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Quo Vadis public administration*

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Quo Vadis public administration was a question raised at an international conference two years ago at Bali by Indonesian scholars as a starting point of discussions. The consensus at the meeting was that public administration had to employ multi-disciplinary approach for the study and analysis of the subject matter related to administering affairs of state. Such a question was not just confined to what appeared prima facie but rather with implications of many aspects regarding the subject matter most importantly it raised issues of the need to make adjustment as to the way the subject matter was taught and learned and to be applied. It insinuated need for change due to the fact that the conventional approach was outdated and there was need for serious discussions among scholars about the subject known as public administration.

It has to be pointed out that intellectual discipline is a method of studying and learning which has come up with accumulated knowledge known as body of knowledge. Intellectual discipline is a systematic

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process of acquiring information and knowledge to be organized to become body of knowledge of the subject matter. This would enable those who have intellectual discipline of the subject to know the subject matter in an organized and systematic way instead of picking pieces of information or knowledge from reading the local dailies, radio and television, and information or opinions gathered from “coffee” council. The coffee council or sapa kafe in Thai is a gathering of clients of a coffee shops who would spend time discussing political events. The chit-chats would serve the objective of exchanging political views among members of the ‘coffee’ council. But the subject matter they have discussed and learned would not constitute intellectual discipline.

Intellectual discipline or academic subject has never been static. The approach of study which was good at one period of time would become outdated when society has changed. The fact of life is society is never static. It is dynamic and ever-changing. Once social change, due to a change in the economic system, social structure, value and norms and culture, has occurred, the political system would have to change to make it more germane to the new environment.

If the academic subject remains static with no adjustment as to its approach of study, the changing environment including technology, economic system, social values and most importantly the administering of public affairs, it would become a case of intellectual discipline lag, in the fashion of culture lag and technology lag. There are a number of factors that need to be scrutinized to find out whether they would lead to the need for an improvement or a change of the conventional teaching, learning and application of the knowledge to make it more relevant to the new public issues which need to be addressed. This is a matter of urgency

most notably developing countries which have adopted the Western method of public management known as “public administration,” into the state bureaucracy.

In the first place, it has to be known that any political system that in existence since ancient times would have method of administering public affairs. Take the form of government for instance. There have been many forms of government ranging from tribal chieftain, military junta, absolute ruler, and subsequently democracy. Viewed broadly, government or “Public Administration” of the national level is more concerned with public policy formulation. Below the government would be professional personnel who would execute or implement policies. This group of people is known as public bureaucrats. They are supposed to serve the government faithfully confining themselves to implementing of policy as portrayed in Max Weber’s ideal-type. The assumption is the political system at the national level has been institutionalized and hence there is a high degree of stability. Take for example the American political system. It is a stable system with a change of government once every four years. Based upon the institutionalized and firmly established political structure and process at the national level, the focus would thus be on the state bureaucrats to execute the policies decided by the government. The apparatus at this level is important because it helps to turn abstract policies into reality by concretizing them. So there is an effort to develop the state bureaucracy which is an important public organization to become more professional for better outputs and outcomes. The structure and process of the organization at this level subsequently started to have its own identity. Some zealous scholars tried to turn the subject of “Public Administration” at the level below the government to become a separate

intellectual discipline. But they forgot the fact that public bureaucracy is a derivative of government at the national level. The degree granted is D.P.A or Doctor of Public Administration which is a professional subject. But some scholars attempted to turn the program into a Ph.D. or Doctor of Philosophy, an awkward situation which embarrassed many other scholars.

But the most relevant point is that the United States during the Cold War era believed that correct management of resources and efficient implementation of public policy by the public bureaucrats who were knowledgeable about Public Administration *à la* the American model would be able to efficiently help with management of public affairs in developing nations. This was necessary when many of the developing nations were plagued by Communist threat. So there was an export of the subject of public administration starting with the University of Indiana opening courses in Thai educational institutes where academic institutions teaching public administration subsequently flourished. The assumption was it would be good for the developing nations. The system would be more modern, efficient and effective and should yield better results. But three things the American “experts” failed to take into account.

First, the assumption that the American system could be put in use in developing nations was wrong. The foundational system or the political system in many developing nations was still undemocratic. It could not be assumed to remain stable so that the organization of policy implementation could function smoothly. How could the state bureaucracy be reliable when even the main structure of politics or government was not well established? Not only that the main political system did not support the growth of public bureaucracy. Indeed in many

regards undemocratic political system disrupted the smooth operation of public bureaucracy by policy of promotion, demotion, appointment and dismissal which were carried on under the spoils system or the patronage system rather than the merit system. Personnel would be demoralized and the system would be in disarray. State bureaucracy has its own internal power struggle which is known as corporate politics. It was aggravated by politics outside of public bureaucracy. That is the high-handed management by an undemocratic system. What the American experts did was to attempt to extrapolate in time and space its public administration model which, generally speaking, did not work very well.

Second, the American experts assumed that what worked in the U.S. would work in developing nations. They did not take into account the fact that what they offered would not be operating in a vacuum but on the foundation of the native traditional structure which in the case of Thailand was the patron-client system in which a small group of elite possessed wealth, status, power. The elite also hold their value or culture as being superior to others and would serve as the basis for social value and culture which the people had to subscribe. The majority of the people had to depend on “gift of grace” from the patron. It was thus *whom* you know rather than *what* you know alone for one to get ahead in one’s career. The contradiction is obvious. The patron-client system is against the merit system characteristic of a modern bureaucracy. The patron-client system is against equality. The patron would hold a higher social status than the client. In the final analysis it is against democracy.

Third, the introduction of “public administration” *à la* the American model was made in the 1960’s during the military government under Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat and subsequently Field Marshal

Thanom Kittikachorn. At that period, Thailand was still a developing agricultural society with the patron-client system as the pillar of society in a number of aspects. It was a time when Thailand attempted to develop import-substitution industries. The political situation was still unsettled with no democracy in sight. By introducing the American public administration to be used for academic training and for running the state bureaucracy, it became a “misfit”. This was because it was an attempt to bring in methods of administration of a democratic and industrialized society marked by well-developed business sector and a politically conscious populace to be applied and employed in an agricultural, unstable and undemocratic political system such as Thailand. Public administration *à la* the American model would thus work only halfway. The two sets of values and modus operandi just could never dovetail.

Viewed in this context, a point was raised at an international seminar that it is about time scholars of developing nations came up with a system which would work in the socio-political context of a non-Western world. There is need for Asian or regional approach to address the public issues. Developing nations should and could develop their own theories. But this has to be considered by taking into account the other factors to be discussed below.

As it was said that intellectual discipline is and should not be static. The same holds true for human society. Human society is a dynamic entity. It will change and adjust to the new environment. Indeed, sheer quantitative change would lead to change to some degree and eventually might lead to qualitative change. The most weighty factors leading to social change are technology change and change of idea most notably value or ideology.

The present-day technology is information and communication technology or ICT which is the feature of the Third Wave civilization as Alvin Toffler wrote in his book. It led to the change of the international environment, which impacts upon social value and political outlook. It ushered in the globalization era, to be discussed later. It led to political demands for rights and freedom, equality, justice, human rights and human dignity. This led to political changes known as “winds of change”. The most obvious changes were the Jasmine Revolution, the Arab Springs, Occupy Wall Street leading to “winds of change,” which was non-stoppable. This phenomenon exerted great impact upon many nations. The globalization era which turned the world into a “global village” and to the extent of “the world is flat.”

But there are new factors which could or would further render the conventional “public administration” out of date in some aspects. This is due to the phenomenon which is part of human society since time immemorial, “change.” This includes the dramatic change stemmed from new technology which produced great impact upon the social values and culture of the people, and importantly change of economic system and business products. But of most importance was the change in political values, political culture and the democratic system itself. Human society has evolved from agricultural society to industrial society and today’s information communication technology as discussed by Alvin Toffler, mentioned earlier, in his Third Wave. It was the Third Wave of human civilization which ushered in a new era known as globalization. In the globalization era, thanks to the social media and social network, people of all walks of life can communicate and exchange and share information and ideas of social as well as political issues. The change from direct

democracy to representative democracy have now turned to a combination of representative democracy with a new system known as participatory democracy where the people became active citizens and would participate in the process of decision-making, public policy formulation, public hearing or even referendum. More importantly, the people now are politically more conscious and they demand for the concrete demands of the four basic needs and a decent life. The people also voice their abstract demands, as already mentioned, for rights and freedom, equality, justice, human rights and human dignity. In the final analysis, the people want to have a viable and sustainable democratic system.

What was followed from the “change” was the Jasmine Revolution and the Arab Spring including Occupy Wall Street as already touched upon. This change in the international environment symbolized “winds of change” which are non-stoppable. The change is real. Just look at the changes in the Middle East and the change in Europe by the influx of refugees. This phenomenon would not just stop at the water edge of a certain place but would spread and expand. And this is what has been happening today in various places of the world.

The important change would be change of social values and political culture. The people would have new perception of themselves and their relations with other groups in society most importantly attitude toward government which exercises state power. Once this has taken place, it would impact upon how the government should run, how public policy should be formulated and implemented and most importantly the involvement of the people who are now important stake holders and are clients of the political system and “public administration.” The method of

working has to change from the attitude of “top-down” to “bottom-up” plus “top-down” through consultation and deliberation. This socio-political change would call for re-examination of the relevancy or adequacy of certain aspects of the conventional public administration whether major change would have to be made regarding the subject matter of the academic field and whether the body of knowledge was lagging behind new realities.

The socio-political change resulted from the globalization process was reinforced by change in the economic production and trade. Today, more trans-national corporations have featured. Co-operation rather than fierce competition may be the new practice. Far more many products have been out of the market. But more importantly is the emergence of new business operation. It was predicted that millions of jobs would be lost due to the irrelevancy of the products and methods of production. Digital economy and a switch of energy, sale methods (through the internet) etc., have produced many new business tycoons. New power houses have sprung up. In a manner of speaking, traditionally state would be powerful while society would be small and lag behind almost in all aspects. Today, society is getting stronger and more powerful, socially, economically and politically and emphatically social value and pattern of behavior. The state, the national government and the administrative supporting organization known as public bureaucracy are compelled to make adjustments starting from attitude of the mandate of one’s job, the modus operandi or method of operation, the changing environment both domestically and internationally. All these factors are closely intertwined.

Of equal if not of more importance are the efforts to keep abreast with the new technology which required for modern management of office and function. In this era of global village, a public agency cannot confine or trap itself in a hermit environment. To make the nation viable and able to catch up with the world, realization of the “change” or “changes” of the environment, internal and external, are sine qua non for running affairs of state. The significance of the need to turn parochialism to modernism can hardly be over-emphasized.

The discussions above intend to provide a background for public office holders to realize needs for reform or else to become completely irrelevant and inconsequential as time progresses. A growing society where people make increasing demands would not tolerate ineptitude, inefficiency and ineffectiveness.

Apart from what has been discussed, new regional cooperation or political and economic groupings have led to a dramatic change in power configuration. And due to the scope and scale of modern relationships among nations, the methods of operation in the past in most regards have to make adjustment by taking into account the new factors especially the new political layout.

The focal point could be Asia where it would be the new economic center of growth. Europe’s economic is likely to be stagnant due to the absence of adult population. Africa is coming along but still far off when compared to Asia. This is the age of Asia and the Pacific as John Hays, who took the concept from Karl Marx, said. This can be seen from the forming of BRICS consisting of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. This is a new power house which can have a great role in economic activities. Brazil is in Latin America and South Africa is in

Africa but due to the modern information communication technology and transportation, the conventional geo-politics and geo-economy have changed to new geo-politics and new geo-economy.

China as the leading nation in BRICS started Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank for logistic development which was joined by scores of nations. Russia and China agreed to use Yuan and Ruble as the currency for trade and now that Chinese Yuan is accepted by IMF as one of the key currencies. All these make BRICS all the more to be reckoned with. The two Asian giants, China with 1.4 billion people and India with 1.2 billion people, prima facie are formidable. Russia is half Asia with great technology and potential to assume its major power role. Brazil has a population of 190 million people whereas South Africa 50 some million people. The five countries constitute people, prospective economic growths, huge markets, and hub of economic production through outsourcing and direct foreign investment (DFI). The advertisement which has been aired “Make in India,” reflected the enthusiasm of India for DFI. Asian nations just cannot afford to ignore BRICS most especially China and India.

The formation of BRICS was to be followed by the materialization of ASEAN Economic Community or AEC. This is a regional co-operation of ten nations including Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, Kampuchea, Laos and Myanmar. The ten nations have a population of 600 million plus. It is big market and a viable economy a vibrant business atmosphere given the big number of population. AEC is a regional co-operation organization with three pillars, economics, politics and social/culture. Literature on AEC is voluminous and points that are well-known would not be reiterated.

Suffice it to say that the nations of Asia and AEC would need to deal with a new situation which would cover the way government is to be run, the public state bureaucracy, business operation, laws and social organizations. To be sure, things would go slow but change is inevitable.

With the formation of BRICS and AEC, reactions of other powers are to be anticipated. Not to be out-maneuvered, the U.S., a former world power with allies in Asia, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand and to a certain degree now Vietnam, made its move. The U.S. has set up what is known as Trans-Pacific Partnership or TPP consisting of twelve countries. The twelve countries are the U.S., Mexico, Canada, Peru, Chile, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and four AEC nations, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei. Immediately, this could be viewed as an attempt to penetrate Asia but obviously it was threat to AEC. The Philippines, Indonesia are in the process of joining TPP. Eventually AEC would be split between policy stand in AEC and TPP. Regardless of the outcome, one thing for sure is the significance of Asia and big power like the U.S. just could not allow it to be dominated solely by other powers such as the ones in BRICS.

The above can be seen as attempts to come up with re-balancing of powers among nations. This has led to new power configuration of the region. Indeed, most countries have already taken side with some trying to take a neutral role. But Asia will be the place of competition and contention. How should the governments of Asia get prepared for this new international and regional milieu? This would go to the agency that administer, manage and implement policy including the government the state bureaucracy and state-owned enterprises. The list can be far extended.

In sum, three main factors, as already discussed, accounted for the ill-fitting of the American model of “public administration” in developing nations including Thailand is the absence of a stable political foundation to warrant a modern public administration. There are also the obstacles posed by traditional socio-political organization, the patron-client system. The employment of methods of the industrial era to be used in an agricultural setup which could not function effectively. Today, at this particular point in time, there are additional factors, as already discussed, to be scrutinized. These include the change in domestic and international environment stemming from change in technology, political values and political culture leading to new demands, etc., which are factors to be taken into account for making adjustment or reform. What cannot be overlooked is formation of regional co-operation organizations. Of importance is the rise of Asia and the Pacific and indeed the Indian Ocean. Amidst all the dynamic events which are taking place concurrently, there would be great need for change and adjustment of all the public agencies concerned starting from the top to the lower levels.

The factors to be taken into account for public agencies are as followed.

First, there is the terminology problem of the academic subject due to the changes discussed. It has been pointed out by some scholars that the conventional public administration has its merit for background understanding. But given the new methods of operation and the involvement of more other organizations, the modus operandi has to be viewed from a different perspective. So the new term “public governance” instead of public administration which is a conventional top-down model, is used. What can explain the new term is to investigate the

difference between the words “public management” and “public governance”. Take, for example, public management of disposal of garbage which could be done efficiently by the agency of local government. That is the credit of the agency. But public governance would involve collaborations from a number of elements. The issue of garbage can be discussed among the agencies concerned with the private sector to collaborate in the matter by whatever means they could offer including donation for buying equipment. But of most importance is to engage the people in general, say, the people of the community to participate in the policy of garbage disposal, the plan to recycle garbage, the development of a city culture where garbage would not be disposed at random, etc. This is public governance or administering affairs of state in the modern era. It involves more social elements.

Second, due to the need and demand for decentralization of power to allow for local-self- government, administering the affairs of state has to take into account the national level and the local level. Local government is to play an important role in this globalization era.

Third, what is to be further considered is the three dimensional picture of the public sector, the private sector or business and the people’s sector characterized by the growth of civil society. The three sectors have to work together to get better results.

Fourth, what is to be considered seriously is that nations cannot live in isolation, public policy and implementation of which would have to accommodate to the domestic scene discussed above but of equal importance is the international factors of the five world trends of supporting for democracy, respect for human rights, free trade, protection of the environment and respect for intellectual property rights. More

important, the globalization process, the rise of Asia and the Pacific and the Indian Ocean, the formation of regional political groupings and the new power configuration with its economic implications have to be taken into consideration regarding “public governance.”

Fifth, to get a broad perspective, one can argue that public governance as defined by our discussion incorporated the national government, state public bureaucracy, local government, the public sector, the private or business sector and civil society groups including the mass media, international environment at the global level, regional level and the individual nation which can be termed “local” with a different meaning from the normal meaning of local government, have to be considered comprehensively. But to make it simple, one can say that three dimensions are to be considered for making adjustment to the new parameter or environment. These are *globalization*, *regionalization* and *localization*. *Globalization* is a reality that one has to operate within the new context whereas *regionalization* marked by the three regional co-operation organization including BRICS, AEC and TPP which have to be taken into the equation of reform or adjustment. *Localization* is how a nation has to adapt itself to the changing environment but making sure that it manages to retain the essential parts of its society. The focus is not to lose its identity completely. Better still how can each nation come up with a system in which there is a synergy of the best parts of the three dimensions above. It is about time the Asian nations individually or in close consultation with member nations came up with, as touched upon, an Asian model of public governance. This suggestion was well received at an international conference at Siam University a few months ago, as earlier mentioned.

All the above should be taken into account for the review of the academic subject, the curriculum, the teaching and learning methods, and the body of knowledge which needs to be updated. It is important to note that failure to take cognizance of the “change” and make necessary and timely adjustments could only lead to social technology lag and culture lag with ramifications of negative outcome.

Quo Vadis public administration. The answer may be derived from what has been argued above. But change can be problematic because it would depend on the political system which influenced public governance. It would also depend on the level of social and political development whether the people understand the need for change. So in the case of Thailand the question above has to be preceded by two questions: Quo Vadis Thailandiae Demokratia; Quo Vadis Societas Thailandiae. Answer to the last two questions would affect the question on Quo Vadis public administration.