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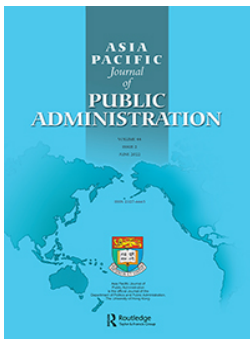
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Quality of government in the Asia Pacific region

Forgotten institution, forgotten continent

In the search of the Holy Grail for economic prosperity in which social sciences have been embarked for long, scholars have emphasised political institutions and given relatively little attention to administrative institutions (Dahlström & Lapuente, 2017). The incentives of the few political officers at the top of public institutions, legislators and executives (either autocratic or democratic) have been studied at length and in great detail, also for Asia, and, for these countries, mostly to explain why institutions do now work properly. But the incentives of the hundreds of thousands of remaining state employees, from top civil servants to street-level public employees (e.g., police officers and teachers) have been largely overlooked, both in general (Dahlström et al., 2012) and in emerging economies (Finan et al., 2017). Nevertheless, the face of the state, for the vast majority of citizens worldwide, is not the face of the president or a legislator, but of public employees. And quality of government – and its dark side: corruption – are, if any, a particularly serious problem in several Asian countries today.

Bureaucracy is forgotten and needs to be rediscovered, and it is in this line of reasoning where this special issue emerges: to focus on what Rothstein (2009) refers to as the “output” side of government (i.e., the quality of public administration involved in policy implementation, state capacity or the quality of governance) instead of the more studied, in political science at least, “input” side (i.e., how voters and/or constituencies affect policy decision-making). Which are the foundations, and consequences, of high-quality public administrations, and how do they vary in the Asia Pacific region

Public bureaucracies have been both theoretically and empirically linked to economic development worldwide. They are also key for other indicators of well-being in a society, such as improved health outcomes. But the vast majority of existing studies focus on North America and Western Europe. There exist many understudied countries on the functioning of public bureaucracies, quality of government, and individual bureaucrats. Investigating these countries helps researchers to test the external validity of existing theories. Thus, this special issue focusing on the Asia Pacific region is of utmost importance.

This Special Issue is composed of four articles, which are substantially and methodologically heterogeneous, but tackle important angles on government capacity and institutional quality in the Asia Pacific region: first, Christopher A. Cooper, on “Encouraging bureaucrats to report corruption: human resource management and whistleblowing”; second, Jinhyuk Jang, on “Power-sharing in governments, clarity of responsibility, and the control of corruption”; third, Abiha Zahra and Tobias Bach, on “The intensity of organizational transitions in government: comparing patterns in developed and developing countries”; and fourth, Hyeon-Suk Lyu, M. Jae Moon, Taehyung Kim and Daeun Sung, on “Linking quality of government to outcomes of civil service training: Evidence from Southeast Asian Countries”.

What we knew and did not know before this special issue

What is the secret of good government? A first temptation is to argue that well-functioning government institutions are merely the result of a well-functioning society, with highly trusting individuals. Despite a widespread belief that a “good society” may lead to good government, the causal arrow may actually run in the other direction: institutional quality leads to a highly trusting citizenry.

Consequently, the attention of scholars has moved towards the inner workings of the state apparatuses. And which elements of the state apparatuses, which public institutions do really matter? In the first place, the public administrations, and, in particular, civil service arrangements, as Cooper’s article explores. And, in the second place, governments, and, in particular, executives’ clarity of responsibility, as Jang’s article examines. Regarding this, the usual argument in the existing literature is that multiple-party governments, where different parties share the political power, reduce the lines of responsibility for government outcomes.

Regarding bureaucracies, they have been traditionally seen in the literature (and in popular accounts) as rigid and hierarchical, but, as Cooper notes in the opening article of this Special Issue, now that a growing body of studies has found that bureaucracies have crucial effects for the promotion of quality of government, they have become the “unsung hero in the fight against corruption”. Therefore, this article joins a current trend among the scholarship in rescuing the advantages of bureaucratic organisations (Dahlström & Lapuente, 2021), in contrast to a long tradition, mostly in the Anglo-Saxon countries, of considering bureaucracies as sources of red tape and slack, given that they are not subject to market competition. Bureaucracy has stopped being seen as an organisational dinosaur or as perverse machinery, but, quite the opposite, as the guarantor of quality of government. The question is how: which particular aspects of a bureaucracy do lead to good governance?

How autonomous bureaucracies and single-party governments promote quality of government

Which type of bureaucracy is best: a bureaucracy totally accountable to their political masters or, on the contrary, a totally autonomous one? From the pioneering work of Evans and Rauch (1999), which by the way included many Asian countries in their sample of 35 developing economies in the 1980s, several studies support the idea of an autonomous bureaucracy. A public administration where jobs are filled by merit-recruited candidates, instead of politically connected ones, leads to lower poverty and lower corruption (Dahlström et al., 2012), to a more impartial regulation of markets and to overall higher levels of quality of government (Dahlström & Lapuente, 2017).

Yet merit-recruitment rarely comes alone. And thus it is difficult to know, in general as a result of methodological challenges, which particular feature of bureaucracies, or civil service systems, do really matter to reduce corruption. One fruitful way to handle these problems is to use micro-level data, as Cooper does in his article. By exploring the responses of individual Australian civil servants, Cooper is able to examine the potential effects of different characteristics – such as merit recruitment, permanent careers, and remuneration – on a key aspect of quality of government: the willingness to report

a corrupt behaviour. In addition, this micro-level data allows Cooper to control the results with numerous variables, such as age and gender and the existence of agency-level whistleblowing procedures, together with the employees' understanding of such procedures, and also the type of corruption.

The findings are truly interesting, for, on the one hand, they indicate that willingness to report corruption depends on the level of meritocracy of the bureaucratic agency (as perceived by the employee), and also on the employee's belief in their opportunities for promotion. And, on the other hand, job permanency, or (satisfaction with) remuneration, two characteristics normally considered as fundamental for the public sector, are not significantly associated with willingness to blow the whistle. The results of this within-country analysis are in line with previous cross-country studies, that have also noted that merit recruitment is more important than job security (Dahlström & Lapuente, 2017).

If we move now to the political instead of the administrative level of a state, which is the distribution of political power that works better to control corruption and promote quality of government? In "Power-sharing in governments, clarity of responsibility, and the control of corruption" Jinhyuk Jang argues that a government with multiple actors, since it blurs the lines of responsibility, will have more problems in controlling corruption than a single-party government. Jang provides tests this theory using an original cross-national panel dataset for 19 Asia Pacific democracies between 1996 and 2019. This is a notable contribution to the literature, as most previous studies have focused either in Western countries or in cross-sectional analysis, so were missing explorations of time differences in quality of government in non-Western settings. The results indicate that the larger the share of legislative power in hands of the president's (or prime minister's) party, the higher the control of corruption in a country is.

How bureaucracies die (or not)

In "The intensity of organizational transitions in government: comparing patterns in developed and developing countries", Abiha Zahra and Tobias Bach deal with one problem that underlies the previous articles: are public institutions immortal? And, if not, how do they come to life and how they die? How relevant changes in government organisations take place? With very few exceptions, there have been few comparative studies of organisational transformation, and that is what Zahara and Bach invite future researchers to do: try to look at structural reforms in different countries and explore, comparatively, their effects on quality of government.

The article provides an innovative research design: to adapt the coding scheme of the Norwegian and Irish State Administration Databases for the context of an Asian, and particularly overlooked, public administration – that of Pakistan. Their resulting Pakistan State Administration Database (PSAD) is a pioneering map of organisational transitions in government in a developing context. A central finding is that, effectively, in Pakistan, bureaucratic terminations are virtually non-existent, and changes are restricted to reorganisations. In addition, and contrary to what could be expected, in comparison with developed countries, the intensity of organisational restructuring was lower in Pakistan.

This finding is testimony to the importance of special issues like this one: exploring a highly studied topic (i.e., quality of government) in an almost uncharted territory for this issue (i.e., Asian Pacific region) helps to break stereotypes.

How bureaucracies improve

In “Linking quality of government to outcomes of civil service training: Evidence from Southeast Asian Countries”, Hyeon-Suk Lyu, M. Jae Moon, Taehyung Kim and Daeun Sung explore a critical aspect: the development of professional competence among civil servants. And, despite its importance, civil service training has been largely overlooked in the literature, both in general as well as in particular in Asia. In addition, civil service training programmes have been remarkably important in the region for decades given that donor countries and organisations have tended to include them with the goal of improving the overall quality of government in the country.

Yet do these training programmes work? This open empirical question is addressed by Lyu, Jae Moon, Kim and Sung, who explore the determinants of the effectiveness of development assistance-based civil service training programmes using a survey of Southeast Asian civil servants who participated in capacity development programmes organised by various Korean institutions in five Southeast Asian countries: Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar and Indonesia. In particular, the authors analyse the effects of quality-of-government-related factors (e.g., anticorruption, rule of law, bureaucratic effectiveness, meritocracy and impartiality) on the effectiveness of civil service training programmes. The results remark the importance of impartiality, which has been seen by many scholars in the literature as the foundation of quality of government (Rothstein & Teorell, 2008). The findings indicate that impartiality, even if the overall perceived quality of government is low, is a significant factor for enabling the posterior application of the knowledge and skills acquired by civil servants during their training.

And this, in turn, is also testimony of the importance of special issues like this one: exploring a relatively understudied topic (i.e., the factors explaining the success of civil service training programmes) in a new setting (i.e., the Asian Pacific region) may help to corroborate long-lasting hypotheses (i.e., the relevance of impartiality).

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Kohei Suzuki is Assistant Professor at Institute of Public Administration, Leiden University. He obtained his PhD in Public Policy from Indiana University, Bloomington. His research focuses both on comparative studies of advanced democracies as well as sub-national studies of Japanese municipalities, and has been published in journals like *Public Administration Review*, *Journal of European Public Policy*, *Governance*, and *Public Management Review*.

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