

A REVIEW OF PUBLIC MANAGEMENT REFORM IN SAUDI ARABIA

Abdullah Al Otaibi

Research Center

Prince Sultan Military Medical City (PSMMC)

P. O. Box, 7897 (K 484)

Riyadh 11159

Saudi Arabia,

E-mail: nmaosman.1@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The objectives of the review are to give an external assessment on the management, administration practices and reform for improvement in Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, this review assesses the degree of coherence and flexibility to delegate and implement change and advancement of authority between the different organizations within their unit headquarters in the different regional and provincial offices in Saudi Arabia.

Public management reform in Saudi Arabia and in the Arab world generally has not been the topic of much literature. However, in understanding public management reform, it is very important to provide a review of the political, economic and cultural values and norms, targeting New Public Management (NPM), with the logics of service and accountability in local public administration. It is to explore organization theory perspectives, responses to introduction of NPM and possible identification of organizational responses like unresolved conflicts between management and staff, decoupling between espoused and enacted practices, loose coupling between functions and individuals, and constructively handling the internal structural and cultural differentiations. These responses, causes and consequences of management and reform are overviewed. The issued decrees of the king on three major political developments in 1992, with the aim of modernizing the government, were those concerning the formation of the Consultative Councils (Majlis Al-Shura) and the second establishing Provincial Councils in Saudi Arabia provinces. They were composed of leading citizens who help to provide input and review the management of the provinces by their respective local governments. The third decree promulgated the Basic Law of Governance, incorporating arrangements for the Consultative Council and the regional government. It established in writing the essential structure and organisation of government and can be seen as constituting a bill of rights for the citizens.

The government instituted the Saudization system in 1995, to solve the shortage of qualified personnel by which non-Saudi employees in public management would be replaced by Saudi nationals. This system lays out the political context and cultural climate from which Saudization emerges as a reform target but, this process has proceeded much more slowly. For modernizing the public administration effectively, the government also established General Memorandum Committee Administrative Reform with the aim of restructuring the public sector at large. These organisational structures of the government agencies had been largely unchanged for nearly forty years, since established, with overlaps and duplications. These reforms resulted in a government expenditure reduction when some agencies were abolished and other services responsibilities of unified.

In conclusion, Saudi Arabia has spent substantial amounts of the money gained from oil revenues on modernising bureaucratic systems, yet any improvements have been slow, with administrative structures, systems and procedures which are outdated, in that the administrative cultures include some holdbacks like unsystematic flows of information and insufficient coordination.

Key words: *Public Management, Administrative Reform, Consultative Councils, Saudization, Governance*

1. INTRODUCTION

Public administrations are a vehicle for expressing the values and preferences of citizens, communities, and society as a whole. Some of these values and preferences are constant; others change as societies evolve. Periodically, one set of values comes to the fore, and its energy transforms the role of government and the practice of public administration (Bourgon, 2007). Public servants are expected to acquire some settings of guiding principles that could help in reforming and shaping citizens' expectations for steering future government actions (Bourgon, 2007).

Around the world societies have undergone tremendous changes in the past thirty years. Since Berlin Wall has collapsed in 1989, an unprecedented convergence towards a 'Democratic Capitalism model' has been witnessed as the most efficient way to enjoy both a high standard of living and quality of life (Fukuyama, 1992, 1995).

The First International Congress in Administrative Sciences, held as part of the Brussels World Exhibition of 1910, has already been noted as the first of a series of events that were destined to lead, twenty years later, to the establishment of the IIAS. A second Brussels Congress was held in 1923 and a third Congress took place in Paris in 1927. A fourth international Congress, held in Madrid in 1930, endorsed proposals to establish an international institute. A much fuller version of this story, which has many fascinating aspects, has been told elsewhere (Drewry, 2005).

Local governments have been subject to intensive change and extensive legislation since the 1970s and British governments like that of Mrs. Thatcher was intended to reduce public expenditure. This has been seen since the election of the new Labour government in 1997, modernization and reform continues in the development of public services in local government. Recent reform of local government has been complicated by the introduction, since 1998, of devolution to the London Assembly with an elected mayor, assemblies in Northern Ireland, Wales and the Scottish Parliament. There are complicated financial relations between local government and the different varieties of devolved government. The United Kingdom remains a unitary rather than a federal state but devolution delivers a level of decentralization. Central government retains control through legal and economic instruments and provides local government with limited autonomy. The elected element in local government contributes to local democracy. Local government provides an important element in the delivery and management of public services but complicated by the fact that privatization has changed the way public services are delivered. There are a plethora of statutes, regulations, guidance and audit systems that provide a comprehensive framework for local government in the provision of education, social services, planning public health and licensing regulation (Kudrycka, 2004).

The public sector¹ plays a major role in society. In most economies, public expenditure forms a significant part of gross domestic product (GDP) and public sector entities are substantial employers and major capital market participants. The public sector determines, usually through a political process, the outcomes it wants to achieve and the different types of intervention. These include enacting legislation or regulations; delivering goods and services; redistributing income through mechanisms such as taxation or social security payments; and the ownership of assets or entities, such as state owned enterprises. Governments also have a role in promoting fairness, peace and order, and sound international relations (CIPFA- IFAC, (2013).

The courts have exercised an oversight of local government through judicial review of disputes between local and central government. As local government must act within its legal powers the legality of its decisions must be in accordance with the law. Local government is expected to become more responsive to local needs and citizenship panels exist to provide input from the local community. Local authorities have contributed to the development of judicial review through a number of landmark decisions and in common with other public bodies, local authorities are expected to conform to the Human Rights Act 1998. The latest Local Government Bill 2002 proposes to identify excellent local authorities who will be rewarded with freedom to act outside the controls of central government (McEldowney, 2011). 'Monopolistic Capitalism' could be another model, emerging in countries such as China and Saudi Arabia, a different one that could be expected later (Minc, 2004). This convergence has occurred during a period of great economic and geopolitical transformation. This is evidenced in the effects of globalization and the emergence of new global economic engines such as China and India, in the exceptional transformation of South Africa and the expansion of the European Union, and in the impact of modern information and communication technologies (Bourgon, 2007).

We have come to realize the importance of good governance and to recognize the interconnected roles of the private sector, the public sector and civil society institutions. We have learned that good governance requires good government – i.e. an effective public service and effective public sector institutions (Bourgon, 2003). The past thirty years mark a rich period of experimentation in public service reforms. Many countries, including most of the developed countries, have undertaken extensive reforms aimed at making government more efficient, more effective, more productive, more transparent and more responsive. The quest to achieve these goals has been pursued through privatization, deregulation, commercialization, customerization or decentralization. Now looking back, we are better able to identify the positive initiatives that show lasting potential – and to discard the less successful ventures that had a negative effect on the ethos of the public service (Bourgon, 2003).

For over two decades a set of management techniques and practices, mostly associated with market and private-for-profit sectors, have been used to reform administration and management in government, in a variety of countries, notably the UK, New Zealand and Australia. The past decade has seen the application of some of these practices in some developing and transitional economies. These techniques and practices have been collectively referred to as the 'New Public Management' (NPM). The NPM reform trends have been driven by a combination of factors, no one of which can be said to be responsible for driving reforms on its own (Larbi, 2003).

New Public Management (NPM) may be defined broadly as a set of ideas and methods that aim to combine accountability and efficiency in public administration. Efficiency is sought through methods such as decentralization of authority to the technical levels while ensuring accountability to society at large. Alternatively, it may imply the creation of market mechanisms for the delivery of services, such as contracting out. There is no real unifying definition of what these ideas and methods are but, for this article, it is retained that NPM represents a dual focus on service to the public and accountability to society at large (Hernes, 2005).

The traditional dual role of public administration is both to be at the service of the local community and to enforce legislation and standards stipulated by the political system at the wish of society as a whole. Service implies proximity to the local population. It implies communication and readiness to serve locals as customers. Service implies attention to individual needs. It requires flexibility and the application of expertise in technical and social matters. In other words, it requires local authority agents to engage with the citizen as an individual and not just as a member of a community. At an organizational level, this implies responsibility devolved to professionals, which again increases their scope for influence on institutional decision making processes as well as the distribution of organizational resources (Hernes, 2005).

Public management reform in Saudi Arabia and in the Arab world generally has not been the topic of much literature. However, in understanding public management reform in Saudi Arabia, it is very important to provide a critical review of the country's political, economic and cultural values and norms (Common, 2008). Argument should be towards the polarized present insight exercise that creates the right context for developing a new synthesis of public administration theory. It also establishes an ambitious goal. We should aim to define a theory that can effectively integrate past strengths, current knowledge and future challenges. That is, a theory that builds upon the strong foundation provided by the Classic model, incorporates the lessons of the last thirty years, and anticipates the imperatives of public service in the twenty-first century.

Theories of Public Management and Reform

The Classic model of public administration theory was first described in the early twentieth century. Given the relative 'youth' of many democratic governments during that era, its emphasis on control and organizational design was well suited to the times. Public administrations molded around this model have proven remarkably stable, even in the face of change and in highly variable circumstances. But the test of a strong theory is not just its staying power. It is the trait of resilience that implies an ability to adapt to new and unforeseen circumstances (Bourgon, 2007).

The Classic public Administration Theory

Civil service bureaucracies emerged in the latter part of the nineteenth century, a period characterized by rapid change associated with the industrial revolution. A meritorious, well-trained public service was a powerful instrument for promoting economic development and building a modern state: it contributed immeasurably to the success of countries undergoing industrialization (Bresser-Pereira, 2005). The Classic model was founded upon a number of conventions, including a strict separation of political and

professional activities, public service anonymity and political neutrality. The public service was governed by precisely prescribed rules and accountable to elected officials: thus, it was expected to exercise minimal discretion in executing its tasks. The power structure was vertical and hierarchical. It valued and encouraged impartiality, compliance and predictability (Kernaghan, 2002).

The public service, as we know it today, owes much to the public administration theory that prevailed at the beginning of the twentieth century including:

- _ Respect for the rule of law.
- _ A commitment to serving the public good.
- _ An expectation that public servants will exhibit integrity, probity and impartiality in serving the public trust.

The model was clear and simple – characteristics that continue to hold great intellectual appeal. Reality, however, is rarely as simple as theory. The Classic model falls

The New Public Management theory

The New Public Management (NPM) theory takes its intellectual foundations from Public Choice theory, which looks at government from the standpoint of markets and productivity, and from Managerialism, which focuses on management approaches to achieve productivity gains. At its core, NPM represents a set of ideas, values and practices aimed at emulating private sector practices in the public sector. NPM has both protagonists (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992; Osborne and Plastrik, 1997) and vehement opponents. It has been criticized for the values it promotes, the disaggregation of the concept of a unified public service and the effects of managerialism on democratic values (Terry, 1993; Carroll and Lynn, 1996).

At the risk of being unfair, I would say that while the Classic public administration theory gave us a sound foundation, the NPM theory starts from the wrong value proposition. However, the underlying issues NPM attempts to resolve – some of which had previously been neglected – deserve our careful attention. Three of the most important issues include:

- _ Citizen-centred services.
- _ Value for taxpayers' money.
- _ A responsive public service workforce.

A New Public Administration theory should help us to address these issues from a public sector perspective, based on public sector values.

The building blocks of a New Public Administration theory

There is a growing distance between the theoretical foundation provided by the public administration theory of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the reality faced by public servants in the twenty-first century. I also argued that, despite its best intentions, the NPM did not offer public servants an alternative model to help them resolve emerging conflicts and tensions. If anything, it added to the confusion (which is not entirely surprising in a change process).

The question of whether we need a 'new synthesis', a new 'integrating framework' or a new 'theory' of public administration is one of degree. There is considerable gap between modern concepts of government and those that held sway in the past. As a result, there is concern about the growing gap between the reality of those serving in the public service and the theory that, in principle, is there to guide them. 'There is nothing so practical as a good theory' (Lewin, 1951). There is nothing so dangerous as a theory that lags behind the times and yet remains the yardstick for making decisions and passing judgments. The concepts or understanding of situations shape the way we think and act. Concepts of citizenship, democracy or public interest have evolved over time and they are continuing to evolve. Consequently, the role of government and the role of the public service are being transformed in ways that push beyond the constraints of the Classic model. A journey towards a New Public Administration theory must start at the most basic level. It begins with the concept of citizenship (Denhardt, 2003).

2. THE ADMINISTRATIVE CONTEXT

Saudi Arabia is one of the most conservative of the Arab states where tradition is given most importance; Islam provides the foundation for the civil, cultural, economic, legal, political and social fabric of the country.

The political system in Saudi Arabia is a monarchy, where the king rules through a council of ministers. The country has no political parties, unions or franchise. People participate in the political life of the country through the Majlis Al-Shura (consultative council), which enables them to voice their concerns and communicate their views to the government. Its chairman and members are appointed by the king, who remains the ultimate authority, promulgating laws and determining new policies (Jabbra and Jabbra, 2005; Mellahi, 2006; Common, 2008).

The Saudi economy is oil based and major economic activities are heavily controlled by the government. It is estimated that Saudi Arabia holds around 25% of the world's proven reserves of petroleum, the largest reserves of any country in the world, and that it is the largest exporter of petroleum. Due to its strategic geo-political position and energy resources, Saudi Arabia is a major player in the stability of the global economy (Mellahi, 2006; Common, 2008). Thus, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the international comparative literature refer to Saudi Arabia as a rentier state, which Owtram (2004:199) defines as one relying on "direct transfers from the international economy in the form of oil revenues". Oil revenues have helped to protect the Gulf states from international economic pressure, but, as Winckler (2000) notes, in the absence of the systems of personal and corporate taxation they also serve as a further safeguard against democratisation. Mellahi (2006) remarks upon the close links between oil prices and political and social stability in Saudi Arabia.

With regard to Saudi social culture, Common (2008) notes that the Gulf states are characterised as centralised, with strong organisational cultures rooted within a regional culture that is based on tradition, religious values and community, supported by the social culture. Saudi Arabia is commonly believed to be characterised by high power distance, collectivism, femininity and high uncertainty avoidance (Barakat, 1993; Bjerke and Al-Meer, 1993; Alshaya, 2002; Jabbra and Jabbra, 2005; Mellahi, 2006; Tayeb, 2005; Idris, 2007; Common, 2008). The management style is hierarchical and a centralised structure (Tayeb, 2005). According to Common (2008), such national characteristics seem to have resulted in a rigid environment which is resistant to administrative change.

3. THE NATURE OF ADMINISTRATIVE REFORM IN SAUDI ARABIA

Within the administrative context set out above, the study aims to present and analyse the attempts at public management reform which are currently underway in Saudi Arabia, as in many countries across the world, in order to improve the performance of public bodies. Saudi public management reform can in some sense be considered a historical development, taking place in different stages with the reform approaches focusing on the issuance of laws and regulations.

In 1953, the Council of Ministers was established, which could be considered the first basic step in establishing a central administration in Saudi Arabia, but true administrative development is considered to have begun in 1970 with the establishment of a central administration and the creation of bodies capable of planning and executing development projects. This decade saw the near completion of the building of Saudi Arabia's organisational, judicial and executive bodies; the Saudi government, taking advantage of the increase in oil revenues, began to implement such reform in the mid-1970s (Tawail, 1995).

Public management in Saudi Arabia is dominated by bureaucracy, which the King supervises and manages via the Council of Ministers, and this is fundamental to public management in Saudi Arabia. The Council of Ministers is powerful, central and dynamic, having responsibility for internal, external, financial, economic, educational and defence policies, as well as general affairs of state. It is answerable to the King for all its activities and those of the bureaucracy (Jabbra and Jabbra, 2005). Common (2008) remarks upon the character of the GCC, of which Saudi Arabia is a member, being centralized, with a pyramidal structure underlying formal control, which makes sure that control is hierarchical.

The implementation of bureaucracy in running public management in Saudi Arabia reveals certain traits. One example is over-centralisation, which is a major problem in that it results in senior managers enforcing commands from their superiors rather than being more independent in making decisions. Jreisat (2003) notes that public employees have lacked the involvement and participation that could facilitate improvements in their performance. Jabbra and Jabbra (2005) found that subordinates relied excessively on

their superiors, passing even minor administrative problems to them for resolution, so that senior public servants were engaged in administrative trivia, rather than spending their time on more important issues.

Saudi Arabian bureaucracy and public management are hampered by rigidity and complicated sets of rules and regulations, with long lines of command, a combination of factors which leads to weak control, as orders can gradually change as they are passed down the ranks, following the 'Chinese whispers' phenomenon. Al-Hegelan (1984) and Jabbara and Jabbara (2005) cite lengthy and time consuming procedures in which the approval of a chain of several officials must be sought before a matter can be sent to a top bureaucrat for his approval. Jabbara and Jabbara (2005) remark upon the plight of citizens who are often obliged to travel to the major cities in order to finalize transactions.

Nepotism, commonly referred to in this context as *wasta*, represents a unique feature of bureaucracy in Saudi public management, arising from the country's basic values of loyalty to family and tribe. *Wasta* among public servants results in a senior official's family or tribal members being recruited into a particular ministry or agency (Al-Awaji, 1971; Jreisat, 2003; Jabbara and Jabbara, 2005; Idris, 2007; Common, 2008).

Several researchers, including Al-Awaji (1971), Al-Ahmadi and Roland (2005) and Jabbara and Jabbara (2005), have argued that one of the most significant barriers to building a Saudi bureaucratic system that is both accountable and responsible has proved to be the unavailability of qualified personnel of the right calibre. This has been a serious problem, particularly when Saudi public services needed to expand rapidly when oil revenues rose and the government wanted to provide Saudi citizens with new services.

These characteristics are reflected in the current output of Saudi public organisations. For example, Jreisat (2003) remarks that despite overstaffing in Saudi public organisations, their actual productivity is low, so many employees underperform. He also found that although the financial rewards were high, there was a lack of innovative and skilled work for Saudi public employees (Jabbara and Jabbara, 2005).

The Saudi government has tried to solve the above-mentioned problems, caused by the bureaucracy that dominates Saudi public management, through some management reform efforts. For example, following the fall in oil prices in the mid-1980s, the country started looking for alternative sources of revenue. One of these was the intensification of global trade relations, which required reform to accelerate international as well as national investment. For example, in order to stimulate competition, Saudi Arabia has recently instituted several laws and policies concerning privatization and investment, notably foreign direct investment (Mellahi, 2006).

In 1992, the king issued decrees on three major political developments with the aim of modernizing the government, the first concerning the formation of the Consultative Councils (Majlis Al-Shura) (Al-Hamad, 1995) and the second establishing Provincial Councils in each of Saudi Arabia's 13 provinces. They are composed of leading citizens who help to provide input and review the management of the provinces by their respective local governments (Almotairi, 1995). The third decree promulgated the Basic Law of Governance, incorporating arrangements for the Consultative Council and the regional government. It established in writing the essential structure and organisation of government and can be seen as constituting a bill of rights for the citizen (Al-Hamad, 1995).

In 1995, in order to solve the shortage of qualified personnel, the government instituted the Saudization system, by which non-Saudi employees in public management would be replaced by Saudi nationals. According to Gallagher (2002), this system lays out the political context and cultural climate from which Saudization emerges as a reform target. Mellahi (2006) notes that the process of Saudization has proceeded much more slowly than the government had hoped.

In order to modernize its public administration effectively, the government also established in 2003 the General Memorandum Committee Administrative Reform. This aimed to restructure the public sector at large, because the organisational structures of the government agencies had been largely unchanged for about 40 years, ever since their establishment, resulting in some overlaps and duplications. These reform efforts have led to a reduction in government expenditure by abolishing some agencies and in unifying the responsibilities of other services (Al-Otaibi, 2006).

Public organisations have also been experimenting with and introducing various NPM ideas and practices, in conjunction with principles from Total Quality Management (TQM), as well as other forms of organisational development and change including the transfer of and reliance on certain market principles such as contracting out and competition. Al-Yahya (2009) comments that this all signifies a major shift in the way public administration operates, which, along with the increased investments in NPM programmes, could

indicate a trend towards relative decentralization and de-bureaucratization. However, Common (2008) argues that such reforms in countries such as Saudi Arabia have aimed to stimulate growth in the private sector and reduce dependence on public sector employment for nationals by focusing on economic and labour market policies, rather than on administrative system reforms.

Regarding the reform efforts in the Saudi health care system, the government took an important step when it established National Health Insurance (NHI) in 1999. The main objectives of the NHI programme are to serve as an additional source for financing health through wage-based contributions by employers and employees, thereby reducing the government's share of total health expenditure, and to transfer some of the social responsibility for such expenditure from government to employers (Mufti, 2000). Another step taken by the Saudi government was the establishment in 2002 of the National Health Services Council (NHSC) to formulate a strategy of health care and the development and adoption of policies of coordination and integration between all the relevant bodies to provide health care services in the kingdom (Al-Rabeeah, 2003).

It is clear that the above management reforms took place through making reductions in expenditure, ending duplication between government agencies, privatizing some government agencies either wholly or partially, establishing training institutions in order to overcome the severe shortage of trained nationals and the adoption of e-government (Al-Tawail, 1995; Jabbara and Jabbara, 2005; Al-Otaibi, 2006; Al-Shehry, et al., 2006). However, in Saudi Arabia, this type of public management reform has also notably involved the coordination and control of the expanding public agencies (Al-Otaibi, 2006; Common, 2008).

In conclusion, Saudi Arabia has spent substantial amounts of the money gained from oil revenues on modernising bureaucratic systems, yet any improvements have been slow, with administrative structures, systems and procedures which are outdated. Al-Khaldi (1983), Al-Rabeeah (2003) and Jabbara and Jabbara (2005) have all commented that the administrative culture is characterised by unsystematic flows of information, insufficient coordination, inadequate planning, inefficient transitions and problems with control and supervision.

Part of the problem in Saudi reform arises from the huge cultural differences between the Western context from which much of the modern administrative framework originates and the various dimensions of the Saudi political context, which is heavily based on traditional and religious values. In particular, the politico-ideological tradition of democracy which evolved in the Western world barely exists in Saudi Arabia. Common (2001) cites Haque's view that the democratic assumptions of neutrality, anonymity and impartiality in administrative procedures and accountability to elected politicians made in Western countries are not generally shared in Saudi Arabia.

Inefficiencies in Saudi public management reform have also arisen from Saudi employees in general and managers in particular being deeply entrenched in certain social structures that render ineffective any rational thrust to managerial strategies. As Saudi Arabia is also a rentier state, the powerful elite do not have much incentive to change their habits. Common (2008) remarks on the slow rate of political change in situations where the powerful elite dominate political life. Basically, the political sphere is restrained by strong institutions which are dictated by culture and tradition.

In Saudi Arabia the social culture lends support to the centralisation of the country, which may be the reason for the problems facing Saudi public management. Therefore, it is clear that although the government has already taken steps, greater effort is still required and that these reform efforts should be compatible with the culture of the country. Curry and Kadash (2002) point out that in developing countries such as Saudi Arabia, any programmes of organisational improvement or change need to be accompanied to some degree by cultural change. Such programmes are the ongoing in Ministry of Education and others in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, in line with the country's education policy goals. The Ministry has drawn up for itself a long-term plan to address these recommendations objectively and scientifically and in accordance with social and economic criteria, through the National Forum which aims to provide basic education for all. Agreement was set upon the aim of having male and female graduates equipped with Islamic values both in theory and practice, in possession of useful knowledge, skills and attitudes, able to interact positively with modern developments and deal effectively and flexibly with advanced technologies, capable of competing internationally in scientific and applied fields and able to contribute positively to the drive for sustainable development. This can be achieved through an efficient education system able to nurture abilities and

propensities and disseminate a positive spirit towards work, in a school environment where education and learning are encouraged (Al shaer, 2007).

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