

Administrative Attitudes of Elite Officials in a Buddhist Polity

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ABSTRACT: A Q sort on administrative attitudes is given to Thai bureaucrats in a test of Riggs' (1961) thesis concerning the importance of Buddhist philosophy in operating premises. The Q sample included issues of authority, values, decision making, recruitment, placement-transfer-promotion, superior-subordinate relations, worker performance, accountability, and group orientation. The resulting four factors largely contradict previous assumptions, and lead to the conclusion that origins of preferences for efficiency and clear-cut operating rules over inefficiency and corruption are human rather than Western-cultural.

The study of comparative administration owes much to the conceptual frameworks advanced by Weber (1947), Berger (1957a, 1957b), and Heady (1984), who characterize bureauc-

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racy in terms of universal rather than particularized values, hierarchy, task specialization, merit systems of selection and so forth. For Heady (1984), "organizations either are bureaucracies or they are not depending on whether or not they have these characteristics" (p. 65). Bureaucracies, especially those manifesting universal values and merit selection, have been considered indicative of political development as defined in terms of liberal concepts of the rule of law and popular sovereignty. These conceptualizations of bureaucracy are most applicable to government organizations in Western industrial nations in which the bureaucracy is the instrument for implementing the will of the legitimate political leadership, which in turn owes its authority to the support of the people.

Scholars of nonindustrialized nations have found the match between the administrative behavior of functionaries and Western notions of bureaucracy to be less than perfect. Chief among these scholars is Fred Riggs (1966), who identified Thailand as a bureaucratic polity because in the decades prior to his investigation the Thai bureaucracy dominated all phases of the political system: Thai bureaucrats not only formulated and implemented policies, but also acted as interest groups and at times assumed the function of the legislature (Nakata, 1981). Thailand was exhibit A in Riggs' (1964) thesis of the prismatic society, in which Western rational values regarding functions and structures of government are adapted to the traditional values and norms of the indigenous culture (cf. Mosel, 1959; Siffin, 1966; Dhiravegin, 1973; Haas, 1979). According to Ayal (1963), Buddhist teachings fit the Thai value system hand in glove: the notion of karma, or fate, for example, reinforces the legitimacy of hierarchical status differentiation; the concept of nirvana, which encourages the pursuit of a calm state of mind, leads to a personal indifference to and detachment from the fate of others (Indapanno, 1969); and the Buddhist principle of the impermanence of laws, which contributes to a short rather than long range

perspective on life, can lead to an unwillingness to expend effort on long range program goals.

The Study

This study reexamines the values and attitudes of senior Thai administrators to determine the mix of modern Western and traditional Buddhist values present in their administrative worldviews. Specifically, it addresses two interrelated research questions: (1) the relative importance of Buddhist and so called modern administrative orientations among senior level Thai bureaucrats, and (2) the extent to which Riggs' (1961) thesis regarding the transcendent importance of Buddhist philosophy continues to hold true. According to Riggs:

Obviously in such a society, there could be no separate doctrine or study of "public administration" any more than there could be separate teachings on economics or religion. Religious ideas were embodied in myths and teachings which also related to politics, administration and economics but not per se -- more realistically, they simply related to life. The Siamese (Thai people) could have a Dharma (Buddhist principle), but not PODSCORB.¹ (p. 73)

Initially, more than 100 members of the Thai Ministry of the Interior were randomly selected for this study; they were selected from the top five ranks of the Ministry, and therefore represent a bureaucratic elite. (The Ministry accounts for 25% of all employees of the government, and is charged with the administration of provincial and metropolitan affairs, the maintenance of public peace and order, and public prosecution and rehabilitation.) Of the 94 subjects finally included, 89 were males and 5 were females. In terms of employment, 26

¹ PODSCORB is a management acronym for planning, organizing, directing, staffing, coordinating, reporting, and budgeting. Early management theorists believed that PODSCORB covered the functions of management. A manager who had mastered PODSCORB was ready to take charge in any organization, public or private.

were from the Ministry's central headquarters in Bangkok, 24 were employed at the provincial strata, and 44 were from the district level. They also represented an educational elite: approximately 30% hold master's degrees, 60% bachelor degrees, and only 10% high school or technical college diplomas.

The Q sample utilized consisted of 54 statements divided equally between modern and traditional Thai bureaucratic attitudes. In addition, statements covered nine issue areas: (a) source of authority, (b) dominant values, (c) decision making patterns, (d) recruitment, (e) placement, transfer, and promotion, (f) superior-subordinate relationships, (g) work performance, (h) accountability, and (i) group orientation. The data were analyzed using Van Tubergen's (1975) QUANAL program, with four factors (as determined by the scree criterion) subjected to varimax rotation.

Consensus

Before considering the factors individually, it is instructive in this case to consider those 10 statements which proved to be consensual; that is, which gained essentially the same score across the four factors. The most positively consensual statements, along with their average factor z scores, are as follows:

- 1.84 The basic criteria for decision making should be based on rational and scientific reasoning.
- 1.80 Planning is the most important function of a manager.
- 1.52 The decision to recruit new personnel should be based on a merit system.
- 1.33 Individuals should consistently sacrifice personal values for the sake of social or community good.
- 1.24 Officials should have a clear knowledge of their responsibilities and of the amount of authority that their superiors hold.

Hence, the factors endorse the application of scientific principles to decision making, planning as the most critical function of management, the principle of merit recruitment, universalistic over personal values, and clear delineation of authority and responsibility -- all of which suggest that certain Western ideas have sunk thoroughly into the Thai bureaucracy. A similar inference can be drawn on the basis of those statements achieving a negative consensus:

- 1.47 Working here just means carrying out what has been already decided from above.
- 1.31 Junior officials should give more weight to the opinions of their superiors than those of fellow workers or outside consultants.
- 1.26 I prefer to recruit personnel who are loyal to me into the organization.
- 0.99 In decision making, leaders are the innovators, and subordinates are the followers.
- 0.98 Life is impermanence and is affected by forces beyond our control.

Rejected are the idea that work means carrying out orders from above, the Buddhist notion of deference to the opinions of superiors, the importance of loyal subordinates, the principle of hierarchy, and the Buddhist idea of impermanence. In sum, the consensus items, both positive and negative, indicate a preference for a Western bureaucratic orientation and a rejection of traditional administrative values; however, the content of the specific factors is more complex.

Factor I: Western Rational

The Western Rational factor was so named because of its conclusive orientation to modern bureaucratic practices and procedures. Of the 94 subjects, 43 were significantly associated with the factor. Following are some of the statements

(accompanied by their normalized factor scores) which distinguished this factor from the others:

- 1.75 Planning is the most important function of a manager.
- 1.65 Only the best performance will lead to pay increases, promotions, etc.
- 1.55 The basic criteria for decision making should be based on rational and scientific reasoning.
- 1.41 Advancement should be based on achievement in work.
- 1.34 The decision to recruit new personnel should be based on a merit system.

The factor is thus oriented toward planning and rational scientific decision making. There is also acceptance of recruitment based on merit, and an expectation that advancement follows good performance. Other statements emphasized universalistic values, the delegation of authority, and group goal setting. One Buddhist inspired statement received moderate support ($z = 1.08$), indicating that the ideal supervisor is expected to protect, compliment, and give generously to those with inferior status. The thrust of factor I was epitomized in the personal comments of one of the subjects purely defining the factor, a 45 year old assistant division chief with a master's degree: "I agree with the full implementation of a merit system in the Thai public service. Public officials should have clear knowledge of their own duties and also the authority of their superiors. Most of all, I agree that advancement in this career depends totally on our achievements at work."

Factor II: Prismatic

Accounting for the highest loadings of 15 subjects, the *prismatic* factor² reflected a mix of modern and traditional values:

- 2.08** The basic criteria for decision making should be based on rational and scientific reasoning.
- 2.00** The decision to recruit new personnel should be based on a merit system.
- 1.55** The ideal superior is expected to protect, aid, compliment and give generously to those whose status is inferior.
- 1.08** The relatives of high ranking officials usually have advantages over ordinary people in getting accepted into the public service.
- 1.92** I prefer to do things myself instead of entrusting them to others.
- 1.40** My contact with my superiors is restricted mainly to the office. I rarely see them anywhere else.
- 1.10** Only the best performance will lead to a pay increase, promotion, etc.

Factor II endorses rational scientific decision making and merit, but these principles are expressed as *shoulds*, and may therefore be more in the way of wishful thinking than statements of objective reality. Strongly competing for the factor's endorsement is the Buddhist notion of supervisors' responsibilities to their subordinates, and acknowledgement of an unequal access to government positions by relatives of high ranking officials.

²So called by Riggs (1964), the prismatic bureaucracy of Thailand represents a transition between a traditional society in which roles are fused and a modern society in which they are diffracted, and was characterized by the coimpingement of both traditional and modern values.

At the negative end of the factor, these respondents do not think of their peers as competent to perform their duties, and they disagree that only the best performance leads to advancement. Finally, factor II respondents acknowledge that their interactions with superiors are not confined to the work environment, which might indicate a traditional orientation to sponsorship involving the need to curry favor with superiors in order to advance one's career.

The personal responses of persons associated with factor II also reflected a more traditional than modern administrative worldview. For example, a 55 year old district officer wrote, "In the office, my fellow workers are not competent to do their jobs. They don't have the appropriate knowledge, and always argue with the patron who asks for their help," a view which is the antithesis of the universalistic values of neutral bureaucratic competence and service to the public. The same respondent also expressed a traditional orientation toward advancement through sponsorship by rejecting the criterion of competence: "It is the truth that working hard does not lead to a successful life, except that we can show it off to the public and gain recognition from our superiors. Most important, we have to keep a close relationship with our superior if we would like to get a promotion."

Factor III: PODSCORB

The PODSCORB factor (see footnote 1) is so named because even more than factor I, it endorses modern principles of bureaucracy. Those 21 persons with highest loadings on the factor represent the best educated groups in the sample, nearly half holding master's degrees. Some of the statements distinguishing this group follow:

- 1.76 In organizational design and management, the ultimate goals of work should emphasize production and efficiency.

- 1.67** Officials should have a clear knowledge of their responsibilities and of the amount of authority their superiors hold.
- 1.33** Individuals should consistently sacrifice personal values for the sake of social or community good.
- 1.45** Junior officials should give more weight to the opinions of their superiors than to those of fellow workers or outside consultants.

As was the case with factor I, factor III endorses rational scientific decision making, planning, and merit-based recruitment, but in addition believes that organization design and management should emphasize productivity and efficiency, and prefers clear knowledge of responsibilities and authority in the organization. These respondents also endorse personal sacrifice for the community good. At the negative end of the array, factor III rejects deference to the opinions of superiors over peers and outside consultants, and in other statements shows disdain for any advantage that relatives of the powerful might have, and for any suggestion that work consists mainly of carrying out orders from above.

Factor IV: Particularism

This final factor represents the views of 10 respondents, and its label derives from the fact that it contains statements which suggest the existence of managerial systems that are not rigidly constrained by operating rules and procedures. The factor also contains statements that acknowledge the operation of a spoils system of recruitment, although the respondents' personal preferences seems to be for a merit system. Some of the factor's distinguishing statements are as follows:

- 1.77** In making decisions, I always consider my obligation toward getting the job done.

- 1.05 The rules are clearly given in the Thai system, but they are easy to circumvent or manipulate to serve personal interests.
- 1.52 To stop cheating and corruption, the laws and regulations have to be strictly enforced.
- 1.34 In order to get the job done, employees should be subjected to strict and systematic discipline and control.

The statement most closely associated with the factor expressed an obligation to consider getting the job done when making decisions: this statement was not strongly associated with any other factor. The other unique feature of the positive end of the factor is a recognition that, although the rules in the Thai bureaucracy are clear, they are easily circumvented. This view is reinforced on the negative end of the factor by a rejection of the idea that controlling corruption and cheating requires a strict enforcement of the laws and regulations. And, the factor rejects strict controls and discipline in order to achieve organization goals. In short, factor IV respondents express a preference for a personalized system of administration in which ends attainment is mandatory and means are discretionary (Riggs, 1964, pp. 278-279). A factor IV administrator, then, might experience no difficulty paying farmers different prices in a government crop buying program so long as the balance sheet totals reflected a money-to-product ratio that equalled the official price established by the government.

Discussion

This study was premised on the conventional wisdom of developmental administration, which urges observers of the administrative process in the so called developing nations to take into account traditional values and beliefs. The current study examined the values and attitudes of senior Thai officials in the Ministry of the Interior regarding administration and management in their agency. Of special concern was the

mixture of modern Western administrative values and the presence of operating procedures that were rooted in traditional Buddhist values.

Our findings, while mixed, provide less support than anticipated for the transitional hypothesis put forward by previous scholars. Our results suggest that senior Thai officials prefer so called Western analytic, bureaucratic systems over traditional modes of operation. The consensus statements as well as the two most explanatory factors (I and II) are permeated with preferences for administrative rationality. They reject, moreover, corruption, particularized management styles, and patronage systems of appointment.

The other two factors (II and IV), however, did suggest the presence of a transitional mode of operations in the Ministry. On balance, however, we must conclude that the administrative attitudes of these senior Thai officials are more bureaucratic than Buddhist.

By asserting that the Thai administration in the 1980s is bureaucratic, we do not mean to suggest that Thai officials prefer Western practices over their own culture. Rather, we mean to suggest a preference for order, structure, efficiency and clear-cut operating rules and procedures over inefficiency, corruption, and muddled policies and procedures. Such preferences may be more manifest in Western differentiated societies, but they are not the exclusive province of the Western mind. Confirmation of this truth can be found in the Japanese economic miracle where the bureaucracy is no less differentiated, hierarchical and analytic than its Western counterparts.

Thus, it is plausible to suggest that bureaucrats in Thailand are working towards order and efficiency out of a human preference for these things over chaos and sloth. We reject the notion that such modernization as has occurred should be attributed to a developmental proclivity to half-heartedly ape the West. Most importantly, our findings suggest that administrative values are present in the thinking of Thai offi-

cials to a much greater extent than has been suggested in previous studies of Thai bureaucracy and culture.

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