a broader culture of "hero-driven reform," where energy at the start does not evolve into lasting institutional routines. The federal transition further complicated reform by creating new tiers of government without clear rules of recruitment, posting, and performance management for years, leaving many commission proposals stalled until the Federal Civil Service Bill was finally passed in 2025.

Integrity weaknesses make the challenge worse. Surveys and public opinion research consistently show that citizens experience bribery, favoritism, and political interference in everyday service delivery, despite formal anti-corruption mechanisms, right-to-information laws, and oversight bodies like the CIAA. This reduces trust in government and lowers the credibility of reform commitments. Taken together, these findings explain why reforms have repeatedly produced reports but not results. The passage of the Federal Civil Service Bill in 2025 offers a chance to fix some of the rule gaps, but past experience shows that laws alone cannot deliver results. What Nepal needs is a permanent center of government system that protects merit-based postings, prioritizes a few achievable reforms, assigns clear responsibility, monitors progress regularly, and communicates results transparently, so that recommendations from commissions and programs finally become part of everyday governance rather than another cycle of reports and announcements.

6.2 Recommendation

Nepal should create a small permanent Delivery Unit in the supervision of the Office of the Prime Minister and Council of Ministers with a legal mandate, its own budget line, and authority to co-ordinate across ministries. A Delivery Unit is a small, permanent team set up at the center of government, usually in the Prime Minister's Office that tracks a few top priorities, makes sure they are translated into practical plans, and holds ministries

accountable for steady progress. International experiences from the UK, Malaysia, and India show that such units help governments move beyond reports and speeches by creating routines for action, monitoring, and follow-up. In Nepal, reforms have repeatedly failed because commissions produced recommendations but no system existed to carry them through once governments changed or officials were transferred. A Delivery Unit is needed to break this cycle of stop-start reform, protect priorities from political turnover, and turn them into habits inside the bureaucracy.

Step-by-Step Guide to Reforming Bureaucracy through a Delivery Unit

1. Establish the Unit with Legal Backing

- Create an office that functions as a Delivery Unit. This office would be staffed with Bureaucrats and external experts. The Office of the Prime Minister and Council of Ministers should function as an oversight agency of this Unit.
- Set up a director on a fixed term, ten to fifteen delivery advisers and analysts, and one liaison in the Ministry of Finance and the National Planning Commission.
- Give it a legal mandate, its own budget, and authority to coordinate across ministries.
- Protect core staff from frequent transfers, a major barrier identified in past reforms.

2. Set a Short List of Bureaucratic Reform Priorities

- Each year, select 5–7 reforms directly linked to bureaucracy, not just broad national goals.
- Examples: faster citizen service times (passports, licenses), stricter merit-based postings, downsizing redundant units, improved performance evaluation, and transparent transfer rules.

3. Define Indicators and Baselines

- For each reform, set clear indicators (e.g., “Reduce sanctioned positions in non-essential support staff categories by 15% within 12 months.”).
- With the Ministry of Finance, National Planning Commission, Central Bureau of Statistics, and lead ministries, define one to three indicators per result, and confirm data sources.
- Publish baselines and quarterly targets so progress can be tracked numerically rather than politically.
- Use existing governance systems already in practice in Nepal such as e-Governance Procurement (e-GP), the treasury system, Health Management Information System (HMIS), and Education Management Information System (EMIS) wherever possible.

4. Run Delivery Labs to Design Reform Plans

- Bring together line agencies, provincial ministries, local executives, police or regulators when needed, service providers, private actors, and civic groups to design how to plan the actual work.
- Each reform plan should name the responsible senior official, list milestones, budget codes, rule changes, and staff needs.

5. Build Ownership through Open Days

- Share draft reform plans with civil servants, unions, and citizens.
- Hold consultations in Kathmandu and provinces to get feedback.
- This reduces resistance and ensures reforms are not seen as “donor-driven” or “externally imposed”.

6. Publish a Reform Roadmap and Allocate Resources

- Convert the plans into a 12-month roadmap with monthly milestones.
- Tie reforms to budget lines, HR actions and procurement and hiring steps tied to Red Book and Line Ministry Budget Information System (LMBIS) codes.
- Make a one-page public “scoreboard” for each reform so citizens and media can track progress.

7. Create a Routine of Stocktakes and Reviews

- Hold weekly issue reviews within ministries to solve small problems.
- Hold monthly stocktakes chaired by the Prime Minister or Chief Secretary, focusing on data, delays, and follow-up decisions.

8. Verify Results and Report Publicly

- Ask independent bodies (Auditor General, NASC, universities) to validate results.
- Use grievance dashboards and service charters to check citizen experiences.
- Publish quarterly notes and an annual report on reform outcomes.

How does this model solve the ARC implementation problem?

- **Political instability and frequent transfers**

Nepal’s reforms often collapse when governments change or senior officials are reshuffled. A fixed annual cycle with published stocktake dates keeps work moving across cabinets. Protecting a small core team in the Delivery Unit from routine transfers ensures continuity, while its authority to call inter-ministerial reviews keeps reforms alive even during political churn.

- **Bureaucratic resistance**

Civil servants often resist reforms that threaten benefits or increase workload without rewards. Delivery labs and open days build ownership by involving bureaucrats, unions, and citizens directly in design. Clear incentives, role-based responsibilities, and visible monitoring reduce the space for quiet delay or obstruction.

- **Fragmentation across tiers and agencies**

Reforms stall when responsibilities are split between federal, provincial, and local governments or across ministries. Labs bring the entire delivery chain into one room, producing a single plan with one owner and shared milestones. Open days create broader commitment, reducing later disputes between agencies.

- **Unclear targets and weak monitoring**

Many past reforms failed because success and failure were never clearly defined. This model requires every reform to have one to three measurable indicators, a baseline, and a quarterly trajectory. Monthly stocktakes using simple red-amber-green tracking keep attention focused on problems until they are fixed.

- **Union influence and politicisation**

Party-affiliated unions and politicised appointments have blocked reforms in the past. Transparent rules on postings, published plans, and public dashboards raise the cost of manipulation. By tying every plan to budget codes, gazette notifications, and HR actions, the model reduces room for backdoor bargaining.

- **Rules and capacity that do not match the job**

Reforms often stumble because laws, budgets, or staffing don’t align with new responsibilities. Each delivery plan under this model is tied to the needed rule change, budget line, and staffing action. Roles

are mapped to competencies, and annual capacity plans are published to ensure that people and skills match the reform agenda.

- **Low transparency and low public pressure**

Past reform reports disappeared into archives with little follow-up. This model builds transparency into the process through open days, one-page scoreboards, quarterly verification notes, and annual delivery reports. Independent validation and grievance dashboards create public pressure, helping honest managers move faster and increasing trust in results.

- **Low trust in reforms**

Citizens often doubt whether reforms make any difference. Independent verification of data, citizen feedback through surveys, and grievance reporting create credibility. Public reporting not only improves trust but also sustains pressure on leaders and bureaucrats to deliver.

6.3 Conclusion

Nepal has entered a new phase. Parliament has been dissolved, an interim prime minister has been appointed, and elections are scheduled for March 2026. This reset follows youth led protests over corruption and poor services and it creates both urgency and political space to fix how the government delivers. In this context, the high level reform commission that met under the previous cabinet is no longer active, and its future is uncertain. The new government should keep the public focus on delivery rather than starting another round of long reviews. The first signal is to affirm that reform continues, to protect merit and rule of law in the civil service, and to move quickly from plans to visible results at the counter and in the field.

Nepal's long history of administrative reform shows that the challenge has never been a shortage of ideas, but rather a failure to carry them into practice. Repeated commissions and donor-supported programs have produced thoughtful recommendations on downsizing, restructuring, merit-based staffing, performance management, and service improvement. Yet reforms have rarely survived the turbulence of political turnover, bureaucratic resistance, and weak monitoring. As past experience demonstrates, reform in Nepal has been hero-driven rather than system-driven, with bursts of energy at the start but little follow-through once governments change or officials are transferred.

The findings of this study confirm that political instability, patronage networks, bureaucratic incentives, and union influence remain powerful obstacles. Reform reports have often been top-down and repetitive, lacking context-specific solutions and without a permanent mechanism to ensure continuity. The federal transition added further complexity by creating new tiers of government without clear rules for recruitment, transfers, and accountability. Integrity concerns, such as politicised appointments, rent-seeking, and citizen experiences of bribery have weakened trust in government and lowered the credibility of reform promises.

Despite these challenges, there is an important opportunity for change. The passage of the Federal Civil Service Bill in 2025 closes a long-standing legal gap and creates the framework for a unified personnel system across tiers of government. But as both domestic evidence and international experience show, laws alone will not deliver results. Reform must be anchored in a permanent routine that converts recommendations into everyday practices.

This report argues that Nepal should establish a small, permanent Delivery Unit within the Office of the Prime Minister and Council of Ministers. With a legal mandate, its own budget, and protection from routine transfers,

the unit can break the stop–start cycle of past reforms by creating an annual cadence of planning, monitoring, and reporting. By choosing a short list of bureaucratic reforms, setting clear indicators and baselines, involving unions and citizens in design, and publishing quarterly progress, the Delivery Unit can provide the discipline and transparency that have been missing.

Ultimately, administrative reform is about building a state that citizens can trust, one where services are delivered on time, rules are applied fairly, and officials are accountable for results. Nepal’s history shows that reform cannot succeed through reports alone, nor can it rely on individual champions. What is needed is a permanent system that aligns politics, bureaucracy, and citizen expectations around a shared routine of delivery. The establishment of a Delivery Unit offers a practical path forward to turn decades of recommendations into real improvements in governance, ensuring that reforms finally move from paper to practice.

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Annexes

Annex I- Table of Respondents to the KII

| Respondent Category | Number of Interviews | Rationale for Inclusion |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------|---|
| Former ARC Chairs | 2 | Shared first-hand experience of leading reform commissions and the challenges of translating recommendations into practice. |
| Former Chief Secretaries | 3 | Provided system-wide perspectives on reform design and implementation challenges from the apex of the bureaucracy. |
| Former Secretaries | 2 | Shared ministry-level experiences, including frequent transfers, bureaucratic incentives, and day-to-day reform obstacles. |
| Former Ministers | 2 | Offered insights into political will, party influence, and the hero-driven nature of reform initiatives. |
| Current Secretary | 1 | Provided contemporary perspectives on ongoing reform processes and the bureaucratic environment. |
| Academia | 2 | Contributed independent analysis and theoretical perspectives on governance and reform. |
| INGO Governance Experts | 2 | Brought in comparative and global governance reform experiences relevant to Nepal. |
| Staff Union Leader | 1 | Represented the perspectives of civil service employees, particularly regarding resistance and union influence. |

Annex II- Questionnaire for KII

1. नेपालमा बुच कमिसनदेखि हालसम्म विभिन्न खाले प्रशासनिक एवं शासकीय सुधार सम्बन्धी आयोग गठन भै सुझावहरू प्राप्त हुने गरेका छन्। कतिपय आयोगका प्रतिवेदनमा दिइएको सिफारिस केही हदसम्म कार्यान्वयन भएको र कतिपय प्रतिवेदनका सिफारिसहरू कार्यान्वयनमा जान नसकेको देखिन्छ। यस सन्दर्भमा आयोगका सिफारिस कार्यान्वयन नहुनुमा के कस्ता कारण वा अवरोधहरू देख्नुहुन्छ?
2. विगतका आयोगका सिफारिस प्रतिवेदनहरूमा कार्यान्वयनसँग सम्बन्धित जिम्मेवारीहरू स्पष्ट थिए कि थिएनन्?
3. सुझाव कार्यान्वयनमा अनिच्छा वा प्रतिरोध कहाँबाट बढी भएको पाउनु भएको छ? राजनीतिक नेतृत्व वा कर्मचारीतन्त्र वा अन्य सरोकारवालाहरू?
4. सुधार सिफारिसहरू कतिको Evidence-based थिए? विज्ञ, ground-level कर्मचारी, public को कुन हदसम्म संलग्नता थियो?
5. सफलतापूर्वक कार्यान्वयन भएको कुनै सुधारको उदाहरण दिन सक्नुहुन्छ? यसको सफलताको पछाडि कुन कारकहरू थिए?
6. उत्तरदायित्व बढाउन के-कस्ता Incentive वा Disincentive को प्रयोग गर्न सकिन्छ?
7. सुधारहरूको लागि प्रशासनिक र राजनीतिक समर्थन बढाउन आयोगले व्यावहारिक कदमहरू के गर्न सक्छ?
8. सुधारका लागि कुन पक्षहरूलाई प्राथमिकतामा राख्नुपर्छ?
9. अबको सुधार प्रयासहरूमा कसरी संस्थागत निरन्तरता र उत्तरदायित्वको संरचना बलियो बनाउन सकिन्छ?
10. अन्य देशहरू (जस्तै: भारत, पाकिस्तान, बङ्गलादेश) का सफल प्रशासनिक सुधार मोडेलहरूबारे जान्नुहुन्छ? तीमध्ये केही रणनीतिहरू नेपालमा लागू गर्न सकिन्छ?