

Administrative Reform Commissions in Nepal: What worked, what didn't?

A POLICY BRIEF

Supun Dahal
Daayitwa Nepal Public Policy Fellow 2025



ANALYZING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ADMINISTRATIVE REFORM COMMISSION IN NEPAL

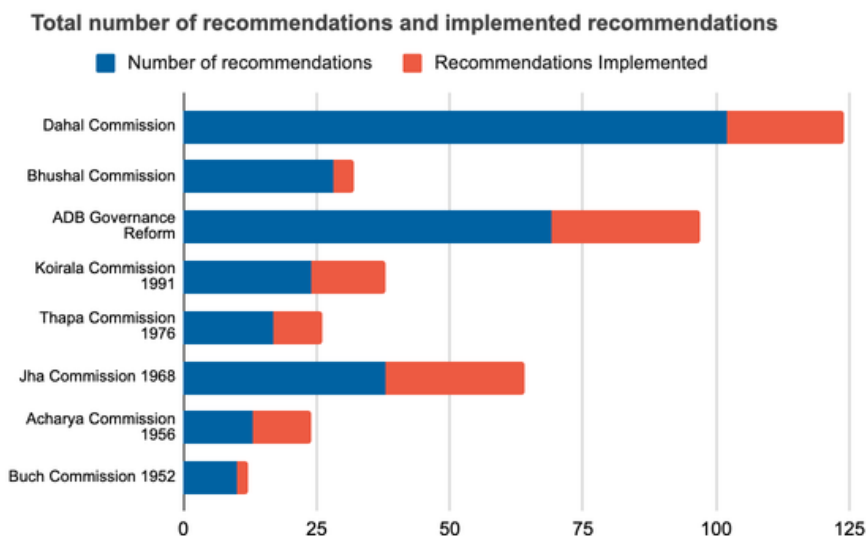
By: Supun Dahal, Daayitwa Nepal Public Policy Fellow 2025, Office of the Prime Minister and Council of Ministers

Executive Summary

For over seven decades, Nepal has established numerous Administrative Reform Commissions (ARCs) to fix its civil service. These commissions have consistently diagnosed the same problems, politicization, inefficiency, weak accountability, and proposed similar solutions. Yet, implementation has consistently failed. This study finds that Nepal is trapped in a cycle of "hero-driven" reform: high-energy commissions produce voluminous reports that are abandoned due to political instability, bureaucratic resistance, and the lack of a permanent body to ensure follow-through. The recent passage of the Federal Civil Service Bill (2025) addresses critical legal gaps but is insufficient on its own. To escape this cycle, this brief recommends establishing a permanent Delivery Unit within the Office of the Prime Minister and Council of Ministers. Modeled on successful international examples (e.g., UK, Malaysia), this small, expert team would be mandated to translate a few key reform priorities into actionable plans, monitor progress through rigorous stocktakes, and ensure accountability via public scorecards. This shift from ad-hoc commissions to a system-driven approach is essential for building a bureaucracy that is capable, accountable, and trusted by citizens.

The Problem: Seven Decades of Diagnosis Without Delivery

Since the first Buch Commission in 1952, Nepal has seen seven major ARCs. Their recommendations have been strikingly repetitive: downsizing government, linking promotions to performance, strengthening meritocracy, etc. However, as the chart shows, implementation rates are chronically low, with the notable exception of the Acharya Commission (1956), which adopted a "real-time implementation" model.



Key Findings: Why Reforms Fail

The study, based on interviews with former chief secretaries, ministers, and experts, alongside document analysis, identifies recurring barriers. The core problem is not a lack of knowledge, but a failure of implementation driven by:

- **Political Instability:** Frequent government changes and short ministerial tenures disrupt reform continuity.
- **Bureaucratic Resistance:** Strong, party-aligned unions and a culture of patronage protect the status quo. Performance evaluations are meaningless, as all civil servants routinely receive perfect scores.
- **No Institutional Memory:** Commissions are dissolved after submitting reports, with no permanent body tasked with monitoring and follow-up.
- **The "Hero-Driven" Trap:** Reform success depends on the energy of individual leaders. When they move on, the reform momentum dies.

- **Implementation Gap:** There is a vast chasm between policy approval and on-the-ground change due to the absence of monitoring and accountability mechanisms.
- **Weak Reform Design:** Recommendations are often top-down, repetitive, and lack feasibility assessments or local ownership.

The Recommendation: A Permanent Delivery Unit

To break this cycle, Nepal must transition to a system-driven reform model. We recommend the immediate establishment of a Delivery Unit (DU) within the OPMCM.

What is the Delivery Unit?

A small, technically skilled team with a legal mandate, its own budget, and staff protected from frequent transfers. Its role is not to design new policies but to ensure the implementation of a few top-priority reforms.

How would it work? A Step-by-Step Approach:

- Set Priorities: Annually, select 5-7 measurable reform goals (e.g., "Reduce passport delivery time by 30%" "Implement transparent transfer rules").
- Define Metrics: For each goal, establish clear indicators, baselines, and quarterly targets
- Create Delivery Plans: Host "delivery labs" with relevant ministries including provinces
- Conduct Stocktakes: Hold monthly data-driven review meetings chaired by the Prime Minister or Chief Secretary to troubleshoot problems.
- Ensure Transparency: Publish a public "scorecard" tracking progress on each priority, validated by independent bodies.

How This Solves the Problem

- **Political Instability:** A fixed annual cycle and protected DU staff ensure continuity across changing governments.
- **Bureaucratic Resistance:** Involving bureaucrats in "delivery labs" builds ownership. Public scorecards increase the cost of obstruction.
- **Weak Monitoring:** Monthly stocktakes and clear metrics replace vague promises with accountable, data-driven progress.
- **Low Public Trust:** Transparency and independent verification build credibility that reforms are actually happening.

Conclusion and Call to Action

Nepal stands at a pivotal moment. The Federal Civil Service Bill provides the legal foundation; a Delivery Unit provides the engine for implementation. The interim government and the government formed after the 2026 elections must avoid the temptation to form yet another commission. Instead, they should act on this evidence-based recommendation to create a permanent system that turns political will into tangible administrative results. By institutionalizing delivery, Nepal can finally escape its seven-decade-long reform trap and build a civil service capable of meeting the aspirations of its people.