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## **Globalizing New Public Management: A Pilot Study from Thailand**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This research is about the impact of the New Public Management (NPM) paradigm on public sector reform in Thailand. The main objective of the research is to explore the question of whether Thai public sector reform belongs to the NPM paradigm, especially whether the intentions and contents of policy documents are actually realized in the implementation process. The study commences by reviewing the transformation of public administration to NPM and how this has affected developing countries. The research is specifically concerned with Thailand and as a first step delineates the history of public administration and its reform in Thailand including current policies. The remainder is comprised of a case study of one ministry in Thailand. Much of the data was collected from semi-structured interviews with officials in the ministry and government agencies responsible for reform. The case study focused on three dimensions of reform: organizational restructure and redesign of internal authority, workforce reduction and internal NPM reform initiatives. The findings were mixed. Some NPM style initiatives such as restructuring of roles and functions were accomplished. However, some areas of NPM have either been partially implemented (downsizing) or not introduced at all (greater competition in public sector). The research concluded that the NPM paradigm had made limited progress in the Thai public sector.

**Key words:** New public management, public sector reform, developing countries, Thailand

### **INTRODUCTION**

For more than half a century, public administration reform has been an important task for the governments of both developed and developing countries. The latter have long and diverse experiences with the reformation of the public sector and frequently seek technical assistance in this field in order to improve the process of national development (UNDP, 2005). The attempts for public sector reform in developing countries started as early as the 19th century. However, because of the highly bureaucratic form and highly centralised administration of the governmental organisations in those countries, including Thailand, these reform efforts have often been unsuccessful. Nevertheless, crisis can often be a catalyst for radical reform. For Thailand, this came in the form of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. It has adversely affected the country, resulting in widespread poverty and many other economic problems. The number of people living below the poverty line increased from 6.8 million in 1996 to 9.8 million in 1999 (World Bank, 2011). Grindle and Thomas (1991) note that in some cases, the perception of a crisis situation may provide an opportunity to introduce significant changes in public policies. The Asian Financial Crisis offered the opportunity for the Thai government to introduce broad-based public sector reforms in order to increase the competence of the government in managing economic affairs to improve service delivery and to introduce greater efficiency into public sector management.

This article explores the reform of the public sector in Thailand, focusing on the NPM model. It investigates what elements of NPM are being introduced in the Thai public sector and whether there is any opposition, since there are scholars such as Siffin (1975), Reeve (1975), Dhiravegin (1992) and Rangsiyogrit (2003) who posit that the Thai bureaucratic system is likely to constrain the NPM approach because of strongly embedded norms and patterns of behaviour that favour such organisational features as process, hierarchy, centralisation, seniority and corruption. This thesis aims to explore the impact of NPM on the public sector reforms in Thailand. This involves investigating the government's claim to be adopting reforms derived from NPM. Moreover, the thesis aims to evaluate the degree to which the declared Thai public sector reforms have actually been implemented.

**From public administration to new public management:** Public administration has been conceptualised as decision-making, project planning, formulation of objectives and goals, establishment and review of organisations, direction and supervision of employees and the exercise of controls and other functions performed by government executives and supervisors (MacRae and Pitt, 1980). It is often associated with the development and well-being of society and good public administration will lead to a strong state. Public administration may also be considered the action part of a government, whereby it is used as a tool to implement and achieve the government's policies.

**Bureaucracy as the traditional model of public administration:** The term 'bureaucracy' can be conceptualised in a variety of ways. For example, Lane (1993) lists ten different usages of the term, while Turner and Hulme (1997) acknowledge four leading meanings of bureaucracy. However, the most common definition of bureaucracy is as a form of organisation. The major point of reference is the work of Max Weber and his 'ideal-type' construct of bureaucracy. Weber noted a particular form of organisation based on rational authority emerging in Europe in the 19th century. Weber believed that customary organisation was being replaced by a new system called bureaucracy and posited that it derived from the rise of rational legal authority in the governance of societal affairs (Rainey, 2003). He saw it as being characterised by a clearly defined division of labour, an impersonal authority structure, a hierarchy of offices, dependence on formal rules, employment based on merit, the availability of a career and the distinct separation of members' organisational and personal lives (Turner and Hulme, 1997).

Even though Weber's ideal-type of bureaucracy may have been the most important model for traditional public administration, it has been subject to a lot of scholarly criticism over the last fifty years. Critics comment that bureaucratic characteristics may turn out to be dysfunctional in public organisations (Hughes, 2003; Rainey, 2003). Thus, it has been suggested that bureaucratic public organisation can be too rigid, narrowly focused and preoccupied with structure and process, with a high level of centralisation, authoritarian leadership styles and officials suffering from low morale (Flynn, 2002; Bozeman, 2000; Caiden, 1991; Kiggundu, 1989). Moreover, according to Merton (1952), Weber seemed to have overemphasised the formal elements of bureaucracy and this leads to trained incapacity; a rigidity of approach which makes it difficult to adapt it in different contexts. Following Merton (1952) pointed out that the bureaucratic environment tends to reward workers for conforming to rules and procedures rather than rewarding them for challenging current methods and processes, discovering new approaches and personalising their work in terms of matching their skills to the requirements of the position. To make matters worse, the word

'bureaucracy' today is claimed to be a synonym for inefficiency (Behn, 1998). For instance, Kiggundu (1989) argued that in Kenya public organisation lacked management skills and talent, engaging in too much paper-work and red tape.

**Public administration reform:** Since it is widely perceived that the traditional model of public administration does not seem to work and is not able to meet or anticipate rapidly changing demands for public services (Batley and Larbi, 2004), developing countries need to reform their public administration to make it efficient and effective and to provide value for money (UNDP, 2005; Haque, 2005; Turner and Hulme, 1997; Heady, 1996). However, public administration reform is actually not a new phenomenon; indeed, developing countries have had a long experience with it. While there may be domestic imperatives for reform, it is often pushed by International Financial Institutions (IFIs), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and bilateral aid agencies. Public administration reform in developing countries can be ascribed to many factors. First, governments in developing countries recognise that only efficient and effective public administrative systems provide valuable support for economic development. Second, public administration reform is seen to contribute to sustainable human development.

**The new public management reform model:** New Public Management (NPM), a new managerial approach, was introduced to replace the traditional model of public administration during the 1980s and 1990s in a group of Anglo-Celtic countries including United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand and Australia. The subsequent adoption of NPM by an increasing number of countries world-wide has been described as 'one of the most striking international trends in public administration' (Hood, 1991). Moving away from the organising principles of traditional bureaucracy, NPM looks to market principles and management techniques drawn from the private sector (Mongkol, 2011).

NPM originated from a combination of two different streams of ideas (Hood, 1991). One stream derives from the new institutional economics such as public choice theory, transaction cost theory and principal-agent theory while the other stream drives from management theory such as performance management. Hood (1991) noted that 'the new institutional economics movement helped to generate a set of administrative reform doctrines built on ideas of contestability, user choice, transparency and close concentration on incentive structures'. The central idea of public choice theory is that because human behaviour is dominated by self interest, government officials strive to maximise their organisational budgets and politicians maximise their votes (Tullock, 1970; Downs, 1967).

The most enduring characterisation of NPM is that of Hood (1991). From observations of changes in public administration in the UK and other similarly oriented countries he drew up a list of seven key elements and these seven key elements of Hood can be described as follows. Firstly, public managers have more autonomy to manage financial and personnel resources with accountability. Secondly, the government focuses on measuring performance through the establishment of goals, target and indicators which can be quantitatively measured. Thirdly, control over output is increased, with an emphasis on the results achieved rather than process involved. Resource allocation and reward are also linked to measured performance. Fourthly, there will be purchaser and provider distinctions through the separation of functions into a quasi-market form. The purchaser and the provider distinctions can be within the government or between the government and the private sectors. The purchaser is the party who decides what will be produced

and the provider is the party who delivers the agreed outputs and outcomes. Fifthly, the government emphasises competition among public agencies through tendering processes and this could help to lower costs and to increase standards. Moreover, contracting out is increasingly adopted as a management tool, especially where a complete market solution or outright privatisation cannot be employed. It is also regarded as a market-type mechanism used to foster competition between private and voluntary sector organisations for the provision of services (Savas, 2000). Sixthly, private sector management techniques and practices such as performance agreement system are implemented in the public sector in order to increase management's ability to hire, fire and reward public servants. Finally, economies in resource utilisation and cost-cutting such as downsizing programs are emphasised by the government in order to reduce or be more efficient with its expenditure. It is claimed by academic commentators such as Doyle *et al.* (2000) that outcomes of the shift to these seven key elements of NPM should be increased accountability, greater transparency and improved efficiency in the public sector.

**New public management in thailand:** Successive Thai governments have battled against bureaucracy and bureaucratic inefficiency for more than half a century. Several largely unsuccessful attempts to reform the Thai public sector have been made since the 1950s (Malee, 2003). But it was not until Thailand was hit by the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis that the government was offered the opportunity to introduce a radical public sector management reform program, which stood a chance of being successful. In 2001, Thaksin Shinnawatra was elected Prime Minister. His government has given added emphasis to the implementation of the NPM approach in the public sector. The government moreover has brought into use information technology and encouraged citizens to participate in government activities. Until the present time, the current government led by the Prime Minister, Abhisit Vejjajiva conceptualised the government as a facilitator or enabler whose role was to stimulate the public sector reform in order to help the country to improve its international competitiveness and thus promote economic development.

**Methodology and analysis:** The instrumental case study was the predominant research method used in this thesis. The case study enables the researcher to look in detail at the implementation of the recent Thai public sector reforms. By focusing on the way the reforms have been implemented in one ministry, the Ministry of Culture, the researcher is able to gain a deeper understanding of the reform processes, especially whether they belong to the NPM paradigm, whether they are really effective and whether implementation actually follows the prescriptions of the government's reform agencies and policies.

**Research design:** The Ministry of Culture has been chosen as a case study for this thesis. It has an appropriate size for study (not too big) and the structure of the ministry is relatively simple. In addition, since all governmental policies must be strictly implemented by every government agency alike, the management reform implementation in the Ministry of Culture can be regarded as an example whose results may be replicated across other Thai government agencies. However, additional studies would be necessary to confirm this.

This case study focuses on the Ministry of Culture as one case study but consists of three component dimensions. Each dimension represents one aspect of the overall reform package and is dealt with separately for the Ministry of Culture. The researcher has not attempted to cover all

aspects of reform in the case study but has focused on three critical areas because each of these is considered as a major reform of the Thai public sector and is claimed by the government as being related to NPM. The first two dimensions are related to organisational restructure and redesign of internal authority and workforce reduction, while the third dimension involves various other reform initiatives which have been implemented in the ministry. These other reforms are not considered major strategic reform plans of the government but the Ministry of Culture claims they are related to the NPM reform thrust of the government.

**Data collection methodology:** The historical data and contemporary data used in this case study consist mainly of archival materials from the Thai civil service, Thai newspaper reports and interviews with key personnel. Archival materials are an important source of information because they consist of many official documents such as minutes of meetings of relevant reform committees, reform proposals, cabinet submissions, internal memos, reports and research papers. Some archival materials were sourced outside of government, notably in newspapers. In addition, the databases of several newspapers were searched for reports on civil service reform issues. Such newspaper reports not only provide a chronology of events but also present critical perspectives. Interviews with key personnel were essential valuable complements to the archival material and comprise the core of the case study. The interviews record the perceptions of civil servants on the reforms being implemented in their organisations. In this thesis, the key personnel are defined as those closely involved with or having stake in each reform dimension. The interviewees comprise two groups. The first group of interviewees is responsible for implementing the reforms and it consists of officials in various positions in the Ministry of Culture. The second group of interviewees is responsible for initiating, transmitting and monitoring the reforms. These respondents are officials working in the Office of Civil Service Commission (OCSC) and in the Office of Public Development Commission (OPDC).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Organisational restructure and redesign of internal authority in the ministry of culture:** The research found that internal management within the Ministry of Culture does not belong to the NPM paradigm since it contradicts the first key element of Hood's NPM model (Hood, 1991), which contends that the government should be able to effectively manage its financial and personnel resources through an appropriate budgeting, accounting and reporting system. This involves decentralising authority to the senior officials in the various government organisations. The theory argues that these senior officials should have more autonomy to manage with accountability as they will be better equipped and situated to direct resources to achieve desired outputs and outcomes.

The study found that the structural reforms enacted by central government and those proposed by the Ministry of Culture did not result in any greater decentralisation of authority to the senior managers in the Ministry of Culture. Indeed the structural changes proposed by the Ministry of Culture and involving the clustering of organisations within the ministry were not permitted by the OPDC. This was somewhat paradoxical as the government policy initially required all ministries to have separate clusters within the organisations. However, the government rejected the proposed structure of the Ministry of Culture stating that as the organisational structure of Ministry of Culture was not complicated, it did not need to cluster its organisations. As a result, the internal administrative authority in the Ministry of Culture remained unchanged as a hierarchical structure

typical of the bureaucratic form of organisation. Even though senior level officials had the authority to manage the government allocated budget as they had in the past, they were not fully autonomous in regards to the management of human resources in their departments since staffing recruitment quotas and promotion of senior level officials were decided by the OCSC.

Even though the first reform does not conform to the NPM paradigm, it can be categorised in the first stage of convergence, referred to as the discursive convergence stage (Pollitt, 1995). This is because the Thai government were talking about giving public manager more autonomy to manage financial and personnel resources. However, only the conceptual agenda has converged. Senior managers in the Ministry of Culture still do not have the authority to manage personnel resources and this reform is not really leading to convergence with models of public administration found in the original NPM countries.

Another point which confirms that internal management in the Ministry of Culture cannot be categorised as NPM is the alleged maintenance of patron-client practices which have been pervasive in the Thai public sector for more than a century. In relation to patron-client ties, some senior government officials were suspected of getting promoted without having their performance measured, through their close links with the appointing officials. This would contradict another element of Hood (1991)'s seven key elements of NPM, the one which indicates that the government should have explicit standards and measures of performance. However, in some cases, even though the Ministry of Culture has set out explicit standards and performance evaluations, it was alleged that they could still be overridden by patron-client practices which can survive in a system of performance evaluation in which hierarchy and authority actually matter more than transparency and results.

In relation to the effectiveness of the first reform dimension, the study revealed that the major organisational restructure of the government which was creation of the Ministry of Culture has been effective and successful in its own right because it achieved the objectives set out by the government in terms of establishing new ministries as well as the restructuring of roles and functions of government. However, the redesign of internal authority has not been successful according to the tenets of NPM. In addition, according to the perceptions of Ministry of Culture officials, the study revealed that a perceived numerical short fall in the number of civil servants combined with a lack of knowledge about public sector reform were regarded as major problems of this reform initiative while differential benefits to individuals from the reform and continuity of the patron-client practice were obstacles to structural reforms in line with stated NPM ideal.

**Workforce reduction:** The study clearly found that the downsizing program in the Ministry of Culture is leading to convergence with models of public administration found in the countries where NPM originated. The downsizing program of the Thai government can be categorised as a part of the NPM model. One of the seven key elements of the NPM model provided by Hood (1991) contends that the government should stress greater discipline and parsimony in resource use. Resource utilisation should be more closely scrutinised and an emphasis on cost-cutting put in place. Workforce reduction is one of the reform initiatives which emphasises decreasing government expenditure and focuses on doing more with less. This downsizing assumes that a smaller number of effective government officials can still produce the same or superior outputs and outcomes than a large number of less effective government officials. The study investigated the downsizing program, known as the Personal Development and Administration Measures. This important initiative consisted of three sub-measures. The first and second sub-measures of the Personnel

Development and Administration Measures aimed at reducing the numbers government officials through a voluntary program. They targeted public servants who wanted to resign from the public sector because they either preferred to change their career paths or were dissatisfied with the public sector reform program. The third sub-measure of the program aimed at reducing the number of government officials who were evaluated as inefficient workers. Thus, it can be seen that the Thai government put an emphasis on cost-cutting by decreasing the number of government officials. The government did not try to reduce the functional coverage of its public administration organisations. Thus, it can be said that the government has been trying to do the same or even more with less.

In relation to the effectiveness of the reform, the study revealed that the first and the second sub-measures were effective and successful in terms of both the objectives of the government and in the perceptions of officials. It was quite easy for the Ministry of Culture and other government agencies to implement the first and the second sub-measures because participation in these two sub-measures was voluntary. One hundred and sixteen officials in the Ministry of Culture willingly participated in these two sub-measures. Implementation of these reform initiatives were accomplished within the allocated time frame. However, the third sub-measure was not fully implemented due to political considerations. The Thai government withdrew from implementing the third sub-measure as it generated dissatisfaction and opposition among public servants and threatened to unseat the government. The government abandoned the third sub-measure as it felt it necessary to placate officials in order to gain votes in the coming election. The episode revealed how political expediency can triumph over reforms ostensibly aimed at increasing efficiency in public administration. It can be concluded that the third sub-measure has been ineffective and unsuccessful in terms of satisfying the reform objectives of the government. The hostile perceptions of officials in the Ministry of Culture also showed how unpopular the reform was. It was therefore not surprising that high among officials' perceptions on obstacles and problems affecting this reform was resistance of Ministry of Culture staff to the performance evaluation, especially as it was seen to encourage favouritism in the determination of job security and promotion.

**Internal NPM reform initiatives:** A variety of additional reforms had been introduced into the Ministry of Culture. These included performance agreements, information technology and public participation. The study revealed that performance agreements have been drawn up and used to evaluate the work of key personnel cascading down to lower level staff in the Ministry of Culture. The Information and Communication Technology Centre was also established in order to support and use information and communications technology as a tool for the development of more efficient administration. Moreover, the Ministry of Culture also encouraged public participation by introducing a Call Centre and website in order to provide information and various services regarding religion, art and culture, as well as to receive feedback and opinions from the public.

The study found that the performance agreement system in the Thai public sector is leading to a convergence with models of public administration found in the original NPM countries. It can be categorised in 'the practice convergence stage' (Pollitt, 1995). It can also be categorised as an NPM reform initiative since it has been implemented in the Ministry of Culture in order to complement the Thai government's Results Based Management (RBM) scheme. This reform can be seen as representative of Hood, 1991 second element of NPM as it aimed at measuring performance. By contrast, the establishment of the Information and Communication Technology Centre is not leading to convergence with models of public administration found in the original NPM countries, as it cannot be regarded as an NPM reform initiative because upgrading



information technology is not new. Such actions have been taken in the Thai public sector for many years and can be seen as representing the traditional incremental mode of reform aimed at achieving efficiency gains within a bureaucratic organisational structure. The study revealed that public participation-the third initiative in this group-is not an explicit part of Hood (1991) NPM model. However, as suggested by Manning (2001), reforms of this nature are very significant components of change initiatives for public sectors in developing countries. In relation to the effectiveness of these internal reform initiatives, the study revealed that technology and public participation were effective and successful in terms of satisfying both the objectives of the government and the perceptions of officials. The performance agreement system was seen to be less effective in the perceptions of middle and junior level officials as they identified that senior level officials would always positively evaluate their organisation because they did not want to discredit themselves. They also worried that performance evaluation was a threat to the job security which has been a feature of Thai public administration for many years.

**Public sector reform in the ministry of culture compared to Hood’s NPM model:** Having just applied the research questions to the three major reform dimensions, it is now possible to judge whether the Ministry of Culture has been reformed in line with each dimension of Hood (1991) NPM model or not. The results of this evaluation are set out in Table 1 where three possible answers are evident: either ‘yes’ the reform belongs to the NPM paradigm or ‘no’ it does not, or, in some instances, a reform may contain elements of both ‘yes’ and ‘no’.

Firstly, internal management within the Ministry of Culture does not belong to the first element of Hood’s NPM model because senior level officials had the authority to manage the government allocated budget but they lacked full authority to manage all human resource affairs as this was the responsibility of the government’s specialist human resource agency, namely, the OCSC. Secondly, the study shows that the Ministry of Culture has set explicit standards and KPIs for its projects. Thus, it can be considered that the ministry has reformed its organisations in line with the second element of Hood (1991) NPM model whether these KPIs are utilised in a manner consistent with the tenets of NPM remains to be seen. Thirdly, since the Ministry of Culture increased the focus on output control, especially after implementing the RBM scheme, it can be concluded that the Ministry of Culture has reformed its component organisations in line with the third element of Hood (1991) NPM model. Fourthly, it can be seen that the internal organisations of the Ministry of Culture are not disaggregated and have no distinction between purchaser and provider and cannot be categorised as in the fourth element of Hood (1991) NPM model. They retain the old functional demarcations characteristic of Thai bureaucracy over many years. However, if we look at the major reform initiative, we can see that the Ministry of Culture was disaggregated from the

Table 1: Public Sector Reform in the Ministry of Culture Compared to Hood’s NPM Model

NPM elements	Yes	Yes / No	No
Hands-on professionalism in the public sector			★
Explicit standards and measures of performance	★		
Greater emphasis on output controls	★		
Shift to disaggregation of units in the public sector		★	
Shift to greater competition in public sector			★
Stress on private sector styles of management practice		★	
Stress on greater discipline and parsimony in resource use	★		

Ministry of Education. Cultural affairs were explicitly separated from educational affairs. Thus, the major reform, which is the establishment of the Ministry of Culture, could be categorised as NPM reform. Fifthly, the study shows that there was no competition between departments within the Ministry of Culture and with organisations in other ministries. Thus, at this stage, it can be concluded that the Ministry of Culture has not reformed its organisations in line with the fifth element of Hood (1991) NPM model. Following Hood (1991) sixth element of NPM model, from the study it can be concluded that a few private sector techniques such as limited outsourcing and the performance agreement system have been implemented in the Ministry of Culture. However, the ministry is not fully engaged with private sector techniques and its staff does not perceive them to be a significant presence. For instance, only minor jobs such as cleaning, security and advertising have been outsourced but there are no major projects which have been outsourced to a third party. Therefore, the Ministry of Culture may be categorised in between yes and no in terms of reforming in line with the sixth element of Hood (1991) NPM model. Lastly, the study shows that the Ministry of Culture introduced a downsizing program within the ministry by implementing the Personnel Development and Administration Measures which consisted of three sub-measures. In terms of both the objectives of the government and the perceptions of government officials, the first and second sub-measures were implemented successfully, although the third sub-measure failed to be implemented. Nevertheless, it can be concluded that this reform initiative could be regarded as the seventh element of Hood (1991) NPM model as it was aimed at resource utilisation while maintaining or even doing more with less personnel and hence less expenditure.

## **CONCLUSION**

Evidently NPM ideas have diffused and disseminated within the Thai public sector, although the implementation of the NPM paradigm has only been partial and therefore the extent of convergence of NPM reform ideas has also been partial. Some reforms such as hands-on professionalism in the public sector is categorised only in 'the discursive convergence stage' while some major reforms such as public culture and values reform are not leading to a convergence with models of public administration found in the original NPM countries. The Thai public sector reform can still be seen as incremental or sporadic reform but it has moved beyond the traditional, reform practices to embrace a wider variety of reform initiatives, some of which have been explicitly drawn from the NPM paradigm. However, the recent Thai experience is not one involving the wholesale and uncritical import of all items from the NPM menu. The Thai public sector environment is quite different from the OECD countries where NPM originated. Factors such as cultural norms, centralisation and corruption are embedded and prevalent in the Thai public sector. Therefore, it would be difficult if not impossible for the government to successfully transfer the entire NPM paradigm and its multiple initiatives into the Thai public sector. In addition, unless drastic measures are taken and some 'across the board' standards and evaluations introduced, full implementation of the NPM paradigm in the foreseeable future will not be achievable. It may not even be desirable for producing the type of public administration best suited to the conditions and conforming to the preferences of Thai society.

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