

Discipline and Democratize: Patterns of Bureaucratic Accountability in Southeast Asia

Scott Fritzen

The Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore

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Abstract: Attempts to ‘regulate’ civil service personnel- to hold bureaucrats accountable, whether to politicians, the people, professional standards or the rule of law- are as old as the politician-bureaucrat relationship itself. Politicians and citizens throughout Southeast Asia are calling for greater bureaucratic accountability in a variety of country settings: one-party states and emerging democracies, and in countries with capable as well as rudimentary bureaucracies. This paper presents an analytical framework that unpacks the idioms used in common accountability reforms applied in Southeast Asian countries into four categories – ‘rules’, ‘watchdogs’, ‘culture’ and ‘re-engineering’ – and relates reform selection and implementation to country governance characteristics. The framework is used to identify reform opportunities, constraints and likely trajectories in the diverse Southeast Asian context.

Keywords: bureaucracy, politics, accountability, Southeast Asia

INTRODUCTION

Attempts to ‘regulate’ civil service personnel — to hold bureaucrats accountable, whether to politicians, the people, professional standards or the rule of law — are as old as the politician-bureaucrat relationship itself. Both politicians and, in some cases, citizens are calling for greater bureaucratic accountability in a variety of country settings. These settings range from one-party states to emerging democracies and from countries with capable as well as rudimentary bureaucracies. But the rhetorical emphasis of such reforms is often similar, with calls to constrain corrupt civil servant behavior, promote positive behaviors (such as responsiveness to the end-users of services), and increase the transparency of decision-making.

Much is at stake in the outcomes (and *perceived* outcomes) of these reforms. The emergence of the governance paradigm over the 1990s has been based on a fundamental premise: the quality of a country’s institutions has a major impact on their development outcomes.^[1,2] Institutional quality has thus become a major focus for actors within governments, civil society and international organizations. Such actors may have a variety of motives: shaping development trajectories, mobilizing constituencies or simply avoiding the wrath of electorates increasingly frustrated over non-responsive bureaucracies.

Yet the diversity of the governance contexts in which such reforms are being attempted raises two questions. What influences the mix of attempted reforms to improve bureaucratic accountability in a given country? And how can we make sense of the prospects for ostensibly similar reform strategies when applied in highly diverse

contexts? This paper argues that the avenues open to countries attempting to improve bureaucratic performance are profoundly influenced by their governance contexts, and that these are in turn usefully placed in a historical context. This obvious point is often neglected by those propounding reforms, who have little interest in pointing out the serious systemic constraints on certain types of reforms, and/or who use the rhetoric of 'democratizing' the bureaucracy in political contexts that remain predominantly uncontested.

This paper has five parts. Following this introduction, I identify some of the key historical stages that have affected accountability relationships between politicians and bureaucrats in some Southeast Asian countries over the 20th century. The next part presents a typology of bureaucratic reform attempts on the present scene and presents some hypotheses for how country governance characteristics might relate to the selection and implementation of reforms within this typology. In the paper's fourth section, selected reforms from Singapore, Vietnam and Cambodia are used to show how the framework may be employed in empirical analysis. The concluding section presents implications arising from this analysis for would-be reformers and considerations for future research.

HISTORICAL PATTERNS OF BUREACRATIC ACCOUNTABILITY

Ever shifting relationships between politicians, and the bureaucratic machinery they seek to control and use for varied purposes, have played a direct or indirect role in several major debates in Southeast Asia since colonial times. One concerns the *contradictions of the colonial inheritance*, with its ideology of a politics-administration separation coupled

with extreme executive dominance in practice. A second concerns the role of the bureaucracy in *promoting economic transformation* in several Southeast Asian states modeling themselves after the successful Newly Industrialized Countries (NICs). More recent calls for good governance in the wake of the East Asian financial crisis coupled with democratization trends in the region have raised the salience of the concept of *democratic accountability* of both politicians and bureaucrats. Examining these three windows onto bureaucratic accountability is an indispensable first step in contextualizing current reform patterns and assessing their prospects.

The colonial legacy

A seminal concept dominating the ‘modern’ democratic notion of the bureaucrat-politician relationship harkens back to Woodrow Wilson’s politics-administration dichotomy: “The field of administration is a field of business...removed from the hurry and strife of politics”^[3] Both politics and administration, it was understood, were to be underpinned by accountability to the public and to the rule of law. This normative ideal, whatever the realities at home, did not travel well to Europe’s Southeast Asian colonies. There, the appointed (European) ‘man in the field’ was the ultimate bureaucrat-cum-politician ruling with great discretion and no democratic accountability^[4]. This was in practice usually consistent with indigenous patterns of rule in places kingdoms of Siam and Burma or the sultanates of the Malay Peninsula.^[5,6,7]

The task of crafting modern polities, whether as part of the decolonization agenda or revolutionary struggles, was one of developing and cementing elite consensus within

functioning organizations capable of commanding a necessary degree of legitimacy and of exercising state power. This task expressed itself in different forms, depending on the contingencies of the political process. Three models are evident.

The first pattern, found in Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines and Burma, involved a semi-sponsored, more or less orderly handover of power from the colonial authorities to a local elite. Colonial authorities looked to the civil service as the logical – often the only – source of acceptably nationalist leadership. In some places, these authorities explicitly endeavored to leave behind more ethnically representative bureaucracies (reversing earlier policies that favored Indians and Chinese in Malaysia, for instance) and political movements.^[8] When such promotion led in practice to uncomfortably close ties between aspiring politicians and bureaucrats (due to the shallow pool of ‘acceptable’ talent on which to draw), principle gave way to political expediency. These former colonies were left with weakly institutionalized political systems that had but a semblance of political-administrative separation – and none at all following the military coups that subsequently occurred in all of the above countries except Malaysia.

Thailand, which avoided colonization, must stand in its own category. Here, at least until recent years, a military-bureaucratic alliance became a key mode for the expression of political interests. The 1932 coup d’etat that overthrew the absolute monarchy was motivated as much by bureaucratic-clientelistic objectives as by calls for greater modernization or democracy per se.^[6] The ensuing pattern of Thai institutional life as “a matter of competition between bureaucratic cliques for the benefits of government”^[6] remained consistent for several decades.

The third pattern – most costly in terms of human suffering and development outcomes – involved prolonged violence and instability in Indochina. It began in the immediate post-war period with the North Vietnamese struggle to unify the country under communist rule, and ended only in 1993 with UN-sponsored elections which introduced incipient democratic institutions to Cambodia.^[9] Prolonged strife, combined with attempts to implement radical socialist programs, left Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia with no formal legacy a separation of governmental powers or of a professionalized bureaucracy. The bureaucracy became part and parcel of revolutionary administrations utilizing neo-Stalinist forms of political organization.

To summarize, the internal contradictions of colonialism, coupled with the political turbulence that followed decolonization and modernization period, left bureaucracies in all of these countries (save Thailand) decisively dominated by political (rather than bureaucratic) elites. The systems that emerged, however, varied greatly in their developmental effectiveness, for reasons explored in the next section.

On the heels of the NICs: The role of the bureaucracy

Beginning with the Japanese transformation, several East Asian countries, together with one Southeast Asian – Singapore – were able to rapidly transform their economies, attaining within the space of some twenty years levels of per capita income that placed them in the ranks of advanced, industrial countries. Several Southeast Asian countries, which collectively became known as the new ‘tigers’ – Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia

– attempted to model the NIC's developmental recipe, and achieved considerable success in doing so.

How had the NICs achieved such feats? This became the dominant question in practical and theoretical debates that continue to this day, and in which the relationships between bureaucrats and politicians came to play a key role. Views divided generally between those^[10,11] who advocated that the state's role in economic decision-making was decisive and others^[12] claiming that state success in achieving macroeconomic stability and an external orientation was far more important than bureaucratic interventions. An influential explanation among the former group^[13,14] held that the key to developmental effectiveness, both in the NIC case and potentially in other countries, was the “embedded autonomy” of the bureaucracy. Bureaucracies could, by this theory, successfully serve as ‘midwives’ to economic development under four conditions:

- A political leadership determined to pursue a transformational agenda with little fear of electoral backlash;
- A meritocratic, technically competent bureaucracy (or an elite, ‘piloting’ segment of it) capable of successfully intervening in the economy due to a combination of the next two conditions;
- An ‘embedded’ bureaucracy, meaning one enjoying dense informational links to the companies and market sectors to be promoted; and
- An ‘autonomous’ bureaucracy, i.e. one not captured by any special interest and therefore capable of ‘disciplining’ capital by, for instance, stopping subsidies where this was necessary.

If these were the conditions of success in the NIC's, to what extent were they achieved in the Southeast Asian context? Singapore, as one of the original NIC's, was in many ways the archetypical example of the process. One must only make the proviso that the autonomy of the bureaucracy was decidedly not that from the ruling People's Action Party itself. Rather, it reflected the overall autonomy of the regime, with its technically competent bureaucrats clearly in position as "implementers" of policies ^[15,16].

Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia were all held up at one time or another as exemplary 'new tigers', primarily due to their success in achieving, for extended periods, high rates of economic growth. Malaysia and Indonesia shared considerable regime stability, a commitment of the leadership to economic modernization, and development outcomes that were broadly based, whether through programs of outright redistribution (as in the case of Malaysia's New Economic Policy) or successful strategy to boost agricultural productivity (as in Indonesia).

The bureaucracy in all of these cases was thought to be reasonably capable and 'technocratic.' Yet economic interventions were of a generally smaller scale than in the NICs themselves, and the 'disciplining' of capital was heavily constrained by the need to promote the 'illegitimate' (i.e. non-transformational) interests of the ruling class itself; this pattern manifested itself in soaring levels of corruption in Indonesia, for instance. Only in Malaysia did the high degree of unity of the Malay political-bureaucratic establishment consistently promote a strongly redistributionist agenda. Yet the developmental model employed by the 'tigers' clearly involved less of a 'steel-frame', disciplined bureaucracy than that implied by the embedded autonomy theory.

Vietnam has more recently emerged as a plausible candidate for ‘tiger’ status, with economic growth rates consistently among the highest in the world over the 1990s. Scholarly debates continue as to whether the far-reaching *doi moi* [renovation] reforms it introduced were driven from the ‘bottom-up’ by local bureaucratic responses to failed central planning or by a far-sighted central leadership^[17]. Whatever the case, the rapid growth that ensued initially reflected gains brought on by the removal of ‘artificial’ constraints imposed by poor institutions such as collective farming. Later, this growth was sustained by a political-bureaucratic Communist Party elite calculus that rapid growth and modernization were the best chance the Party had to maintain its legitimacy^[18]. This strategy of economic reform with continued political authoritarianism has generated some tensions in Vietnam, as it has in countries such as Singapore and Malaysia.

Pressures for reform: The governance agenda

The last fifteen years or so have seen a shift in the parameters of the debate over the politician-bureaucrat relationship throughout Southeast Asia. Two overlapping categories of influence are particularly important in this context: democratization and the rise of the ‘good governance’ agenda.

Calls for greater political accountability have been on the increase throughout the region. A “third wave of democratization^[19]” saw civilian, multi-party rule return in the Philippines (1986), Thailand (1992), Cambodia (1993) and Indonesia (1998). Public anger over the closed workings of political-bureaucratic elites was a key factor in

bringing down autocratic rulers all of these countries (except Cambodia). This increased mobilization and citizen consciousness has carried over into the democratic politics in these countries; anger over the perceived misuse of the bureaucracy for narrow political purposes continued to motivate calls for both political and bureaucratic reform in several contexts, for instance in the ouster of President Joseph Estrada during “People’s Power II” (2002) and in the introduction of an ambitious new constitution in Thailand in 1997. Citizens throughout the region showed themselves eager and willing to envision democratization as a check on both unaccountable political and bureaucratic power.

In Singapore, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Brunei, governance remained authoritarian and overall system parameters (for practical purposes, if through very different mechanisms) uncontested; in Myanmar (Burma) a small group of generals continued to block any political normalization. Even in these countries, the *ersatz* vocabulary of democratization – articulated in terms of improved governmental responsiveness to citizen feedback – featured prominently in official political discourse, though practical reform efforts betrayed the significant contradictions of their contexts (see case studies of Singapore and Vietnam in section four below).

The ‘good governance’ agenda that arose contemporaneously with the democratization movement above was given impetus both by academic work linking regime characteristics to development outcomes and by various international donors. One variant of the agenda, driven by increasing financial integration of the region, concerned corporate governance. Explanations of the Asian financial crisis beginning in 1997, which afflicted Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines more than other Southeast Asian countries, came to center on a pernicious set of incentives – of politicians to use capital

markets for personal purposes; of banks to lend funds for unsound investments; and of bureaucratic regulators to overlook all of the above^[20]. Such developments led to pressures for greater transparency, disciplined oversight systems, and a clearer separation of bureaucratic from political authority.

Another ‘good governance’ agenda lies in the promotion of decentralized decision-making and management, whether in a democratic, fiscal or administrative context. Here too there was much to discuss on the regional scene, with virtually all countries in the region engaged in some form of formal decentralization policy. For many countries, this went well beyond rhetorical support. Through the rapid introduction of two decentralization laws (No. 22/1999 and 25/2000) in the immediate aftermath of Soeharto’s resignation, Indonesia moved “from being one of the most centralized countries in the world to one of the most decentralized”^[21]. Thailand and the Philippines both continued to decentralize decision-making to provinces and districts, the latter quite vigorously^[22]. (See the case study of Cambodian decentralization below.)

Democratization and good governance pressures, driven by the increased sophistication of societies and by global financial integration, have thus propelled the politics-administration link into the center of political discourse throughout the region. In a few countries (notably Myanmar and Laos and Brunei) the impetus behind an efficient, professional bureaucracy is still weak. Other countries often classified as ‘authoritarian states’ (such as Singapore and Vietnam) are attempting to make their bureaucratic systems more responsive to their publics without threatening (indeed, while bolstering) the position of ruling elites. In more democratically competitive settings, a wider range of reforms – from formal regulation of civil servants via asset disclosure requirements to

democratic decentralization to increase the direct accountability of service providers and local politicians to the public – is being introduced. Capacity to implement such ambitious reforms is in all cases limited.

A DESCRIPTIVE TYPOLOGY OF REFORM ATTEMPTS

As shown above, pressures for greater bureaucratic accountability have been advanced from different angles: from the need to consolidate political systems in the immediate aftermath of decolonization; to effect economic transformation, and to promote democratization. In all cases, specific reform attempts could draw on a template of options. There have been a number of attempts. Drawing on an earlier attempt to catalogue different bureaucratic accountability reforms^[23], I propose a simple scheme for capturing major reform possibilities.

The conceptual framework is based on distinctions between the *aims* of reforms (whether to curb negative bureaucratic behaviors or to promote positive ones) and the scope of instruments applied (whether directly to organizations or to the field of relations between public-sector actors). Cross-tabulating these distinctions yields Figure 1.

Quadrant 1 – ‘rules and restraints’ – involves the attempt by politicians to directly suppress unwanted bureaucratic behavior. Informally, for instance, leaders might seek to create a climate of fear among bureaucrats with threats of sharp, summary punishment for transgressions against their wishes. Formally, prohibitive regulations on bureaucratic conduct may be policed internally, either by commissions established by, and accountable to, political leaders, or within the bureaucracy itself. Examples of such

strategies would include anti-corruption commissions that are primarily internally oriented (i.e. monitor the bureaucracy with little external publicity or assistance), as in Singapore, and civil service rules written into of conduct, including those monitored by professional organizations.

Quadrant 2's 'culture'-based strategy includes attempts to create positive incentives for performance by directly influencing the major inflows of human and financial resources to the civil service and the rules guiding their work. Emphasizing the need to make recruitment to the civil service more meritocratic is a classic element of the 'embedded autonomy' argument. Boosting morale and attracting talented individuals by improving the pay and career prospects of civil servants is another widely touted strategy (one in which Singapore, as shown below, has invested heavily). A range of organizational reforms falling under the rubric of the New Public Management comes into play as well. These include efforts to improve organizational culture with greater esprit d'corps and sense of professionalism^[24], and performance measurement and contracting systems that attempt to devolve responsibility for a clearer sense of outcomes while freeing managers to focus more on the means.

Figure 1. A typology of bureaucratic accountability reforms

Purpose	Control	Organizational	Scope
			Structural
		1. <u>Rules and Restraints</u> : <i>Asset disclosure, internal rules, complaints / feedback dealt with administratively</i>	III. Managerialist version: <u>Political control</u> ; Democratic version: <u>Watchdogs</u> : <i>Transparency-based approaches, asset disclosure requirements, independent anti-corruption commissions</i>
		2. <u>Culture</u> : <i>Meritocratic promotion, org culture, performance measurement, pay reform, administrative decentralization</i>	4. Managerialist version: <u>Competition</u> : <i>Privatization, Competitive pressures, reengineering, user fees, independent statutory agencies</i> ; Democratic version: <u>Democratic decentralization / devolution</u>

In contrast to the organizational emphasis of the first two, quadrants three and four represent attempts to re-configure the field of relationships between the civil service and other actors in ways that may change the incentives for bureaucratic action more fundamentally. In quadrant three this is done for the purpose of restricting the bureaucracy, in quadrant four for promotional purposes. In both cases, there is a distinction can be made between *managerialist* and *democratic* strategies.

Quadrant three's managerialist variant we find in the 'political control' strategy, which attempts to institutionalize monitoring relationships between politicians and career bureaucrats. Efforts aimed at shoring up the direct accountability of bureaucrats to political overseers would include provisions for political appointments to, and legislative oversight of, the bureaucracy. The democratic 'watchdog' variant is one much touted by various multilateral agencies, in which civil society (or more generically a third party actor) monitors the behavior of the bureaucracy, with varying degrees of legal recourse. Examples would include press liberalization and rules subjecting bureaucratic decision-

making (for instance on procurement) to external, independent review. Asset disclosure requirements for public officials, when coupled with public review, would fit into this category as well.

Quadrant four's managerialist version revolves around more radical application of New Public Management theories. 'Competition' is fostered via application of market mechanisms, as agencies are forced to compete with each other and the private sector for funding. Agencies are allowed substantially greater autonomy and insulation from political decision-making; the extreme case would be the establishment of statutory boards. The democratic version of quadrant four represents the attempt to strengthen overall democratic responsiveness of politicians *and* bureaucrats to the public, in many cases via some form of system-wide democratization coupled with 'devolution'. In a recent statement of this strategy ^[2], the mutually reinforcing incentives of politicians, bureaucrats and citizens lead to better service delivery outcomes. Democratic systems provide a launch pad, in this view, for citizens to organize and to pressure central and (depending on the degree of democratic decentralization) local leaders. These, in their search for broad democratic support, devise public goods-oriented strategies and place pressure on the bureaucracy to deliver; they also monitor actual performance. The bureaucracy is 'sandwiched' between the higher expectations of the people and the monitoring pressures from both citizens and politicians, leading to greater overall incentives to perform well.

Linking systemic capacities and reform programs

How can we relate country context to the selection of, and prospects for, reform programs falling into the various categories above? Four broad statements can guide attempts to link context and reform programs, and motivate the case studies in the following section.

First, figure 1 is structured loosely in terms of the strength of pressures working on bureaucratic actors and the degree of institution-wide capacities necessary to make the reforms functional. Promotional strategies are (when functional) both stronger and more capacity intensive than restrictive strategies; it is generally easier to prohibit a specific behavior than to create the institutional incentives for positive action. The same is true for structural, as opposed to agency-specific strategies. They help to alleviate classic principal-agent problems by ‘socializing’ the monitoring of bureaucratic behavior.

Second, the specific types of capacities needed to make the strategies work vary from quadrant to quadrant. The ‘organizational’ strategies - particularly ‘rules and restraints’ – are, as classic principal-agent problems, strongly affected by the way in which the institutional environment affect prospects of enforcement. The level of information available to principals in monitoring the actual behavior of the bureaucratic agents, and the likelihood that breeches of conduct will in fact be detected and punished, become critical. Incentives also matter, not only those to avoid negative action on the part of errant bureaucrats, but those underlying enforcement effort on the part of ‘principals’ (i.e. politicians). The ‘rule-of-law’ version of this strategy requires for its success independent and capable institutions of enforcement. In addition, a restraint-oriented strategy becomes feasible in proportion to the degree to which professional codes of conduct become institutionalized, and internalized, by bureaucrats^[23].

The culture strategy, in turn, depends heavily on the quality of human and financial inputs available to the civil service. Countries with well-developed educational systems will have a greater depth of human resources to draw on; countries with well developed revenue systems and higher income levels will be able to affect civil servant incentives through more generous pay packages. Broader elements in the cultural and historical background – such as norms supportive of education-based elites and of Wilson's politics-administration dichotomy – are also critical; it may be impossible to actively promote bureaucratic performance where political-bureaucratic ties are largely clientelistic in nature.

Structural strategies are more capacity intensive. Here, the degree of institutional development – *both* in terms of regularized bureaucratic processes *and* the viability and health of democratic pressures – are strongly implicated. Democracy and political institutionalization are the two critical factors for structural strategies. Democratic capacities underpinning strategies in quadrants 3-4 are likely to be sufficiently developed only in relatively consolidated democracies where the principle of political accountability has been well-established. Where this line lies exactly will demand country-specific scrutiny. The managerial variants are highly dependent on the existence of an 'embedded' bureaucracy as described by Evans^[13], which in turn is influenced by the extent of political stability and market development.

Third, sectoral differences may come into play for the New Public Management reforms of quadrants 2 and 4. Service delivery varies significantly in terms of whether outcomes of bureaucratic action are easily visible and assessed or not to outside monitors, and whether the process of reaching outcomes – the specific outputs of the bureaucracy –

are easily structured and therefore monitored^[25,26]. New Public Management strategies will be generally more successful in areas where both are more amenable to external monitoring and assessment. For instance, accountability reforms based on contracts and performance monitoring systems in tax collection agencies – where both are visible – are more likely to be potentially more sustainable and effective than those in, say, regional development planning agencies.

Finally, while individual reforms may be categorized in Figure 1, the most interesting aspects of reform programs may lie in the interaction between reform elements and dynamic political and economic contexts. The case studies below explore this interaction.

THREE CASES FROM SOUTHEAST ASIA

Countries in Southeast Asia can be divided into four broad patterns of bureaucratic reform that throw light on the connections posited above. The paper presents two country examples from the final pattern in order to demonstrate how the framework can be used to shed light on specific types of politician-bureaucrat interaction.

First, there are countries for which bureaucratic accountability reforms are effectively off the agenda, constrained by extreme authoritarianism of leaders coupled with critically weak legal structures. In Myanmar and Laos, the rhetoric of bureaucratic reforms is unlikely to advance much beyond basic quadrant 1 proposals due to political authoritarianism and lack of well-developed legal structures.

A second pattern, which might be captioned ‘stumbling towards synergy’, applies to the four more developed multi-party democracies in the region: Thailand, Malaysia,

Indonesia and the Philippines. These countries are all initiating a complex range of interventions to advance bureaucratic accountability. These reforms share the aim of strengthening the rule of law within a democratic context; that is, both politicians and bureaucrats are to be ultimately accountable to the people.

According to the framework advanced above, potentially synergistic effects between reforms should be most apparent in such settings; democracy enables a larger potential range of reforms. One example of such synergy is these countries' anti-corruption strategies, combining asset disclosure requirements for public officials with anti-corruption commissions and a (relatively) free press. In Thailand's case, these reforms have been embedded within a range of anti-corruption institutions launched by the new (1997) constitution itself.

Third, a 'managerialist' vision of reform is evident in Singapore. There, a high-capacity bureaucracy has been built up over several decades, and a range of reforms representing all of the quadrants are being given sustained attention. The final pattern involves the attempt to initiate relatively ambitious structural reforms in country contexts constrained by low resource levels and moderately or weakly institutionalized bureaucracies. This applies to the cases of Vietnam and Cambodia in their different ways. It is to these last two patterns that the analysis now turns.

Singapore's managerialist vision

Singapore's bureaucracy presents something of a conundrum for theorists of administration: it is undoubtedly high-capacity, yet as Hamilton-Hart^[15] puts it, "has

limited internal cohesion and, *qua* bureaucracy, occupies a subordinate role in the political process.” Singapore’s administrative reforms have fallen into virtually all of the categories in figure one’s typology, with different quadrants emphasized at different points in its short history. Two points stand out.

The first is the high degree of success in structuring the administrative system along “structural political control” lines (quadrant 3). Worthington notes that in Singapore’s “managerial state”, the bureaucracy as a tool of a “hegemonic political program” has achieved “an overwhelming presence” in both society and (through Government Linked Corporations, among other instruments) the economy^[27]. Structurally, public and private sector actors – “entwined in terms of their interests, roles and career paths” – combine to form the governing elite^[15]. In such a system, centers of accountability may be diffuse – witness the “enormous autonomous power” possessed by administrators of statutory boards, for instance – even while the overarching effect is to create a “centralization of power within a small group”^[16].

Second, Singapore’s administrative reforms have for the most part taken place within the *organizational* quadrants of figure 1 (quadrants 1 and 2). Reforms to combat corruption and promote responsiveness in the civil service are widely regarded even by Singapore’s critics to have been successful in creating highly effective civil service machinery. The earliest phase of reform in Singapore drew largely on the managerialist strategies in quadrant 1. A high priority for the leadership following Singapore’s expulsion from the Malaysia in 1965 was to ensure the loyalty of civil servants to the leadership in the face of an ongoing Communist challenge and to make the civil service more sensitive to the needs of the population. Towards these ends, the People’s Action

Party (PAP) “relied on two agencies—the Political Study Centre and the Central Complaints Bureau—and a host of other measures---viz., participation in mass civil projects, recruitment of non-English educated graduates into the civil service, tougher disciplinary measures, and a policy of selective retention and retirement of senior civil servants.”^[29]

A priority emerging somewhat later was the reduction of petty corruption, held to be rife throughout the service during the colonial period. Singapore’s strategy follows the classic recommendations of the economic analysis of corruption (Rose-Ackermann 1999): raise the potential costs and lower the potential benefits of engaging in corrupt activities. Three key steps in Singapore included: 1) creation of a strong legal foundation for a broad definition of corruption (including the *intention* to be corrupt) and with high penalties for those convicted; 2) establishment of the Corrupt Practices Investigation Board located within the Prime Minister’s office which was primarily (especially in the early periods) focused on the investigation of malpractice; and 3) substantial increase in salaries for civil servants^[30]. In addition, the political leadership consistently signaled its commitment to anti-corruption consistently and its performance in reducing corruption as an early locus of legitimacy. This anti-corruption strategy, with its mix of quadrants 1-2 control and promotional measures, has been deemed extremely effective in rooting out bureaucratic corruption. For a number of years, Singapore has ranked as one of the least corrupt countries in the world in international surveys such as the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index (<http://www.transparency.org>).

A different set of reforms known as PS21 has focused further attention onto quadrant 2 in recent years. Several initiatives centering on “a culture of efficiency and customer

service” if not democratic accountability^[28] include the widespread use of service standards, work improvement teams, performance measurement systems linked to incentives and awards for innovative practices, and measures to enhance feedback from the consumers of public services^[31]. These measures fit neatly under the ‘Reinventing Government’ or ‘New Public Management’ rubric^[32]. It is difficult to assess the effectiveness of the PS21 reforms, as independent and publicly accessible evaluations appear to be lacking, but the Singaporean public sector is widely praised for its efficiency and adaptiveness.

This short review raises a question. How is it that Singapore has been apparently successful in its use of several different reform strategies, from control to promotion, and from organizational to structural change? It may be that a necessary (though insufficient) condition for reform success has been the lower transaction costs associated with monitoring bureaucratic behavior in this city-state context. Another is the virtuous circle through which resources for bureaucratic reform (such as civil service pay increases) have both contributed to, and been generated by, Singapore’s remarkable economic ascent.

The main precondition for continued reform along the managerialist path outlined above is probably the persistence of a policy orientation based on the disciplining effect of economic integration and openness. The ample evidence for such an orientation co-exists with signs suggesting it may become increasingly difficult for Singapore. Hamilton-Hart^[15] emphasizes the way in which Singapore’s high-performance public sector rests on informal norms and practices reinforcing meritocracy, but questions how robust the system is in light of an emerging class of elite individuals straddling public-

private sector boundaries. There is also little evidence of a move towards more political competition at present, suggesting internal reform improvements might reach a natural barrier. For example, Singaporean reforms that in other contexts might potentially occupy the democratic sector in quadrant 4 – such as the creation of Community Development Councils (CDC) in the 1990s to make service delivery more responsive to local needs – may fail to reach their potential; at present, CDC members are in fact appointed by the PAP itself^[33]. Haque’s finding that the “overwhelming power of bureaucracy” and dominant social groups and classes prevent New Public Management-oriented accountability mechanisms from working properly in developing country environments^[34] might apply as well to Singapore’s context.

Such a movement towards the democratic versions of the bureaucratic accountability strategy (quadrants 3 and 4) would in Singapore rely on a loosening of PAP hegemony over both bureaucracy and civil society; for the former there is no evidence to date, while analysts debate the extent to which the latter may be occurring^[35].

Probing systemic limits: Cambodia and Vietnam

Cambodia and Vietnam are both among the lowest income countries in Southeast Asia, although Vietnam has more than 10 years of very rapid economic growth and poverty reduction behind it. Given that it is likely to be extremely difficult to initiate and sustain bureaucratic accountability reforms in low income countries, it is not surprising that both have in different ways hit against important obstacles in their institutional reform programs. Yet these obstacles are not directly related to the low level of economic

development. The attempt in Vietnam to promote bureaucratic accountability to political officials via increased internal as well as third party (citizen) monitoring as an anti-corruption strategy is testing the constraints of its authoritarian political system. Cambodia is attempting democratic decentralization in part as a bureaucratic reform strategy in conditions that make this very difficult due to weak institutional development.

The Vietnamese government initiated a “grassroots democratization” policy in 1997, mandating that local governments take all necessary steps to ensure that procedural democracy is respected at the local government level^[36]. Particular attention is given to ensuring that all government investments at the grassroots, and all taxes and labor contributions, are implemented equitably and transparently. The decree and accompanying implementation guidelines are an attempt to set clearer local governance standards in areas of great practical concern to villagers. Efforts to pilot implementation guidelines for these specific guidelines have been ongoing in all provinces under the general leadership of the ruling Communist Party, which has made the initiative a high stated priority^[37]. The policy was formulated against the background of unprecedented large-scale demonstrations, some of which turned violent, against local official corruption, particularly in the use of infrastructure funds in Thai Binh province over 1997-8.

The key issue in grassroots democratization has been enforcement. In theory, the policy attempts to clearly communicate democratic rights to villagers, who will therefore monitor their fulfillment carefully and complain to higher levels of government when local government officials obstruct these. Yet there are serious reasons to doubt whether the policy can succeed in changing behavior incentives faced by local officials, despite its

important position in the government's anti-corruption strategy. Its 'policy logic' – the theory linking program outputs and root causes of the problem being addressed – is flawed, focusing attention on the commune level, when in fact corruption is endemic throughout the Vietnamese system. Its "implementation logic" – the assumptions it makes regarding the likely disposition of local implementers on whom the whole scheme rests – is also tenuous. District and provincial levels of government are often far removed psychologically as well as geographically from the village gates. Officials at these levels – not as a class known have favorable attitudes towards decentralized, participatory processes – are unlikely to enforce its provisions rigorously against errant officials at the grassroots (provided there is no local outcry), or to use the new policy as a major criteria for assessing local government performance. The question thus remains as to whether an internal quality control strategy, coupled with third-party monitoring, can work in a politically non-competitive environment. The positive answer in Singapore's case may be due more to the significantly different institutional environments and capacities of the two systems.

Cambodia emerged from two decades of instability, including the terror of the genocidal Pol Pot regime, in 1993, when elections organized by the United Nations where held. Its political normalization has been slow, punctuated by a violent coup in 1997 and by the dominance, in part through intimidation, of the ruling Cambodian People's Party. Yet progress has certainly been made since that time, and observers of the Cambodian scene note that its chances of development success are better than they have been arguably than any time in its recent history.

In part based on well-organized donor support,^[38] Cambodia is proceeding with the creation of elected Commune Councils, a form of political decentralization at the most grassroots level of government. In 2002, a total of 1,621 commune councils comprising between 5 and 11 members were popularly elected with several parties submitting lists of candidates. The councils were overwhelmingly dominated by the ruling Cambodian People's Party, and the fairness of the elections was called into question by many observers. However, campaigning was vigorous on all sides and many analysts also marked the elections as a step forward in the process of political normalization of the country.

Introducing significant (though still 'mid-range') decentralization reforms in such a resource and institutionally challenged country as Cambodia poses interesting questions. One is how the councils, probably differently in various places, come to see and play their role over time. Under their current mandate, they councils essentially have two types of roles, summarized in an NGO statement on the eve of the commune elections:

Cambodia's communes, with state-appointed commune chiefs, have only ever been associated with controlling, regulating and recording the affairs of the commune.

With decentralization, all of this is meant to change....While the communes will continue to have an important role as agents of the central government, their primary focus will become the development of the commune.^[39]

It is in fact an open question as to which of these functions will over time predominate. The Law on Administration of Communes, signed into law in March 2001 represents a sharp break from previous patterns of administration in Cambodia. Communes were established during the French colonial period, with legislative origins in

a royal decree of 1908 that allowed for the election of a commune chief by the inhabitants of a commune; there was also substantial fiscal decentralization as well. Yet this did not prevent the councils from being functioning primarily as deconcentrated agents of the center. Devas^[40] goes so far as to claim that “it is questionable whether local government, in the sense understood in the West, has even existed in Cambodia.”

Powerful interests beyond history will also constrain the development of a ‘demand’ for democratic institutions from below. Cambodia’s bureaucracy is highly politicized, with political appointments dominating the bureaucracy and even relatively low-level officials facing significant pressure to align themselves with a party.^[41] Given the current one-party dominant political scene, elected councils in many localities will likely come to be seen as agents of a hierarchical party structure, one not necessarily based on popular legitimacy. The level of interest of community members in the councils is still unclear.^[42]

Another challenge for bureaucratic reform in Cambodia will be to develop ways of linking service delivery in general at the local level to effective forms of planning, financing and community participation. At present, higher levels of government transfer funds for basic administration expenses along with a small block grant for community development, which averages less than \$6,000. Attempts are being made to make these allocations more sizeable and predictable. At present, the only apparent way to do this is with donor financing. The long-term financial sustainability of a council development orientation clearly remains a question mark.

Cambodia is thus something of an oddity. Its substantive political devolution has bypassed two levels of government to go directly to the commune level, the lowest administrative level of government. The creation of this new institution stands, however,

in an administrative and fiscal semi-vacuum, in that supportive deconcentration reforms (from centre to province and, in particular, from province to district) have not advanced nearly so quickly. While political devolution is unleashing significant opportunities for communities to exert pressures for democratic accountability, it is as yet unclear how well Cambodia's generally low-capacity bureaucracy and political institutions will be able to respond.

DISCUSSION

This section has two aims. It first summarizes key findings from the historical overview, typology and case studies reviewed in the paper. Given the exploratory nature of the paper, some findings take the form of specific hypotheses for further research. The section then examines the implications of this type of analysis for assessing the prospects and likely trajectory of reform programs in the region.

Linking reforms to governance context and characteristics

The paper has argued that two aspects of the governance context must be examined to understand the likely adoption and trajectory of bureaucratic reforms. The first is the pattern of relationships between politicians and bureaucrats – the driving force behind all administrative reform programs. Three brief country examples from Southeast Asia suggest that the historical legacy of two key variables influence reform programs:

- Extent of a separation – even if rhetorical – between political and bureaucratic accountability; and
- Extent of political institutionalization at time of independence.

Greater levels of both of these variables are hypothesized to lead countries to pursue higher-leverage ‘promotional’ bureaucratic reforms (quadrants 2 and 4 of our framework).

The second aspect of the governance context concerns the match between the systemic capacities demanded by particular reform programs and those actual available in a system. Some initial hypotheses from section three above are broadly confirmed by the case studies. They mainly go back to a simple premise: reforms that seek to promote good bureaucratic performance and to re-structure the relationship between the bureaucracy and other societal, political or economic actors are more intensive of systemic capacities than those that seek to restrict specific kinds of bureaucratic behavior and that focus on specific agencies.

One promising aspect of the typology presented in section three, together with its supporting postulates, is that it can be used to generate a range of hypotheses for future research, all with theoretical and practical significance:

- Reforms (democratic variants of quadrants 3 and 4) that purport to subject the bureaucracy to greater accountability from citizens (as opposed to the end-users of services) are likely to be non-starters in authoritarian settings;
- Countries with weakly institutionalized legal systems will face particular difficulties promoting greater rule-based accountability (quadrants 1 and 3).

- Countries with low levels of human and financial inputs to the bureaucracy will be hampered in their pursuit of strategies based on recruitment and organizational management reform (quadrant 2).
- Those without well developed, competitive market economies will find New Public Management-style managerialism difficult (quadrants 2 and 4).^[43]

The evidence reviewed here from the case studies of Singapore, Vietnam and Cambodia is consistent with these assertions, which will require further articulation and testing.

Assessing reform appropriateness and feasibility

While country context matters in determining the prospects of particular reforms, it is also true that reformers inside and outside of government often employ rhetorical strategies that may in part conceal such constraints. The Cambodian and Vietnamese cases provided two examples of this. The Cambodian case suggests how administrative capacities can be overstretched by a democratic decentralization initiative that demands greater institutional capacities than at yet exist on the Cambodian scene. The case of Vietnam's grassroots democratization policy demonstrates how tenuous a supposedly 'democratizing' reform meant to curb local government corruption can be in the context of an authoritarian, one-party state.

Such examples can be found in otherwise high-capacity contexts as well. For instance, the lack of an effective political opposition in Singapore frees the government to pursue ambitious bureaucratic reforms of a 'managerialist' variety. Yet this same 'democratic

deficit' may actually hamper achievement of the rhetorical goals laid out in various government interventions to promote an “active citizenry,” as noted earlier in the Community Development Council example.

This insight does not necessarily imply that reforms that aim high – beyond existing systemic capacities – should not be attempted by reformers or supported by well-positioned outsiders. It is clearly important to analyze the fit between existing and implied systemic capacities, and to proceed cautiously where a disjunction appears. Yet checklists of ideal implementation conditions will rarely be fulfilled in developing countries. That is perhaps especially true for anti-corruption programs, suffering as they do from a paradox: anti-corruption reforms demand substantial systemic capacities; capacities that are weakest in exactly those contexts where they are most needed^[19]. When, and under what conditions, should reforms be promoted *despite* their incongruence with many powerful interests at central and local levels? Where, for instance, should reformers begin in attempting to ‘subvert’ the multiple, interlocking props supporting corrupt behaviors in countries where corruption is systemic? Analysts must begin to look towards a broader framework for deciding what types of bureaucratic accountability reforms may be meaningful in highly adverse environments. Such a framework has yet to be articulated, but might incorporate the potentially positive elements of conflicts over implementation, reflecting changing expectations and the strengthening of nascent coalitions supporting change^[20].

Reformers and their supporters in adverse settings will thus need a high tolerance for signs of chaos and dysfunction in institutional reforms – something very evident in Indonesia and Cambodia as these countries pursue capacity-intensive decentralization

reforms. They will also need to look for ways in which reforms interact with other aspects of a changing socio-political situation, particularly where the environment is rapidly changing. In Indonesia and Thailand, for instance, such an approach would imply looking beyond the obvious, high-profile shortcomings of recently introduced asset disclosure requirements for public officials to consider the manner in which civil society groups have been emboldened to challenge long-entrenched elites. It should also be acknowledged that it is rarely possible for bureaucratic accountability reforms to be both comprehensive and sustained for a lengthy period of time; the sequencing and pace of reforms will vary depending on “policy windows” of opportunity – periods in which actionable proposals, reform champions and a facilitative environment come together^[44].

However, supporting bureaucratic accountability reforms in states that are both highly authoritarian and non-developmental – the fourth pattern observed in section 4 – appears inadvisable in light of the framework introduced in this paper. Leaders may evince an appetite for the rhetorical legitimacy provided by such paper-reforms, yet there is arguably a threshold of systemic capacity necessary before these become viable. In such settings, ‘realistic’ reform attempts are likely to be confined to pilot initiatives in non-essential ministries, where a margin of experimentation and institutional incongruence may be tolerated by political elites.

The problem is that it may be difficult to actually distinguish, based on formal regime characteristics, ‘non-starter’ environments from those which are ‘merely’ averse but still promising. One distinguishing indicator may be the extent to which there is a degree of localized innovation – local ‘policy experiments’ – found throughout the administrative system. In other words, is the institutional environment sufficiently permissive for local

reformers to carve out a meaningful space for experimentation (whether due to decentralized governance arrangements or to de facto central neglect)? If the answer is yes, there may be scope for promoting such experimentation. The further step of sponsoring the horizontal spread of innovation would depend on a more facilitative, activist central government role. Diagnosing institutional capacities and possibly heterogeneous administrative practices in a given country context requires in-depth local knowledge, or what one analyst^[45] called an “anthropology of the state.”

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38. Extensive donor reports on the key donor program in this vein – UNDP's Seila – are available; see for instance Rudengren and Ojendal (2002). “*Learning By Doing: An Analysis of the Seila Experience in Cambodia*.” SPM consultants, mimeo.

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41. Min Muny, personal communication.

42. "Very few villagers (almost nobody) know that there is a commune development committee and that they are responsible for deciding how to spend the commune's LDF (local development fund). If the CDC does a good job or a bad job, the villagers do not know, they are only aware of their VDC and village chief." (Biddulph et. al, 1999 quote in Ayres, p. 54). Of course this bleak situation may well have could have changed post-election.

43. To note that 'context matters' in this sense is to underline that that policy adaptations typically correspond to the 'mixed scanning' model of planning, in which decision-makers maintain both a wide perspective on systemic variables to maintain orientation as focus their attention onto specific instances and notable exceptions (Etzioni, A. *Mixed Scanning: A Third Approach to Decision-Making*. *Public Administration Review*. December 1967, 385-91).

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