

The Leader's Role on Civil Service Reform in Asean Countries

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Abstract

In many Asian Countries, public administration is in the process of considerable change and reform. Citizens in these countries have demanded faster, better, and cheaper public service. They have also demanded more efficient government. In order to meet these demands, the nation has to change its public services into more democratic, efficient, and citizen-oriented government. Experiences gathered from Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines, in comparison to the situation in Indonesia, which the another lived are discussed.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In 1991, the World Bank released a report entitled “ The Reform of Public Sector Management: Lesson From Experience”¹ which was drawn from the experience of the World Bank and its member countries in the 1980's. This report approached civil service reform from two complementary perspectives: *first*, short-term cost-containment measures aimed at reforming public pay and employment system, and *second*, medium-term programs to build institutional support for cost-containment and to strengthen the government's ability to manage the civil service. For a short term measure, government pay and employment reform has focused on four main problems:

- a. Excessive public sector wage bills, measured both by the ratio of personnel expenditures to government revenues or total expenditures, and by the degree to which personnel recurrent expenditures are crowded out by wages;
- b. Surplus² civil service staff, with “surplus” defined by a range of measures and rates, including the number of civil servants in relation to the number of participants in the modern sector labor forces, and by operating budgets too low to support the current number of employees;
- c. Salary erosion, or the decline in wages that reflect not only the high level of inflation in many countries but also the trade-off between expanded employment and lower average pay, and the proliferation of non-wage benefits to offset the fall in real pay; and

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¹ World Bank, Country Economic Department, “The Reform of Public sector Management: Lesson and Experiences”, World Bank: Washington D.C.1991.

² The notion of “surplus” contains an element of subjectivity; rigorous measures of the concept have proved difficult to devise and apply. Criteria used include comparative (cross-national) ratios of the number of civil servants to the overall population, or as percentage of the country's modern sector.

- d. Wage compression, meaning the small difference between the highest and lowest civil servant salaries making it difficult to attract and retain qualified staff:

These reforms were the reaffirmation of the issue of the modernization of the public service experienced by Western countries, especially in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.³The following factor helped to push this modernization: ***First***, the economic and financial pressures facing the government of such countries in the last quarter of the twentieth century and the early years of the twenty-first century. These pressures led government to question the benefits of traditional large-scale public bureaucracies and reinforced demands for greater efficiency and value of money in the operations of civil services. Governments “reassessed their bureaucracies and demanded changes” (Hughes, 1998, p.4)

Second, the public pressure on governments to deliver services that are more responsive to the public. There has been a growing recognition that the consumer of public service should be at the heart of the arrangements for services delivery. Whereas the traditional public administration perspective was based on idea that public sector management was different form business management, there is now a view that public administration “has everything to learn from the private sector” (Gunn, 1998, p.1). There is a belief that “better management” can solve a range of economic and social problems faced by governments (Pollit, 1993, P.1) and that management techniques from the private sector should be imported into the civil services and other parts of the public service.

Third, the growing awareness of the potential of information technology in helping to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of public service operations (see: OECD 1990,p.14). Technological developments have transformed the processes of public administration. The developments of information technology in the delivery of public services is one of the four administrative “megatrends” linked with the emergence of the so-called New Public Management or better known as the **NPM** (Hood, p.3).

Lastly, the desire to improve political control of central government bureaucracies is another important factor in helping to explain the modernization agenda. In a number of Western liberal democratic countries, the higher civil service has been seen as an entity to be controlled by elected politicians. Concerned that permanent officials had become too powerful in the formulation of public policy, the political leaders of many Westren countries have attempted “to reassert political control over the bureaucratic machine” (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2000, p.155).

Based on the situation us described by the World Bank's Report mentioned above, the reformation of bureaucry as a part of the administration reform is needed. Bureaucratic reform always need a very clear and consistent direction from the leader of government.

2. ADMINISTRATIVE CULTURE

The de-bureaucratization movement as an administrative reform is more than a political act. It is challenging basic social values. As James Q. Wilson

³Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (1990 and 1993) “Public Management Development : Survey 1990 and Survey 1993” Paris: OECD, 1990 and 1993.

commented, "The way in which a bureaucracy operates cannot be explained simply by knowing its tasks and the economic and political incentives that it confronts. Culture makes a difference"⁴

Culture is the reflection of the economy and politics. The dominant forces and the newly emerging forces in the economy and politics are also those in culture. However, culture is not simply the ideological reflection of current forces and contradictions in the economy and politics. It is also the accumulation of previous notions, customs, and habits, and which will persist for so long as there are carriers and are part of the social psychology of the people wherever they lived.

The bureaucracy has a structure that breeds its own administrative culture. Incoming political leadership often reacts to the bureaucracy it inherits by instituting personnel purges, reorganization or both, either to cleanse the old system and reorient it to the needs of the new dispensations, or to reshape the achievement of its policy and program objectives. Therefore, any new political order brings to the regime-bureaucracy relation its own political culture. As the bureaucracy accommodates and eventually trusts the new regime, an administrative culture supportive of the political leadership emerges.

The biggest hurdle to administrative reforms, however, appears to be the role of politicians in controlling bureaucracy. Political leaders in a party-run polity are unlikely to appreciate the importance of a political neutral civil service. They are also not adequately restrained from pursuing extraneous goals in and through the bureaucracy. Indulgence by dominant-party politicians has also resulted in widespread political interference in administrative decisions and the politicization of bureaucracy decision-making⁵.

Another factor which contributed to the success of administrative reform is the role of leaders. For better implementation of any change in public services very persistent and visionary leaders are needed. Therefore, there has to be quality leadership that will provide guidance and inspiration to the whole community, especially in the bureaucracy as the government's machine. Leadership is thus a necessary but insufficient condition for institutionalizing public sector reforms. Leadership is the key element in reforming the office and, in larger sense, achieving an engaging and performing civil service in a challenging and globalizing world at present⁶.

⁴James Q. Wilson, "Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do" Basic Books. 1989, p.203.

⁵This kind of politicization in bureaucracy was branded as "bureaucratic polity" in Thailand (See: Fred Riggs, "Thailand: The Modernization of a Bureaucratic Polity", Honolulu, East West Center Press, (1996) and "dominated bureaucracy" in the Philippines (See: Ledivina V. Carino, "A dominated Bureaucracy: An Analysis of the Formulation of, and Reaction to State Policies in the Philippine Civil Service", Occasional Paper Administration, University of the Philippines, 1989.

⁶The Malaysian Prime Minister's DR. Mahathir Mohammad had a vision for 2020 that established a "Malaysian Incorporated"; while Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra of Thailand introduced the "CEO-Manager" style for Thai Civil Service. Since the birth of the Philippine Republic in 1946, civil service reform has been undertaken during the administration of Presidents Roxas, Quirino, Magsaysay, Marcos and Aquino. In Indonesia the late President Soeharto reformed the civil service system in 1974. Since then no major changes in public service system have happened in Indonesia until announcement of the law No. 5 year 2014 on National Civil Apparatus (Aparatur Sipil Negara/ASN)

Good governance occurs not only when politicians are honest and accountable, but also when civil servants are efficient and productive, since the quality of governance has been largely dependent on the quality of people who run it. A government that is maintained by responsible, highly competent individuals motivated by a strong desire to serve and improve the lives of others can be assured of government that truly works for the people. Most of the ills in the government can be traced to the lack of this basic quality in service. Sadly the reputation of public officials speaks for itself in almost of the developing countries without exception in Southeast Asia. There is the general perception that the bureaucracy in the region remains largely inefficient and corrupt, even if the President or Prime Minister is honest and sincere and working for the interest and general welfare of the people.

The determinant factors which influenced and affected the implementation of public service reform in some of the ASEAN countries which were reform in some of the ASEAN countries which were studied is summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Influencing Factors In Civil Service Reform

Country	Political Influences	Institutional Support	Leadership Values
MALAYSIA	Political interference in bureaucratic decision making	Ethical Guidelines, active usage of ICT (Information and Communication Technology. Sometimes its called Information Technology (IT) only)	Political will and leadership support with clear vision
THAILAND	Top echelons monopolized political and administrative power	Strong role of CSC (Civil Service Commission), well established norms and values	CEO-manager's style, creation of senior executive services (SES)
PHILIPPINES	Tradition of subservience instead of independence and neutral civil service	Positive contribution of CSC, strong and active role of NGOs and POs (People's Organization)	Political will for rationalization and decentralization programs
INDONESIA	Top echelons selected through politically decision making process	Just recently have CSC, not-so-clear division of the roles of institutions responsible for civil service matters	Need for strong and visionary leaders and more systematic reforms

Source: Author's own perception from the research's findings

3. CONCLUSION

The impending economic activities demand that not only civil servants in general be fully equipped and trained for the great tasks but orientation and motivation should permeate especially to the higher echelons. Such orientation is being provided in almost all countries to equip them to undertake more complex

tasks and create the necessary equipment. It is also to be ensured that better tools and techniques are used at all levels to improve performance and productivity of civil servants.

Governments need to enhance leadership capacity of public servants, a prerequisite for harmonious, evenly distributed, and peaceful development, clear forecasting and planning to meet future challenges, as well as the maintenance of the rule of law and orderly progress. Every leader in public service must have adequate management capacity to plan, prioritize, steer implementation, monitor and control, evaluate and recast plans. This condition is a must in Malaysia and Thailand which both experience political turmoil and have difficulty preserving neutrality among public servants. In addition, Indonesia still needs a strong and persistent leader.

Towards this end, in most Asian developing countries, the civil service reform initiated, such as merit-based promotion, entrance to the service based on competitive examinations, the protection of the civil servants from arbitrary removal, the protection of their political neutrality, meaningful compensation packages, and the policing and management of the civil service by an independent body should be relentlessly pursued. These are initiatives necessary to achieve the goals of responsiveness, impartiality, and professionalism of public service in these countries.

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