



New public governance in Saudi cities: An empirical assessment of the quality of the municipal system in Jeddah



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ABSTRACT

This paper explores attitudes among citizens and public sector officials in Jeddah city regarding the quality of the municipal system in accordance with aspirations for New Public Management efficacy and a public governance system that functions with efficiency, effectiveness and democratic values. This investigation reveals that, although various aspects of politico-administrative reform have altered the configuration of public management, the essential characteristics of good governance remain unassessed. The state administrative system has not been consolidated, nor has organizational effectiveness been improved. In order to confront challenges created by public sector agencies, we must identify factors that may encourage its promotion. Significant attention should be paid to establishing an appropriate institutional framework to create coherent governance legislation that supports the establishment of enduring democratic values. This should be employed to generate the general capacity and competence of public bodies, and to encourage government officials to act as catalysts to create an integrated form of governance bringing integrity and improvements in public institutions, with high quality municipal services.

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1. Introduction

Saudi Arabia has a centralized governmental system where all financial resources are allocated nationally. An orthodox model of administration emphasizing strong top-down authority has developed since the establishment of the Kingdom in 1932. Before 1970, Saudi welfare-state policies led the approach of traditional public administration, which sought to improve bureaucratic organization and to make it more responsive to citizens' interests. However, this emphasis on centralization and sectoral policies was severely criticized. Later, the government embarked on sweeping reforms to introduce New Public Management principles in order to upgrade the classical managerial system and revitalize bureaucratic centralization.

In the 1990s, after petroleum prices fell and the debt and fiscal crisis followed, there was increasing skepticism about the impact of bureaucratic reform in widening an understanding of ethical governance and empowerment of local communities and civic society stakeholders. There was also widespread discontent with diminished public services. Downgrading services threatened the

administrative capacities of local authorities and constrained cooperation between public sector organizations. This disabled public governance, making it ineffective in extending public amenities and infrastructures.

Changes in people's quality of life brought a growing sensitivity to international issues. This has challenged public management and policymaking, accelerating fresh initiatives to overcome inefficiencies within the administrative fabric, delegating greater fiscal and legal power to local authorities, using market mechanisms to improve the quality of service.

The 'orthodox' autocratic model of public administration and bureaucracy has suffered public perceptions of failure since the dramatic changes in the popular Arab mood following political upheavals sweeping several countries after the 'Arab Spring', resulting in far-reaching regime change in Tunisia, Libya, Yemen and Egypt. Reforms have been embraced under the banner of a radical move from authoritarianism towards democracy. This aims to change the direction of administrative and political reforms to enlarge the public sector agencies and turn shared governance into social reality, revitalizing civic society by allowing people to have a greater say on decision making (UNDP, 2013).

We aim to stimulate discussion of new public governance by underlining the complex challenges facing public officials in Saudi

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Arabia in establishing a system of good governance. We make particular reference to Jeddah City using existing analytical tools, exploring how far the proliferation of new public management (NPM) techniques and governance perspectives (followed by reform) supported economic interactions compatible with socio-cultural realities. We will review public administration literature and theories of governance from both the political and institutional points of view.

In the last decade, the Saudi government has taken vital steps in domestic political reform. Seven main initiatives were undertaken, including the enlargement of citizens' rights in domestic affairs, municipal elections and the amendment of the Shura Council's Statutes.

Since the early 1990s, responding to excessive urban growth, Saudi Arabia has emphasized political and administrative reforms in order to ensure economic, social and political stability while promoting urban development. As a result, regional authorities were given responsibility to regulate public amenities' provisions within their administrative areas, increasing municipal competence and enabling local municipalities in major cities to address the effects of sprawling developments. Population growth increased the strain on public services. By the 1990s, the failure of spatial planning and public management mechanisms to address urban issues alongside public demands led to advocacy for local management and a rethinking of paths to organizational improvement. This has stimulated involvement in local management by private sector actors and community volunteers. This collective decision-making process shaped governance thereafter, when several administrative changes were made. These included private sectors tendering of many municipal services like refuse collection and street landscaping.

Despite these substantial shifts – deploying decentralized policies in assigning considerable responsibility to regional provinces and municipalities – reform never became a reality; its impact was minimal and has remained little more than government rhetoric. The central authority would not relinquish control over resources for regions and municipalities. Public sector agencies attitudes have not changed enough to achieve the various reform proposals (Mandeli, 2010a, b). Although these municipalities are administratively independent, they act according to rules drawn up by the general directorates in the main municipality, which limits participation.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) claims Saudi Arabia has undertaken improvements in fostering democratic governance in the light of national and local authority reforms (Almarshad, 2011). However, as Richards (2005) indicates, the prevailing centralized governance culture, the low dependence of the country on its communities, the use of force to maintain government grip on power, and the resources of authoritarian governments have hindered the transition to democracy (Safieddine & Attoue, 2009). Comparative studies such as the World Bank's 'governance indicators' for government effectiveness and regulatory quality have placed Saudi Arabia on a middling rank. While certain regulations and procedures have been simplified, the bureaucracy remains turgid and unaccountable. The applications of the Rule of Law and demands for extensive documentation have undermined administrative capacity (Tucker, 2012).

Like most countries, Saudi Arabia signed the United Nations Millennium Declaration in 2000, which calls for good governance. The Saudi bureaucracy had mixed reactions to this declaration and its conventions and protocols. On the one hand, the government issued laws and regulations and set up municipal councils. Viewed from this perspective, local councils afford a democratic vehicle for community governance. On the other hand, while the machinery and processes of municipal councils were being established, central

authorities and ministries further tightened their grip on centralized power, thereby incapacitating the roles and function of these councils.

This study examines the impact of recent reforms on local authorities in managing municipal affairs and service delivery following the 2005 municipal elections and the new structure of municipal councils. It is important to inquire how far the reform goals were achieved and how far they have impacted public services and local governance integrity. Institutional coherence is crucial in promoting local participation alongside other principles and governance enhancement. We shall explore the attitudes of citizens and officials in Jeddah-based public sector organizations regarding the quality of the municipal system, citing concerns about the efficacy of New Public Management and a governance system functioning efficiently and adhering to democratic values.

The findings indicate that, in confronting challenges created by public sector agencies, attention should be paid to the establishment of an appropriate institutional framework in order to create coherent governance legislation that supports the creation of an enduring democracy. This should increase the capacity and competence of public bodies, while encouraging government officials to act as catalysts. Confusion about responsibilities leads to frustration among many participants, resulting in disinterest.

2. New public management and governance in advanced countries

In recent years, the structure and functions of local governments around the globe have been subject to reforms stemming from fresh concepts in public management and governance. These reforms represent a shift from Traditional Public Administration (TPA) model to NPM, and from the latter to New Public Governance (NPG) (Andresani & Ferlie, 2006; Hur, 2011).

Historically, the TPA model prevailed across developed countries from the 1920s to the early 1970s. It is shaped by Max Weber's notion of bureaucracy (1947), which claims the bureaucratic system is the most efficient form of managerial control for modern industrialized economies. According to Weber, bureaucratic government should be based on rule-following, be organized hierarchically, and be staffed by skillful professionals with authority and capacity to implement rules and policies (Hughes, 2003).

In the early 1980s, following several fiscal crises, bureaucratic governments caused much social unease. This was marked by the failure of traditionally autonomous public administrations. It was attributed to their rigidity, lack of scope, over-consumption of resources and focus on rules rather than cost awareness and effectiveness (Pfiffner, 2004). This fostered a paradigm shift in developed countries, to regulation through 'New Public Management'. It stimulated successive waves of politico-administrative reforms (Calogero, 2010), which have intensified demands for greater sub-national authority involvement in improvements to service delivery, for governments to be more responsive, and for public expenditure to be applied more efficiently. These demands have been fuelled by the belief that fiscal and legal autonomy for local governments is a tool that will improve organizational capacity and empower local agencies to contribute to public policy (Bovaird & Löffler, 2003; Calogero, 2010; McGrew, 2002; Rondinelli, 1999).

Bevir (2007, 2010) describes the fragmentation of public authorities and accountability dilemmas which have been exasperated by private sector corruption. He places this alongside lack of trust in public sector agencies and concerns about democracy. All these stimulate thinking about efficient public management and

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