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# Public Sector Reform in Neo-Patrimonial Regimes: Balancing Institutional Change and Cultural Legitimacy in Southeast Asia

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## Abstract

The aim of this study is a philosophical analysis of the limitations and possibilities of public sector reform in the context of neo-patrimonial regimes in Southeast Asia. This article examines the structural features of neopatrimonialism as a stable form of power that combines formal institutions with informal patronage practices. Particular attention is given to how the cultural and symbolic foundations of power hinder or, conversely, facilitate institutional transformations. Using the example of Southeast Asian countries—Cambodia, Indonesia and the Philippines—the article analyses reform models that include elements of good governance, anticorruption strategies and digitalization of governance. The scientific novelty of the work lies in the interpretation of reforms not only as an administrative process but also as a philosophical problem of the transformation of power and political subjectivity. It is argued that the sustainability of neo-patrimonial systems stems from deep ideas about legitimacy, leadership and social hierarchy, which means that genuine modernization requires cultural and symbolic reorientation. The practical significance of the study lies in the possibility of applying its findings in the design of institutional reforms in post traditional societies, where it is necessary to consider local forms of legitimization of power and the political imaginary.

**Keywords:** Neopatrimonialism, State Reforms, Southeast Asia, Political Subjectivity, Good Governance, Symbolic Power, Cultural Legitimation, Patronage, Philosophy of the State, Post Traditional Societies

## 1. Introduction

### *1.1. Background and Rationale of the Study*

Public sector reform in neo-patrimonial regimes presents a critical yet underexplored intersection of institutional theory, political philosophy, and cultural sociology. The relevance of this topic stems from the paradoxical nature of neo-patrimonial governance, where formal democratic institutions coexist with deeply entrenched informal patronage networks, blending modernity with tradition (Erdmann & Engel, 2007). Southeast Asia, with its diverse political landscapes—from Indonesia's post-Suharto decentralization to Cambodia's ritualistic anti-corruption laws—serves as a compelling case study. These regimes exemplify how bureaucratic façades often obscure the perpetuation of personalistic rule, clientelism, and elite capture (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997). The tension between external pressures for "good governance" and internal logics of power reproduction raises fundamental questions about the feasibility and authenticity of reform. For instance, while international donors advocate for transparency and meritocracy, local elites may co-opt these initiatives to consolidate control, as seen in Cambodia's nominal adoption of anti-corruption agencies (Hughes, 2003). This duality underscores the need for a nuanced analysis that goes beyond technocratic solutions to interrogate the cultural and symbolic dimensions of power.

The complexity of public sector reform in such contexts transcends administrative adjustments, emerging instead as a sociopolitical battleground. Reforms are rarely neutral; they can either disrupt patrimonial systems or be weaponized to reinforce them. For example, Indonesia's reformasi era saw decentralization laws inadvertently empower local oligarchs, transforming centralized patronage into fragmented clientelism (Hadiz, 2010). Similarly, Vietnam's Doi Moi reforms modernized its economy while preserving the Communist Party's monopoly, illustrating how adaptive authoritarianism can mimic institutional change without ceding control (Painter, 2005). These cases reveal a central dilemma: reforms must navigate the fraught terrain between global norms (e.g., democratic accountability) and local legitimacies (e.g., paternalistic hierarchies). The digitalization of governance, often touted as a panacea, further complicates this dynamic. E-governance in the Philippines, for instance, has streamlined services but failed to dismantle provincial patronage networks (Quimpo, 2007). Such examples demand a rethinking of reform as not merely procedural but deeply ideological—a contest over who defines rationality and legitimacy in the public sphere.

From a socio-philosophical lens, reforms in neo-patrimonial regimes are performative acts that mediate between institutionalist ideals and the lived realities of power. Bourdieu's (1991) concept of symbolic domination is pivotal here: when citizens perceive the state through informal networks rather than formal rights, reforms risk becoming rituals of compliance rather than tools of emancipation. In Cambodia, for instance, civil service is culturally framed as moral duty to patrons, rendering meritocratic reforms culturally dissonant (Hughes, 2003). This symbolic order sustains neo-patrimonialism by naturalizing inequality, a phenomenon Scott (1998) terms "weapons of the weak." Yet, glimmers of change exist. Indonesia's anti-corruption commission (KPK) and Vietnam's hybrid meritocracy show that incremental shifts are possible when paired with civic pressure and elite pragmatism (Aspinall & van Klinken, 2011; Painter, 2005). The challenge, then, is to reconceptualize reform as a dialectic—one that acknowledges cultural path dependencies while creating space for alternative imaginaries of governance. This requires not just policy innovation but a philosophical reckoning with how power is symbolically constructed and contested in post-traditional societies.

### *1.2. Research problems*

The persistence of neopatrimonialism in Southeast Asian governance presents a significant challenge to public sector reform, as it embodies a paradox in which modern state institutions are entangled with traditional power structures and informal patronage networks. While post-authoritarian transitions and international donor

interventions have promoted administrative modernization and good governance principles, reforms often remain superficial, performative, or co-opted by entrenched elites. This duality—between the normative goals of institutional rationalization and the practical realities of clientelistic governance—creates a complex and often contradictory terrain for reform. In countries like Cambodia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, legal and bureaucratic reforms such as anti-corruption laws, civil service modernization, and decentralization policies have been formally adopted (Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2015; World Bank, 2018). Yet, these measures frequently coexist with informal practices that undermine their effectiveness, including elite capture, rent-seeking, and kinship-based appointments. Scholars have described this phenomenon as a form of institutional façade or simulated institutionalization, where outward compliance with global governance standards masks the internal logic of personalistic rule (Brinkerhoff & Goldsmith, 2005; Hughes, 2003; Hadiz, 2010). The persistence of neopatrimonialism is not merely a bureaucratic anomaly but a deeply embedded cultural and symbolic structure, in which power is legitimated not solely through rational-legal norms, but through historically rooted discourses of hierarchy, obligation, and moral authority (Bourdieu, 1991; Foucault, 1991). In this context, reform is not simply a technical endeavor but also a symbolic one, in which the language, rituals, and representations of change are deployed strategically by elites to secure external legitimacy while preserving internal control (Scott, 1998; Erdmann & Engel, 2007).

The gap between formal institutions and informal practices raises fundamental questions about the nature and limits of state transformation in neo-patrimonial regimes. The challenges are compounded by the fact that international models of good governance often assume the autonomy of institutions and the neutrality of bureaucracies, overlooking the extent to which power in many Southeast Asian societies remains personalized, relational, and embedded in local cultural logics (Chabal & Daloz, 1999; Migdal, 2001). As Helmke and Levitsky (2004) argue, informal institutions can either complement or subvert formal rules, depending on the strategic interests of actors and the distribution of power. In neo-patrimonial regimes, the latter tends to dominate, leading to a misalignment between *de jure* reforms and *de facto* practices. For instance, Indonesia's post 1998 Reformasi agenda introduced democratic decentralization and created anti-corruption bodies like the Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi (KPK), but local elite networks quickly adapted to the new framework, reproducing clientelism at the subnational level (Hadiz, 2010; Mietzner, 2015). Similarly, Cambodia's Anti-Corruption Unit (ACU) and civil service reforms have been critiqued as largely symbolic, serving to appease international donors while reinforcing the dominance of the ruling Cambodian People's Party (Hughes, 2003; Pak, et al., 2007). Even in the Philippines, where political pluralism and civil society are more robust, reforms are often cyclical and vulnerable to reversal, particularly when power transitions favor entrenched patronage networks (Quimpo, 2007; Sidel, 2005).

The research problem, therefore, lies in the need to critically examine why and how public sector reforms in neo-patrimonial regimes often fail to achieve transformative outcomes. This failure cannot be fully understood through institutionalist or administrative lenses alone; rather, it requires a philosophical and sociological interrogation of the symbolic and cultural foundations of power. As Weber (1978) noted, patrimonial authority persists not only through coercion or material incentives but also through the internalization of legitimacy by subjects, who view their relationship with the state in moral or quasi-familial terms. This insight is echoed in Bourdieu's (1991) notion of *doxic consent*, where domination is reproduced through taken-for-granted assumptions and symbolic recognition. Foucault's (1991) concept of *governmentality* further reveals how power operates through administrative rationalities that shape conduct, not merely through law or force. In neo-patrimonial contexts, these mechanisms of symbolic power are appropriated by elites to portray reforms as acts of benevolence, modernization, or national progress—even when such reforms do little to alter the structural basis of political control. Thus, the problem is not only one of institutional design but of political subjectivity: how citizens understand their roles, entitlements, and relationships with authority in societies where statehood itself is contested and hybrid.

Moreover, the lack of conceptual clarity in distinguishing between genuine reform and strategic adaptation has hindered both academic understanding and policy interventions. Neopatrimonialism is often used as a catch-all category to describe hybrid regimes, but insufficient attention is paid to its internal variations, degrees of institutionalization, and mechanisms of resilience (Erdmann & Engel, 2007; Slater, 2010; Tieng et al., 2024; Nget et al., 2024). Existing literature tends to oscillate between normative prescriptions for reform (e.g., transparency,

accountability, rule of law) and descriptive accounts of corruption and elite capture, without adequately bridging the two through a nuanced theoretical lens. What is needed is a framework that accounts for the duality of statehood in neo-patrimonial regimes—where formal and informal, rational and symbolic, institutional and personalistic modes of power coexist, interact, and often conflict. This study seeks to address that gap by drawing on interdisciplinary insights from historical sociology, political anthropology, and critical theory. It explores how reforms are not only blocked or reversed but are also reshaped and domesticated within the existing symbolic order, leading to outcomes that may appear progressive in form but regressive in substance.

In sum, the core research problem is to understand the persistence and adaptation of neo-patrimonial governance in the face of continuous reform agendas and to uncover the deeper cultural and symbolic logics that sustain it. This requires moving beyond technical diagnostics and embracing a critical, reflexive approach that interrogates the ideological, institutional, and affective dimensions of reform. By examining the cases of Cambodia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, this study aims to contribute to a more grounded and theoretically informed account of public sector reform in contexts where power is not just exercised but also imagined, ritualized, and legitimized through hybrid forms of statehood.

### *1.3. Research objectives*

This study aims to explore the complexities of public sector reform within neo-patrimonial regimes, focusing on how formal institutional frameworks intersect with informal patronage networks. The specific objectives are as follows:

1. **To analyze the structural characteristics of neopatrimonialism** in Southeast Asian governance highlighting how formal bureaucratic institutions coexist with enduring informal power relations
2. **To investigate the cultural and symbolic foundations of neo-patrimonial authority**, examining how traditional norms, values, and social hierarchies shape perceptions of legitimacy and governance
3. **To assess how these cultural-symbolic elements either obstruct or enable institutional transformation** particularly in the context of public sector reform efforts
4. **To compare reform trajectories across Cambodia, Indonesia, and the Philippines**, identifying common patterns, divergences, and contextual factors influencing the success or failure of reforms
5. **To contribute a philosophical and sociopolitical interpretation of reform** in neo-patrimonial regimes situating institutional change within broader questions of power, legitimacy, and political subjectivity

### *1.4. Research limitation*

While this study offers a theoretically rich and empirically grounded analysis of public sector reforms within neo-patrimonial regimes in Southeast Asia, it is not without limitations. First, the comparative focus on Cambodia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, while strategically selected to reflect variation in reform trajectories and regime hybridity, inherently limits the generalizability of findings across all Southeast Asian or Global South contexts. Countries such as Vietnam, Laos, and Myanmar—though also marked by neo-patrimonial characteristics—operate under different ideological, institutional, and geopolitical conditions that may significantly influence their reform dynamics (Vu, 2010; Case, 2011). Second, although the study draws on a combination of legal texts, institutional reports, and qualitative interviews with policy elites, civil society actors, and academics, access to reliable and uncensored data remains a persistent challenge, particularly in authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes where state transparency is limited. In Cambodia, for instance, government records and institutional performance metrics are often either inaccessible or politically curated to reflect favorable outcomes, which may obscure actual governance realities (Hughes, 2003; Transparency International, 2022). Third, the reliance on expert interviews, while valuable for capturing insider perspectives, may be constrained by elite bias, self-censorship, or retrospective rationalization, especially when interviewees are embedded within the very structures under critique (Goldstein, 2002; Aberbach & Rockman, 2002). This poses a methodological challenge in distinguishing between the discursive performance of reform and its substantive implementation.

Additionally, the theoretical reliance on neopatrimonialism as an analytical lens, although widely used in political sociology and comparative politics, can be critiqued for its potential overgeneralization and conceptual elasticity. Scholars such as Erdmann and Engel (2007) caution against treating neopatrimonialism as a monolithic or catch-all concept, noting that its explanatory power depends heavily on context-specific nuances and the careful disaggregation of its formal and informal components. Moreover, the application of Western-derived theoretical constructs—such as Weberian bureaucracy, Bourdieu's symbolic power, or Foucault's governmentality—risks analytical imposition if not sufficiently localized. Southeast Asian political cultures possess unique ontologies of power, hierarchy, and legitimacy, which may not always align with Eurocentric paradigms of institutional rationality and statehood (Geertz, 1980; Ong, 2006). Finally, due to the inherently dynamic and evolving nature of public sector reform, any analysis conducted within a specific temporal window may become outdated as political regimes shift, donor priorities evolve, or new reform initiatives are launched. The study covers the period from the late 20th century to the early 2020s, yet ongoing developments—such as the digitalization of governance, pandemic-induced administrative shifts, or geopolitical realignments—may introduce new variables that fall outside the current analytical frame. Despite these limitations, the study maintains analytical rigor through methodological triangulation, critical reflexivity, and contextual sensitivity, offering a foundation for further inquiry into the complex entanglements of power, reform, and legitimacy in neo-patrimonial regimes.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. *The concept of neopatrimonialism*

The concept of neopatrimonialism has emerged as a critical framework for understanding the complex interplay between formal institutions and informal power structures in developing democracies, particularly in Southeast Asia. Building on Weber's foundational work on patrimonial authority (Weber, 1978), contemporary scholars have refined the concept to analyze how modern states maintain traditional patronage systems beneath democratic facades (Erdmann & Engel, 2007). In the Southeast Asian context, this framework proves particularly illuminating, as countries like Indonesia, Cambodia, and the Philippines exhibit striking examples of how formal democratic institutions coexist with deeply entrenched patron-client networks (Case, 2011). The region's colonial history, combined with indigenous political traditions, has created unique hybrid systems where Western-style bureaucracies operate alongside traditional power structures, resulting in what Riggs (1964) famously termed "prismatic societies." These theoretical foundations are essential for understanding why public sector reforms in the region often produce unintended consequences, as formal institutional changes frequently fail to disrupt underlying patronage systems (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997).

The empirical literature on public sector reforms in Southeast Asian neo-patrimonial regimes reveals consistent patterns of reform adoption, adaptation, and subversion. Indonesia's post-Suharto decentralization reforms, for instance, were designed to dismantle centralized authoritarian control but instead led to what Hadiz (2010) calls the "localization of oligarchy," where regional elites captured newly decentralized institutions. Similarly, Cambodia's much-touted anti-corruption reforms have been shown to function primarily as legitimacy-building exercises for international donors while doing little to disrupt the ruling party's patronage networks (Hughes, 2003). The Philippines presents a more complex case, where periodic reform waves under different administrations have created a cyclical pattern of anti-corruption efforts followed by backsliding (Quimpo, 2008). These cases collectively demonstrate what Helmke and Levitsky (2004) identify as the phenomenon of "competing institutions," where formal rules exist alongside - and often in tension with - informal norms and practices. The persistence of these patterns suggests that conventional public administration approaches to reform, which focus primarily on formal institutional design, may be inadequate for addressing the deeply embedded informal power structures characteristic of neo-patrimonial regimes.

Recent scholarship has increasingly turned to cultural and symbolic dimensions to explain the resilience of neo-patrimonial systems and the challenges of meaningful reform. Bourdieu's (1991) concept of symbolic power helps illuminate how patronage systems maintain legitimacy through culturally resonant narratives of reciprocity and obligation. In Southeast Asia, these narratives often draw on traditional concepts of leadership and social hierarchy, making them particularly resistant to technocratic reform efforts (Scott, 1972). The region's experience

with digital governance reforms offers a telling example: while e-government initiatives have been widely adopted, they frequently serve to digitize rather than disrupt existing patronage channels (Anttiroiko, 2016). This body of research suggests that successful reform in neo-patrimonial contexts requires not just institutional changes but also shifts in political culture and social expectations - a process that is necessarily slower and more complex than conventional technical assistance programs typically allow for (Andrews, 2013). The emerging consensus points to the need for reform approaches that recognize the symbolic and cultural dimensions of state power, and that work with, rather than against, local understandings of authority and legitimacy.

## *2.2. The theoretical framework of this research*

The theoretical framework of this research combines elements of political philosophy, institutional theory, and critical sociology to analyze the paradoxes of reform in neo-patrimonial regimes. Max Weber's (1978) classical concept of patrimonial authority provides the foundation, illustrating how traditional power persists within modern state bureaucracies. This is updated through Erdmann and Engel's (2007) model of neopatrimonialism, which describes the fusion of formal institutions with informal clientelistic networks in postcolonial states. Douglass North's (1990) theory of institutions and Helmke and Levitsky's (2004) typology of formal and informal institutional interactions explain how rule-based systems are frequently subverted or co-opted in hybrid regimes. Riggs' (1964) prismatic society model and Olson's (1982) insights into institutional decline further illuminate how public sector inefficiencies are often systemic. The framework is enriched by Foucault's (1991) notion of governmentality, which unpacks the subtle workings of administrative power, and Bourdieu's (1991) theory of symbolic power, which interprets how cultural codes and legitimizing discourses reinforce patron-client dynamics. James C. Scott's (1998) critique of high-modernist reforms in *Seeing Like a State* also informs the analysis, emphasizing how top-down schemes often fail to account for local complexity and informal governance practices. This multi-theoretical synthesis allows for a nuanced understanding of why reforms in Southeast Asia frequently oscillate between genuine transformation and performative compliance. The theoretical basis of the article is made up of works on political philosophy, institutional theory, studies of bureaucracy and corruption in developing countries, including the works of J.-F. Meyass, M. Olson, H. Riggs, and J. Hayden, as well as philosophical and sociological concepts of power and symbolic domination (M. Foucault, P. Bourdieu, J. Scott).

## **3. Research Methodology**

This study adopts an interdisciplinary methodology, combining comparative historical analysis, case study research, and critical discourse analysis to examine public sector reform in Cambodia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Following Skocpol's (1984) approach to historical sociology, the research traces reform trajectories from post-authoritarian transitions—such as Indonesia's Reformasi in 1998 and Cambodia's UNTAC-led shift in 1993—to contemporary governance patterns. Yin's (2014) case study methodology guides the detailed examination of key institutions like Indonesia's Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi (KPK), Cambodia's Anti-Corruption Unit (ACU), and the Philippines' Civil Service Commission. The study also incorporates critical political anthropology, as informed by Gupta's (1995) ethnography of bureaucracy, to uncover how everyday state practices sustain neo-patrimonial logic. Discourse analysis, following Fairclough (2003), is employed to examine how reform narratives are constructed and contested across official documents, civil society reports, and media sources. The research design relies on source triangulation—cross-verifying official and third-party data—and analytical generalization to produce findings that are both empirically grounded and theoretically robust. This pluralistic approach enables the study to explore not only the structural constraints of reform but also the agentic strategies deployed by elites and reform advocates within neo-patrimonial regimes.

This study draws upon a comprehensive, multi-source dataset to investigate public sector reforms in Cambodia, Indonesia, and the Philippines from the late 20th to the early 21st centuries. The dataset includes official government documents such as Cambodia's Law on Anti-Corruption (2010), Indonesia's Decentralization Law No. 22/1999, and the Philippines' Anti-Red Tape Act (2007), each offering insights into legislative intent and institutional restructuring. These primary materials are complemented by policy reports from international organizations, including the Asian Development Bank (ADB, 2015; Sam et al., 2015), the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators (2018), and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2020),

which provide critical external evaluations of reform efforts. In addition, the study integrates expert interviews conducted between 2015 and 2022 with policymakers, civil society representatives, and academic experts, offering qualitative insight into on-the-ground implementation challenges. Quantitative data from national statistical agencies—such as Indonesia’s Central Bureau of Statistics and Cambodia’s National Institute of Statistics—are used to track metrics on bureaucratic efficiency, corruption, and public trust. Key academic contributions also inform the analysis, notably Hadiz’s (2010) *Localising Power in Post-Authoritarian Indonesia* and Hughes’ (2003) *The Political Economy of Cambodia’s Transition*, which provide contextual depth on political economy and elite networks. Comparative governance indices such as Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index and the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project offer a broader empirical framework for cross-national analysis. This triangulation of legal texts, institutional reports, interviews, and statistical data ensures a multi-dimensional and balanced understanding of reform processes, enabling both top-down and bottom-up perspectives.

## 4. Findings and Discussions

### 4.1 Findings

#### 4.1.1 Findings Based on the First Objective: Features of Neopatrimonialism in Southeast Asian Governance

Neopatrimonialism in Southeast Asia is characterized by the coexistence of formal bureaucratic institutions and deeply entrenched informal power networks. This duality is evident in countries like Cambodia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, where governance structures are often overshadowed by patronage systems, clientelism, and personalized rule (Erdmann & Engel, 2007). The findings reveal that formal institutions, such as legislatures and judiciaries, exist on paper but are frequently circumvented or co-opted by informal practices. For example, in Cambodia, political loyalty and kinship ties often determine access to public resources, undermining merit-based systems (Un & So, 2011). A key feature of neopatrimonialism in the region is the centralization of power around a dominant leader or party. In Malaysia, for instance, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) historically maintained control through a combination of formal policies and informal patronage (Gomez & Jomo, 1999). Similarly, in Thailand, military and business elites exert significant influence behind the scenes, despite the presence of democratic institutions (McCargo, 2005). These informal networks are resilient, often surviving political transitions and reforms.

Table 4.1: Features of Neopatrimonialism in Southeast Asian Governance

Key Feature	Description	Country Examples	Scholarly Support
Coexistence of Formal & Informal Systems	Formal institutions (e.g., legislatures, judiciaries) exist but are undermined by informal patronage networks, clientelism, and personalized rule.	Cambodia, Indonesia, Philippines	Erdmann & Engel (2007); Un & So (2011)
Centralization of Power	Dominant leaders or political parties maintain control through formal policies and informal patronage, often sidelining institutional checks and balances.	Malaysia (UMNO), Thailand (military-business elites), Singapore (PAP)	Gomez & Jomo (1999); McCargo (2005)
Economic Incentives & Patronage	Public sector positions, contracts, and state resources are distributed as rewards for political loyalty, fostering corruption and weakening meritocracy.	Indonesia (post-decentralization local elites), Philippines (bureaucratic appointments), Malaysia (state-linked companies)	Hutchcroft (2014); Hadiz (2010)
Resilience of Informal Networks	Informal power structures and patron-client relationships	Cambodia, Thailand, Indonesia, Myanmar	Hadiz (2010); Un & So (2011)

	persist despite democratization or institutional reforms, often adapting to new political contexts.		
Personalization of Rule	Decision-making is highly centralized around individual leaders, with policies and appointments reflecting personal interests rather than institutional norms.	Philippines (Marcos, Duterte eras), Cambodia (Hun Sen), Indonesia (Suharto era)	Slater (2010); Case (2011)
Weak Rule of Law	Legal systems are manipulated to protect elites and their networks, undermining judicial independence and accountability.	Malaysia, Cambodia, Myanmar	Lindsey & Dick (2016); Un & So (2011)
Blurred Public-Private Boundaries	State resources and authority are used for private gain, with limited distinction between public office and personal business.	Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand	Gomez & Jomo (1999); Robison (2012)

Table 4.1 systematically outlines the defining features of neopatrimonialism as observed in Southeast Asian governance. Neopatrimonialism refers to a hybrid political system where formal state institutions coexist with—and are often undermined by—informal networks of patronage, personal loyalty, and clientelism. The table highlights how, despite the presence of constitutions, legislatures, and courts, real political power frequently operates through informal channels based on personal relationships, kinship, or ethnic ties. This dualism weakens institutional effectiveness and accountability.

Centralization of power is another key feature, where dominant leaders or parties maintain control by blending official authority with informal patronage, often sidelining checks and balances. Economic incentives and patronage further entrench neo-patrimonial practices, as public resources and government positions are distributed to reward loyalty rather than merit, fostering corruption and inefficiency. The resilience of informal networks is notable; these structures adapt and persist even after democratization or reforms, ensuring elite dominance. Personalization of rule, weak rule of law, and blurred boundaries between public and private interests further illustrate how neopatrimonialism distorts governance, erodes accountability, and perpetuates elite control. The table, supported by scholarly references and country examples, demonstrates that these features are not isolated but interconnected, shaping the political landscape across Southeast Asia.

Another critical finding is the role of economic incentives in sustaining neo-patrimonial systems. Public sector positions are frequently used as rewards for loyalty, creating a cycle where institutional effectiveness is secondary to personal gain (Hutchcroft, 2014). For example, in Indonesia, the decentralization reforms of the early 2000s inadvertently strengthened local patronage networks, as regional elites used newfound powers to consolidate their influence (Hadiz, 2010). The persistence of these features highlights the challenges of implementing Weberian-style bureaucratic reforms in Southeast Asia. While formal institutions may adopt modern governance frameworks, informal practices continue to dominate, raising questions about the feasibility of top-down institutional change.

#### 4.1.2 Findings Based on the Second Objective: Cultural and Symbolic Roots of Neo-patrimonial Authority

The legitimacy of neo-patrimonial governance in Southeast Asia is deeply rooted in cultural and symbolic traditions. Traditional beliefs, such as the Javanese concept of *halus* (refinement) in Indonesia or the Khmer notion of *boramey* (charismatic authority) in Cambodia, shape perceptions of leadership and legitimacy (Anderson, 1990; Hinton, 2005). These cultural frameworks often emphasize hierarchical relationships and the moral obligation of

leaders to provide for their followers, reinforcing patronage systems. In Cambodia, for instance, the historical legacy of the *devaraja* (god-king) concept continues to influence contemporary governance, where leaders are expected to embody both political and spiritual authority (Chandler, 2008). This cultural backdrop legitimizes personalized rule and discourages challenges to authority. Similarly, in Thailand, the *sakdina* system, a traditional hierarchy of status, persists in modern bureaucratic practices, where respect for seniority and connections often trumps formal rules (Ockey, 2004). Religious institutions also play a symbolic role in legitimizing neo-patrimonial authority. In Myanmar, Buddhist monks have historically been intertwined with political power, lending moral credibility to rulers (Schober, 2011). Likewise, in Malaysia, the alignment of Malay rulers with Islamic values reinforces their legitimacy, even as they engage in patronage politics (Milner, 2008).

Table 4.2: Cultural and Symbolic Roots of Neo-patrimonial Authority in Southeast Asia

Key Aspect	Description	Country Examples	Cultural/Symbolic Concepts	Scholarly Support
Traditional Leadership Norms	Cultural concepts frame leadership as hierarchical and morally obligatory, reinforcing patronage.	Indonesia ( <i>Javanese halus</i> ), Cambodia ( <i>boramey</i> )	<i>Halus</i> (refinement), <i>Boramey</i> (charisma)	Anderson (1990); Hinton (2005)
Historical Legacies of Authority	Ancient rulership ideals (e.g., god-king) persist, legitimizing personalized rule.	Cambodia ( <i>devaraja</i> ), Thailand ( <i>sakdina</i> )	<i>Devaraja</i> (god-king), <i>Sakdina</i> (status hierarchy)	Chandler (2008); Ockey (2004)
Religious Symbolism & Legitimacy	Religious institutions (Buddhism, Islam) sanctify political authority.	Myanmar (Buddhist monks), Malaysia (Islamic monarchy)	Monastic-military ties, Sultanate-Islam alignment	Schober (2011); Milner (2008)
Adaptive Reinterpretation of Tradition	Leaders repurpose traditional narratives to justify modern authority, resisting liberal reforms.	Regional cases (e.g., Cambodia, Thailand)	Syncretism of ancient and modern rhetoric	Chandler (2008); Ockey (2004)

The findings suggest that these cultural and symbolic elements are not static but are actively reinterpreted to suit contemporary political needs. For example, modern leaders in the region often invoke traditional narratives to justify their authority, blending ancient symbolism with modern governance rhetoric. This dynamic complicates efforts to introduce liberal democratic norms, as cultural legitimacy often outweighs formal institutional checks.

#### 4.1.3 Findings Based on the Third Objective: Cultural-Symbolic Elements and Institutional Transformation

The interplay between cultural-symbolic elements and institutional reform is complex, with these factors both obstructing and enabling change. On one hand, traditional values can hinder reform by legitimizing resistance to external models of governance. For example, in Vietnam, Confucian ideals of harmony and hierarchy have been used to justify top-down control, limiting the space for participatory reforms (London, 2009). Similarly, in Laos, the persistence of patron-client relations has slowed public sector modernization, as reforms threaten entrenched interests (Stuart-Fox, 2005). On the other hand, cultural frameworks can also facilitate reform when aligned with local values. In Indonesia, the *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation) tradition has been harnessed to promote community-based governance, complementing decentralization efforts (Antlöv, 2003). Likewise, in the Philippines, the *bayanihan* (collective action) spirit has been invoked to support anti-corruption campaigns, demonstrating the potential for cultural resources to drive change (Rocamora, 1998).

Table 4.3: Role of Cultural-Symbolic Elements in Public Sector Reforms in Southeast Asia

Country	Cultural-Symbolic Factor	Impact on Reforms	Reform Strategy	Outcome	Key Studies
Vietnam	Confucian ideals (hierarchy, harmony)	Obstructive: Used to justify top-down control, limiting participatory reforms.	Centralized, state-led modernization.	Limited institutional pluralism; resistance to "Western" governance models.	London (2009)
Laos	Patron-client relations	Obstructive: Slowed modernization by protecting elite interests.	Gradual, elite-negotiated reforms.	Weak bureaucratic autonomy; persistence of informal networks.	Stuart-Fox (2005)
Indonesia	Gotong royong (mutual cooperation)	Facilitative: Supported community-based governance post-decentralization.	Aligned decentralization with local collectivist values.	Enhanced local participation but uneven implementation.	Antlöv (2003)
Philippines	Bayanihan (collective action)	Facilitative: Mobilized anti-corruption campaigns.	Framed reforms as communal moral duty.	Temporary accountability gains; cyclical regression due to elite resistance.	Rocamora (1998)
Cambodia	Moral leadership traditions	Mixed: Effective when framed as restoring traditional ethics.	"Localized" accountability reforms.	Superficial compliance; elites co-opt narratives.	Un (2018)
Thailand	Buddhist principles of ethical governance	Mixed: Used to advocate transparency but often weaponized by elites.	Reformists invoked Dhammic governance.	Selective adoption; limited elite buy-in.	Khemthong (2020)

Table 4.3 highlight the importance of culturally sensitive reform strategies. For instance, in Cambodia, efforts to improve public sector accountability have been more effective when framed as reinforcing traditional notions of moral leadership rather than imposing foreign models (Un, 2018). Similarly, in Thailand, reformists have leveraged Buddhist principles of ethical governance to advocate for transparency (Khemthong, 2020). However, the effectiveness of such approaches depends on the willingness of elites to relinquish informal privileges. In many cases, cultural narratives are selectively employed to resist rather than enable change, underscoring the need for incremental and context-specific reforms.

#### 4.1.4 Findings Based on Objective Four: Comparing Reform Trajectories in Cambodia, Indonesia, and the Philippines

Public sector reforms in neo-patrimonial regimes exhibit both commonalities and divergences across Cambodia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, shaped by historical legacies, elite interests, and sociopolitical structures. While all three countries have faced pressures for institutional modernization—whether from international donors, civil society, or economic imperatives—their reform outcomes vary significantly due to differing levels of elite resistance, bureaucratic capacity, and cultural adaptability. Cambodia has pursued reforms under strong centralized leadership, where the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) has selectively adopted technocratic changes while preserving patronage networks. Decentralization efforts, such as the 2002 Seila program, aimed at improving local governance but were co-opted by elites to reinforce their control (Un, 2018). Anti-corruption initiatives, including the 2010 Anti-Corruption Law, have been criticized as performative, lacking genuine enforcement due to the intertwining of corruption with political survival (Öjendal & Lilja, 2014). Cambodia's reforms thus reflect a pattern of simulated modernization, where formal institutions are adjusted superficially while informal power structures remain intact.

Indonesia, by contrast, has experienced more substantive—albeit uneven—reforms following the 1998 fall of Suharto. The Big Bang decentralization of 2001 transferred significant authority to local governments, reducing central dominance but also enabling new patronage networks at the regional level (Hadiz, 2010). Anti-corruption measures, such as the establishment of the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), have had notable successes, though political backlash and judicial interference persist (Butt, 2019). Indonesia's trajectory demonstrates a competitive clientelism model, where decentralization creates spaces for reformist actors to challenge entrenched elites, albeit within a still-neo-patrimonial framework. The Philippines presents a case of cyclical reform and regression. Post-Marcos democratization saw periods of anti-corruption mobilization (e.g., the 2001 EDSA II uprising), yet clientelism remains pervasive. The 1991 Local Government Code empowered local elites, leading to fragmented governance (Hutchcroft, 2014). Recent efforts like the 2012 Good Governance and Anti-Corruption Plan have been undermined by enduring *padrino* (patronage) systems (Quah, 2020). The Philippines exemplifies reform stagnation, where civil society activism creates temporary accountability gains, but structural neopatrimonialism endures.

Table 4.4. Comparative Analysis of Governance Reforms in Indonesia, Cambodia, and the Philippines

Category	Common Patterns	Key Divergences
Elite Resistance	Reforms diluted when threatening vested interests.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Indonesia: Elites adapted by entering democratic institutions.</li> <li>- Cambodia: Strong elite capture, with reforms subordinated to regime survival.</li> <li>- Philippines: Political families co-opt reforms to maintain dynastic power.</li> </ul>
Donor Influence	International actors (e.g., World Bank, UNDP) drive reforms but face local realities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Indonesia: Some success in aligning donor goals with national development plans.</li> <li>- Cambodia: Reforms shaped by donor agendas but often symbolic.</li> <li>- Philippines: Selective donor compliance, especially in economic governance.</li> </ul>
Path Dependence	<p>Historical norms (e.g., Javanese feudalism, Spanish <i>caciquism</i>) shape outcomes.</p> <p>Colonial legacies and historical governance traditions continue to influence reform implementation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Indonesia: Javanese hierarchical norms influence bureaucratic culture.</li> <li>- Cambodia: Khmer Rouge legacy fosters centralized control.</li> <li>- Philippines: Spanish-era patronage and American-style institutions coexist awkwardly.</li> </ul>
Political Openness	Civil society plays an uneven role in pressuring reform, shaped by political context.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Indonesia: Post-1998 democratization empowered NGOs and media.</li> <li>- Cambodia: Repressive laws limit civil society space.</li> <li>- Philippines: Open system, but activism fragmented and often co-opted.</li> </ul>
Decentralization	Reforms aimed at improving service delivery and local accountability, with mixed results.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Indonesia: Genuine but uneven decentralization, with variation across districts.</li> <li>- Cambodia: Deconcentration is gap between formal structures and actual empowerment- Low (centralized oversight)</li> <li>- Philippines: Local governance captured by long-standing political clans.</li> </ul>

Anti-Corruption	Anti-corruption efforts are widely promoted but politically constrained.	Indonesia: KPK enjoys relative autonomy and public trust, though under recent threat. - Cambodia: Anti-Corruption Unit is widely perceived as less independent and politically controlled, - Philippines: Institutions exist, but enforcement is weak and selective.
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The table 4. 4 offers a more comprehensive and structured comparison of governance reform trajectories in Indonesia, Cambodia, and the Philippines. It highlights common patterns, key divergences, and country-specific details across major reform categories.

#### 4.1.5 Findings Based on Objective Five: to contribute a Philosophical and Sociopolitical Interpretation of Reform in Neopatrimonial Regimes

Public sector reform in neo-patrimonial regimes cannot be understood solely through technocratic lenses; it requires engagement with deeper questions of power, legitimacy, and political subjectivity. Drawing on political theory (Foucault, Weber) and postcolonial critiques (Chatterjee, Scott), this study interprets reform as a contested terrain where formal institutions clash with informal sovereignties. Neo-patrimonial regimes operate as hybrid sovereignties, where Weberian rational-legal authority exists alongside personalized rule. In Cambodia, Hun Sen's regime exemplifies neo-patrimonial charisma, blending legal-bureaucratic rhetoric with patronage-based loyalty (Springer, 2015). This duality reflects Foucault's (1991) notion of governmentality—where power is exercised not just through laws but through social norms and subject formation. Reforms that ignore these embedded power structures risk becoming superficial, as seen in the Philippines' recurring anti-corruption failures. Legitimacy in Southeast Asia often hinges on pre-modern symbolic capital (e.g., *devaraja* in Cambodia, *bapakism* in Indonesia). Reforms that disrupt these cultural scripts face resistance for violating moral economies of reciprocity (Scott, 1976). For instance, Indonesia's KPK gains legitimacy by framing anti-corruption as a *jihad* (holy struggle), aligning reform with Islamic ethics (Butt, 2019). Conversely, Cambodia's CPP invokes national survival narratives to justify centralized control, portraying dissent as destabilizing (Hughes, 2009). This illustrates how legitimacy is performative—reforms must "speak the language" of local political theology.

The subjectivities of citizens and bureaucrats in neo-patrimonial systems are shaped by patronage dependencies, complicating reform. In the Philippines, *Utang Na Loob* (debt of gratitude) sustains clientelist voting, undermining meritocracy (Quah, 2020). Yet, alternative subjectivities emerge: Indonesia's reformasi activists and Cambodia's labor unions demonstrate that counter-hegemonic narratives can challenge neo-patrimonial logic (Ford, 2019). These struggles reflect Chatterjee's (2004) "politics of the governed," where marginalized groups negotiate—rather than reject—patronage systems. This analysis challenges the teleological assumption that modernization inevitably erodes neopatrimonialism. Instead, reforms are renegotiations of power—sometimes reinforcing hybridity (e.g., Indonesia's decentralized patronage) or producing new exclusions (e.g., Cambodia's technocratic elites). A critical takeaway is that "successful" reform may require strategic hybridity, where formal and informal systems are pragmatically blended rather than forcibly separated.

Table 4.5: Philosophical and Sociopolitical Interpretation of Reform in Neopatrimonial Regimes

Analytical Dimension	Key Concepts	Case Examples	Theoretical Foundations	Implications for Reform
Power and Hybrid Governance	Weberian rational-legal authority vs. personalized rule; Foucault's governmentality	Cambodia's CPP (Cambodian People's Party), Philippines (anti-corruption failures)	Foucault (1991), Weber	Reforms must address embedded power structures; technocratic approaches alone fail.
Legitimacy and Cultural Contingency	Pre-modern symbolic capital (e.g., devaraja, bapakism); performative legitimacy	Indonesia (KPK's anti-corruption jihad), Cambodia (CPP's national survival narratives)	Scott (1976), Political theology	Reforms must align with local cultural scripts to gain traction.
Political Subjectivity and Resistance	Patronage dependencies (utang na loob); counter-hegemonic narratives	Philippines (clientelist voting), Indonesia (reformasi), Cambodia (labor unions)	Chatterjee (2004), Gramsci	Reform requires reshaping subjectivities; marginalized groups negotiate hybrid systems.
Implications for Reform Theory	Teleological modernization critiques; strategic hybridity	Indonesia (decentralized patronage), Cambodia (technocratic elites)	Postcolonial theory (Chatterjee), Hybrid governance scholars	Successful reform may require pragmatic blending of formal/informal systems.

Table 4.5. synthesizes the complex dynamics of public sector reform in Southeast Asia's neopatrimonial regimes, arguing that technocratic solutions fail unless they engage with deeper sociopolitical and philosophical dimensions. The framework is organized into four key dimensions: power and hybrid governance, legitimacy and cultural contingency, political subjectivity and resistance, and implications for reform theory. Each dimension integrates theoretical perspectives (e.g., Foucault, Weber, Chatterjee) with empirical cases (e.g., Cambodia's CPP ruled Government, Indonesia's KPK, Philippines' clientelism) to demonstrate how reform efforts collide with entrenched informal systems. The table challenges Western assumptions of linear progress, showing instead that successful reforms must navigate hybrid sovereignties, culturally rooted legitimacy, and contested subjectivities. By highlighting the interplay of formal institutions and informal power, the analysis underscores the need for context-specific strategies that blend—rather than dismantle—existing systems. This approach rejects one-size-fits-all solutions, emphasizing adaptive reform that aligns with local political theologies and power structures.

#### 4.2. Discussions

The findings of this study reveal that public sector reform in neopatrimonial regimes, such as Cambodia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, cannot be fully understood through the lens of administrative modernization alone. Instead, these reforms are shaped by a persistent duality in governance: formal institutions co-exist and often conflict with entrenched informal networks of patronage, clientelism, and personalized authority (Erdmann & Engel, 2007; Bratton & van de Walle, 1997). While international donors and domestic elites often promote reform and good governance rhetoric, its implementation is typically limited by structural and cultural constraints that sustain neopatrimonial logics of power (Hughes, 2003; Hadiz, 2010). A critical contribution of this study lies in its cultural and symbolic interpretation of neopatrimonial authority. In these regimes, legitimacy is often rooted in traditional norms, such as the Khmer concept of boramey (charismatic authority), the Javanese ideal of halus (refinement), or the Philippine practice of utang na loob (debt of gratitude). These cultural scripts reinforce hierarchical relationships and moral obligations that blur the lines between public service and personal loyalty (Anderson, 1990; Hinton, 2005; Quimpo, 2007). Reform initiatives that ignore these symbolic dimensions are often perceived as alien, leading to passive resistance or surface-level compliance. This finding aligns with Bourdieu's (1991) notion of symbolic power and Foucault's (1991) concept of governmentality, wherein reforms function as administrative changes and ideological performances that align with or disrupt embedded modes of legitimacy.

The comparative analysis illustrates both the adaptability and the resilience of neopatrimonial systems. In Cambodia, for example, reforms have served mainly to maintain elite control while projecting a façade of modernization. Anti-corruption agencies and civil service reforms exist in name but lack the independence and capacity to challenge patronage networks (Pak, Horng, & Eng, 2007; Un, 2018). In contrast, Indonesia's post-Suharto reforms produced more substantial outcomes—such as the creation of the KPK and decentralized governance—but these too were co-opted by local elites, resulting in fragmented rather than dismantled patronage (Hadiz, 2010; Mietzner, 2015; Run et al., 2015). The Philippines demonstrates cyclical reformism, where periods of accountability are followed by regression, often due to the enduring power of political dynasties and the instrumental use of reforms for electoral gains (Sidel, 2005; Quah, 2020). Importantly, these cases show that vested interests do not simply block reforms; they are also selectively appropriated and adapted. This reflects the phenomenon of “simulated institutionalization,” where reforms mimic international best practices without altering the underlying structures of power (Brinkerhoff & Goldsmith, 2005). In such contexts, reform efforts become rituals of external compliance that mask internal continuity. The implication is that technocratic solutions—such as performance evaluations, anti-corruption laws, or digital governance—must be rethought as part of a broader sociopolitical process. As Scott (1998) cautioned in *Seeing Like a State*, top-down interventions often fail when disregarding the informal logics and everyday practices that sustain state legitimacy.

The study also underscores the importance of civil society, media, and reformist leadership in catalyzing genuine change. Indonesia's reformasi movement, bolstered by civic engagement and media scrutiny, created openings for institutional innovation, even if limited (Aspinall & van Klinken, 2011). Cambodia's constrained civil space and authoritarian consolidation limit bottom-up reform dynamics (Hughes, 2009). These differences point to the significance of political subjectivity—how citizens and bureaucrats perceive their roles in governance, which shapes the receptivity and sustainability of reform. In Chatterjee's (2004) terms, the politics of the governed in neopatrimonial regimes is not about rejecting the state but negotiating with it through familiar channels of moral economy and reciprocity. From a philosophical perspective, the persistence of neopatrimonialism demands a reevaluation of the ontological assumptions underlying public administration. Reform is not merely a matter of institutional design but a process of cultural transformation. As Weber (1978) and Bourdieu (1991) suggest, domination is sustained through coercion and internalized norms and symbolic structures. Hence, successful reform requires new rules and new imaginaries of authority, citizenship, and accountability. This entails rethinking the state not as a neutral apparatus but as a historically embedded field of power relations, rituals, and representations (Foucault, 1991; Scott, 1998). In conclusion, the study reinforces the idea that neopatrimonialism is not a static vestige of the past but a flexible and adaptive mode of governance. It thrives through hybridizing modern bureaucratic forms and traditional authority, making reform a deeply contested and culturally situated process. Moving beyond universalist models, effective reform strategies must account for power's symbolic and relational dimensions. This requires a paradigm shift—from institutional transplantation to culturally attuned, incremental transformation grounded in local histories, meanings, and social agency.

## 5. Conclusions and Recommendations

### 5.1. Conclusions

The analysis of attempts to reform the public sector in the neopatrimonial regimes of Southeast Asia allows us to draw a number of fundamental conclusions that are important both for theoretical understanding of the very nature of power in transitional societies and for developing applied strategies for institutional transformation. One of the key philosophical results of the study is the understanding of neopatrimonialism not as a static archaic form of power doomed to self-reproduction but as a flexible configuration capable of adapting and modifying depending on the context. Unlike idealized models of a rational-bureaucratic state, neopatrimonial structures incorporate elements of formal modernization while maintaining the deep cultural foundations of informal politics. Such duality is not a temporary deviation from the “norm” but reflects the stable logic of the sociocultural evolution of power in societies where personal loyalty, patronage and symbolic sacralization remain important channels of legitimation (Erdmann & Engel, 2007). In this sense, reforms do not eliminate neopatrimonial relations but transform them from closed and clannish to more institutionalized and “managed-hybrid” forms.

The comparative experience of Southeast Asian countries demonstrates that universal reform recipes oriented toward good governance standards often ignore the cultural and political specifics of the regions. Attempts to mechanically implant Western models of governance without taking into account existing power codes and practices lead either to the simulation of reforms or to their institutional deformation. The key problem is not the absence of institutions but their inconsistency with the local logic of political action. Consequently, the philosophical task of reform consists not only of changing the formal structure of the state but also of changing the symbolic foundations of power to transform the cultural matrix itself, in which a citizen begins to be thought of not as a client but also as a subject of law. This process requires the time, reflection and internal cultural work of society, without which no institutional reform will be sustainable. Reforming the public sector is only possible if there is a minimum level of political agency—both among reformers and society. Civil society, the media, educational institutions, and social movements shape the contours of a new political imaginary in which power is subject to discussion, criticism, and public scrutiny. In the context of neopatrimonialism, such processes often encounter resistance from elites, but they lay the foundation for long-term change.

Importantly, agency is not equal to democracy in the liberal sense. It can manifest itself even under authoritarian control if there is space for alternative interpretations of power, public expression of interests, and professionalization of management structures. The example of Indonesia, with its postauthoritarian development, shows that even limited political openness can give rise to profound transformations. Finally, the need for philosophical reflection in matters of state reform is important. Technical reforms—personnel rotation, anticorruption measures, and digitalization—will not have the desired effect without an ontological rethinking of the very nature of power and the social contract. It is necessary not only to manage institutions but also to understand them as a result of historically established symbolic structures that operate not as laws but also as archetypes, myths, and rituals. The philosophy of politics is capable of revealing the deep foundations of the stability of neopatrimonial forms, such as the concept of "paternal authority", the cult of the charismatic leader, and the rhetoric of national salvation. Only by exposing these structures can we develop strategies for their transformation without destroying the social order. Thus, public sector reforms in the neopatrimonial regimes of Southeast Asia are not a linear movement toward rationality but rather a complex process of rethinking power, cultural identity, and institutional logic. Successfully moving beyond patronage politics requires not only political will but also deep cultural transformation, where philosophy becomes not an abstract theory but a practice of critical thinking and social design. From this perspective, the lessons of Southeast Asia become relevant and universal—not as recipes but as invitations to complex and responsible reflections on the fate of the state in the 21st century.

### *5.2. Recommendations for Further Research*

Given the complex and evolving nature of neopatrimonial regimes, future research should delve deeper into the micro-dynamics of informal governance, particularly how everyday interactions between citizens and state actors reproduce or contest patronage-based authority. Ethnographic and participatory research methods could illuminate how public officials interpret and implement reforms in practice, and how cultural scripts—such as filial obligation, religious values, or notions of loyalty—shape administrative behavior. Further inquiry is also needed into the role of mid-level bureaucrats and frontline service providers as potential reform brokers or gatekeepers, especially in hybrid governance systems where informal and formal rules coexist. Comparative subnational studies across regions and municipalities may offer new insights into why reform efforts succeed in some contexts while failing in others, despite similar institutional frameworks. Such localized analyses could help refine theories of institutional pluralism by capturing the adaptive strategies of elites and reformist actors operating within neopatrimonial constraints.

Another promising avenue for future research is the intersection of digital governance and neopatrimonial resilience. While many Southeast Asian governments have adopted e-government platforms to enhance transparency and service delivery, the extent to which these digital tools challenge or reinforce informal patronage networks remains underexplored. Studies should examine whether digitalization leads to real accountability or merely digitizes clientelist practices under the guise of modernization. Additionally, further research could focus on the symbolic dimensions of reform narratives—how state actors frame reforms in culturally resonant terms to

secure legitimacy, and how various publics receive these narratives. Discourse analysis, media studies, and digital ethnography could enrich our understanding of the performative aspects of governance in hybrid regimes. Finally, more attention should be paid to the role of civil society, youth movements, and transnational networks in shaping alternative imaginaries of governance. By integrating political theory, cultural anthropology, and policy analysis, future research can move beyond static models of institutional design and contribute to more context-sensitive strategies for meaningful reform.

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