

This article is based on a true story. It describes just one attestation process of our Foreign Office that the citizens are forced to endure. The article is not intended to criticize any individual but only to highlight an archaic practice that could be completely done away with.

Verify the verified

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My interaction with various government departments, spread over past many years, created an opportunity to frequently run into and befriend a gentleman called a 'Notary Public'. Located close to a foreign embassy, along the kerb on a raised footpath, a table, a chair and a bench define the boundary of his makeshift office. Seals and stamps of various shapes and sizes, hot wax, official 'stamp papers' and some basic stationary enable him to provide key inputs to an otherwise dysfunctional bureaucracy.

A few stamps, seals, signs and scribbles by the 'Notary Public' can magically transform any ordinary piece of paper into a completely legal, attested and officious document. Attestation is a myth propagated by the government and accepted by the vast majority. The government makes money by the sale of stamp papers. The Notary Public makes money by affixing his stamps and signatures. The helpless common man is the only one who loses money, wastes time and gets a runaround. One could also question as to why ordinary citizens need to have their documents attested by a 'first class gazetted officer'. Why could they not be attested by a peon, a gardener, a housewife or an individual himself?

Consider a recent example of the attestation madness. Two brothers, 'X' and 'Y' wanted to sell a piece of inherited land. 'X' lived in Karachi and 'Y' lived in Canada, while the piece of land was located in a village near Jhelum. It was figured out that either 'Y' would need to personally visit Pakistan or send a general 'Power of Attorney' (POA) to enable his brother 'X' to act on his behalf. 'Y' opted to prepare a POA in favour of 'X', placed his photograph, attached a photocopy of his CNIC, signed every page and had the POA sent to 'X' in Karachi.

'X' was delighted to receive the POA and was all set to leave for Jhelum to execute the next step in the process. His enthusiasm however took a nosedive when told by a friend that the POA was not worth the piece of paper on which it was inscribed. The POA had to be 'attested' by Pakistan's embassy in Canada in order to be considered a

valid document. Reluctantly the document was sent back to Canada where it was duly baptized by the Pakistani embassy and returned to 'X' after about 3 weeks.

At this stage it was discovered that the attestation of POA by the Pakistani embassy in Canada was essential but not adequate. The document required a further attestation / verification by the Foreign Office in Karachi. When approached, the Karachi Foreign Office confirmed the absolute necessity of this re-verification, but stated that it could not do so until after receiving confirmation from the original source – the embassy in Canada.

Left with no choice, 'X' waited for a week before going back to the Karachi Foreign Office. Luckily, the confirmation from Canada had arrived and the POA was duly signed, stamped and registered by the Karachi Foreign Office. By now the POA had almost become holy, with the double distinction of having been attested by Pakistan's embassy in Canada as well as the Foreign Office in Karachi.

'X' promptly left for Jhelum the very next day and confidently presented the twice attested POA to the office clerk at the Jhelum sub-registrar's office. "But this POA is no good. It needs re-verification from Karachi Foreign Office", the clerk tersely concluded after examining the document for some 30 seconds. "Sure, but that has already been done", replied 'X' confidently. "Yes, but what we now need is to reconfirm if the Karachi Foreign Office has indeed verified the document. For this we will send them a letter asking them to verify if it was true that they had in fact verified this particular POA. Only after we receive their confirmation, would we be willing to register your POA in our office", the clerk explained to a very deflated 'X'. The letter was most aptly titled as, 'verify the verified'.

How come it never occurs to the government of Pakistan that attesting the same document three times is absurd and preposterous. Except for the unimaginable torture to common citizens it adds no value to the process. A simple 'read only' database, simultaneously accessible to all embassies abroad, foreign offices at home and the sub-registrar offices in Pakistan could be created to completely eliminate the second and the third attestation.

It is time for Pakistan to lessen the misery of its citizens. There ought to be no need for any 'notary public' or 'gazetted officer' attestation. Where required, a citizen should attest his/her own documents. It should be for the government to create its own mechanisms to determine if a document is true or false. In today's world of technology and data-bases, creating systems to verify the validity of documents could be accomplished in a matter of weeks and not months.