The Dynamics of Public Sector Reform: Implementation of the Position Classification System in Bhutan

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Abstract

In recent decades the intensity with which governments have initiated public sector reforms increased tremendously. Amidst such a flurry of reforms, Bhutan’s government implemented the Position Classification System (PCS) reforms in 2006. The PCS represented a major tranche of public sector reforms that included human resource management and performance management components. The implementation of the PCS, which was based on international ―best practices‖, met with sharp criticism in Bhutan. This thesis, using the implementation of the PCS in Bhutan as a case study, examines the dynamics of public sector reforms and discusses the convergences and divergences in the public sector reform trajectory.

In doing so, three key aspects of the ―dynamics‖ of public sector reform are analysed in this thesis. The first aspect is the debate over ―revolutionary‖ or ―evolutionary‖ nature of the reform. Through the concept of paradigms in public administration, this thesis identifies an ideal type typology of public administration, and distinguishes the components of the PCS as normal policy making (evolutionary reform) and paradigm-shift policy (revolutionary reform). On the basis of the ideal type typology, the thesis demonstrates that Bhutan’s public administration is hybrid with combinations of characteristics of the various paradigms and models of public administration. The second
aspect of the dynamics of public sector reforms is the effect of the scope and timing on
the evaluation of the reforms. Based on the data gathered from in-depth interviews and an
opinion survey of the Bhutanese civil servants in 2011, the thesis evaluates the various
dimensions of the PCS. The third aspect of the dynamics of public sector reform is the
drivers of the reform and their forms of interaction. In examining the main drivers of the
PCS, the thesis explores topical topics on public sector reforms such as policy transfer,
ideas and symbolism, stakeholder participation, and change management. One of the
main findings of the thesis is the interaction between the reforms and the context and
culture of the administrative system that these reforms are applied in. Using Geert
Hofstede’s Value Survey Module to generate original values for the culture of Bhutan,
the thesis demonstrates the importance of context and culture in the implementation of
public sector reforms.

The thesis provides one of the first comprehensive historical analyses of public sector
reforms in Bhutan, a country that is relatively understudied. The thesis is also one of the
few empirical studies that maps the ideal types based on the paradigms of public
administration to a country’s administrative system. To suit Bhutan’s monarchical
political context, the ideal type typology includes the patronage system as one of the
models. Another significant contribution of the thesis is that it is one of the few empirical
studies, which evaluate policy by using a revisionist approach that combines the
rationalist and the argumentative traditions. Finally, the thesis serves as a basis for the
next set of public sector reforms to be implemented in Bhutan’s civil service through a
set of policy recommendations based on the experience of the PCS.