The Quest for Indigenous Administration: Asian Communist, Islamic Revivalist, and Other Models

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Abstract

This paper briefly explores instances of administrative indigenization—defined as native patterns neither imposed nor copied from Euro-centric systems—and implications for the study of Comparative Public Administration. China and Iran—as presented in the Comparative Public Administration literature, broadly defined—are suggested as iconoclastic administrative models which are both viable and interesting and in contrast with Western (Northern) models of study and application. Other emerging models—many of them based on grass-roots movements (not to be confused with terrorist movements)—also provide alternatives to the prescriptions of the New Public Management as well as to the conventional secular, “non-political” hierarchies. Comparative Public Administration needs to accommodate such alternatives on a coequal basis.

Introduction

Comparative Public Administration—as it moves into the Twenty-First Century—faces an interdependent world of instant access and open communication and—arguably—increasing distrust of Western (Northern) models of study and application. The “Washington consensus”—the package of free-market reforms which in John Williamson’s expression encompassed conventional World Bank and bi-lateral wisdom (Williamson, 1990)—revealed weaknesses in application, and academic study analyzed the consequences of New Public Management reforms around the globe. “Indigenous solutions for indigenous problems” may become the guiding precept—even in American CPA circles—and grass-roots organizations of various persuasions may become pervasive. The degree of disaffection with imposed, “neo-colonial” models of administration tied to a single, international free-market economy dominated by a handful of nation-states should not be underestimated.

The quest for indigenous models of administrative reform—as this article will attempt to show—has already taken unexpected turns including the success of Iran’s Islamic Revivalist and China’s Asian Communist models—to name two which are system-wide.
Other efforts to recast (or at least rename) institutions, to design training and education programs for officials without Western advice, and to develop policy models which are not simply derivative are currently underway. Formal statements such as the African Charter or Kampala Document and—more recently—the New Partnership for Africa—may present a critical policy challenge to Western-imposed programs. The centerpiece of the New Partnership is a peer-review mechanism to apply pressure on corrupt or incompetent regimes. Unlike previous plans, this one is designed to have enforcement powers. Under the New Partnership, countries that voluntarily participate will pledge to meet standards for clean government, democracy, and human rights and will be responsive to peer-review panels that will help with self-assessments (Economist, 2004).

On the academic front, indigenous literatures—some highly polemical—are arising to counter the “captive mind” and “colonized curriculum” (Alatas, 1993). Rather than a universalized, open exchange of ideas with continued Western (Northern) dominance, this scenario suggests increasing fragmentation.

Administrative Theory has begun to address the putative inclusiveness of its models based on assumptions of regularity and order. Models of development often assume a linear movement from primitive to modern, underdeveloped to developed, or non-Western to Western. As Jamil Jreisat emphasizes, we need to “break down the ethnocentric fences in order to achieve—a deeper understanding of administrative problems and solutions in different contexts” (Jreisat, 2003, p. 162).

This brief paper will explore two indigenous models—Iran and China—as examples of viable (not to be confused with desirable) alternatives to imposed or copied administration, and—for small, decentralized instances—will attempt to describe the importance of grass-roots administrative movements. Implications for Comparative Public Administration will also be discussed.

**Asian Communist Administration, the Chinese model**

Deng stated: “Streamlining organizations constitutes a revolution” (jingjian jigou shi yi chang geming). He said, seriously: “If we fail to carry out this revolution, if we let the present overstuffed and overlapping Party and state stay as they are—without clearly defined duties and with many incompetent, irresponsible, lethargic, under-educated and inefficient staff members—we ourselves will not feel satisfied and we will not have the support of the lower cadres, much less of the people” (He, 2001, pp. 187–188).

In the post-Communist world, the one major Communist system remaining is China’s. Although sometimes similar in stated objectives, the approach to development and administration has been primarily indigenous—in the sense of being neither imposed nor copied from Euro-centric systems—and—in this case—has been implemented throughout the entire nation-state.