Chapter 103
Political and Cultural Issues in Digital Public Administration

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ABSTRACT

Political and cultural aspects of digital public undertakings in developing countries are often neglected as more emphasis is placed on the technological components. The mutual impact between political or cultural issues and emerging trends such as cloud computing and social networks exacerbate the problem. This chapter analyzes political and cultural issues which have a significant impact on digital public administration and e-government initiatives in developing countries, also taking into consideration the emerging tendencies and technologies. It combines theory and practice, including studies that demonstrate different political or cultural issues involved in the digital undertakings in these countries, examples from different contexts and nations, and a case study from Turkey. The chapter starts with examples of different political issues, analyzing and summarizing some of the most relevant of these issues, including existing literature related to each subject. It continues with cultural issues. The subsequent section contains a discussion of how political and cultural issues relate to the tendencies of the Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) sector, and why this context is important for digital initiatives in developing countries, as an initial guide to existing and future challenges. The chapter ends with the case of Turkey, which demonstrates political and cultural issues faced on both national and regional levels, in the context of digital public administration and emerging trends in ICTs.

INTRODUCTION

Almost all countries in the world have taken some steps to digitize their public administration, and have realized e-government initiatives in the recent past, especially in the last decade since the establishment of the Millennium Development Goals of the United Nations (UN). Advanced economies which had the necessary technology, skills, and capital were early adopters, aiming for higher productivity, competitiveness, transparency, and participation. These countries have reached much higher levels of digitization than developing nations. Despite significant efforts in the recent years, including some relatively

successful examples, the majority of developing countries still face serious challenges to catch up with their developed counterparts.

Political and cultural issues, neglected in most cases, are among these difficulties, as the above mentioned initiatives have been more technology centered than citizen oriented. When technological design of hard components such as engineering meets soft realities such as politics or culture, the result is almost always the same: partial or total failure.

This chapter aims to explore and address political and cultural challenges developing countries have faced and are expected to confront in digital public administration and e-government initiatives, taking into consideration the emerging tendencies and technologies. It combines theory and practice, building on existing theory on the subject and uses the case study of Turkey, along with other examples, as empirical evidence for these challenges.

POLITICAL ISSUES

One of the current and future challenges in digital public initiatives is politics. Politics, and hence the collective decision making process and structure, influences digital public administration and e-government efforts. The political environment in most of the developing countries is often inadequate for planning, implementing or measuring effectively these initiatives. Political instability, coalition governments, and authoritarian administrations are among the many factors, impeding digital efforts. On the other hand, successful implementation of an e-government design may not improve the human development of a developing nation or make it more democratic, even if it makes the government work more efficiently. Many research studies argue that e-government nurtures politics through enhanced citizen participation and improved public services, though much remains to be done in this area. Its effects on democracy remain to be seen.

Nonetheless, the political aspect is crucial for the success of e-government initiatives in developing countries. Furuholt and Wahid (2008) argue that the main opportunities for e-government in general, like cost reductions, improved efficiency, and quality of services, will also apply to projects in developing countries, but governments of transitional democracies and developing economies may be driven more by a need to improve openness and citizen opportunities to solidify their legitimacy, and may thus emphasize reforms such as transparency and increased citizen participation.

Hanna (2009) suggests that e-government is essentially a political, not a technical project, which means that managerial and institutional reform must accompany technological change. According to Hanna, e-government is conditioned by the political and institutional context of its application, more than by other concerns such as technical standards and infrastructure. Hanna, therefore, concludes that understanding the political and institutional nature of e-government provides the key to seeking appropriate measures and entry points to realize the transformational potential of information and communication technologies (ICTs) for governance and public service performance.

AL-Shehry (2008) states that the political implications of e-government include many advantages for governors and citizens such as increased citizen participation in political processes, building trust between citizens and their government by improving the government's image, and facilitating democratic stages by voting online. AL-Shehry concludes, after an extensive literature review, that most factors of failure in information systems projects are related to ignoring or not caring about human and organizational issues while a few factors have a technical origin.

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