

Formulating Good Governance and Moving Forward: Navigating Transparency or Reinforcing Authority and Power?

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Abstract

In reshaping and strengthening the state in its exercise of wide-ranging influences by entrenched interests either by the state, bureaucrats or for the citizens, there is confounding complexity made more so by the rapid expansion of networking and social media. Governance, more so of good governance is primarily driven by the constant interaction between government agencies and highly organized interests of those involved directly or indirectly. This is evident at every level of government – national, state, and local government. These relationships are interlocked and dominated by sets of well-organized special interests. The manifestation of good governance in ensuring an acceptable level of economic prosperity as well as in navigating transparency especially among citizenry is evident, at least expected so in the eyes of citizens today by the functions of public bureaus. This paper will deal with this dynamism in the system of governance and public policy in the administration of Malaysia that features state as well as citizens engaged in pursuing their respective goals.

INTRODUCTION

Governance, more so of good governance is primarily driven by the constant interaction between government agencies and highly organized interests of those involved directly or indirectly. This is evident at every level of government – national, state, and local government. These relationships are interlocked and dominated by sets of well-organized special interests. Many citizens think of believe that government agencies do not perform in terms of achieving the objectives. Low performance contributes to lack of trust in government with citizens having perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors that discourage them from putting what they value including time and money in the hands of the government (Christensen & Laegreid, 2005).

Many governments brought in legislation, changed the language that was used to describe the public sector and introduced concepts such as “value for money” and “performance measurement”. Hence “new public management” (NPM) was born. The basic premises of NPM were (Hood, 1991): the employment of professional managers; explicit standards and measures of performance; greater emphasis on consistency of services; decentralisation; increased competition between organisations and sub-units; emphasis on private-sector management styles; and increased accountability and parsimony in resource use.

Believers in New Public Management (NPM) attribute a high priority to measuring output and outcomes and aim to base their new policies and management activities on this type of information-ideally meant to make policy implementation more efficient and effective. However, evaluation studies show that many attempts to introduce results-based management are still unsuccessful. Nevertheless, the need for measuring output, outcomes, and evaluation activities remains an important element in statements by politicians and administrators focused on improving government's performance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature identifies the key features of a successful performance management system as being: alignment of the performance management system and the existing systems and strategies of the organisation; leadership commitment; a culture in which it is seen as a way of improving and identifying good performance and not a burden that is used to chastise poor performers; stakeholder involvement; and continuous monitoring, feedback, dissemination and learning from results. Results-based management is the talk of the day at all levels of the public sector: local, regional, national, and even supra national.

The increased attention to performance assessment in the public sector coincides with the rise of administrative reform. In the 1980s, economic decline and increased international competition triggered such reform in most western states. New Public Management (NPM) was introduced with twofold objectives: to cut budgets and to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of government bureaucracy. To achieve the latter objective, market-type mechanisms such as privatization, competitive tendering, and vouchers were introduced in the public sector, and departmental units were hived off into quasi-autonomous nongovernmental organizations. Examples can be found everywhere (for a review of 10 OECD countries, see Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2000).

Public perception of the government and ruling party has been smeared with negativity which currently stands at 87% (The Sun, 23rd January 2017). It has been reported that the government is at a disadvantage due to the online domination of anti-government or anti-establishment cyber-troopers in moulding the public's perception. Thus the role of social media plays a crucial role in dominating the minds of citizens as how we have seen in the election campaign of Donald Trump.

There is much sensitivity in dealing with the system of governance and public policy in the administration of Malaysia that features highly bureaucratized organizations, state, and non-state engaging in their respective goals that are evident and occasionally absent of good governance given the clashes or even collusions as they cooperate along with their purposes that direct them.

Such actions constitute and exert control in policy-administration process and public policies that is in constant contact with the forces of networking that is largely authoritative but found to be facilitating interactions in favor of those that could be of private interests which might/not be discovered much later. Thus, how does the state move forward in balancing the representation of interests in the administrative process and how at times violations of

sensitivity could be compromised without being known but becomes acceptable at the end of the administrative process in the making of public policy?

Theoretical Perspectives- Government Performance and Trust

Goal setting theory asserts that people with specific and challenging goals perform better than those without clear and measurable goals which will improve performance. An agency theory relationship exists when individuals/stakeholders (principals) hire others (agents) to delegate responsibilities to them where incentives play a fundamental role in terms of self-interest/utility function in wealth and leisure. Thus, public administrators tend to use this framework which are imposed on them from the hierarchy within their systems.

Table 1 below shows the main characteristics of goal setting theory and agency theory.

Similarities/Differences	Goal setting theory	Agency theory
	Clear and measurable goals are required Incentives are positively related to performance Decentralisation and performance measurement systems are important for high performance Complexity complicates the achievement of high performance	
Main driver of performance	Goals	Incentives
Goals	Clear and measurable goals motivate managers to achieve these goals	Clear and measurable goals are necessary in order to decentralize decision rights, develop adequate performance measures and provide adequate incentives
Decentralisation	May block the implementation of adequate actions in order to achieve the goals	Part of an “optimal configuration” in order to mitigate control problems
Performance measurement system	Provide feedback to managers in order to improve performance	Provide outcome information as the basis for contracts, respectively provide indications of managerial behaviour
Incentives	May provide meaning to the goals provided	Motivate managers
Complexity	Complexity (task complexity) reduces the relation between clear and measurable goals and performance	Multiple goals and stakeholders affect the applicability of high-powered incentive systems
Important characteristics of public sector employees	Ability and commitment to goals affect performance	Intrinsic motivation, self-selection and professionalism affect marginal costs of incentives

Table 1. Goal setting theory and Agency theory. Adopted from Verbeeten (2008).

Three theoretical traditions (cultural theories, theories of government performance, and institutional theories) attempt to explain the origins of institutional trust, and they provide very different perspectives on how ordinary citizens develop high levels of trust in political institutions (Mishler & Rose, 2001; Norris, 1999). Cultural theories emphasize the role of deep-rooted cultural norms and individual’s socialization experiences (Putnam 1993).

Policy Changes and Trust

Public perceptions of economic and social also matters. Given the politics of policy changes of the government, there is relationship in the development of trust in the legislature and government. Citizens judge a legislature according to whether it provides what people want and whether it provides a reasonably fair chance for them to influence decision-making processes through the periodic general elections which may promote a sense of citizen control at the very least. Leaders are expected to be able to contribute constructively and be directly involved in formulating, implementing, controlling and supervising policies that are specifically designed to address the problems of their constituents according to the right order of priorities.

The problems of governance that arise in most nations today are the repercussions of poor management of public resources and failure in policy implementation by leaders who lack commitment, integrity and the relevant knowledge. It is vital for leaders to be knowledgeable and capable of demonstrating high competencies and correct attitudes for their followers to replicate. When discussing the elements of leadership and policy changes and of course the element of trust included, one must realize that leaders are the prime movers in the nation-building agenda.

As Malaysia makes its way to become a developed nation, the aspect of nation building should not just be about making the country economically and politically strong, it also needs to include the creation of a nation that is united and resilient. In Malaysia, diversity shapes the very essence of the country's social structure and historical aspects. Good leaders will be able to manage these diversities and leverage upon the cultural and ethnic plurality to become pillars of strength in building a better nation.

Citizens have the abilities to acknowledge improvements and positive changes that have taken place and currently being carried out by our leaders. For leaders to make policy changes, they must possess great responsibilities that need to be shouldered with integrity, enthusiasm and dignity, which may seem absent at times. Leaders must learn to become agents of change and learn to accept the reality that the country and its populace have evolved rapidly with the challenges put forward by the world today, in the nation-building agenda. Given the essence of power vested in the leaders, leaders need to ensure that leaders should not perceive leadership as a position of authority for them to further their personal interests. Having said this, policy changes have evolved, some towards the positive whilst some tend to be on the reverse, as some of these policies need further detailed discussion and focus.

In this respect, the government had taken a cue from the 2008 general election to initiate reforms on a broad spectrum of governance, including the economy as seen in many of the transformation programs.

Citizen-participation effectiveness

Most citizen participation techniques have proven to be less-than-adequate tools for informing policy makers attributable either with the shortcomings of citizens such as limited interest in

participating and limited information for the citizens given the embedded unwillingness among public bureaucrats, policymakers and politicians to share their power in developing policies. Further, among the limited knowledgeable citizens, the trust for the policymakers, bureaucrats and politicians can be low with regards to both the substance and salience of the issues.

Thus, how does the state move forward in balancing the representation of interests in the administrative process and how at times violations of sensitivity could be compromised without being known but becomes acceptable at the end of the administrative process in the making of public policy? How does the state navigate better transparency for better governance?

TRUST, TRANSPARENCY, & POWER CONSOLIDATION

Ethics play a significant role in influencing the public's view on the level of trust they have for the local authority. The results of the study reveal that ethics in government officers is significant in affecting the people's trust and also to raise the level of service satisfaction among citizens and the objective of the study has been achieved. Thus, when citizens believe that lower levels of ethics and public integrity exists in public administration, they will also demonstrate lower levels of satisfaction with the services they receive and vice-versa. Hence, it is concluded that trust and satisfaction are affected by citizens' perceptions of the level of ethics in public administration.

Thus, the question in mind is how the state or its local agencies navigate better transparency for better governance? While Article 10 of the Federal Constitution guarantees the freedom of speech and expression (subject to certain conditions), the right to freedom of information is not expressly protected under the Federal Constitution or in domestic laws. Following the momentum towards more deliberate democracies where an informed electorate is integral, it is pertinent that the right to access and disclose information is a key ingredient of transparent and accountable governance.

In Malaysia, a number of anti-corruption measures were initiated under the Fighting Corruption National Key Results Area (NKRA) of the Government Transformation Program to generate a better environment. The Corporate Integrity Pledge (CIP) was introduced for companies to develop their own anti-corruption program. The CIP is a document which pledges a company to upholding the Anti-Corruption Principles for Corporations in Malaysia in the conduct of its business and in its interactions with business partners and the Government. And along with it is the Whistleblower Protection Act, which encourages citizens to come forward to highlight corrupt practices in all organization and since 2010, 96 whistle blowers have been given protection of their identity. Under planned amendments to the Registrar of Societies Act 1966, clear guidelines will be set out on donations made to political parties which would include receipts issued upon the collection of political funds as well as for all donations to be properly recorded and accounted for. All that being said, yet there are many more despite crackdown from time to time.

Some other touch point programs which impacts on people, include the 1Malaysia People's Aid (BR1M), 1Malaysia Book Voucher (BB1M) and 1Malaysia Veterans Recognition Program (1MVRP). Under the BR1M, a disbursement of RM500 to households with monthly income of

RM3000 and below, adding up to a RM2.2 billion initiative was given. BRIM 1 and 2, which give cash awards in 2012 and 2013 to poor households have been received by over four million people. The amount is now increased to RM1200 in 2017. In addition, the government also gave out RM545 million in the form of RM100 schooling assistance to primary and secondary school students from Year One to Form Five as well as RM200 book vouchers to public and private institution students. In relation to reducing the incidence of poverty and enhancing the productivity of low-income households, one of the key achievements was in moving a significant number of households out of the extreme poor and setting up sustainable incomes.

As witnessed in the results of the last general election, the more urbanized and educated votes exhibit lower levels of trust in the legislature as they are more likely to have more information on the government decision-making process and being more critical of how the political system works in the country. People who feel that their own ethnic group is treated unfairly by the government are more likely to show lower levels of trust in the legislature as those ethnic groups marginalized from the government decision-making process are very likely to express their distrust in the legislature, which again may contradict the role of legislature in representing and the various and conflicting interests of the society as a whole.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The findings and arguments can be provocative, but they are limited in a number of ways and clearly not definitive. Most of the measures of performance are perceptual or intermediate. Against this backdrop, many policies have been introduced and changed in view of increasing vulnerability of the government in its dual role of navigating transparency as well as reinforcing power and authority. Much publicity is communicated to the citizens on the success of policies and continuation of transformation programs which were being implemented or have been so recently in supporting economic growth and moving forward to the future in the complicated dynamism. Often it further accentuates that many policy measures and targets are highly likely to continue to be tightly controlled and shielded with the culture of secrecy. Building upon past and present experiences, it ought to institutionalize public transparency and accountability within all facets of public administration with more open data policies and practices, even more so towards achieving a developed nation status. Amongst others, access to information as a transparency tool or mechanism should be incorporated in formulating good governance in the efficiency of delivery systems, reduce information asymmetries and facilitate accountability mechanisms rather than relying on powers of ancillary enforcement currently prevalent.

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