

ADMINISTRATIVE CHANGE IN THE ASIA PACIFIC: APPLYING THE POLITICAL NEXUS TRIAD

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***ABSTRACT:** In their 1998 Governance article, Moon and Ingraham offered the political nexus triad (PNT) as a framework for the comparative analysis of public administration reform in Asia. Moon and Ingraham posited a strong relationship between the balance of the PNT (the relationship between politicians, bureaucracy, and civil society) and the scope and nature of administrative reform. Their analysis of China, Japan and South Korea yielded some interesting results in terms of the changing power relationships in those three countries as a result of administrative reforms. This article utilizes Moon and Ingraham's comparative framework to investigate administrative change in three more Asian governments: Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore. However, the key difference with Moon and Ingraham's study is that in these three cases, it appeared that administrative reform was mainly used as an instrument to sustain existing PNTs in the face of political pressures, both internal and external. The article also exposes a weakness in Moon and Ingraham's framework: that civil society provides a source of politicization that drives administrative change. Asian administrative traditions have yet to evolve to the extent that inputs from a wider civil society are sufficiently institutionalized to make an impact on the reform process.*

Moon and Ingraham (1998) developed a framework for analyzing administrative reform in three Asian countries: China, South Korea, and Japan by using the political nexus triad (PNT) as a theoretical model. Their article was a bold endeavor: as they concede in their article, the comparative analysis of public administration is always a daunting task. Furthermore, they correctly point to the scant attention that Asia has received in the research and literature relating to global administrative reform. Thus, the application of the PNT appears to be a useful theoretical model for explaining administrative change across a cluster of countries or jurisdictions. The PNT takes politics, administration, and civil society as a set of interactions, which combine to produce public policy. This article utilizes this framework to explain administrative change in three other Asian governments: Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore. As administrative reform is essentially a political process, which alters the power relationships between politics and administration, the

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introduction of administrative reform cannot be divorced from its local political context. This was certainly the case in Moon and Ingraham's study. However, this article takes the view that political elites are likely to be cautious of introducing administrative reforms that are likely to threaten the political equilibrium.

Moon and Ingraham aimed to fill a gap in the literature by examining administrative change in Asia from a comparative perspective. The aim of this article is to extend their analysis further by looking at three other countries in Asia that have different contextual histories from those countries studied by Moon and Ingraham. Although the analysis here is more closely concerned with civil service change, it does not ignore the broader reforms taken into account by Moon and Ingraham. Superficially, at least, the three governments seem naturally comparable. Singapore and Malaysia are similar in that they are nation-states that gained independence from Britain; they became independent of each other in 1965. Hong Kong, on the other hand, was returned to China in 1997. Nominally at least, it continues to have some measure of autonomy as a special administrative region (SAR) of China.

Furthermore, all three governments have enjoyed relatively strong economic growth in recent times, despite the effects of the Asian financial crisis that began in 1997. Hong Kong and Singapore are regarded as first-tier East Asian newly industrialized economies, with Malaysia regarded as a second-tier Southeast Asian newly industrialized country (Jomo 1997, 8). However, "Malaysia resembles the East Asian tigers . . . more than its immediate neighbors in the relative egalitarian distribution of wealth and in the integrity of its business environment" (Root 1996, 66). Along with Singapore, Malaysia has relied heavily on foreign direct investment in order to develop economically. All three polities have been labelled as administrative states, largely as a consequence of their ex-colonial status. However, when compared to Hong Kong, Singapore "has followed a highly interventionist route to development" (Jones 1997, 99).

We must therefore remain aware of the fundamental differences between the three governments. For instance, Hong Kong and Singapore are often regarded as an obvious paired comparison, yet Singapore's strongly interventionist government is quite different from Hong Kong's bureaucratic government. However, all three governments are characterized by close links between the civil service and political elites (in Hong Kong, at least until July 2002, the link is actually a fusion).

Much of the material in this article is based on material obtained at interviews conducted in English by the author, who holds the records in the form of written notes. The interviews were conducted between 1998 and 1999 in Hong Kong with senior civil servants and a former civil servant. In Singapore, interviews were conducted in December 1998 with both senior civil servants and academics. In Malaysia, interviews were conducted in February 1999 with senior civil servants. All the interviewees from the civil services in each government represented central coordinating departments with a key role in implementing civil service reform.

THE POLITICAL NEXUS TRIAD IN HONG KONG, MALAYSIA, AND SINGAPORE

Moon and Ingraham (1998, 80) argue that the PNT contributes to the characteristics of initiation, implementation, and the effect of administrative reform in nations. The PNT is held to be in equilibrium when politicians, bureaucrats, and civil society exert equal power over the political process. Where any of these key actors exert more power, the PNT is thus skewed in that direction. Therefore, Hong Kong's PNT is clearly bureaucracy dominant, although it is the most complex case of the three. Hong Kong's colonial bureaucratic polity was retained following the reversal of sovereignty to China. Until July 2002, there were no ministers or a cabinet (and there is some debate over the extent to which the new system is a ministerial one). An executive council dominates the policy process, which consists of top civil servants, business and institutional leaders, but it contains no popularly elected representative. The members are appointees of the chief executive (or the governors until 1997). The principal officials accountability system (POAS), as the new ministerial form of government in Hong Kong is known, formulates policy. Prior to July 2002, this was the role of the executive branch of the government or the government secretariat, in what was a civil service-led system. Civil servants, with little input from elsewhere, effectively made policy. Thus, the political legitimacy of the Hong Kong government has traditionally relied on the appearance of a politically neutral civil service (Scott 1996, 279). The joint declaration between Britain and China prior to the handover enshrined the notion that a neutral, stable, and effective civil service was instrumental in guaranteeing the future livelihood of Hong Kong.

The recent dominance of the civil service in policy formulation appeared to ensure that there were no pressures for administrative reform from outside the government. The democratic culture in Hong Kong is relatively young, and protests at the events at Tiananmen Square in 1989 provided an important impetus to the democratic movement. Pressure for democratization was also a reflection of the prodigious economic development of Hong Kong, and change had become inevitable by the early 1980s. However, during a period of growing economic prosperity, an actual decline in support for pro-democratic movements was observed in the early 1990s. Although Sing (1996, 487) argues that in a booming economy more public demands, frustrations, and conflicts are aimed at the government, it appears that economic prosperity for the majority of the population diverted attention away from political participation during a crucial period in Hong Kong's political evolution.

We might assume that given the slow pace of democratization in Hong Kong a more responsive public administration in the absence of political accountability would be required. The cautious introduction of soft democracy by the last governor, Chris Patten, in 1992 appeared to be designed to assuage conservative and business elite fears that democratization would actually undermine the efficiency of the civil service. Democratization was effectively frozen after the handover in 1997. Of the three polities examined here, Hong Kong probably has the most developed civil society in terms of the social institutions that are not subject to state interference.

A shift towards a more executive-led PNT in Hong Kong appeared to occur during Chris Patten's incumbency as governor. He mirrored the resolve shown by his former

leader, Margaret Thatcher, in pushing for administrative reform (LeHerissier 1995, 205). Prior to Patten, Hong Kong had been governed by a series of career bureaucrats who by and large shared the same culture and values of bureaucratic governance. Unlike his predecessors, Patten was a career politician who made an impression on the style of administration during his term in office. By contrast, as a businessman (a former shipping magnate), the present chief executive, Tung Chee-hwa, might be expected to show a strong preference for managerialism in public services. However, since 1997, the consumerist sensitivity established by Patten has been abandoned in favor of less openness, and authority is now delegated with great reluctance. Ironically, as S. Vines notes in his article "Colonial Echoes as Tung Shuts Out the People," in *The Independent* on 1 August 1997, Tung's style of government is regarded as conducive to the restoration of colonial practices. More critically, the Hong Kong Democratic Foundation (HKDF) Policy Committee (1998) notes that the civil service is simply a bureaucracy only fit to implement policy decisions rather than an administration with an authority and a right to govern.

Malaysia appears to be a prime minister-led PNT. Politics and administration in Malaysia has been dominated by the prime minister (PM). For instance, in relation to the immediate past PM, Mohamad Mahathir, Milne and Mauzy (1999, 2) noted that he did "not give the bureaucrats much chance to resist his will." However, there are close ties between leading politicians and bureaucrats, not least because of shared social values and backgrounds. Administrative change in Malaysia is driven by the demands of economic development, which are balanced by the demands of Malays who, following independence from Britain in 1957, challenged the economic ascendancy of the Chinese community. To correct this perceived imbalance, the subsequent domination of Malays in the civil service has become "the key to understanding the pattern and style of its administration" (Zainuddin 1998, 1327).

Despite the power of the PM, the colonial legacy and the drive for economic development has meant that Malaysia, along with Hong Kong, has been described as an administrative state (Ahmad 1987, 1). Hence, the Malaysian bureaucracy is unable to demarcate between policy implementation and formulation. If we accept Malaysia as an administrative state, then decision making is confined to a narrow political leadership acting together with senior bureaucrats, with a slow turnover of personnel. Top bureaucrats are in accord with politicians on the need for effective public administration. As Tan Sri Abdul Halim bin Ali, chief secretary to the government of Malaysia, explained in a 13 February 1999 interview, administrative matters are discussed in the cabinet and ministers are told to be hands on. Officially, politics and administration are considered separate in Malaysia; this was reinforced following the accession of Mahathir. However, the discussion of administrative problems in the cabinet and the involvement of ministers suggest the falseness of this dichotomy. The chief secretary's predecessor, Tan Sri Dato' Seri Ahmad Sarji bin Abdul Hamid, remarked in an 11 February 1999 interview that "I can't imagine introducing administrative reforms without cabinet support."

Mahathir's personal impact on public administration in Malaysia was considerable. Consequently, administrative reform has come from the top down from a politically secure and stable political leadership, at least until very recently. Mahathir was instrumental in driving public administration reform from the beginning of his incumbency in 1981. Since

1986, the administrative reform process has emanated from the panel on administrative improvements to the civil service (PANEL). The chief secretary issues a series of development administration circulars on behalf of PANEL under the seal of the Prime Minister's Department. During Ahmad Sarji's tenure as chief secretary between 1990 and 1996, these circulars were the basis of Malaysia's administrative reforms. No circulars have been issued since Sarji's retirement, as it was felt that a sufficiently strong basis had been established.

Any input from the broader civil society in Malaysia is minimal, which suggests that the nature of politics in Malaysia is rigidly authoritarian. Most of the mass media is controlled by either the government or the ruling party in what is only a "rather elementary civil society" (Haynes 1997, 118). In fact, the complexity of Malaysian civil society, which is ethnically divided, means that the government must be responsive to demands in the wider society to avoid potential conflict. Economic development brings further complexity as societal expectations change about government. In Malaysia, the new economic policy (NEP) of 1969 aimed to produce a Malay capitalist class to rival that of the dominant Chinese. Stability in Malaysia appears to be valued over democratization (Means 1996, 246).

The PNT in Singapore appears to be less clear cut, with administrative reform apparently driven by ministers in a dominant and unified political party and senior bureaucrats. Jones (1997, 49) regards the People's Action Party's (PAP) uninterrupted rule as having contributed to the emergence of Singapore's "apolitical, administrative state." Civil servants have long played a role in the political process, thus underlining Singapore's characterization as an administrative state. The influence of civil society in Singapore is debatable. Shee (1985, 12) argues that Singapore is a democracy simply because it has regular general elections and there are strong lines of communication between government and the governed. The fact these lines of communication were actually institutionalized by the PAP in the form of grass-roots organizations is very different from the plurality of interest groups and social movements found in Western liberal democracies. Another aspect of civil society, pressure group politics, is also rejected as being inappropriate for Singapore (Sikorski 1996, 822). As in the cases of Hong Kong and Malaysia, administrative reform in Singapore can only be explained by focusing on a narrow elite of senior PAP politicians and bureaucrats. Thus, the leadership succession in November 1991 from Lee Kuan Yew to Goh Chok Tong might be regarded as a watershed for public administration in Singapore. Goh introduced a public service orientation for the civil service (Khong 1995, 134). There is a parallel here with the arrival of Patten in Hong Kong in 1992, where the leadership succession heralded administrative changes in a more consumerist direction.

The next section provides an overview of administrative change in each of the three governments, the purpose of which is to elucidate why public-sector reform was considered, its likely outcomes, and its impact on the PNT. This section will also concentrate on reform efforts from the late 1980s onward, when New Public Management (NPM) began to challenge the tenets of bureaucratic administration in the West, thus testing the stability of established PNTs.

ADMINISTRATIVE CHANGE IN HONG KONG: PREPARING FOR 1997 AND BEYOND

The political effects of the reunification with China in 1997 are key to understanding administrative change, or the absence of it, in Hong Kong. Here, the focus is on three, mutually reinforcing phases: the publication of the *Public Sector Reform* (PSR) document in the late 1980s, the Patten reforms of the mid-1990s, and the post-1997 Tung reforms. The PSR report (Hong Kong Finance Branch 1989) appeared to align Hong Kong with the NPM international administrative reform trend. PSR was a finance branch initiative, and although it was internally generated from within the bureaucracy the British consultants Coopers and Lybrand also had significant input. The report was basically a discussion document containing basic principles for financial management reform, built on the assumptions that policy and operations were separable and that there should be more flexibility in service delivery and more emphasis on relating resources to policy objectives.

There is a range of interpretations on offer for the introduction of PSR in 1989. The general view is that the report was a result of pressures to democratize and for the bureaucracy to maintain its legitimacy (Cheung 1992; Lam 1995; Lau 1997). As Lui (1994, 18) points out, "failure to attain efficiency would not only be administratively undesirable but also might threaten the political authority of the unaccountable bureaucrats." Although Cheung (1992, 116) argues that PSR was "engineered from the top down by the government, without any apparent corresponding demands from the outside," Huque (1996, 121) takes a somewhat broader view to suggest that economic problems in the early 1980s, followed by strikes and demonstrations, prompted the report "to ameliorate similar situations." Burns (1994, 243) adds that "squeezed by an ambitious public works program on the one hand, and demands for more services on the other, the government drafted PSR to cope with the situation." In sum, the main aim of PSR appears to be political rather than administrative. PSR was a product of the uniquely uncertain political environment in anticipation of Hong Kong's reunification with China. PSR was being drafted at the same time as the Basic Law (Hong Kong's post-1997 constitution), so it could be argued that its basic tenets could be guaranteed as part of the continuity that the law intended to preserve.

Patten (1992-1997)

The next phase of administrative reform in Hong Kong began with the appointment of Chris Patten as governor. As S. Vines notes in his aforementioned article of 1 August 1997, Patten was in favor of more open and responsive government by forcing "even the most humble civil servant to recognize that he or she was also responsible to the public." Patten also built on the rhetoric of the PSR in his approach to administrative reform in Hong Kong. The first change of note came with the establishment of the Efficiency Unit in 1992. Unlike the financial scrutinies that marked the introduction of its UK predecessor in 1979, the unit emphasized a shift towards a client-based culture for the civil service. PSR's focus also switched from the emphasis on financial and policy management to human resource management. Like its counterpart in the UK, much of its establishment was to do with symbolic as well as practical impact. Sankey (1993, 78) viewed the unit as "an agent

of change with authority from the top to cross traditional boundaries,” and its purpose was to put into practice the philosophy of the PSR report. In particular, the performance pledge (PP) initiative, a key responsibility of the unit, would “pressure departments into adopting basic PSR principles more urgently” (84).

Patten’s policy address of 1992 underlined the objective of serving the community. The *Serving the Community* (Hong Kong Efficiency Unit 1995) document that eventually followed was intended to be a management guide for civil servants, and provided the blueprint for the Patten reforms. However, the document did little more than reconfirm the earlier PSR report. For instance, it advocated that framework agreements should be drawn up between policy secretaries and agency heads. A Hong Kong Finance Branch (1995) document also recommended some delegation of financial management to policy branches and departments. However, Patten did not attempt to alter the structure of government, nor did he transform the civil service. According to a senior civil servant, Patten preferred to emphasize politics by promoting Hong Kong’s fledgling democracy, whose politicians increasingly put pressure on the government generally and on the policy secretaries in particular. The Patten reforms, like the PSR document, had a political purpose related to the pending reunification with China. Performance pledges, in particular, were part of a renewed attempt of the government to “bolster its legitimacy” in the run-up to reunification (Lau 1997, 43). Thus, the notion of managerial freedom that underpins NPM acted as a shield for Hong Kong public administration from “external political capture” (Huque, Lee, and Cheung 1998, 52).

Tung (1997 -)

The present chief executive, Tung Chee-hwa, largely maintained the administrative system he inherited in July 1997, at least until he won his second term in office in 2002. Tung’s relative inertia can be ascribed to the Basic Law, which guaranteed continuity in the civil service system and conditions of service. In his first policy address in 1997, he announced a range of promises on a number of policy areas, such as education, that cut across departmental boundaries. The civil service responded by proposing a target-based management process (TMP) to achieve continuous improvement in public services. One of the key features of TMP is to identify and manage the process for delivering results across traditional organizational boundaries. Policy secretaries were made responsible for delivering strategic policy objectives and coordinating across other policy bureaus, departments, and agencies. The overall objective was to focus government accountability on results achieved for the community by raising the level of performance review and accountability to a focus on outcomes, leaving departmental managers to concentrate on managing resources effectively (Hong Kong Efficiency Unit 1998, 12-13).

In his policy address in October 1998, Tung announced the enhanced productivity program (EPP), which demanded that each government department and agency produce plans and targets to achieve a 5 percent productivity growth by 2002, without additional resources. This appeared to be a direct response to the Asian financial crisis of 1997-8. However, this initiative seems to be more concerned with short-term quantified gains rather than making lasting improvements in public service delivery. Furthermore, EPP

encompasses a move towards contract rather than permanent appointments in the civil service, under the guise of human resource flexibility. The deregulation of human resource management and the introduction of performance-related pay was further emphasized in the *Civil Service into the 21st Century* document (Hong Kong Civil Service Bureau 1999).

In Tung's first term, it appeared that the style of government changed little following the transition to SAR status. As the *South China Morning Post* commented in an article entitled "Shipping Magnate's Transition to Politician" on 8 October 1998, "older colonial ways of doing things did not change overnight on June 30 last year." It is still perhaps too early to gauge the impact of the new ministerial system announced in July 2002, but overall, administrative change in Hong Kong continues to be initiated by the bureaucracy, although it is increasingly embracing the managerialist thrust of Western-style NPM. Moreover, the Asian economic crisis of the late 1990s and a series of policy fiascos opened the civil service in Hong Kong to wider public scrutiny than it endured in the past.

Impact on the PNT in Hong Kong

Application of the PNT model to Hong Kong is largely frustrated by the unique transition from colonial government to SAR status. Prior to the arrival of Patten in 1992, the reform program surrounding PSR was entirely driven by its bureaucracy, albeit with assistance from British official secondments and consultants (Common 2001, 147-148). The high esteem with which the civil service had been held in Hong Kong meant that the bureaucracy was anxious to maintain its legitimacy in addition to concerns about closer integration with Chinese administrative practice (Huque, Lee, and Cheung 1998, 14). Once Patten arrived, he behaved like a mini prime minister and launched his own administrative reform agenda, which received tacit support from the bureaucracy as it built upon, in large part, the PSR document. Patten's high political profile can be explained in terms of the final preparations for Hong Kong's reunification with China, but after 1997 his successor, Tung, initially scaled down the profile of the new post of chief executive. However, the introduction of the POAS in July 2002 appears to mark a shift in the PNT away from the bureaucracy. The fourteen secretaries that make up Tung's cabinet have replaced the civil servants who used to be responsible for policymaking. However, the new secretaries are not accountable to the Legislative Council (Hong Kong's law-making body, which is partially directly elected), so it appears that this does not mark a phase in Hong Kong's democratization. The fact that the secretaries are political appointees of the chief executive only appears as an assertion of top-down political control, which can be traced back to Beijing. However, the PNT in Hong Kong's classic administrative state was certainly dominated by the bureaucracy despite the democratic reforms of the early 1990s, up until very recently.

To gauge the impact of civil society in Hong Kong on the PNT is slightly tenuous given that the bureaucracy is perceived as being highly autonomous and aloof from society. The role of civil society in the reform process in the period leading up to 1997 is generally dismissed, as reform was regarded as "an intrabureaucratic strategy to solve the institutional problems faced by the administrative elite" (Huque, Lee, and Cheung 1998, 51). However, as Huque, Lee, and Cheung also argue, the bureaucracy now needs to be

attuned to the fact that the people of Hong Kong are increasingly open to external influences, and thus measures are required to “enhance social cohesion and the effectiveness of the administrative system” (160). Moreover, with the onset of the Asian financial crisis, civil society became more aware of the shortcomings of Hong Kong public administration, which provided a rationale for the *Civil Service into the 21st Century* document (Cheung 1999, 12).

The Basic Law, Hong Kong’s mini-constitution after 1997, guaranteed the preservation of Hong Kong’s system of governance, thus facilitating a smooth transition to SAR status for the new leadership in Beijing. Although civil service reform remains high on the agenda in Hong Kong, the Basic Law acts as a severe constraint, and the outcome of the reform efforts highlighted here remains marginal, at best. Without any appreciable alteration in the PNT, these reforms have served to shore up the legitimacy and the perceived efficiency of the Hong Kong bureaucracy, both to the Chinese government and the international business community. Patten was interested in altering the PNT in Hong Kong in the run up to 1997, and arguably the quickening of administrative reform could be regarded as a means to debureaucratize policymaking in Hong Kong. In some ways, Patten was too late to make any substantial changes; the National People’s Congress of China had already adopted the Basic Law in 1990. Of course, Hong Kong is an anomalous case, as it was a singularly unique example of a bureaucratic polity being transferred from one sovereign state to another, until being superseded by Macau in 1999.

ADMINISTRATIVE CHANGE IN MALAYSIA: PRESERVING THE STATUS QUO

Since the mid-1980s, Malaysia’s reforms appeared to be in line with international trends towards marketization, downsizing, and managerialism. However, where the impetus for change in Hong Kong came from the bureaucracy until very recently, the initial impetus in Malaysia was generated from the political leadership in the early 1980s, with the emphasis on economic reform and development. By the late 1980s, the government became less directly involved in economic development and attention shifted to the internal workings of the public sector (such as the excellent work culture movement of 1989). In fact, these changes were more context specific and had little to do with following international trends. Root (1996, 75) argues that the excellence movement was more concerned with asserting “a neutral merit-based criteria for providing and assessing public service as contrasted to the ascriptive criteria of race, ethnic or family origin.” However, the excellence movement was generally regarded as the beginning of a concerted reform program for the 1990s.

The modified budgeting system (MBS), introduced in 1990, further marked the apparent shift from development administration to greater managerial autonomy and flexibility. MBS modified a previous planning programming budgeting system (PPBS). MBS stresses decentralized management more broadly by attempting to match authority and accountability in a similar way to the UK financial management initiative in the 1980s. In 1992, the micro accounting system (SPM) was announced, to determine the cost of outputs of government agencies and thus ensure greater cost consciousness among managers. It also supports MBS by providing cost information for the output of each

project, program, or activity in all ministries and departments. However, in a 12 February 1999 interview, Dr. Halim Shafie, director of the National Institute of Public Administration in Malaysia, observed that SPM is perceived as largely conceptual in that, like MBS, it falls short on implementation. In 1997, it was decided to streamline the implementation of both MBS and SPM. It was felt that with MBS, middle management was reluctant to make decisions, and that managerial freedom needed reemphasis. According to the chief secretary, the treasury is still unwilling to relinquish control and the economic difficulties following the Asian financial crisis served to strengthen their hand (Ali interview, 13 February 1999).

There were also other significant public management changes during the 1990s. In the area of human resource management, the new remuneration scheme (NRS) was announced in 1991. It suggested that salary movements be tied to annual rather than three yearly appraisals, based on reward and recognition (Shafie 1996, 342). The NRS was also supposed to reduce hierarchy by amalgamating salary and service groups and by reclassifying personnel into three main groups: top management, middle management, and professional and support groups (Halligan and Turner 1995, 86). In June 1993, the client's charter (a written commitment by a government agency to its users in an attempt to standardize service delivery) was launched. The government is convinced that the client's charter has helped agencies become more sensitive and committed to providing quality services to users.

The most recent public management change in the Malaysian public service includes the introduction of quality standards. The ISO 9000 requirement for all government organizations was introduced in June 1996 by a prime ministerial circular. Malaysia was supposed to be the first country in the world to try and implement ISO 9000 for its entire administration. However, in January 1997 Prime Minister Mahathir gave all government agencies and departments until the year 2000 to qualify for ISO 9000 certification. But what is being implemented in the Malaysian public service is, in fact, MS ISO 9000, which refers to the Malaysian standard (MS) series issued by the Standards and Industrial Research Institute of Malaysia. It is the Standards Institute that looks at other international standards and chooses whether or not to adopt them.

Impact on the PNT in Malaysia

Public administration remains resiliently hierarchical in Malaysia, with all the initiatives outlined here being driven from the political executive downward. Reform has not shifted the PNT away from the prime minister, whose department is responsible for administrative reform efforts. Politically, Mahathir sought to maintain his power base despite a much reduced majority in the November 1999 general election and the political fallout from the sacking and subsequent imprisonment of his former deputy. When Mahathir's attention was diverted elsewhere, apart from developments related to information technology strategy the Malaysian public service sought to consolidate the reforms of the first half of the 1990s.

In Malaysia, although Mahathir dominated the PNT, the close relationship between the dominant political party (the United Malays National Organization) and senior officials in

Malaysia obscures the PNT to a large extent. The new PM, Badawi, elected in March 2004, is a career bureaucrat but his impact on the PNT is yet to be ascertained. Politicization of the bureaucracy appears to be high. The effects of administrative reform have only altered the PNT at the margins by increasing access to information and providing forums for feedback from public service users.

In Malaysia, it appears that administrative reform serves to reinforce dominant political purposes while deflecting any opposing conceptions that may come from a weakened civil society. Thus, the very limited influence of civil society on the reform process can only be understood in terms of the NEP that served to favor Malay interests, the implications of which have reinforced the position of a dominant Malay social class which is served by the state bureaucracy. Therefore, any further development of a civil society in Malaysia continues to be inhibited by communal division and the authoritarian characteristics of the government (Crouch 1996, 247).

In addition, the "commonality of outlook and purpose between the administrative and political elites" (BICA 2001, 155) in Malaysia renders the application of the PNT as problematic when analyzing administrative reform. The result is that reforms have tended to be superficial rather than the deep structural changes that have accompanied the more radical NPM observed in other countries. In Malaysia, the prime minister has remained the key driver of change, ensuring that the bureaucracy remains complicit, largely due to his powers of patronage. External political pressures such as those presented by the Asian financial crisis, and internal political pressures such as those presented by internal ethnic cleavages, are checked and rebuffed by the centrality of prime ministerial power and authority.

ADMINISTRATIVE CHANGE IN SINGAPORE: MODERNIZATION AND THE MAINTENANCE OF PARTY CONTROL

The public sector has driven economic growth in Singapore. The emphasis on economic development continues to dominate the political agenda, and this largely accounts for the PAP dominating the PNT. Therefore, recent public-sector reforms may be interpreted as "part of a nation-wide process of improving efficiency and quality through good management" rather than being linked to the diffusion of the NPM canon (Flynn 1997, 19). In 1991, the accession of Goh Chok Tong as prime minister appeared to intensify the reform effort in Singapore's public service. Symbolically, the Service Improvement Unit (SIU) was quickly established in the PM's office in April 1991 to elicit feedback from the Singaporean public to improve the service provided by government departments and statutory boards. However, two major reforms were heralded in the mid-1990s: budgeting for results (BFR) in July 1994 and public service for the twenty-first century (PS21) launched in May 1995. It is these reforms that have appeared to bring Singapore in line with international public management trends.

Of the two reforms, PS21 has the highest public profile. In fact, PS21 consolidates or extends a number of existing schemes, including work improvement teams and service improvement. However, PS21 requires a paradigm shift from public servants (Singapore PS21 Office 1995, 2) and was publicized as an attempt to get away from the top down approach of Singaporean policymaking. The high profile of PS21 is explained by the

emphasis in official documentation that it is an initiative that involves the entire public service in efforts to increase efficiency and provide better services. Moreover, the government seemed anxious that PS21 did not appear to be driven from the top down within the bureaucracy. Consequently, as cited in an article by C. Tan entitled “Embrace Newer, More Efficient Forms of Service—PM Goh” in the *Southeast Asia Business Times* on 29 May 1997, the prime minister stated that “for it to succeed, it must go beyond the public officers. We, Singaporeans, must be part of the PS21 movement as users of the public service.” However, PS21 was internally generated by the public service, despite acknowledgement that there should be shared responsibility for administrative reform beyond the domain of the political leadership.

The objectives of PS21 are:

- to nurture an attitude of service excellence in meeting the needs of the public with high standards of quality and courtesy, and
- to foster an environment which induces and welcomes continuous change for greater efficiency and cost effectiveness by employing modern management tools and techniques while paying attention to the morale and welfare of public servants (Singapore PS21 Office 1995, 3).

According to Lim Siong Guan, a permanent secretary in the prime minister’s office and generally considered to be the chief architect of the initiative, the two objectives are not mutually exclusive, although the first objective was to make PS21 tangible. The second objective seeks to create a “different organizational culture and norms” (Lim 1998, 125). These objectives are to be achieved by focusing on four areas of the public service: staff well-being, ExCEL (excellence through continuous enterprise and learning), organizational review, and quality service. Cheung (2003, 155) argues that what sets PS21 apart from public-sector reforms elsewhere is that it seeks to reinforce the strong administrative state in Singapore by making it adept at keeping up with “the latest developments and future challenges.” Elsewhere, reform in the public sector is justified by streamlining and denigration (155).

By contrast, BFR appears to be more directed by the political leadership than PS21. It can be regarded as a productivity drive that received political endorsement, whereas PS21 was a public service initiative aimed at changing attitudes and values rather than procedural or organizational change. Under BFR, autonomous agencies (AAs) were created at arm’s length from ministries. Each agency sets its own outputs and targets, to which their budgets are related. In theory, they are to be managed autonomously and have budgetary freedom. In line with agency models elsewhere, ministers purchase the operational outputs from AAs that produce policy outcomes. The first batch of AAs was announced in March 1996 and implemented from 1 April 1996.

Impact on the PNT in Singapore

Arguably, PS21 has been largely responsible for a slight shift in the PNT away from the party towards the bureaucracy, but this argument is difficult to sustain given the PAP’s control over the bureaucracy. As in the case of Malaysia, it is difficult to see where any

input from civil society may come from, given that what appears to be civil society in Singapore consists of state-sponsored, grassroots organizations. As Lingle (1996, 102) observes, it is difficult to imagine “that spontaneous initiatives or critical judgements are likely to emerge out of politically constructed organizations that are funded by a government that governs on the basis of intimidation and fear.” Top politicians, as in Malaysia, also dominate the PNT in Singapore and the bureaucracy is highly politicized by the dominant PAP, which effectively forms a homogeneous elite (Ho 2000, 43). Although the two major reform efforts of the 1990s appear to have been generated by two sets of political actors (politicians and BFR, and bureaucrats and PS21), the level of politicization is such that this apparent bifurcation is largely meaningless.

However, in contrast to both Malaysia and Hong Kong (which was preoccupied during much of the 1980s and 1990s with pending transition to SAR of China status), Singapore’s self-consciously outward-looking economy helped to set the pace of reforms that have had some impact in terms of user involvement, albeit within the restricted channels sanctioned by the PAP government. Certainly, the self-conscious nature of the Singaporean government (of a small state in a world that is economically globalizing) provides part of the political pressure for change. Externally, Singapore is anxious to maintain its image as the global city-state, and the PAP no longer “has to spend a great deal of time trying to win a consensus in favor of a switch in direction” (Murray and Perera 1995, 2). Thus, internal pressure for change remains slight: any influence that nongovernmental groups “exert on problem definition and issue expansion is often indirect and minimal” (Ho 2000, 136). The result is that any administrative change in Singapore is technocratic and elitist.

THE APPLICABILITY OF MOON AND INGRAHAM’S POLITICAL NEXUS TRIAD

Moon and Ingraham’s study demonstrated that the degree to which the bureaucracy is politicized is high in China, South Korea, and Japan. Similarly, in Hong Kong it is the bureaucracy that makes policy, and the relationships between ruling party and bureaucracy in Malaysia and Singapore have a high level of interpenetration. In Malaysia, the bureaucracy also effectively institutionalizes *bumiputra* (ethnic Malay) interests. In Singapore, the bureaucracy is effectively controlled by politicians (Ho 2000, 173). The effects of administrative reform have only altered the PNT at the margins by increasing access to information and providing forums for feedback from public service users in Malaysia and Singapore. In Hong Kong, the impact is negligible, especially given the fact, for instance, that performance pledges are determined by government agencies without consultation with the public. The lack of a developed civil society, at least from a Western perspective, draws us to a rather simplistic conclusion that any public management reforms that do not alter power relationships within the individual polities are the ones that are most likely to be adopted. In fact, the attraction of reforms, even the simple promise of doing something that appears to be in line with international trends, may actually serve to consolidate and legitimate existing PNTs that reflect elite preferences.

In all three polities, the influence of civil society on the reform process is weak. As Cheung (2001, 18-19) explains, the notion of an autonomous civil society is “wholly novel

in many Asian countries and would take much time to nourish.” Therefore, as illustrated by the cases in these three polities, it is difficult to see how reforms can be driven by civil society. For policymaking in general, the public, unless sufficiently organized, remains a secondary actor behind top politicians and bureaucrats. The fragility of civil society in East and Southeast Asia was not sufficiently recognized in Moon and Ingraham’s model, and the political context that stresses the notion of the strong state is likely to mitigate against any sustained input from civil society, no matter how well developed. In the West, NPM appears to tip the balance in favor of the public by shifting accountability for service delivery to front-line managers, but this is unlikely to be a reform goal in the polities observed. Thus prior to 2002, in Hong Kong’s bureaucratic polity administrative reform has done little to alter the PNT balance—enshrined as it is in the Basic Law. The bureaucratic polity maintained its relatively high degree of autonomy from society, although democratization has allowed some role differentiation between politicians and bureaucrats (Burns 1999, 189). This has been reinforced by POAS, but this alteration in the PNT has everything to do with politics and nothing to do with administrative reform. In Malaysia and Singapore, users of public services have been redefined as customers, in line with the rhetoric of NPM elsewhere. However, reforms have aimed specifically at encouraging private-sector confidence (both domestic and international) in the public sector, and responding to an increasingly vibrant and critical middle class.

Moon and Ingraham (1998, 93) observed that in China there had been a gradual separation of bureaucracy from politics along with the expansion of the private sector. However, privatization has not been an overriding policy goal of the three cases (although it has been an important policy thrust in Malaysia). Moreover, it is unlikely that these administrative states, despite the rhetoric of the reforms, would want to attempt to separate policy from operations, even if it is theoretically spurious. In China, the institutionalized fusion of party and bureaucracy at all levels has been regarded as a serious handicap for administrative modernization programs. In Japan, it was found that administrative reform served to increase the politician’s political power and policy expertise. As Japan is the closest approximation to a Western liberal democracy in the Asia-Pacific region, it is to be expected that politicians and civil society would want to assert some control over the bureaucracy (88). However, both Malaysia and Singapore would have no interest in doing this due to the close relationships that exist between the dominant party and the bureaucracy. Since 2002, it appears that Hong Kong is trying to shift the PNT away from its bureaucracy. Moon and Ingraham’s findings about Korea appear to resemble most closely the situation in the countries examined here. In Korea, the reforms achieved an increase in bureaucratic autonomy. Although Moon and Ingraham considered Korea to be in a process of democratization, the reforms in these countries have had a similar effect. In Singapore and Malaysia, top politicians may be happy to shift blame for administrative problems, whereas officials may use reform rhetoric to increase their own autonomy over policy. In Hong Kong, we saw how administrative reform was used to legitimate the role of the civil service, at least until very recently. In all three cases, administrative reform activity is a reflection of the mutually dependent relationship between the public and the private sectors, although government-business relations are less strong in Hong Kong than in Malaysia and Singapore.

CONCLUSION

Table 1 below summarizes administrative reform in the three polities. The key ingredient of civil service reform was the gradual introduction of the set of public management techniques associated with NPM, although there is very little consistency in its application. As Moon and Ingraham (1998, 93) observed, “the instruments are localized to fit each country’s political, economic and administrative context.”

Moon and Ingraham’s (1998, 94) study found that administrative reform alters the power relationships between politicians, bureaucrats, and civil society. By applying their model to Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore, it can also be demonstrated that administrative reform can serve to reinforce existing PNTs. In Hong Kong, the administrative system was effectively frozen by the Basic Law, which guaranteed the region’s form of governance for fifty years after the handover to China. For example, despite the rhetoric of the *Civil Service into the 21st Century* document (Hong Kong Civil Service Bureau 1999), Basic Law Article 103 states that the employment and recruitment conditions of the civil service should be retained. In Malaysia and Singapore, it could be argued that reforms have bolstered single-party dominance in both countries, although the

TABLE 1
Applying the Political Nexus Triad to Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore

	<i>Hong Kong</i>	<i>Malaysia</i>	<i>Singapore</i>
Conventional PNT	Bureaucracy-led PNT (until 2002)	Prime minister-led PNT	Party-dominant PNT
Politicization of bureaucracy	High	High	High
Initiator of administrative reform	Bureaucracy	PM/officials	Politicians/officials
Acting agency for administrative reform	Finance Branch	PM’s office (MAMPU)	Public Service Division
Key feature	Managerialist initiatives, greater flexibility in personnel management	PM-inspired bureaucratic initiatives, flexibility in finance and budgeting	Managerialist initiatives, performance management
Contents of administrative reform	Deregulation, separation of policy from operations, import of Western managerial techniques	Privatization, import of Western managerial techniques, budgetary reform	Separation of policy from operations, import of Western managerial techniques
Effects on PNT	Negligible (increase of political power from 2002)	Increase of politician’s power, some increase in citizen participation	Gradual increase of bureaucratic power and citizen participation

nature of the reform process is quite different. In Singapore, the PAP appears to be inclined to allow the bureaucracy to take reform initiatives, but this is unsurprising given the high degree of politicization in the bureaucracy. The internal tensions of Malaysian politics mean that administrative reform also remains driven from the top down. Thus, the utility of Moon and Ingraham's PNT in the Asian context is that it provides a potential framework for demonstrating the delicate maneuvering required by dominant single parties in the Asian context, but it is severely limited in the absence of viable party competition or a developed civil society in these Asian polities. Thus, administrative reform is too powerful a term to describe the marginal changes made to the public management systems of these governments.

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