

THE GOVERNMENT MUST CONTAIN THE SPIRALLING PUBLIC WAGE BILL

Posted on Jul 07, Posted by [Mwathane](#) Category [Others](#)

Escalation of highly paid public offices

Recent reports indicate that the comprehensive monthly perks for our Members of the National Assembly following their discussions with the salary commission is above one million Kenya Shillings. Senators may earn an equivalent. County representatives too are said to have had their comprehensive package improved to over two hundred and thirty thousand. Governors may follow. Constitutional Commissioners, Principal and Cabinet Secretaries will earn super salaries too. The perks of Chief Executives of public agencies aren't far below. Public officers who support such super scale cadres will, away from the public eye, easily argue their case for reasonably high allowances and salaries, further aggravating the situation. County assemblies are at various stages of establishing high offices. I have heard some call for the establishment of a health and also a poverty commission. The quest for the establishment of highly paid offices is seemingly relentless. Middle and junior level ranks in the public service will also soon demand more.

Pay not based on performance and production

Teachers have gone on strike; they seek more money. Besides the matter of laptops, they've been emboldened by the recent reviews of emoluments in parliament and central government. Lecturers, doctors, nurses and other professionals in public service will follow. The overall public wage bill, supported by taxing us, has recently skyrocketed. This has grossly undermined our ability to initiate capital projects and maintain our health, education, security and service infrastructure facilities. Sadly, provided they get their way with more, most people seem least

bothered about the ability of our fledgling economy to support and sustain the bloated public wage bill.

The tragedy is that the determination of public salaries has not been based on performance and production. A good audit of pay against production per unit time may reveal that most high office holders are giving far less than they earn. But in their quest for higher pay, they cite the comparative salaries of others, cost of housing, travel and entertainment. Such reasons fly in the face of performance and production. No one should ever earn what's not commensurate with production. That amounts to subsidizing lifestyles from public funds while millions of Kenyans can hardly feed and live decently. This is obscene and should stop.

Threat to private enterprise

Furthermore, the current level of public salaries has started undermining private enterprise. Many strategic leaders in the private sector, under great pressure to maintain annual profits, are beginning to find the public sector a better sanctuary. Professionals in the private sector have also lately trained their eyes on high paying political offices and the public sector. This trend will progressively send the wrong signals and undermine entrepreneurship and the growth of our private sector, hitherto the engine to our economic growth. And since the private sector is primarily driven by performance and production, private sector salaries are unlikely to be reviewed in sync with the public sectors'. But the high public salary levels will unfortunately incite comparative demands from private sector workers. In the absence of increased production, private sector will respond to such demands through layoffs and closures.

That's why President Uhuru Kenyatta's consistent plea for a curb in Kenya's public wage bill is admirable. We should all support and help to realize it. The spiraling public wage bill is perhaps the single greatest threat to his legacy and Kenya's economic recovery. And if not managed, this wage bill will undermine and stymie the Jubilee government's agenda. Policy drivers must begin to firmly clarify that improperly thought out pay reviews and an escalation of high offices increases the comparative cost of Kenya's labour and goods. This in return dampens and reduces demand for our export goods which shrinks our economy.

Government must contain wage bill

The government therefore has to do more to reverse the emerging trends and perceptions. The President and his allies must stand firm in the face of the current industrial interventions. It has been a great strategic mistake to allow the establishment of too many highly paid 'talk shop' offices. It is a mistake to allow adhoc salary levels and reviews inconsistent with performance. It was unwise to allow the high perks for Parliamentarians, judges, constitutional commissioners and other high offices in the face of the current poverty levels. We as a nation must get serious about the true value of money.

Unpopular as it may be, only a rationalization review will save the situation!

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