Chapter 5
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Impact of the Disintegration on Public Administration: An Overview

In the preceding pages, the process of reform and various crises that had engulfed the Soviet Union from March 1985 to December 1991 have been examined; in our view, this very process turned into a process of disintegration of the Soviet Union with a sudden collapse of the country and its socio-economic system. This exercise indeed comprises the main background of our study of the state of Public Administration in the Soviet Union in the period under review.

The various stages of the process of disintegration of the country correspondingly affected the Public Administration as has been observed. Though the intensity of this impact on the administrative structure fluctuated from time to time, it was never outside the purview of this impact right through the six years. It was thus inevitable that as the country and its social system gradually headed towards disintegration, the Public Administration in the country should decay and eventually collapse.

Indeed, as traced through the earlier chapters, the entire edifice of Public Administration in the country faced unprecedented
difficulties as it had to function within, what has been termed here, 'war of laws' that is to say, a plethora of laws, mostly conflicting, emanating from the Union and its constituents. The administrative structure was trying to serve dual centres of power at Moscow, the one of the union, and the other of the new sovereign republic of Russia under President Yeltsin. The Yeltsin government was functioning more as a rival power centre to the Union structure. However, in such an unparalleled scenario the balance was shifting, and after the August Coup, more swiftly towards the Russian federation. The August Coup gave Yeltsin his best chance to establish and assert his leadership capabilities and political power. After the Coup, career-minded Party bureaucrats of the administration were fast shifting their allegiance from the Union to new Russia under Yeltsin. Such a large scale shift of loyalty created unusual confusion and instability in the Public Administration, and in fact, it contributed to the actual dissolution of the Union and to Gorbachev's resignation as President of the USSR in December 1991.

It may be appropriate here to identify some of the main aspects of the impact of disintegration on the country itself. Most of the important elements that were characteristically representative of the Soviet Union and its system as such, just disappeared or were disposed
off. These included the ideological setting, the Communist Party, party/state, KGB, Soviets, Republics of the USSR and all the Union networks. The powerful elites of the armed forces, secret police and other similar institutions received a severe jolt in the influential position they so far held. Though some institutions like the state-controlled industries, collective farms, public social, health and civil care services, educational and cultural institutions continued in place, they too were either reordered, or restructured as new units, or even edged out significantly from mainstream functions. “On top of all, there was also the collapse of the decades of old habits, thinking, ways of life, expectation and values; a crisis of consciousness and cognition had surfaced affecting the elite in particular.” As Gorbachev put it, “the processes of disintegration outran the new institutions of power and administration while the increasingly strong radical democratic opposition systematically undermined the foundations of power as it expanded its fight against the centre and centrisms.” This process gained momentum quickly and eventually the state and its social system just paled into history.

As pointed out earlier, the scope of the study does not include investigating why and how Gorbachev’s programme of reform

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gradually turned into a process of disintegration. The focus of our study as discussed in the previous pages is on Public Administration, against the backdrop of reforms and crises. Hence to begin with, the Soviet Union had traditionally developed into a one-party state under the guidance of the Communist Party only, therefore there was in practice hardly any distinction between the state structures and institutions and the party structures and institutions. The Communist Party as the central core institution in the Soviet Union controlled and directed all the other institutions. The reform process when it targeted the party began to ring alarm bells in the party hierarchy. They felt threatened by the imminent loss of their immense privileges and power. Moreover, the democratization of the Soviet institutions progressed, the party:

began to feel apprehensive of the loss of their traditional power and privilege. On the other hand Gorbachav was mainly instrumental in creating a vacuum, particularly as a result of his efforts to shift the fulcrum power from party apparatus to state organs. The end result was that the earlier unanimity of party over the programmes of glasnost and perestroika was fast disappearing with signs of split in the party hierarchy.4

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4 Imam, n. 1, p. 48.
The scraping of Article 6 of the USSR constitution which had codified the unchallenged supremacy of the CPSU shook the very foundations of the Soviet Union. Now there was a clear signal for party and civil administration bureaucrats to change directions. The old nomenklatura system collapsed quickly but the real change unfortunately was registered only in change of labels - the administrators and bureaucrats turned new democrats joining the Yeltsin camp. As always, Yeltsin who was trying to gain power tacitly, clinched this opportunity to his advantage. At that point of time in mid 1991 Yeltsin had not much to offer them, except the continuity of their jobs and privileges. In fact, there was no administration worth the name to administer. But as for Yeltsin chaos and disorder were his opportunity.

When finally the CPSU was dissolved after the August coup it was just a matter of time, indeed less than four months, that the one-party state, namely the USSR, had collapsed. The fact was that without the Communist Party there could have been no Soviet Union. It was the party leadership that had made the Soviet Union tick and stick together for over seven decades. The result now, after August 1991, was that the Public Administration assumed new roles and functions limited only to the republican territory. However, the mindset of 'new' administrators and their system remained intact as it could not have changed so suddenly and rapidly. As almost all administrative personnel have come through the nomenklatura, their basic orientation
could not be easily erased. Though Soviet Public Administration definitely had changed through the six years of reform but not sufficiently enough to have a total break from the past. Yet it sought to function in the new environment of democracy and civil liberty within the framework of change and continuity. At the end of the year 1991, only the future would show how much continuity and how much change were operative in its structure and functions.

Yet another notable impact on Soviet Public Administration could be seen in the very dissolution of the state structure of the Soviet Union and the emergence of new Public Administration structures in the fifteen newly independent republics. The process had begun with the declaration of sovereignty by Russia and the election of Boris Yeltsin as President of Russia in June 1990, and it was nearly complete by November 1991 when all the former constituent republics of the union had completed the process of breaking away from the Union. As a matter of fact, even before Gorbachev could resign in December 1991, independent republics were already functioning, with the three Baltic states breaking all ties with Moscow. It has been observed earlier how Gorbachev endeavoured to save the Union before the final collapse. The proposed Union Treaty scheduled to be signed in August 1991 had raised the hopes of the administrative structure. However, after the coup the crisis had deepened and there was a total reversal with regard to the Union Treaty. "The August putsch brought the
general crisis to the breaking point. The most disastrous aspect of this crisis was the disintegration of the State system.”

As pointed out earlier, the process of disintegration of the state system of the Union which really began in June 1990 gradually unleashed a ‘war of laws’, and it got intensified as new independent republics contributed after the August Coup. The republics passed several decrees to take charge of their own affairs and very often these conflicted among themselves. The Russian President and the Russian Parliament, now functioning from Moscow, challenged all central laws, central authority and administration. They gradually took over almost all functions of the Union under Yeltsin’s command as the elected President of the Russian federation. Following his lead, the Presidents of other republics too did the same. Thus all the functions of the Union administration came under the charge of the Republican administrators, and in practice it really amounted to Russian administration. The result was that an administrator or a top bureaucrat of the Union, including the President of USSR, sitting in his office, did not know exactly what his domain was or how his commands and orders were implemented. By the time the process of

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disintegration of the Soviet Union was completed, there was no viable administrative structure of the Union left in position.

Another unfortunate offshoot of the new stances adopted by the republics, that had functioned so far under the centralized command system of the USSR, was that they gradually began to assert themselves, and on most occasions their function and authority clashed. In this phase, the Russian President Yeltsin did not help matters; on the contrary, he began to overrule the authority of the Republican administrators. A case in point was his initial confrontation with Ukraine during 1991 which snowballed later into the complicated issue of jurisdiction of the Great Soviet naval base of Odessa. Even in the governance of the Russian Federation, Yeltsin displayed authoritarianism and independent decision-making without any consultations. Thus for administrators in the Russian Republic there was still little or no scope for exercising freedom in discharging their duties.

The formation of Commonwealth of Independent States in early December 1991 hardly changed anything. This seemed more as a declaration of intention, particularly against a possible comeback of Gorbachev. However, this new brand of rivalry among the administrative structures of the newly independent republics made the
task of the administrators of the erstwhile republics of the Soviet Union almost nonfunctional. In actual terms, with the exception of Russia, republican administration in all the new republics had collapsed. New administrative structure had to take shape, most likely within the paradigm of continuity and change.

Thus the most important aspect of the disintegration of USSR appeared to have resulted from the collapse of the one-party state under the centralized command system of the CPSU and the breakup of the Union state establishments. It may be noted that these impacts came into open as a result of a process, spread over six years and not suddenly. Yet it can be observed that Soviet Public Administration had left a deep imprint on the republics that emerged newly, including Russia. It may thus be safely concluded that republican administration in the new states of the erstwhile Soviet Union may well have begun functioning under the paradigm of continuity and change.

Eight years after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, as this study is being concluded, the obvious signs in that direction need not be overlooked.