
‘Sign here’: politics and integrity in public administration (B)

4 April 2023

Jay Adan looked at the file sitting on his desk: a list of 116 candidates that he suspected had been illegally selected for 102 vacant spots in the Mountain State Emergency Services. He considered it unethical to approve a corrupt recruitment process, but the interior minister had made the recruitment a priority, and the emergency services director, who was heading the recruitment committee, had certified in writing that the process had been completely above board. Rejecting the list now could cost Adan his career.

The complainants

By late November, Adan was looking for a new approach to avoid approving the list. The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) had previously sent Adan a complaint from some candidates who claimed that the recruitment had been unfair, which Adan had forwarded to the emergency services director as the head of the recruitment committee. Now, he contacted the candidates directly and asked them to take their complaint to the permanent secretary, Mountain State's most senior civil servant.

The permanent secretary met with the group and wrote a note to Adan to investigate the matter. He put the note on their complaint file, then handed the file to an aide to stamp and deliver to Adan's office. However, the note never reached Adan's desk: he suspected that someone in the permanent secretary's staff had intercepted the file en route. Fortunately, one of the candidates had thought to take a picture of the note on their phone. In the image, Adan could recognise the permanent secretary's handwriting and signature, but knew that it would not be considered an official document without the stamp. Nonetheless, Adan sent the complaint and the picture of the note to the emergency services director, asking for his response.

The interior minister learned about the image and sent his chief of staff to Adan's office to insist that an unstamped document held no authority. However, Adan was adamant that the signature alone was sufficient to proceed. The chief of staff left but, determined to speed up the process, personally brought Adan the emergency services director's written response to the complaint that same evening. The response stated that the complainants in question had failed the written exam. Adan, who was shortly to go on a pre-planned weeklong vacation, told the chief of staff that he would respond to the matter upon his return.

The night before his leave began, when Adan was at his local gym, he found himself cornered again by the interior minister's chief of staff, who had brought the entire list to the gym for Adan to approve. The chief of staff insisted that the matter was urgent since Adan would soon be on leave. Yet instead of signing, Adan wrote a note to the permanent secretary, asking if the director's response to the complaint was sufficient to proceed or if Adan should launch an inquiry. He did not officially need the permanent secretary's go-ahead for the inquiry, but wanted his support as the matter was politically sensitive. The chief of staff objected to Adan's note, knowing an inquiry would delay things further, but Adan was unmoved.

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Seeking support

Once he was back in the office in early December, Adan explained the situation to the permanent secretary and asked for his support in a formal inquiry. The permanent secretary told Adan that he would help him where he could, but that he would not directly act against the interior minister. He advised Adan to move quickly before matters were escalated to the governor, as then they would all be bound to follow the governor's orders.

Meanwhile, Adan decided to reach out to his connections in the national intelligence agency. The agency was highly respected in the country, and Adan knew that the governor's office would take communications from them seriously. Adan shared the complaint with one of the agency's senior-most officials in the province who assured Adan of his support.

Confronting the minister

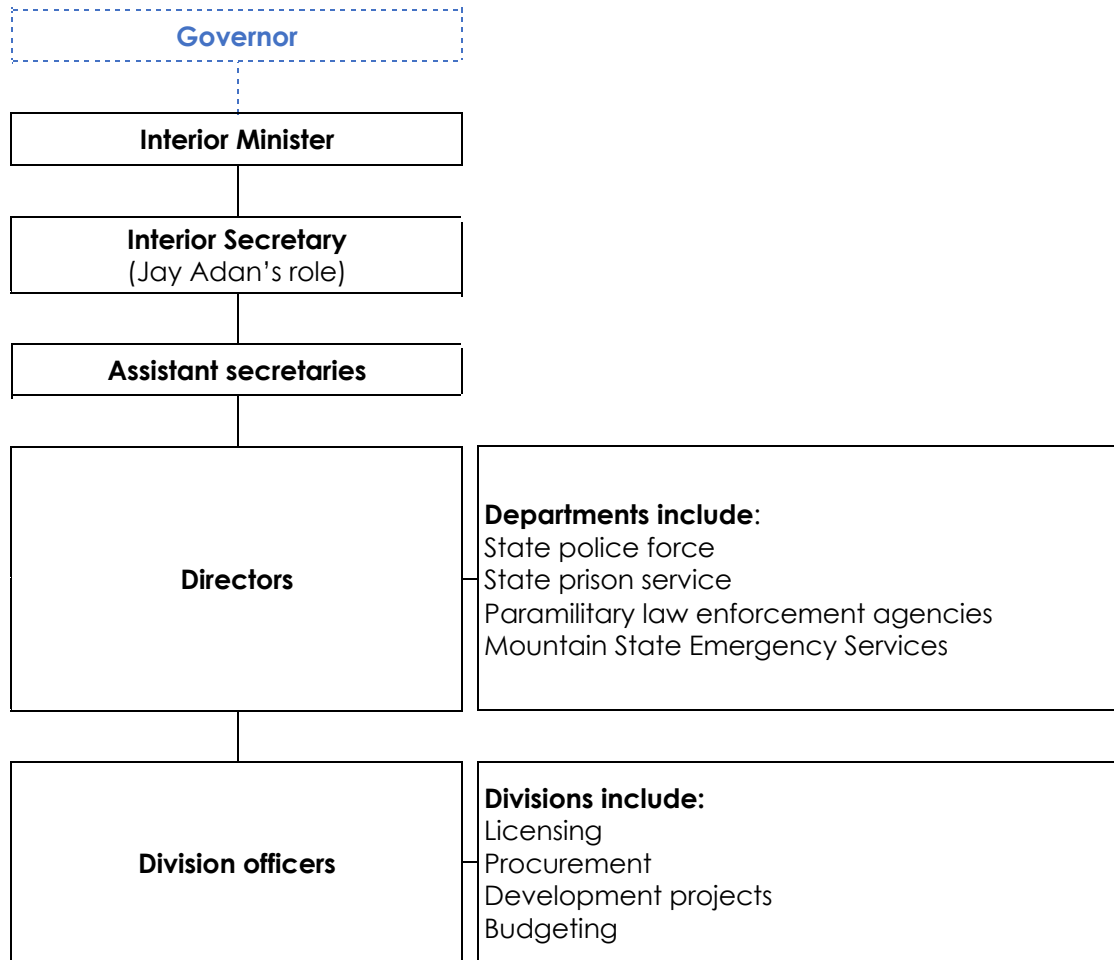
By mid-December, a month and a half since he had first received the list, Adan had still not approved the candidates and his relationship with the interior minister had deteriorated such that they were barely on speaking terms. The minister, now resolved to get rid of Adan, asked the governor and permanent secretary to transfer Adan out of his post. However, the two advised the minister to drop the matter: replacing Adan so close to elections could invite bad press, and the next officer might also cause him problems.

Meanwhile, unbeknownst to the minister, Adan launched a formal inquiry into the recruitment process. As per procedure, Adan selected one of his assistant secretaries, who supported him in running the department (see [Exhibit 1](#)), to lead the 10-day inquiry. Adan knew that the assistant secretary would not want to invite the minister's anger, nor Adan's (as Adan was his direct superior). Adan suspected that the assistant secretary would try to find a middle ground. Adan also recognised that if the resulting report upheld the recruitment's legitimacy, his due diligence would be over. He would have no further legal duty to justify delays.

Adan sensed that the mounting tension between him and the minister was only making matters worse. He decided to reach out and try to resolve their differences. Though the minister had thus far been unsuccessful in transferring him, Adan had heard rumours that the minister was planning to threaten to resign if Adan remained in his post. Adan called the minister but received no answer. When the minister returned his call, they decided to meet at 3.30pm the next day, a Saturday. The minister did not confirm a location for their meeting but told Adan to coordinate with his office closer to the agreed upon time. However, when Adan called after lunch on Saturday, the minister's office was unreachable. Adan had grown tired of the back and forth. The minister lived nearby, and Adan knew his address. It was time for them to speak directly.

Exhibit 1 Simplified structure of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Mountain State

NB: This chart appears as Exhibit 1b in the A case and is reproduced here for ease of reference



Source: Compiled by case writers.

Note: At each level, officers are supported by various technical, clerical, and auxiliary staff.