The Politics of Administrative Reforms in Asia: Paradigms and Legacies, Paths and Diversities

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Many Asian governments have embarked on administrative reforms of one kind or another, engaging in rhetoric that resonates with the global paradigms of “new public management” and “good governance.” This article seeks to understand Asian administrative reforms against the background of international influence, policy diffusion, domestic politics, institutional dynamics, and administrative traditions and legacies. It is impossible to capture the whole range of national reform types within any neat and tidy Asian paradigm, but some common strands of national reform paths in the region can still be traced. Different problems and failures are found to be addressed by Asian reforms, reflecting diverse motives and resulting in varied outcomes. The “old” public administration regime has largely coexisted with the “new” public management approaches and tools.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Asian countries have been riding increasingly on the global movement of public sector reforms. Since the 1997 Asian economic crisis, which caused doubt to be cast on the validity of the previous “East Asian miracle” thesis (World Bank), there have been calls for institutional reforms in some Asian countries to cope with the challenge of globalization and catch up with some recognized “best practices” (Asian Development Bank [ADB] 1999, 2000; Schiavo-Campo and Sundaram). Countries relying on the assistance of international organizations or developed donor countries have become particularly prone to imposed conditions of aid in the form of requirements on specific reform targets and strategies.

Apart from economic and fiscal pressures, however, domestic political changes, including regime change, democratization, and the collapse of the preexisting political order, have also resulted in a new articulation of governance that underlies new institutional arrangements, in addition to the innate influence of national administrative traditions such as the colonial, military, or imperial legacies of some countries. Asian administrative reforms are often closely linked to political reforms arising from decolonization and nation building. There are also “socialist” countries such as China and Vietnam that have embarked on paths of economic

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and administrative transformations because of systemic reform and ideological revision.

Different paradigms are found to have impacted on Asian institutional reforms. Two notable ones are the “new public management” (NPM) and “good governance” models. NPM is generally held to have informed administrative reforms in many developed Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (Manning, 5). Other parts of the world are also exposed to NPM’s impact (Haque 2001a; McCourt and Minogue; Turner 1998, 2002). The “good governance” objectives are advocated by regional and international organizations (e.g., ADB 1995, 2000). Asian institutional reforms are not isolated from such global waves of public sector reforms. The questions, however, are: Do Asian reforms conform to what is generally regarded as a global paradigm of administrative change or reinvention, or do they assume a different institutional logic? By extension, do most Asian countries conform to a common regional path that can be contrasted with, say, Western European or North American methods?

In posing such questions, there are two caveats. First, reform diversities prevail even among more advanced nations pioneering the current global wave of reforms (Cheung 1997; Christensen and Laegreid; Common 2001). As Christopher Pollitt (2000, 185) observed, “path dependent” explanations fit public management reform rather well. Some countries (such as Germany) have found it more politically and legally difficult to change central administrative structures; and not all OECD countries shared the same past in the form of a “traditional bureaucracy.” In many countries, more autonomous state bodies existed (Clarke and Newman). Similarly, Asian national situations cannot be casually lumped together into a regional pattern. Second, Asian reforms are noted for their features of nation building and state-capacity enhancement, which have been motivated by national politics as much as by external inspirations. However, the “political” nature of such reforms cannot be stretched too far; after all, reforms in most countries are not devoid of political motives and calculations (Kettl), not to mention the domestic need to build and sustain political coalitions for change. Overgeneralization is as much an analytical risk as overplaying local uniqueness.

EXPLAINING ADMINISTRATIVE REFORMS

Pan-Asian studies of administrative reforms are scant partly because of such conceptual hurdles. A few recent ones are Mark Turner (2002) and Barbara Nunberg (2002) on Southeast Asia, and Shamsul Haque (2001b) on South Asia, and Anthony Cheung and Ian Scott on Asian reform paradoxes and paradigms. Most normative studies attribute the need for reform to either inadequacies of existing administrative systems or the impact of external or global best-practice reform models. Domestic political or popular demands for better government performance are often a
common factor. ADB (1999) has identified different sets of governance problems facing subgroups of Asian countries ranging from an overextended state, weak administrative system, to cronyism, and proposed priority actions ranging from decentralization, cutting red tape, to corporate governance reforms (see Table 1).

### The Global “New Public Management”

A common explanation of administrative reforms at the global level is NPM, the substance of which is well articulated in the literature (e.g., Hood 1991; Lane; McLaughlin, Osborne, and Ferlie; Pollitt and Bouchaert). As reform prescription, NPM represents a critique of the traditional model of public administration based on state bureaucracy (Dunleavy and Hood; Hughes) and of the general failure of government—expressed as an unresponsive but invasive state, overextended state, or private-interest state captured by privileged groups (Minogue). Because of NPM’s growing international currency, it is easy to understand

### Table 1

**Governance Challenges To Be Addressed by Reform Actions in Asia**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subregion/Type</th>
<th>Governance Challenge</th>
<th>Priority Action</th>
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<tr>
<td>Former centrally planned</td>
<td>• Overextension and overcentralization of the state</td>
<td>• Encourage carefully timed process of decentralization</td>
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<td>economies</td>
<td>• Lack of appropriate legal framework and skills</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Greater reliance on the market</td>
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<tr>
<td>Least-developed countries</td>
<td>• Very weak administrative system</td>
<td>• Extend the scope and accelerate the pace of administrative reform</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Encourage exposure to good practices</td>
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<tr>
<td>South Asia</td>
<td>• State tries to do too much given limited resources and capabilities</td>
<td>• Better matching of role of the state to its capability</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Regulatory ossification</td>
<td>• Cut red tape</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• “Crony capitalism”</td>
<td>• Encourage administrative renewal</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Weak checks and balances in public–private relations</td>
<td>• Improve openness, reciprocity, and checks on administrative discretion</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Barriers to competition</td>
<td>• Strengthen corporate governance systems</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Encourage competition</td>
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<tr>
<td>Southeast Asia</td>
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*Source: ADB (1999, 18).*
its impact on Asian and other countries in the newly developed or developing world, which feel the urge to follow the latest international “best practice.” Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell saw public-management changes as heavily driven by “mimetic” processes. These are in addition to policy learning and international organizations that promote ideas about “best practice” and benchmarks on “good governance,” such as the World Bank and OECD.

Supply-Side Explanations

A supply-side explanation of administrative reform in Asia, and indeed elsewhere, may thus rest on the claim that certain ideas and practices proving to be effective (such as NPM) are being spread or “exported” by reform pioneers and leaders to the follower/learner/imitator countries. Such an exporting process can be logically sustained by policy transfer and policy diffusion theorizations. However, the force of such supply-side explanation is not without conditions or bounds.

First, there is a limit to the internationalization of policies. While convergence is a powerful rhetorical theme, helping to give an added legitimating force to national reformers by “running with the herd” (Hood 2000, 203), any diffusion, transfer, or learning of “international” policy has still to be distilled by national politics. The policy idea may be international in origin, but the actual policy-making process in any country always remains local. Second, a global reform paradigm, even in its place of origin, may not represent a single fixed set of reform instruments or strategies. In the case of NPM, it embraces a whole range of measures and strategies lumped together for government reformers to pick and choose. Christopher Pollitt and Geert Bouchaert (Ch. 8) categorized these as the strategies of four “Ms”—maintaining, modernizing, marketizing, and minimizing (the public sector). The actual strategic choice is determined by national conditions and the political agenda, as well as by motives and preferences of decision makers, resulting in distinct national reform styles representing diverse philosophies (Kettl, 62). Third, NPM reforms are noted more for their divergence than for uniformity (Cheung 1997; Hood 1996; Ingraham). NPM convergence may mean quite different things—talk, decisions, actions, and results (Pollitt 2001). There is a lot more information around the world on discursive and probably decisional convergence, yet far less evidence on practice and results convergence (Pollitt 2001).

While NPM (or the equivalent reinvention agenda in the U.S.) seems the global fashion, influencing the thinking of many leaders and reformers in developing nations, some critics, skeptical of the universality of NPM, have pointed to themes of reform unrelated to NPM, such as capacity building, control of corruption, political decentralization, and public empowerment (Minogue, Polidano, and Hulme; Polidano and
Talking of a post-NPM reform agenda, they have emphasized the importance of civil society as the source of push for better governance (Polidano and Hulme 2001). This marks two different approaches to public sector and institutional reforms—one managerially oriented under NPM and the other more socially rooted under the “good governance” notion.

Governance may be defined in terms of a wide variety of values that contribute toward enhancing government’s capacity to deliver good performance to meet citizen needs and expectations, such as accountability, participation, transparency, and predictability (ADB 1995, 7–13; Commonwealth Secretariat 2000, 7–9). As a concept, governance goes beyond the issue of public management to address the more fundamental question of how to strengthen government and other institutions in society to help solve problems and meet challenges, entailing government–market, government–society, and intragovernment relationships. Under the good governance paradigm, public management reform is necessary in many developing countries whose public sector has been tainted by “uneven revenue collection, poor expenditure control and management of a bloated civil service, [and] a large para-statal sector” (Commonwealth Secretariat 2000, 11; also ADB 1995, 26–33). State institutions have to be reformed to make them more efficient, accountable, and transparent. Civil service reforms are needed to restore the morale and integrity of the public service through merit-based recruitment and promotion.

Since the 1990s, especially after the outbreak of the Asian economic crisis, “good governance” has become a mission of reform for the region as a whole (see Table 1). Those countries that receive external aid have to toe the line of international organizations, some of which advocate neoliberal governance reforms that resonate NPM. The post-Asian crisis view has been that some Asian governments’ close ties with business and active intervention in the economy were the source of corruption and crony capitalism, which in turn accounted for the East and Southeastern Asian bubbles (ADB 1999; Bhatta; also Quah). The “good governance” approach is of particular appeal to South Asian countries where formally democratic political institutions fail to function effectively and the government’s performance in economic management has been erratic (Huque, 1290).

**Demand-Side Explanations**

Why countries adopt or borrow certain reform strategies and models depends on both the normative appeal of such strategies and models as well as the reform agenda-setting process conditioned by national needs and political demands. For example, it is generally held that bureaucratic and political choices, in addition to rational and ideological considerations, shaped the actual NPM policy decisions, for example, bureau-shaping strategies of public service managers (Dunleavy 1986, 1991),
self-destruction of the old public administration institutions (Hood 1994, 141), and the “public service bargain” between politicians and bureaucrats (Hood 2002). Kuno Schedler and Isabella Proeller also argued that NPM reforms were initiated in reaction to current political challenges in European local governments. Donald Kettl (67) observed that most reform discourses began with a flawed premise—that management reform is most fundamentally about management, so much so that discussions quickly became “enmeshed in arcane debates about the relative value of output and outcome measures, strategies for culture change, and the importance of reengineering versus ‘soft’ people-based approaches.” He argued that elected leaders did not pursue management reform for its own sake but because they believed it served a broader political purpose. Administrative reform is also about political reform—how to strengthen the ability and capacity of elected officials to produce results.

William Hojnacki identified three sources and patterns of politicization of administrative reform, namely internally (bureaucracy)-driven, politician-driven, and society-driven politicizations. In the same vein, Myungjae Moon and Patricia Ingraham (78) conceptualized administrative reform within a “political nexus triad” (PNT), whereby reform became “a product of the politicization process, in which the three PNT actors [politicians, bureaucrats, and citizens] communicate and bargain their political interest regarding government performance (function) and the administrative system (structure).” They observed a bureaucracy-led PNT in Japan, a party-dominant PNT in China, and a president-led PNT in South Korea. Reviewing the adaptation of the NPM menu by Southeast Asian countries, Mark Turner (2002) detected both “enthusiastic” diners (Singapore and Malaysia) and “cautious” diners (the Philippines, Thailand, and Indonesia), while the rest (Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia) knew little of NPM. Both the source of demand (and motives) for administrative reform and the degree of enthusiasm for particular reform models vary within the region.

SOME COMMON THEMES IN EVALUATING ASIAN ADMINISTRATIVE REFORMS

Asian Political Economy and a Strong Bureaucracy

As an economic crisis hit Asia in 1997, Paul Krugman (27) remarked, “If there is one thing that believers in an Asian system admire, it is the way Asian governments promote specific industries and technologies; this is supposed to explain their economies’ soaring efficiency.” The Asian crisis has provided some counter-theses to this assumption, including his own theory of preparation to account for Asia’s previous rapid growth. However, many of the features of the Asian (more specifically, East Asian) approach still persist, including adherence to the fundamentals of macro-economic management, reliance on a bureaucracy able to conceive and
implement a “strong state,” and commitment to long-run development. As Shahid Yusuf (7) put it, “a circumscribed dirigisme yielded good results on balance because of an overriding commitment to rapid and efficient development, combined with the ability of a strong state to abandon initiatives that were seen to be failing.”

This is not the place to diagnose the Asian models of economic development, but it is important to recognize that nation building, steering (and very often directing) the economy, and the predominant status and role of the bureaucracy have always been keys to administrative organization and reforms in the region. For some countries, following regime change or transition in the 1990s, and the rising expectations of their population, better responsiveness to citizen demands and making administration more transparent, accountable, and less susceptible to corruption have become added objectives. The economic setback unfolded by the Asian crisis and the challenge of globalization have triggered new demands for adjustments and actions. However, taking up reform models to streamline administration and the public sector is not the same as diluting the role and weakening the capacity of the state. There are certainly some elements of NPM and good governance on the region’s administrative reform agenda, but the fundamental nature of Asian states and public sectors remain essentially intact.

Many Asian states are highly interventionist. Both China and Vietnam, still under communist rule, were previously state-planned and now state-directed marketizing economies. In Japan, considered by Chalmers Johnson as the model of developmental state, and most Asian “little dragons” (South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore), a strong bureaucracy with an active interventionist industrial policy was credited for achieving outstanding economic performance (the “governed market” model according to Robert Wade). Jonathan Unger and Anita Chan also observed that the governments of high-growth East Asian economies shared “a common advantage in adopting state-corporatist solutions: every one of them already possessed well-organized bureaucracies with established traditions.” A rich literature exists on government–industry relations and state capacity in East Asia (e.g., Brodsgaard and Young; Evans; Wade; Weiss). Arguably, Hong Kong has stood out as an exception to that model, providing seemingly reverse proof of a successful free-market, noninterventionist economy. However, it depends on how intervention (or nonintervention) is interpreted. As J. R. Schiffer pointed out, the colonial government in Hong Kong was active in regulative controls and involved extensively in social policy, using land revenue instead of heavy taxation to finance government welfare. After the reversion to Chinese sovereignty, a new form of state interventionism has emerged as a result of the political institutionalization of economic functional interests (Cheung 2000).

Outside the “governed-market” sphere, other Asian countries have also emphasized state-led development and close government–business
links. For example, India, despite being a market economy, has long practiced economic planning and has been criticized as implementing “command capitalism” (Jain, 1318) through extensive state regulative controls of industry and cumbersome licensing schemes, partly due to political and bureaucratic corruption. In Malaysia, the adoption of the New Economic Policy in 1971 as a blueprint to reduce interracial economic differences in favor of the indigenous Malays (bumiputera) led to government stepping into a wide range of commercial and industrial activities. This “government-in-business” strategy was enforced through setting up public enterprises and an expanded ownership of publicly listed companies. The 1983 “Malaysia Incorporated” policy aimed to establish an active and cooperative relationship between the private and public sectors in formulating and implementing policies in order to boost the development and industrialization efforts of government (Common 2003, 175–176). Both Indonesia and Thailand have had a long history of close affinity and institutionalized integration between military-based governmental power and private business interests, to the extent of breeding crony capitalism (RIPA, Chapters 2 and 3). Even among states performing poorly in the quest for development, this has not disturbed the popular belief that it is the government’s task to produce development (Turner 2002, 1506).

State-led or -dominated economic development in Asian countries is not consistent with the private sector-led ideological underpinnings of neoliberal institutional reforms advocated by some international agencies or the NPM-guided reforms now taking center stage globally, which see the private sector as the principal answer to resource and welfare allocation. Despite adopting NPM-like administrative reforms, some countries, notably Malaysia during the Asian economic crisis, continue to reject the neoliberal economic prescriptions. The urge for less government in favor of more market is less innate than what the official reform program or rhetoric suggests. The size of bureaucracy might have been trimmed and its hierarchical structure streamlined under the modernizing agenda, but the prominence of the state (and its bureaucracy) has persisted.

Administrative Reform Trajectories and Constraints

Most Asian countries have legacies of colonial rule, military rule, or one-party authoritarianism or dictatorship. As such, they all share a strong tradition of bureaucratic rule. Bureaucrats governed polities have induced essentially a paternalistic, authoritarian (even militarized), and highly centralized bureaucratic culture in the civil service, which defines the inherent characteristics of public administration. Inasmuch as Asian nations are subject to the influence of international reform movements and paradigms, they have also followed previous paths of administrative development and modernization started since independence or post-War
political transition, with distinct reform logics grounded in national regime needs.

Since the founding of the communist regime in 1949, China has been embroiled in several decades of government structural reforms and decentralization and recentralization, as the party-state responded to central government burden and local challenges within the context of ideological conflict and power struggles. Since the 1980s, there have been gradual and increasingly bold attempts to marketize the economy, reducing the size of both the state and the public ownership sector. The pursuit of civil service reform, if put within an international perspective, seems part of an overall attempt to “debureaucratize” state organizations so as to enhance institutional competence, but it can also be construed as a process of “rebureaucratization” geared toward transforming an administrative machinery previously dominated by revolutionary cadres into a bureaucracy more akin to the rational-meritocratic Weberian model. Such attempts at rationality building, however, are subject to political constraint—the national civil service system introduced in 1993 has continued to reiterate the “party managing cadres” dogma (Chan; Lan). The primary logic of administrative reforms, despite downsizing the state bureaucracy, hiving off agencies and enterprises, and streamlining government structures, has remained that of reinforcing the communist party-regime in a redefined scope.

The same state-enhancing logic applies to several other jurisdictions. Singapore has gone through four stages of public service reforms since independence in 1965—from “survival” (1960s) and “efficiency” (1970s) to “people” (1980s) and “change” (1990s) (Commonwealth Secretariat 1998, 14). All of these reform processes aimed to strengthen and enhance the efficiency and leadership capacity of the civil service bureaucracy. They have been accompanied by a policy to get the best into the civil service in line with the “macho-meritocracy” ethos (Vogel, 1053), with competitive pay regimes implemented for ministers and senior civil servants. Consistent with this policy path, the PS21 (Public Service 21) initiative of 1995 is ultimately about strengthening government leadership rather than managerialism per se (Cheung 2003b). The same is true of Hong Kong, governed by the bureaucracy during the British colonial period and keen to pursue administrative self-improvements since the 1970s. There, the civil service had long been held in high esteem, enjoying almost infallibility in efficiency, until the Asian economic crisis, and more recently, major policy blunders and the fiscal deficit together induced an about-face toward the civil service (Cheung 2001, 2002c). But civil service resistance continues to halt the implementation of a more far-reaching reform agenda, which is perceived to upset stability.

In Japan, despite a long history of administrative reform involving the establishment of successive administrative reform councils and commissions since the 1960s, the reform experience has pointed to a slow and somewhat hesitant process, because of the previously successful inter-
locking array of institutions that were resistant to rapid change (Beeson). Reform proposals were often a compromise with the agency bureaucrats, known as “preemptive bureaucrats,” whose attitude was critical to the success of major structural changes, as in the privatization of Japan National Railway and Nippon Telegraph and Telephone (Ito, 251). The existence of “bureau pluralism” has ensured the well-entrenched power of the bureaucracy, while the legalistic tradition of public administration, requiring lawmaking to endorse administrative and organizational arrangements, also renders any reform process highly politicized and time consuming as it entails executive–legislative compromise on top of politics–bureaucracy bargaining (Nakamura 2002). (Such “legalism” is also typical of South Korea and Taiwan, both former Japanese colonies.) As Akira Nakamura commented (1999, 137), Japan seemed ready to undertake the task of reforming the government, with decentralization, deregulation, and the reduction of central agencies placed on the agenda, but skepticism persists because of the “growth of a concerted effort on the part of national bureaucrats to thwart reform efforts,” in addition to various entrenched vested interests.

The genesis and evolution of the South Korean bureaucracy points to a postcolonial bureaucracy inheriting “overdeveloped” administrative structure instituted by Japanese colonial masters (Woo-Cumings, 435). Like in Japan, the majority of laws originated with the bureaucracy and not with legislators, and administrative policies were strictly originated and orchestrated within the bureaucracy itself (Woo-Cumings, 453). During military rule, administrative reforms were instituted from above in an effort to legitimize a highly unpopular regime (such as the “small government” concept actively pursued by then President Chun Doo Hwan), but many did not last and the bureaucracy soon returned to its former size. The post-1997 Kim Dae Jung government used reform to build a “small but strong government” to face the economic crisis. Reform attempts in the past were mostly conducted under the facade of national emergency and crisis, hence lacking strong public support (P. S. Kim, 175). Bureaucrats generally saw reform activities as a source of instability and uncertainty (Hahm and Kim, 491). Many public officials have shown a tendency toward pockchi-pudong—“lying down and refusing to budge”—while some like to harp on the theme of “the good old days” (P. S. Kim, 176). There is greater advocacy for NPM lately, triggered by globalization and fiscal stress, but the institutional setting for change remains intact.

Administrative change in Malaysia since independence in 1957 has gone through four phases—maintenance administration until the late 1960s, development administration in the 1970s, cultivation of an efficient civil service in the 1980s, and the adoption of business practices since the late 1980s (Halligan and Turner, 66–69). Each was a result of environmental factors (particularly economic conditions and societal demands) and the developmental policies and objectives of the government. Under development administration, it was recognized that civil servants should
become key agents of change, and the public sector was to play a central role in promoting development and institution building. The Malay-dominated bureaucratic elite also constitutes the power base of the United Malay National Organization, which has ruled the country continuously since independence through a national front regime.

In the Philippines, public administration had gone through the post-independence days of rapid expansion in civil service employment, corruption, and inefficiencies to Ferdinand Marcos’ reorganization reforms and his centralization and militarization of state institutions in the 1970s and early 1980s, and then to Corazon Aquino’s administrative reform to “demarcoify” the bureaucracy (Halligan and Turner, 100). Fidel Ramos’ Philippines 2000 required a responsive and effective bureaucracy, to facilitate the implementation of development plans. Despite NPM themes of decentralization, empowerment and client orientation, the main thrust of Aquino’s bureaucratic reorganization was to purge public organizations of Marcos appointees and supporters. Neither Aquino’s nor Ramos’ reforms had made any real impact, which Mark Hayllar attributes largely to political disruptions and resistance, ultimately subjecting whatever changes initiated to the old paradigm of patronage and pork-barrel politics.

In most Southeast Asian countries, public sector jobs provided employment for constituents and opportunities of patronage for political supporters, helping to consolidate the power of the ruling elites, for example, in Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Malaysia. Cutting the size of the public sector often failed to go beyond the rhetoric and would anyway be opposed strongly, forcing the regime to provide substitute provision, for example, through state-sponsored or government-linked enterprises. Overall, some bureaucracies were too strong and too resistant to reform, while others, like in the Philippines and Indonesia, had a capacity level too low to undertake vigorous modernization (Nunberg, 19).

India has inherited from the former British colonizers a powerful administrative service. The civil service is accorded constitutional status. Legal and constitutional guarantees, intended to protect civil servants from arbitrary actions and unjust administrative decisions, have also come to be used as “the ‘guardian’ of corrupt and incompetent bureaucrats” (Jain, 1305). Attempts to formulate and implement development plans under “command capitalism” were accompanied by a quick proliferation of administrative planning and agencies and the phenomenal growth of public services for developmental purposes. Despite several decades of administrative reforms, progress had been uneven. R. B. Jain (1325, 1327) attributed this to the politico-administrative environment: “Political interference, influence peddling, growing nexus between politicians, criminals and bureaucracy, pervading corruption in all walks of public life, muscle-flexing through the unions have made even the most legitimate means of control and accountability meaningless in the administrative parlance.” The Indian experience has been typical of South Asian
countries. Mohammand Mohabbat Khan (86) also argued that elite civil services there had been the vanguard of resistance to any attempt to change the status quo and had largely been successful because of the political leadership’s undue dependence on them.

Empowering rather than Denigrating the Bureaucracy

The bureaucracy in most Asian countries is essentially a modernizing and developmental bureaucracy, in line with the nature of the state. Hence, most Asian governments have resorted to public management reforms in order to secure new or reinvented structures and systems of operations that can improve the capacity of the state (and of the bureaucracy) so as to better lead nation building and economic development efforts. Many Asian countries have been governed as one-party regimes (such as China and Vietnam in which political and bureaucratic interests are one) or corporatist regimes based on a coalition of party, bureaucratic, business, and even military interests (as in several Southeast Asian nations, notably Indonesia and Thailand prior to democratization, and in South Korea and Taiwan before regime transition). In Hong Kong, Japan, and South Korea, there has also been a long history of bureaucracy-dominated policy making. It is thus inconceivable for any administrative reform undertaken to adopt an antibureaucratic or bureaucracy-skeptic slant as in some Western countries (as noted in Britain, North America, and Australasia, although less so in Continental Europe such as in France and Germany).

Instead, the bureaucracy in East and Southeast Asia is often credited with its expertise and vision in promoting economic development. Administrative reforms have mostly adopted a pro-bureaucracy or at least a bureaucracy-friendly orientation, and are usually bureaucrats-driven. They were conceived not within the context of denigrating civil service competence, but rather enhancing its importance within the paradigm of the East Asian miracle. Both Hong Kong and Singapore, for example, shared the characteristics of what Hood (1996) described as the “Japanese way” of NPM reform (i.e., high opportunity, low motive). There was neither a collapse nor discrediting of the old public administration regime. The two administrative states have remained powerful and strong. In the aftermath of the Asian crisis, as global recession continues, both city-states have encountered economic and fiscal difficulties. In Singapore, the People’s Action Party civil service governing coalition still persists, and there is one mind in pursuing public sector reforms for more overt managerial and economic objectives. In Hong Kong, reforms were driven by the dominant bureaucracy until most recently when a split emerged between the new political elites (represented by newly appointed ministers from outside the civil service) and the bureaucratic mandarins, resulting in a new reform rhetoric critical of civil service performance (Cheung 2004). In South Korea, it was reported that “bureaucratic policy making was too strongly advocated to argue against its
prevalent role images. Usually some innovative higher civil servants initiated a leading role in administrative reforms, although government bureaucracy is basically conservative and resistant to change” (B. W. Kim, 25).

Recent public sector reforms in Malaysia have all the exhortations of NPM. Reform measures for improving productivity and quality included (1) the New Remuneration System, which provided a more flexible civil service pay structure linked to performance appraisal, (2) the Modified Budgeting System entailing budgetary devolution and accountability, and (3) Client’s Charters. There are also efforts to combine entrepreneurship and ethical values in remodeling the civil service culture. The civil service is to become more mission-oriented, dynamic, and resilient, and to adapt itself to the transformational agenda for national development under the Vision 2020 plan launched in 1991. Yet, the developmental nature of the bureaucracy remains intact. As a key government advocate of reform explained, the Malaysian public service “was seen to be the least parochial of institutions in society and when all else failed, the public service stood ready to fulfill its assigned role” (Karim, 18).

The bureaucracy of Thailand, embracing the military, police, and civil administration, had been the leading power in a country that was ruled as a bureaucratic polity. For a long time, political organs of government had been largely under the control of the bureaucracy, with the image of the bureaucrat far superior to that of the politician (Halligan and Turner, 157). Democratization of political institutions that began in the 1990s has yet to reach a stage that could fully subdue bureaucratic power. Civil servants enjoy good protection under the 1992 Civil Service Act from punitive action by ministers. Since 1991, successive Thai governments have made public sector reform a high priority. However, despite reforms, the new Civil Service Act was described as “pro-bureaucrat and anti-politician” (Halligan and Turner, 173), and Bidhya Bowornwathana (2000, 403) observed that the bureaucratic nature of the Thai polity meant that the bureaucrats controlled the agenda of reform, its pace, and its execution.

### Administrative Reform as Political Solution and Patronage

All administrative and management reforms carry a political purpose. In the case of Asia, a close intermingling between administration and politics and between government and business have resulted in administrative reforms often becoming an arena for the pursuit of political interests. The privatization of public enterprises is a good case in point (Cheung 2002b). The public enterprise legacy in most Asian countries has resulted from a deliberate state policy on nation building and economic development. Some governments pursued public ownership for ideological reasons (as in pre-reform China and Vietnam), and others (such as South Korea, Taiwan, and Malaysia) used public enterprises for political patronage and
social redistribution purposes. The existence of a large and extensive public enterprise sector had created not only a state-dominated economic structure that would require a long time and a strong political will to transform, but also an institutional configuration of interlocking economic, social, and political interests hard to disentangle in order to make way for more fundamental reforms. As such, coalitions of interlocking interests remain in power, continuing to espouse a state-managed economic strategy; reform policies, such as privatization, were often adopted not for the purpose of reducing the role and influence of the state, but rather to strengthen state capacity in alternative ways, underpinned by the same institutional logic that drove the previous public enterprise boom.

While most Asian countries have pursued a privatization policy of some kind since the 1980s, privatizations in individual countries were more motivated and shaped by domestic factors—very often political and social, unconnected with efficiency concerns. For example, privatization in Malaysia turned out to be a policy tool to facilitate handing over privatized enterprises and assets to selected indigenous bumiputra interests, in much the same logic as that of the previous public enterprise policy (Jumo, Adam, and Cavendish). In South Asia, recent enthusiasm for privatization and marketization has been marked by rent seeking of internal power blocs (Haque 2001b, 1425–1426). In India, for example, highly profitable public enterprises were sold at heavily discounted prices to businesses close to the government. Similarly, the major beneficiaries of market-driven policies in Pakistan and Sri Lanka were business, bureaucratic, and political elites. Privatization in Taiwan in the 1990s was more a response to political democratization and the rise of indigenous Taiwanese business power who demanded a share of the public enterprises long monopolized by supporters and cronies of the previous Kuomintang (KMT, or Nationalist) regime (Liou). In Singapore, privatization facilitated the expansion of stock market capitalization and underpinned the government’s new regionalization policy to encourage government-linked corporations to invest overseas as economic entities without undue government shadow (Low, 104–107).

As regards public sector reform in general, Hong Kong pursued such reform before 1997 not because of any pressing fiscal or economic needs, but more in order to secure a management answer to the challenge of political transition (Cheung 1999). In Taiwan, the abolition of the provincial layer of government in 1998, in the name of downsizing and fiscal efficiency, was partly, if not predominantly, motivated by the political objective to remove an important island-wide power base of former provincial governor James Soong, an adversary of previous President Lee Teng-hui (McBeath). Political liberalization and regime transition during the 1980s and 1990s triggered a general process of “de-authoritarization” and depoliticization of the civil service. Current government-reinvention reforms, although influenced by NPM and U.S. reinvention reform fash-
ions, have also been motivated by the new Democratic Progressive Party government’s attempt to revamp a bureaucracy long dominated and shaped by the KMT (Cheung 2003a).

In China, reform measures, such as government restructuring, civil service system, decentralization, and fiscal devolution, serve a political mission. They are not just for the sake of load shedding or catching up with the global reform trends. Rather, they are ultimately geared toward preparing the still politically centralized and authoritarian party-state for coping better with governance challenges in a marketized and increasingly fragmentary environment where localism is on the rise to become both the impetus for, and constraint on change (Cheung 2002a, 268). In Thailand, according to a close local observer (Bowornwathana 2002), current Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra has been attempting to use administrative reform as a political instrument to consolidate his control over the bureaucracy, and thus his own political power.

Paradox of Asian Administrative Reform

A paradox of Asian administrative reforms is that these reforms very often are promoted by authoritarian and sometimes nondemocratic or illiberal regimes in a system with a weak or even subordinate private economy and a premature, although gradually rising, civil society. Hence, the success of reforms depends on those established political and bureaucratic interests that might otherwise be regarded as targets of reform and thus likely to be resistant to change. As Cheung and Scott (17–18) argue, administrative competence cannot be achieved without strengthening the capacity of the state to govern and mobilize social resources and support. Similarly, methods and procedures to bring about efficiency, accountability, coherence, and probity cannot fully work if devoid of the wider contexts of policy capacity and state capacity.

In many parts of Asia there is close intermingling between state and economy and between state and society when the society (or market) is still largely dependent on or subservient to the state. If economic and social ills are considered an outcome of the Asian system of governance, then rather than expecting an external force (such as international agencies) and externally imposed reform packages to work in bringing about fundamental changes, one has to look for a domestic “will” to reform. That will can come about only with the support of appropriate incentive mechanisms (and reform motives) built into an unsatisfactory system. Given the mixed impact of reforms on the vested interests of dominant elites, opposition to, or sabotage of reform is common as in the case of Taiwan (Dickie) and to some extent Hong Kong these days. Reforms as designed and implemented by the reform elites may also create room for malpractice and opportunities for all kinds of rent-seeking activities by bureaucrats through whom reforms have to be implemented as already noted above.
Authoritarian regimes undergoing reform face the dilemma of how to retain political control and yet enable the economy and society to liberalize to help secure popular support. China is a case in point. After all, most such regimes aim to strengthen their capacity rather than weaken it through reforms. They may not therefore allow going too far in the decentralization of powers and resources as what the “good governance” paradigm or NPM reform rhetoric preaches. Bureaucratic corruption poses another dilemma. Much corruption in Asia is institutionalized. To the extent that the civil service system is also built upon institutionalized patterns of patronage and corruption, coupled with low pay and wide discretion in levying charges and finding other means of income supplementation (as in Indonesia and China), efficiency and merit in civil service reform is often more claimed than accomplished.

In India, where the principles of civil service merit and neutrality as inherited from previous British rule are constitutionally prescribed, public administration is subject to political intrusion and corruption of another kind, rendering reforms very difficult if not impossible. As an Indian civil servant put it, the civil service has been corrupt and has served the narrow ends of patrimonial politics (Das, 227). The present system has worked well only in coordinating rents and getting them shared across both the official and political realms. Accepting new reform paradigms like NPM would necessarily mean confining politics to the realm of policy making that offers limited prospects for rent seeking, something not welcomed. On the other hand, day-to-day administration provides ample opportunity for money making, such as transfers and postings of civil servants, awarding of major contracts and concessions, and the provision of goods and services free or below market prices (Das, 228). As such, Indian politicians do not take kindly to administrative reforms that separate policy making from policy implementation, or other aspects of good governance. As in other developing countries, new management approaches in India and Sri Lanka were often introduced with a good deal of rhetorical commitment; in all sectors, governments tended to restructure their organizations rather than to make a real change in what they do (Batley, 762).

COMPARING ASIAN ADMINISTRATIVE REFORMS

Different Conditions for, and Routes of, Reform

Returning to the two questions posed at the beginning of this article, the above discussion points to a diversity of motives, imperatives, and constraints pertaining to administrative reforms in Asian countries. It is impossible to pack these reforms into a particular paradigm, not to mention one in contrast with any claimed global reform model. In any case, the existence of any dominant global paradigm has been much debated in the literature. Even among OECD countries, generally regarded as
pursuing similar forms of public management reform, different paths have been identified (Pollitt and Bouchaert). The purpose of this article is not to engage in any “Asian versus Western” argument or clash-of-civilizations theorization. However, understanding the complexities and diversities of Asian administrative reforms helps to sensitize us to more particularistic domestic traditions and conditions that are largely responsible for shaping the actual reform agenda, transcending the influence of international ideas and good-governance prescriptions.

There are obviously various ways of presenting the Asian administrative reform scene. Categorization can be based on the degree of economic development, state–business relations, cultural affinities, or common heritage in administrative traditions. It can also be premised on the degree of enthusiasm for change (the enthusiastic, the cautious, and the ignorant, as Turner [2002] described it), or the motives and outcomes of reform. Putting different Asian countries into an “administrative” Asia is neither feasible nor meaningful. Still, what has been discussed has revealed at least several significant clusters of Asian reform countries (see Table 2), based on administrative traditions and legacies, political economy, state role and capacity, salience of administrative reform, and the forces and progress of change.

**Commonalities and Differences**

National administrative systems vary from country to country as a result of constitutional design, political evolution, and institutional legacies. Many Asian countries have adopted a state-planned, state-led, or state-managed approach to economic and social development, whether in a capitalist or socialist setting. This has meant not only the expansion in scope and powers of the state vis-à-vis the economy or society, resulting in lopsided relationships that nowadays demand more fundamental governance-structure reforms to correct. In the past, it had also led to the rapid growth of the bureaucracy and proliferation of the quasi-governmental public sector, organized as complex hierarchies engaged in interlocking structures with businesses and major social groups, not to mention networks of government patronage and public employment for social distribution purposes found in some countries like Malaysia and Indonesia.

Against such a common pro-state or statist institutional background, it is not surprising to observe that reform programs in Asia have not carried any overtly anti-public sector perspective, and do not seek to denigrate the bureaucracy per se. Administrative reforms remain essentially policy instruments to shore up an existing pro-state, and very often also pro-bureaucracy, regime. This does not mean that Asian publics are necessarily happy with bureaucratic performance. Quite the contrary, public dissatisfaction has been one of the key factors inducing and sustaining the reform momentum, at least at the level of political discourse.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regional Subgroupings</th>
<th>Japan and East Asian &quot;NICs&quot;</th>
<th>Southeast Asian Developing States</th>
<th>Socialist “Transition” States</th>
<th>Subcontinent States</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Administrative traditions and legacies</td>
<td>Strong, centralized bureaucratic tradition; politics-administration fusion (Singapore and Hong Kong are typical “administrative states”)</td>
<td>Mostly postcolonial (and some also post-military) regimes, with strong bureaucratic state having close links to business</td>
<td>Communist one-party authoritarian bureaucratic rule; politics in administration (state and bureaucracy are one)</td>
<td>Postcolonial regimes, with relatively strong, centralized bureaucratic tradition (In India, the civil service enjoys constitutionally protected status)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature of political economy</td>
<td>Developmental state—“governed market” model (with the exception of Hong Kong, which displays a semi-interventionist model)</td>
<td>“Government-in-business” model with highly institutionalized government-business relations</td>
<td>From state-planned to state-dominated economy and development</td>
<td>State regulative controls—“command capitalism” in India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State role and capacity</td>
<td>Historically strong capacity; highly interventionist (less so in Hong Kong)</td>
<td>State capacity largely dependent on regime control over economy and society</td>
<td>State capacity in question as economy transits toward market</td>
<td>State capacity in question due to political and bureaucratic corruption</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salience of administrative reform</td>
<td>Bureaucratic modernization and self-improvement; state capacity enhancement</td>
<td>Bureaucratic modernization and efficiency improvement; better subservience to political control</td>
<td>Bureaucratic modernization and rationality building, within context of regime consolidation and institutional reconfiguration</td>
<td>Political control and bureaucratic modernization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forces for change</td>
<td>Outcome so far</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mainly bureaucrats driven, until most recently when politics and societal demands pushed for greater pace of reform (In Singapore, there is a joint politics–bureaucracy agenda)</td>
<td>Bureaucratic domination of reform agenda, with slow progress (Successful “public service bargain” in Singapore, hence minimum bureaucratic resistance)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mainly politics driven (to enhance bureaucratic efficiency), coupled with societal demands (In Taiwan, Thailand, and Indonesia, regime change has brought about political desire to check or subdue bureaucratic power. There is also pressure from international organizations on Indonesia)</td>
<td>Results slow and mixed; problematic “public service bargain” and bureaucratic skepticism and resistance at times</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Party-state driven, to enhance regime capacity to cope with legitimacy and efficiency crises</td>
<td>Party-dominated agenda for reinvigoration of existing regime; reform not allowed to dilute regime control</td>
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<tr>
<td>Formally politics driven, although bureaucracy has inherent interest and say over substance and pace of reform</td>
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</table>

^Newly industrialized countries (South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong).
However, the private sector oriented and neoliberal connotations of current global reform ideas, such as NPM, do not sit logically with the rather statist and bureaucratic nature of many Asian administrative systems, not to mention the bureaucracy-driven nature of many reforms. All the recent talk about government downsizing and making more use of market means, as emerging in essentially statistic systems like Japan, Korea, and even Malaysia and Singapore, has yet to bring about the toning down of the strong-state tradition. One may argue that even in NPM-pioneer countries in the OECD, public management reform is not divorced from strengthening state capacity, but such capacity, in the context of many Asian countries, has to do with preexisting socially dominant and sometimes politically authoritarian regimes. The “old” public administration regime, in this sense, coexists with the “new” public management approaches and techniques.

While modernization and self-improvement can broadly cover the more diverse specific agendas of national reform programs, spanning decentralization, fiscal reform, efficiency drive, and structural streamlining, there are basically two different types of “failures” being addressed by such reforms—the failure (as in India and the Philippines) to create an effective and relatively incorrupt Weberian bureaucracy, and the putative failure of Weberian bureaucracies in more advanced countries such as Japan and Korea. In the case of China and Vietnam, one may add a third type of failure, namely the absence of a rational-legal bureaucracy that has to be developed in this current reform process as it also tries to bring about some post-Weberian features of flexibilities and market orientation. Using similar reform instruments to address different types of system failures obviously represents diverse political motives and reform agendas, and varying degrees of challenge to the ancien régime.

The lack of a clear ideological or paradigm break with the past means that reforms have been pursued to the extent of largely preserving pre-existing interests and institutions. Political challenges to the old regime may be on the rise, but whether or not there exist sufficient political will and organized efforts to reform the existing structures, practices, and culture depends not only on the general opportunities created by a major crisis such as the Asian economic crisis or regime change and transition, which triggers motivations for more fundamental changes or sustains a conviction for reform, but also on those nation-specific conditions shaped or dictated by institutional and path-dependency factors. Intra-Asia variance in reform momentum is found to be determined by changing politics–bureaucracy relations, regime change and transition, and government–society interaction (e.g., whether public pressures can induce more proactive response from government leaders).

As discussed earlier, the bureaucracy-dominated nature of policy making in many Asian countries and the fact that some reforms are bureaucrat-driven would ensure that such reforms do not turn out to upset the system as a whole. To say this is not to deny the possibility of the reform
process creating new institutional dynamics that would result in outcomes quite unplanned for and unexpected. Whether public management reforms would simply restore the old regime, or can in the process transform such regime and its internal institutional relationships remains to be seen. In this respect, countries such as China and Malaysia should serve as a good testing case.

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NOTES

1. “Maintain” refers to tightening up of traditional controls, fiscal restraints, and campaigns against waste and corruption; “modernize” refers to bringing in more flexible ways of public management and some corresponding adjustments to the political system; “marketize” refers to instituting as many market-type mechanisms as possible, entailing penetration of the administrative system by market values and practices; “minimize” refers to handing over as many tasks as possible to the market sector (Pollitt and Bouchaert, 176–178).

2. Muhammad Rais Abdul Karim was Director-General of the Malaysian Administrative Modernization and Management Planning Unit in the Prime Minister’s Department.

3. The author would like to thank one of the reviewers of this article for pointing this out.

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p=governance.


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