



COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL ECONOMY MODELS IN SOUTH ASIA AND THEIR IMPACT ON PUBLIC SECTOR REFORM

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Abstract

This study presents a comparative analysis of political economy models in South Asia and their influence on public sector reform. The political economy of South Asian nations—such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal—has been shaped by diverse colonial legacies, state-building trajectories, institutional configurations, and political cultures. These models range from centralized bureaucratic systems to more pluralist and democratic frameworks, each with varying degrees of state intervention, policy autonomy, and fiscal decentralization. By examining the interplay between political institutions, governance structures, and economic strategies, this review evaluates how different political economy paradigms have influenced the formulation, implementation, and sustainability of public sector reforms. The analysis draws on empirical evidence and policy case studies to highlight sectoral differences in reform outcomes across education, health, infrastructure, and e-governance. It further explores the role of international financial institutions, donor conditionalities, civil society engagement, and political patronage in shaping reform trajectories. The findings reveal that countries with more inclusive political institutions and greater civil society participation have achieved relatively higher levels of reform success, despite challenges of corruption, capacity constraints, and policy inertia. In contrast, reforms in more authoritarian or clientelist settings tend to be top-down, donor-driven, and less sustainable. The study concludes by proposing a context-sensitive framework for public sector reform in South Asia, emphasizing institutional legitimacy, political will, and adaptive governance mechanisms.

Keywords

Political Economy; Public Sector Reform; South Asia; Governance Models; Institutional Development

INTRODUCTION

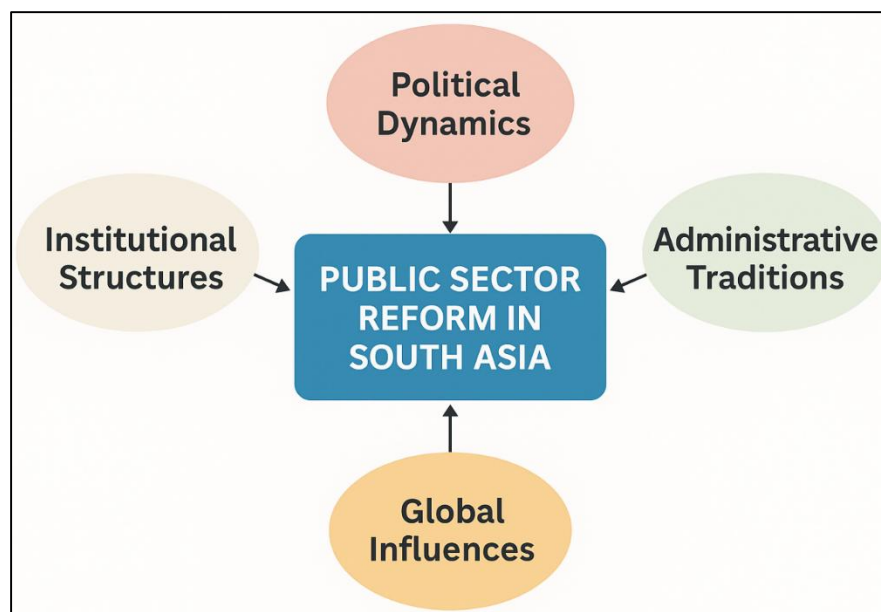
Political economy, as an interdisciplinary domain, explores the interaction between political institutions, economic structures, and the actors who operate within these frameworks. Rooted in classical works by Smith, Ricardo, and Marx, modern political economy has evolved to encompass a range of analytical perspectives, including rational choice institutionalism, historical institutionalism, and developmental statism (Ali, 2004). At its core, political economy investigates how governance systems and political incentives shape economic decision-making and resource allocation. It evaluates the ways in which institutional arrangements, political power, and policy choices influence the performance and legitimacy of state institutions (Samaratunge & Bennington, 2002). The significance of political economy analysis has expanded in the context of global development, where governance reforms, economic liberalization, and public sector efficiency remain central themes (Kochanek, 1994). Scholars emphasize the importance of unpacking the distribution of political power and identifying the role of formal and informal institutions in shaping development outcomes (Robertson, 1993). Rather than treating reforms as technical procedures, political economy reframes them as political processes embedded in contestation and compromise (Ospina et al., 2004). This theoretical approach is especially salient in regions characterized by institutional hybridity and evolving democratic institutions. The intersection of politics and economics thus provides a nuanced lens to analyze how institutional reform is initiated, implemented, and sustained within complex governance environments (Cheung, 1996). These insights have been integrated into development policy practices, including those of the World Bank, which employs political economy diagnostics to identify reform obstacles and opportunities (Haque, 2003). In light of these dynamics, political economy emerges as an essential analytical tool in assessing the structural determinants of public sector performance and institutional change. Globally, the application of political economy to public sector reform has been driven by the recognition that technical fixes alone do not resolve governance failures or improve institutional outcomes (Knott & Miller, 2006).

Reform trajectories are shaped by the distribution of power, the strength of coalitions, and the capacity of state institutions to adapt to shifting political contexts (Khan, 2003). International experiences from Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia underscore that institutional reforms often stall or fail not because of design flaws but due to political resistance, elite capture, or bureaucratic inertia (Khan, 2003). In response, international organizations increasingly promote context-specific, problem-driven approaches that integrate political economy insights into policy formulation (Jayasuriya, 2000). The relevance of this analytical shift is evident in donor-supported reform programs that seek to align incentives, build coalitions for change, and strengthen accountability mechanisms. Political economy has informed strategies in civil service reform, public financial management, decentralization, and anti-corruption efforts across varied institutional landscapes (McCourt & Minogue, 2001b). For example, the implementation of performance budgeting in Rwanda, administrative devolution in Indonesia, and judicial reforms in Mexico were all shaped by contextually grounded political economy assessments (Islam, 2004). These cases demonstrate that political feasibility and institutional legitimacy are as critical as technical precision in reform outcomes (Litvack & Rondinelli, 1999).

Additionally, global initiatives such as the Public Expenditure and Financial Accountability (PEFA) framework and the Governance and Anti-Corruption (GAC) strategy at the World Bank have integrated political economy tools to evaluate governance readiness and institutional resilience (Knott & Miller, 2006). Consequently, the global experience validates the necessity of understanding reforms as political negotiations influenced by historical

legacies, interest group dynamics, and institutional architecture. This international significance of political economy analysis provides a valuable comparative framework for evaluating reform processes in South Asia. The formation of political economy models in South Asia is deeply rooted in colonial experiences, which established the administrative, fiscal, and legal foundations of contemporary state structures (Turner, 2002). The British Raj imposed a centralized bureaucratic system, land tenure arrangements, and revenue extraction practices that prioritized control over developmental governance (Haque, 2003). These legacies persisted after independence, as postcolonial states inherited a state apparatus designed for command and compliance rather than service delivery or accountability (Alam, 1994). The institutional continuity of colonial rule is particularly evident in the Weberian-style civil services of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, which continue to dominate public administration. While each country adopted distinct political paths—ranging from India's electoral democracy to Pakistan's civil-military authoritarianism—state institutions remained characterized by hierarchical control, centralized decision-making, and weak citizen engagement (Turner, 2002). These configurations influenced public sector reform by entrenching institutional path dependencies and bureaucratic inertia (Segal, 1990). For instance, efforts to decentralize administration or modernize public service delivery often encountered resistance from entrenched elite networks and administrative monopolies (Trezzi, 2001). Moreover, colonial revenue systems such as the zamindari and ryotwari arrangements shaped post-independence property rights, resource allocation, and fiscal decentralization policies (Samaratunge & Bennington, 2002).

Figure 1: Determinants of Public Sector Reform in South Asia



South Asia's colonial history thus forged a distinctive institutional framework that continues to influence contemporary political economy arrangements (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004). The interplay between inherited bureaucratic structures and evolving democratic processes creates a hybrid political economy model—one that combines formal administrative rationality with informal patron-client dynamics (Haque, 2003). Understanding this historical context is essential for analyzing public sector reform, as it illuminates how state capacity, bureaucratic behavior, and institutional legitimacy are conditioned by long-term structural factors.

South Asia represents a region of considerable institutional diversity, where governance models vary across countries and subnational units. These models are shaped by constitutional structures, political party systems, and administrative traditions (Alam, 1994). India exhibits a federal democracy with a competitive multi-party system, where subnational governments exercise autonomy in public administration, particularly in sectors such as education, health, and local infrastructure. By contrast, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka function as unitary states with highly centralized decision-making processes, even though decentralization has been formally introduced. Nepal's transition to a federal republic introduced new complexities in power-sharing, especially in the context of a fragile post-conflict environment (Slater, 1997). These variations have important consequences for how public sector reforms are conceptualized and executed. Federal systems may offer institutional space for innovation and experimentation, as evidenced by Kerala's participatory planning and Tamil Nadu's health reforms in India. Conversely, centralized regimes may experience more uniform policy diffusion but face challenges in tailoring reforms to local needs (Turner, 2002). Governance structures also shape bureaucratic autonomy and policy coherence. For example, administrative decentralization in Pakistan under the Local Government Ordinance 2001 did not significantly improve accountability due to weak provincial coordination and political fragmentation (Hood, 1995).

Moreover, the interaction between formal institutions and informal political networks often determines reform outcomes. Patron-client relationships, party loyalties, and elite bargains influence budget allocations, personnel appointments, and service delivery across the region (Larbi, 1998). Political economy analysis of governance models thus reveals how institutional configurations mediate the balance between reform ambitions and administrative realities. This diversity underscores the necessity of contextually grounded approaches that account for both structural features and political dynamics in shaping public sector reform strategies (Samaratunge, 2000). Bureaucracies across South Asia retain structural features derived from colonial administration, including hierarchical organization, generalist cadres, and centralized control (Samaratunge & Hughes, 2001). These structures influence how administrative behavior shapes policy implementation and reform adoption (Lan & Rosenbloom, 1992). In India, the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) maintains considerable discretionary authority over policymaking and public resource management, often resulting in conflicts between technocratic expertise and political oversight (Pollitt, 2003). Similar dynamics exist in Bangladesh and Pakistan, where bureaucratic hierarchies are marked by politicized appointments and limited performance incentives (Goetz & Jenkins, 2001). Administrative behavior is also shaped by political alignments, especially when bureaucrats are embedded within patronage systems (Only, 1995). This entanglement undermines reform credibility, weakens institutional coherence, and reduces citizen trust in public institutions (Trezzi, 2001). Performance management systems, often introduced as part of donor-driven reform packages, face implementation bottlenecks due to misaligned incentives and lack of administrative autonomy (McCourt & Minogue, 2001a). Efforts such as the Results Framework Document in India or performance appraisal initiatives in Sri Lanka show limited impact without complementary political support (McCourt & Minogue, 2001). Moreover, bureaucratic resistance to change is reinforced by institutional silos, lack of cross-sectoral coordination, and minimal engagement with non-state actors (Bin Shafie, 1996). In many South Asian contexts, reform narratives emphasize capacity building without addressing the deeper political constraints that shape administrative decision-making (Behn, 1998). Thus, political economy approaches reveal that bureaucratic performance is not merely a technical function but a politically mediated process influenced by institutional design and incentive structures (Samaratunge & Bennington, 2002). The quality of public administration, therefore, becomes both a driver

and a reflection of the broader political economy landscape in which public sector reforms are situated. Electoral politics plays a pivotal role in shaping public sector reform dynamics across South Asia, influencing both the design and implementation of administrative changes (Farnham et al., 1996). In competitive democracies such as India and Sri Lanka, politicians often prioritize short-term electoral gains over long-term institutional reform (Kochanek, 1994). Populist policies, including subsidies, welfare transfers, and public employment schemes, are frequently employed as electoral strategies, creating fiscal pressures and undermining administrative coherence (Ospina et al., 2004). For instance, India's Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) has contributed to poverty alleviation but also raised concerns about leakages and administrative overload (Boyne et al., 2002). Clientelism, characterized by the exchange of resources for political support, further complicates reform alignment by distorting incentive structures and fragmenting policy coherence (White & Kelegama, 1997). In Pakistan, political patronage often determines civil service appointments and resource allocation, limiting the scope for rule-bound administrative reform (Hughes, 1998). Bangladesh's alternating political regimes have contributed to politicized public administration and limited continuity in reform processes (Hood, 1991). Nepal's fragmented party system and coalition politics have generated inconsistent policy mandates and weakened oversight institutions (Keating, 2001).

At the same time, electoral politics can enable reform when governance improvements are electorally rewarded or when political competition fosters innovation in service delivery (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004). Subnational variation within countries illustrates how political incentives vary across local contexts. For example, performance-based electoral competition in urban India has spurred digital governance and transparency initiatives (Cheung, 1996). Political economy models therefore highlight that electoral dynamics are central to understanding the political feasibility, sequencing, and sustainability of public sector reforms across South Asia (Jones, 1996). International donors and civil society actors exert significant influence on public sector reform in South Asia by shaping agendas, supplying technical expertise, and monitoring implementation (Haque, 2003). Donor-supported programs often emphasize public financial management, anti-corruption measures, and civil service restructuring, using conditionalities and performance metrics to guide policy adoption (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992).

Furthermore, in countries like Bangladesh and Nepal, such interventions have supported fiscal transparency and capacity building, albeit with varying degrees of domestic ownership (Knott & Miller, 2006). Sri Lanka's adoption of ICT tools in public administration reflects donor influence in modernizing bureaucratic functions (Goetz & Jenkins, 2001). Civil society organizations (CSOs) and media platforms enhance political accountability by exposing administrative malpractice, advocating for transparency, and mobilizing public discourse on governance reforms (Only, 1995). In India, RTI activism and social audits have empowered citizens to demand institutional responsiveness and monitor public expenditure (Trezzini, 2001). Similar roles are observed in Bangladesh, where watchdog groups like Transparency International Bangladesh contribute to anti-corruption awareness and policy advocacy (Boyne et al., 2002). In Nepal, CSOs have played crucial roles in decentralization and post-conflict institutional development (Goetz & Jenkins, 2001). However, donor agendas and civil society interventions interact with domestic political economies in complex ways, often constrained by elite resistance, regulatory backlash, or selective state engagement (Trezzini, 2001). Moreover, the effectiveness of accountability mechanisms depends on the enabling institutional environment, legal frameworks, and the political will to implement reform feedback loops (Alam, 1994). Political economy analysis thus reveals that external and societal actors operate within bounded political spaces shaped by

institutional interests, power relations, and governance logics. These factors collectively define the scope, content, and traction of public sector reform initiatives across South Asia. The primary objective of this systematic review is to critically examine the influence of distinct political economy models on public sector reform across South Asian countries, specifically focusing on India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. This study seeks to identify and compare how varying institutional arrangements, political systems, governance structures, and bureaucratic norms impact the design, adoption, and outcomes of reform initiatives in the region.

Given the shared colonial histories but divergent postcolonial trajectories of South Asian states, the review aims to synthesize empirical and theoretical evidence to uncover patterns of convergence and divergence in reform processes. A key goal is to analyze the ways in which the distribution of political power, elite interests, and policy coalitions shape administrative change and public service delivery mechanisms. By doing so, the study interrogates how public sector performance is mediated by political incentives, institutional capacities, and the broader context of governance. Additionally, the review intends to investigate how international influences—particularly donor agencies, global governance norms, and transnational reform models—interact with domestic political economies to affect reform implementation. The objective is not only to assess the presence or absence of reform outcomes but to contextualize them within the political economy logic of each country. The study also aims to explore the role of electoral dynamics, clientelist practices, and civil society participation in enabling or obstructing reform agendas. Another objective is to assess subnational variations in reform success, particularly within federal systems like India and Nepal, where regional political economies significantly influence administrative performance. In pursuit of these aims, the review systematically collects, evaluates, and synthesizes academic literature, policy reports, and empirical case studies using a comparative framework. This framework facilitates a structured understanding of how political economy configurations across South Asia affect the trajectory and substance of public sector reform. The resulting insights are intended to contribute to the broader discourse on governance and institutional development in emerging democracies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature examining political economy models and their effects on public sector reform in South Asia reveals a complex interplay between institutional structures, political dynamics, administrative traditions, and global influences. Public sector reform, broadly defined as the process of restructuring government institutions to enhance efficiency, transparency, and accountability, has been a recurrent theme in governance literature since the 1980s (Feddersen & Pesendorfer, 1999). However, the political economy approach—emphasizing the centrality of power, interests, and institutions in shaping reform trajectories—offers a more nuanced understanding of why reform outcomes vary significantly across different contexts (Ashworth, 2006). In the South Asian context, countries have adopted a range of reform strategies influenced by colonial legacies, administrative path dependencies, electoral politics, and donor engagement (Hortacsu & Syverson, 2007). While some studies highlight technical and managerial aspects of reform (Gordon et al., 2007), others underscore the embeddedness of bureaucracies within patronage networks and informal power structures (Galasso & Nannicini, 2009). This literature review aims to synthesize existing scholarship on the institutional, political, and external determinants of public sector reform in South Asia by organizing key debates into thematic clusters. These themes are arranged in a comparative and analytical structure to facilitate a clearer understanding of the mechanisms through which political economy models impact public service outcomes. The review not only draws on country-specific case studies but also leverages comparative frameworks to identify regional patterns and theoretical

gaps. It critically engages with empirical studies, policy analyses, and conceptual frameworks to frame the discussion within both global and South Asian-specific contexts. Through this synthesis, the literature review sets the foundation for evaluating how varying governance models mediate the reform process and shape the delivery capacity of the state.

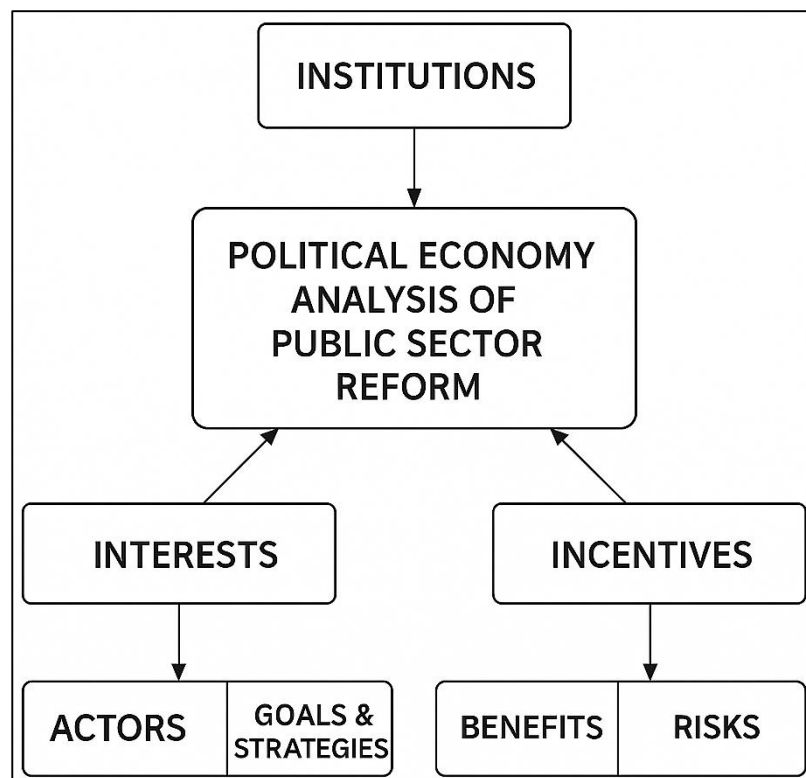
Political Economy in Public Sector Reform

The evolution of political economy as a scholarly discipline reflects a shift from normative and philosophical perspectives in classical thought to empirical and institutional analysis in contemporary research. Classical political economy, developed by theorists such as Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and Karl Marx, centered on the role of production, class relations, and market dynamics in shaping societal outcomes (Persson et al., 2000). These early frameworks conceptualized economic systems as inherently political, driven by the distribution of power, wealth, and labor. In contrast, contemporary interpretations emphasize formal institutions, governance structures, and the incentives that mediate interactions among state and non-state actors. Krehbiel et al. (1987) advanced a historical-institutionalist approach, defining institutions as the “rules of the game” that constrain and enable economic performance. This framework has been instrumental in linking institutional quality with development outcomes. Persson et al. (1998) further expanded this analysis by distinguishing between inclusive and extractive institutions. According to their model, the presence of inclusive institutions—those that promote broad-based participation and secure property rights—fosters sustained growth and effective governance. In contrast, extractive institutions limit opportunities and perpetuate elite control, which can hinder reform efforts. McCubbins et al. (1987) supports this view by arguing that development outcomes are not determined by specific policy choices but by how institutions shape incentives for policymakers. Contemporary political economy thus extends beyond state-market dichotomies to incorporate a multidimensional view of power, norms, and collective action (Myerson, 1995). This shift has significant implications for public sector reform, where institutional capacity, historical path dependencies, and power asymmetries influence both reform design and implementation (Lindbeck & Weibull, 1987).

Consequently, political economy today is understood not only as a theoretical framework but as a practical tool for diagnosing the constraints and possibilities of governance reform. The interplay between institutions, interests, and incentives is central to the political economy analysis of public sector reform. Institutions—defined as formal rules, informal norms, and organizational structures—shape how political and bureaucratic actors pursue their interests and respond to policy incentives (Baron & Ferejohn, 1989). These institutions determine the distribution of power and resources and thus influence which reforms are feasible, desirable, or resisted. Ferejohn and Krehbiel (1987) emphasizes that effective reforms are not universally transferable but are contextually bound to institutional environments. Institutions act as filters through which economic and political interests are articulated, negotiated, and implemented. In South Asia, for example, the persistence of colonial administrative structures continues to shape bureaucratic behavior and reform resistance (Romer & Rosenthal, 1979). Interests refer to the goals and strategies of actors—such as politicians, civil servants, and business elites—who may support or oppose reform depending on how it affects their position within the system (Groseclose & Snyder, 1996). These actors often operate within patronage networks, reinforcing informal institutions that contradict formal rules (Wittman, 1983). Incentives, in turn, are the perceived benefits and risks associated with reform implementation. For instance, civil service reforms aimed at improving meritocracy may be obstructed by actors who benefit from nepotism or discretionary appointments (Persson & Tabellini, 1999). The problem of “isomorphic mimicry,” where reforms are adopted in form but not in function, often arises when incentives for

genuine change are weak. (Laver & Shepsle, 1990) argue that political economy analysis should identify these institutional and incentive structures to uncover the real drivers of reform success or failure. By examining how interests and institutions align or clash, scholars can assess reform viability and implementation risks. This tripartite framework—institutions, interests, and incentives—offers a robust foundation for understanding why some reforms gain traction while others falter, particularly in settings with weak state capacity and entrenched elite dominance (Diermeier & Feddersen, 1998). The application of political economy to governance and development studies has significantly enhanced analytical clarity in understanding why reforms often fail to achieve their intended outcomes. Traditional development approaches focused on institutional capacity-building or economic liberalization frequently neglected the underlying political dynamics that shape administrative behavior (Dixit et al., 1997).

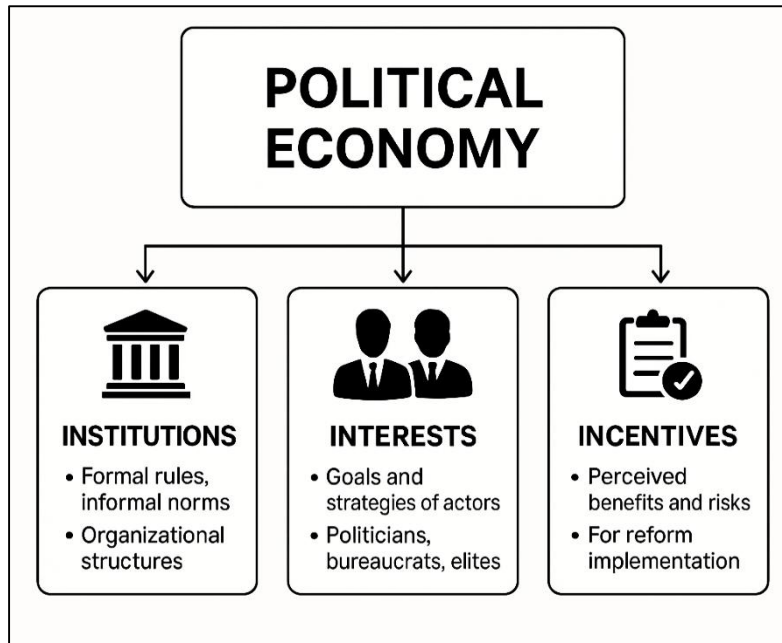
Figure 2: Framework for Political Economy Analysis of Public Sector Reform



In contrast, political economy explicitly incorporates power relations, institutional constraints, and actor incentives to diagnose governance failures and reform barriers. Baron (1998) conceptualize this approach as a means of examining how formal and informal institutions interact with stakeholder interests to shape policy design and implementation. Persson et al. (2000) demonstrate that political economy frameworks can explain the divergence between policy intentions and outcomes, especially in contexts of fragmented political coalitions or weak institutionalization. In South Asia, such divergence is evident in reform programs that remain on paper due to bureaucratic resistance or political disinterest. For instance, administrative decentralization in Pakistan and Sri Lanka failed to improve service delivery due to conflicting political incentives and weak local capacity. Political economy analysis helps illuminate these dynamics by tracing how institutional rules and elite strategies interact to produce governance outcomes (Tanzi & Davoodi, 1997a). Moreover, the relevance of political economy extends beyond academic theorizing to

influence donor strategies and policy advice. The World Bank's Problem-Driven Governance and Political Economy Analysis (GPEA) toolkit encourages development practitioners to incorporate political analysis into reform design (Tanzi & Davoodi, 1997). This framework allows reformers to identify entry points for change and build coalitions that align with local political realities. By situating reform within a broader political and institutional context, political economy offers a practical framework for diagnosing reform challenges, tailoring interventions, and evaluating reform sustainability across governance systems (Tanzi & Davoodi, 1997).

Figure 3: Foundations of political economy in public sector



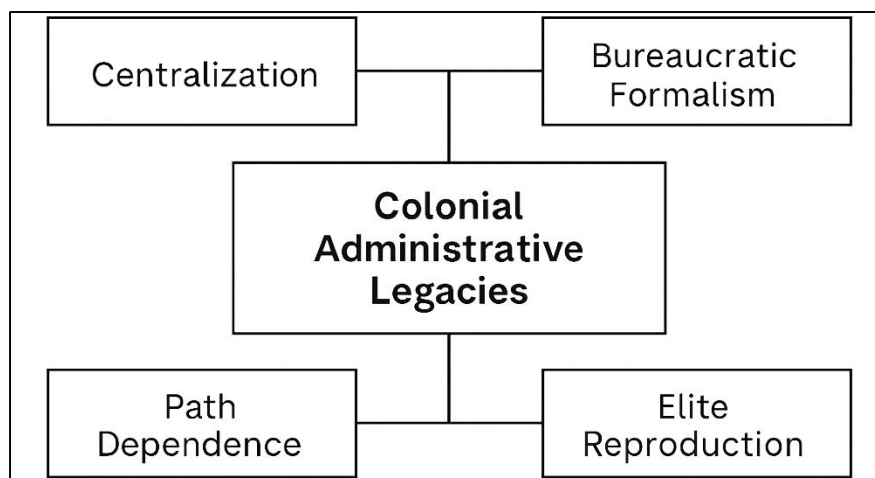
Political economy approaches differ significantly from traditional technocratic and managerial models of public sector reform, particularly in how they conceptualize problems and prescribe solutions. Technocratic models typically emphasize capacity deficits, efficiency metrics, and rational planning, often assuming a neutral state apparatus and linear policy processes. These approaches prioritize administrative restructuring, performance measurement, and cost-saving mechanisms without adequately addressing the political contexts that constrain reform implementation. In contrast,

political economy approaches reject the assumption of neutrality and instead focus on the distributional implications of reform—who gains, who loses, and why reforms succeed or fail. Dewatripont and Maskin (1995) critiques managerialism for its "good governance" prescriptions that fail to consider political feasibility. Reforms such as civil service rationalization, procurement modernization, or decentralization are often adopted as donor conditions but falter when they threaten entrenched power structures (Becker & Mulligan, 1998). Technocratic reforms may offer technically sound solutions, but without the support of politically influential actors, these solutions are unlikely to be implemented effectively or sustained over time (Becker & Mulligan, 1998). The failure of many structural adjustment programs in South Asia during the 1980s and 1990s exemplifies the limitations of technocratic reform paradigms when disconnected from political realities (Tsebelis, 1995). Political economy frameworks respond to these limitations by promoting problem-driven, context-specific reform strategies that align technical solutions with political incentives. This shift from best practices to best fit represents a fundamental reorientation in how public sector reform is conceptualized and operationalized. Rather than assuming a universal reform model, political economy analysis emphasizes understanding the local institutional environment and negotiating feasible reform paths. This contrast highlights the need to move beyond technocratic ideals and engage with the real-world complexities of governance systems.

Colonial Legacies and Institutional Continuities in South Asia

Colonial rule in South Asia established administrative frameworks that fundamentally shaped the nature of state institutions, bureaucratic hierarchies, and governance philosophies across the region. The British colonial administration implemented a centralized bureaucratic system designed to maximize control over land, labor, and revenue, emphasizing authority, surveillance, and administrative discipline rather than participatory governance (Jalal, 1995). These structures prioritized order and stability over responsiveness and accountability, laying the foundation for extractive and non-democratic institutions. The Indian Civil Service (ICS), later adapted into the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), epitomized the elitist nature of colonial governance, functioning as a ruling class distinct from the local populace (Mohammad-Arif, 2014). Its recruitment, training, and ethos were designed to enforce imperial interests while excluding popular participation, thus institutionalizing hierarchical rule and formal proceduralism. In territories that now constitute Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, similar administrative structures were replicated, emphasizing top-down authority, bureaucratic insulation, and legalistic rigidity (Bertrand & Laliberté, 2010). These templates discouraged innovation, nurtured rule-bound obedience, and created distance between state agents and citizens (Ganguly, 2010). The district collector and commissioner roles exemplified bureaucratic centrality, with broad powers over fiscal, policing, and judicial functions, often operating without accountability mechanisms (Krishna, 1994). British colonialism also fostered a culture of institutional paternalism, where public services were treated as instruments of control rather than development (Visweswaran, 1997).

Figure 4: Colonial Administrative Legacies and Their Institutional Continuities in South Asia



This administrative heritage has proven remarkably resilient, embedding a legacy of bureaucratic elitism, administrative rigidity, and limited participatory governance across postcolonial South Asia (Pandey, 1990). The enduring nature of these institutions reflects their foundational design: they were not created to evolve democratically but to reinforce imperial authority. As a result, colonial administrative legacies continue to shape public sector institutions, influencing both their structure and their reformability in contemporary contexts. Following independence, South Asian states largely retained and repurposed the bureaucratic machinery inherited from colonial rule, adapting it to serve new political elites without altering its underlying logic. Instead of dismantling or democratizing the colonial administrative architecture, postcolonial governments maintained centralized civil services as instruments of developmental planning and political control (Mahajan, 2000). In India,

for example, the IAS retained its prominence, continuing to operate with broad discretion and autonomy while becoming enmeshed in democratic politics (Singh, 2001). This continuity reflected the postcolonial state's ambivalence—balancing the need for institutional legitimacy with the political imperative to maintain elite dominance (Kaviraj, 1997).

In Pakistan and Bangladesh, the adaptation was similarly conservative. The Civil Service of Pakistan (CSP) was preserved as a generalist, hierarchical cadre designed to shield bureaucrats from political interference, yet over time became politicized through military regimes and elite bargains (Hansen, 1999). Bangladesh, after 1971, adopted much of the Pakistani administrative framework, with its bureaucratic culture marked by rigidity, procedural formalism, and limited responsiveness (Menon, 2003). In Sri Lanka, too, post-independence leaders co-opted the civil service to serve Sinhala majoritarian interests, reinforcing colonial centralism through ethnicized administrative patronage (Ludden, 1997). Elite reproduction through bureaucratic channels became a dominant feature of postcolonial state formation. The continuation of English-based education, generalist bureaucratic roles, and metropolitan career trajectories ensured that the civil service remained a preserve of urban elites (Mahajan, 2000). Informal norms around bureaucratic status, patronage, and insulation from public scrutiny persisted, limiting the potential for grassroots accountability or service delivery reform (Hansen, 1999). These patterns reveal a critical insight: postcolonial adaptations of colonial bureaucracies were not transformative but recursive, enabling elite consolidation while maintaining administrative distance from the governed (Khattak, 1996).

The concept of path dependence provides a compelling explanation for the enduring influence of colonial-era administrative institutions in shaping contemporary governance across South Asia. Path dependence suggests that once institutional patterns are established, they tend to persist due to increasing returns, institutional lock-in, and high transition costs (Ruggie, 1993). South Asian states exemplify this logic, as the bureaucratic systems designed during colonial rule remain deeply embedded in postcolonial governance structures, limiting the scope for structural reform (Visweswaran, 1997). Even when reform is politically desirable, the transaction costs—legal, administrative, and cultural—of altering entrenched institutions can be prohibitive. This inertia is visible in reform attempts that mimic modern practices without altering core bureaucratic routines, a phenomenon described as "isomorphic mimicry" (Chari, 2015). Administrative reforms in Pakistan and Bangladesh, such as civil service downsizing or performance-based promotions, have often failed to gain traction due to bureaucratic resistance, political ambivalence, and deeply embedded informal norms (Leake, 2016). In India, reforms such as the Second Administrative Reforms Commission have generated voluminous recommendations, yet implementation remains fragmented due to institutional path dependencies and sectoral compartmentalization (Eslava et al., 2018). Path dependence also manifests in legal frameworks and regulatory cultures that favor control over flexibility, thereby reinforcing administrative centralism (Sur, 2016). The logic of precedent, bureaucratic career incentives, and political patronage reinforce the status quo, creating a reform environment where symbolic gestures often substitute for substantive change (Gilmartin, 2015).

Moreover, training institutes, recruitment exams, and performance evaluation systems continue to reflect outdated administrative norms, limiting the transformative capacity of the bureaucracy (Dirks, 2002). Thus, institutional inertia, rooted in colonial administrative legacies, remains a central obstacle to reforming the public sector in South Asia, both structurally and culturally. Centralization has been a defining feature of the colonial administrative tradition across South Asia, and its legacies persist in the institutional

architecture and culture of public administration in the region. The British designed centralized administrative systems to ensure tight control over large territories, relying on a small, elite cadre of officers vested with wide-ranging powers (Ansprenger & Mamdani, 1997). This centralism emphasized command-and-control mechanisms over participatory governance or local responsiveness. Post-independence, these systems were preserved and even reinforced under the guise of national unity and developmental planning (Sinha, 2017). In practice, this meant that decision-making authority remained concentrated at the central level, limiting local autonomy and initiative.

This structural centralization has been compounded by a bureaucratic culture that prioritizes procedural compliance over outcome-oriented performance. Public servants are often rewarded for rule adherence and risk aversion rather than innovation or responsiveness (Kolsky, 2015). This culture of compliance is a direct legacy of colonial governance, where administrators were trained to implement orders and enforce regulations rather than engage with citizens or adapt to contextual needs (Cohn, 2021). As a result, even well-intentioned reform efforts are often executed mechanically, without significant adaptation to ground-level realities (Stern, 2011). The persistence of centralization and bureaucratic formalism is also evident in intergovernmental relations, where fiscal and administrative powers remain skewed toward central ministries (Iyer, 2010). In Pakistan, for example, repeated attempts at decentralization have faltered due to limited provincial autonomy and weak municipal governance structures (Pillai, 2016). Similarly, in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, devolution remains largely symbolic, as central authorities retain control over budgets, personnel, and project approvals (Hopkins, 2015). Thus, the colonial legacy of centralization has not only institutionalized top-down governance but has also shaped the behavioral norms and performance expectations of bureaucratic actors, perpetuating a cycle of administrative stagnation.

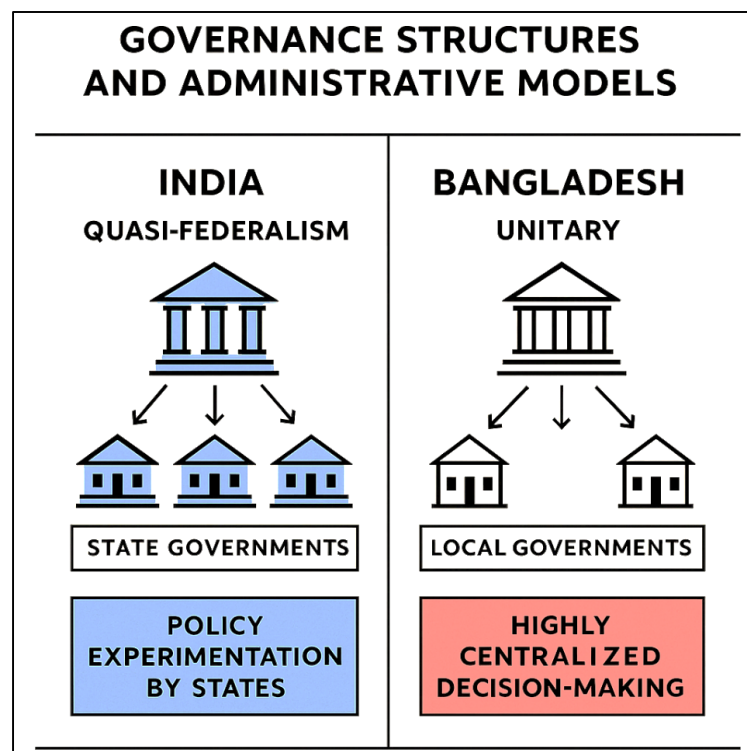
Comparative Governance Structures and Administrative Models

Governance structures in South Asia exhibit considerable variation, with significant implications for public sector reform trajectories. India is often characterized as a quasi-federal state, where the constitutional framework formally assigns powers to both the Union and state governments, but in practice, the central government retains significant authority (Meuleman, 2014). This quasi-federalism allows Indian states some autonomy in policy experimentation, particularly in sectors like health, education, and rural development, resulting in divergent reform outcomes across subnational units (Ahmed & Sanchez-Triana, 2008). Conversely, Bangladesh maintains a unitary system where decision-making is highly centralized, and local governance structures remain institutionally weak and politically dependent on the central regime (Buuren & Nooteboom, 2010). In such centralized settings, reform initiatives are often implemented in a top-down manner, reducing responsiveness to local conditions and inhibiting policy innovation (Lyhne et al., 2017). Moreover, federal arrangements, while theoretically conducive to decentralization, also create challenges in coordination and resource distribution. In India, tensions between central mandates and state-level execution have often led to fragmented accountability and variable reform success (Kaufmann et al., 2010). States with stronger institutional capacities, such as Kerala and Tamil Nadu, have managed to implement inclusive reforms, while others lag due to political instability or administrative weaknesses (Hofstede, 2011). In contrast, the centralized structure in Bangladesh allows for more uniform policy implementation but has struggled with bureaucratic rigidity, politicization, and lack of local participation (Sadler & Dalal-Clayton, 2005). Thus, governance structure plays a decisive role in shaping both the scope and effectiveness of public sector reform.

Comparative studies affirm that neither federalism nor centralization guarantees success; rather, the institutional design and interplay between political actors determine outcomes

(Elling & Nielsen, 2017). The relationship between central authority and local institutions is crucial in mediating reform processes, influencing administrative behavior, fiscal allocation, and the responsiveness of public services (Allen et al., 2010). The decentralized nature of governance in some South Asian states enables subnational units to pursue distinct public sector reform strategies, leading to significant variation in outcomes across regions. In India, where constitutional arrangements allow states to design and implement key public policies, notable disparities exist in the scope, quality, and sustainability of reforms (Söderberg, 2016). Kerala's participatory planning model, for instance, fostered inclusive governance through institutionalized local bodies and empowered civic engagement in budget decisions and project selection (Theesfeld & Schleyer, 2013). Tamil Nadu's innovations in health and education delivery, including targeted welfare programs and public-private partnerships, reflect how regional political economies can drive context-sensitive reforms (Young, 2002). In contrast, northern Indian states such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar demonstrate weak reform records due to entrenched political patronage, low bureaucratic capacity, and limited administrative continuity (Dutterer & Margerum, 2014). These variations underscore how institutional density, civic mobilization, and historical trajectories influence subnational reform capacity. Even within centralized systems like Bangladesh, local experiments such as the Union Parishad development initiatives and NGO-supported governance mechanisms show differential success depending on district-level leadership and community participation (Folke et al., 2002).

Figure 5: Comparative Governance Structures and Administrative Models



Research also highlights how subnational bureaucracies can act autonomously in some contexts, leveraging local knowledge and political networks to adapt central reforms to regional realities (Pahl-Wostl et al., 2007). However, the presence of strong local actors does not always translate to effective reform unless accompanied by enabling institutional frameworks and fiscal decentralization (Heijden & Heuvelhof, 2012). Comparative evidence from South Asia demonstrates that decentralization alone is insufficient; reform

outcomes are mediated by the alignment between institutional capacity, political incentives, and administrative coherence at the subnational level (Eckerberg & Joas, 2004). Legal-bureaucratic systems in South Asia, largely inherited from colonial rule, continue to define formal governance processes and influence how public sector reform is structured and implemented. These systems emphasize hierarchy, rule-bound administration, and generalist expertise over context-driven or participatory approaches (Frey & Eichenberger, 2002). Bureaucrats operate under a highly codified system of procedures, which often leads to a compliance-oriented rather than results-oriented administrative culture (Galaz et al., 2012). In India, the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) maintains a stronghold on policy implementation, often acting as a mediator between political executives and ground-level functionaries (Villamayor-Tomas, 2018). This model has facilitated policy continuity but limited flexibility and responsiveness to emerging challenges. In Bangladesh and Pakistan, legal-bureaucratic frameworks mirror similar rigidity, with central ministries maintaining authority over subnational units, resulting in coordination failures and delayed service delivery (McGinnis & Ostrom, 2011). Public sector reform initiatives—such as administrative restructuring, e-governance, and fiscal devolution—often falter due to the misalignment between formal legal mandates and the informal practices that dominate administrative behavior (Folke et al., 2002). For instance, reform measures aimed at increasing transparency or performance-based incentives are frequently undermined by outdated civil service rules and lack of political oversight (Pahl-Wostl et al., 2007).

Moreover, the dominance of legal formalism limits citizen engagement and innovation, as administrators are incentivized to follow procedures rather than solve problems (Ju et al., 2018). The accountability frameworks within these systems remain upward-focused, privileging ministerial authority over public feedback (Healey, 1997). This bureaucratic orthodoxy creates a significant obstacle to reform implementation, as formal governance systems remain insulated from democratic pressures and performance-based evaluations. Therefore, formal legal-bureaucratic structures, though administratively stable, often inhibit adaptive, inclusive, and problem-responsive governance across South Asia (Rhodes, 2006). Alongside formal structures, informal governance arrangements exert a substantial influence on the political economy of public administration in South Asia. These informal systems include patron-client relationships, rent-seeking practices, personalized decision-making, and the use of political loyalty in administrative appointments (Lin et al., 2014). Such practices are embedded in everyday bureaucratic operations and often determine access to resources, service delivery patterns, and the fate of reform initiatives (Paskaleva, 2009). Informal governance modes thrive in contexts where legal institutions are weakly enforced, and political accountability mechanisms are underdeveloped (Kickbusch & Gleicher, 2012).

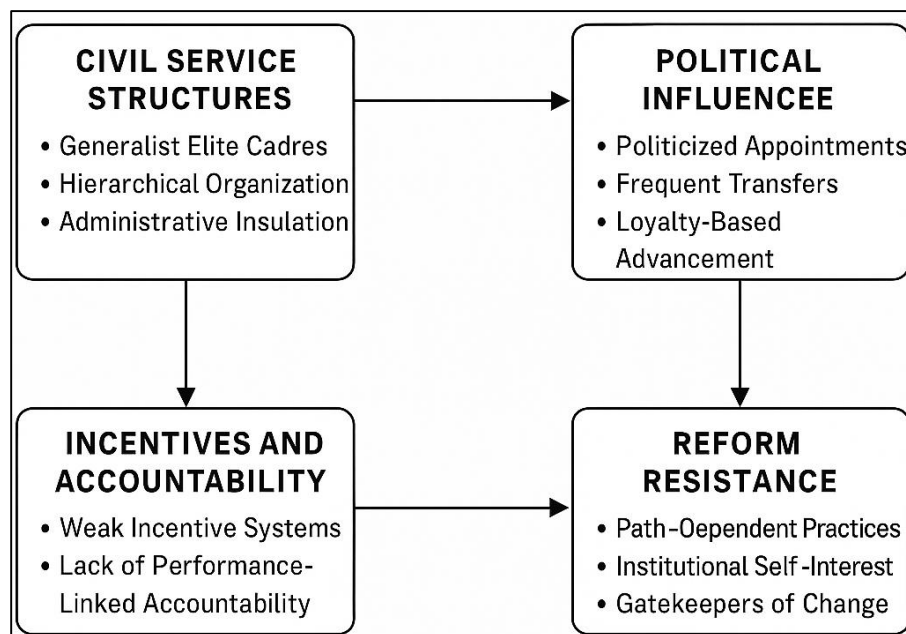
In many cases, informal networks parallel or even override formal rules, particularly in the allocation of public sector jobs, procurement contracts, or discretionary funds (Bevir, 2012). For example, in Bangladesh and Pakistan, politically motivated transfers and promotions of bureaucrats are common, reducing administrative neutrality and undermining meritocratic norms (Hufty, 2011). In India, electoral dynamics often influence budgetary allocations at the state level, with politicians using public programs to cultivate vote banks (Dameri & Benevolo, 2016). These practices create a dual reality where formal institutional reforms coexist with informal mechanisms that distort implementation. Hybrid institutional forms—where formal laws coexist with informal norms—complicate efforts to promote transparency, efficiency, or citizen participation (Meijer & Bolívar, 2015). This duality is not necessarily dysfunctional but reflects the adaptive strategies of actors within constrained institutional environments (Lange et al., 2013). However, informal governance also risks entrenching inequality, as access to services becomes contingent on social ties and

political allegiances rather than legal rights or public need (Chourabi et al., 2012). As a result, reform strategies that fail to address the interplay between formal and informal institutions risk irrelevance or cooptation. Understanding informal governance thus becomes essential for designing feasible and context-appropriate reform interventions in South Asia.

Bureaucracy, Administrative Culture, and Reform Incentives

The institutional structures of civil services in South Asia are deeply rooted in colonial administrative traditions and continue to wield significant influence over public sector reform. In India, the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) functions as a generalist, elite cadre with extensive jurisdiction over policy formulation and implementation. It remains one of the most powerful and entrenched bureaucracies in the region (Alcaraz-Quiles et al., 2014). Similarly, in Pakistan, the Civil Service of Pakistan (CSP), modeled closely on its colonial predecessor, has historically monopolized decision-making, often resisting attempts at modernization and democratization (Kettl, 2006). These bureaucracies are typically characterized by hierarchical organization, administrative insulation, and generalist dominance, which often hampers technical specialization and responsiveness to reform demands (Haque, 2006).

Figure 6: Reform Incentive Dynamics in South Asia



However, civil service structures in both countries have become increasingly susceptible to political interference. Frequent transfers, politicized appointments, and loyalty-based career advancement dilute the neutrality of bureaucrats and foster a culture of administrative compliance over public accountability (Kickert, 2007). In Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, similar patterns of politicization have been observed, with ruling coalitions using bureaucratic reshuffles to reward allies and marginalize opponents (Benito & Bastida, 2009). This dynamic undermines the autonomy and professionalism essential for policy continuity and effective reform implementation (Torres, 2004). Reform efforts aimed at curbing political interference—such as India's Civil Services Board and Pakistan's restructuring commissions—have yielded limited results due to weak political will and institutional resistance (Alcaide-Muñoz & Bolívar, 2015). The entanglement of bureaucracy with political power produces a context in which civil servants are often compelled to align with transient

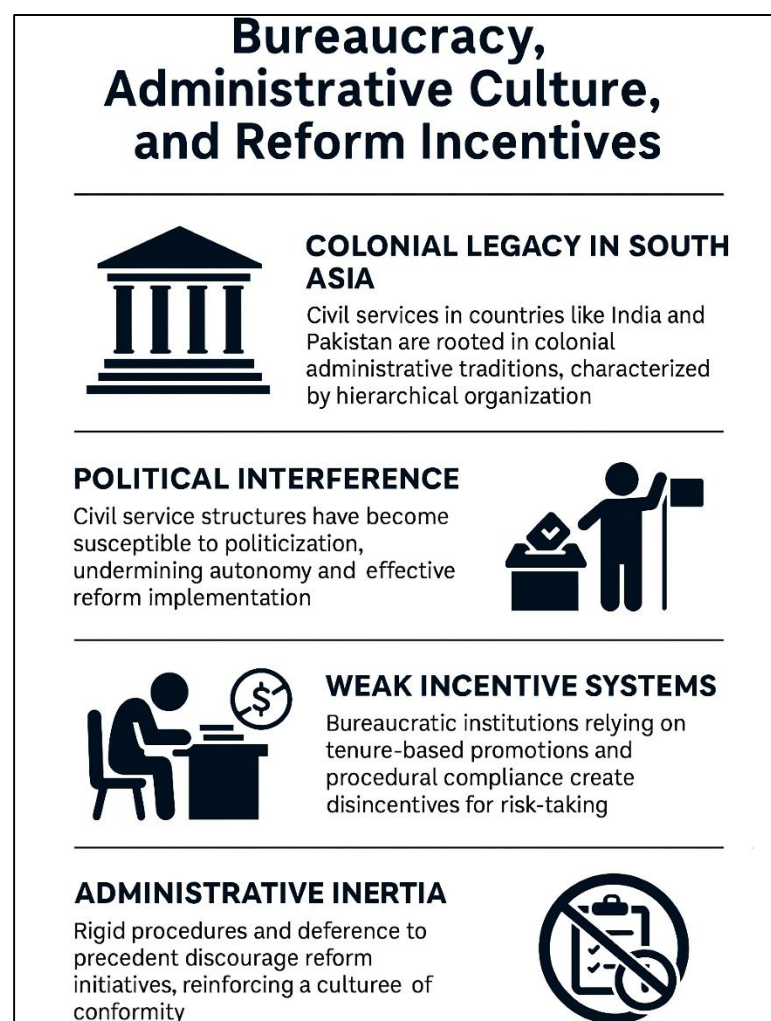
political interests rather than long-term policy goals (Krause et al., 2014). As a result, administrative reform becomes hostage to political calculations, and civil service systems struggle to function as effective engines of public sector transformation (Pina et al., 2010). The efficacy of public bureaucracies in South Asia is significantly constrained by weak incentive systems and the absence of performance-linked accountability mechanisms. Bureaucratic institutions, structured around tenure-based promotions and procedural compliance, rarely reward innovation, efficiency, or public responsiveness (Kickert, 2007). In India, the IAS promotion and evaluation systems rely primarily on seniority and subjective appraisals, limiting the motivation for proactive governance or reform-oriented behavior (Besant-Jopnes & Bacon, 2001). Similar trends exist in Pakistan and Bangladesh, where civil service hierarchies offer limited avenues for merit-based advancement, and performance assessment frameworks are either rudimentary or inconsistently applied (Alexander et al., 2003). These institutional constraints create disincentives for risk-taking and reform implementation, particularly when coupled with rigid rules and bureaucratic procedures (Williamson, 1994). Public servants are often discouraged from engaging in adaptive governance or collaborative decision-making due to fear of disciplinary action or political backlash (North & Alt, 1990). Moreover, performance management systems—such as Results Framework Documents or service delivery scorecards—introduced under reform programs are frequently underutilized or applied in symbolic ways that fail to influence actual administrative conduct (Manibog et al., 2003).

Attempts to introduce performance-based incentives, including pay-for-performance schemes or accelerated promotions, have encountered implementation difficulties due to lack of clarity in evaluation criteria, resistance from entrenched interests, and the absence of credible monitoring systems (Levy, 1993). In Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, pilot initiatives aimed at linking performance with career progression have failed to gain traction due to lack of institutional support and resistance from public sector unions (Alexander & Chia, 2002). Consequently, performance bottlenecks persist, not because of a lack of reform ideas, but due to systemic misalignment between institutional incentives and desired administrative behavior (Hunt & Shuttleworth, 1996). Bureaucratic resistance is a recurrent theme in public sector reform literature and is particularly salient in the context of South Asian states, where administrative elites often act as gatekeepers of change. This resistance stems from a complex mix of organizational culture, institutional self-interest, and path-dependent practices that discourage internal transformation (Besant-Jopnes & Bacon, 2001). Principal-agent theory offers a useful analytical framework to understand these dynamics. In many South Asian contexts, the state (as principal) lacks the mechanisms to effectively monitor and discipline bureaucrats (the agents), who may have divergent interests and greater control over information (Newbery, 2000).

Reform initiatives aimed at improving service delivery, enhancing transparency, or decentralizing authority often confront subtle forms of bureaucratic sabotage—ranging from procedural delays to reinterpretation of rules and non-cooperation with oversight mechanisms (Alexander & Chia, 2002). In India, the implementation of the Right to Information Act and e-governance platforms was met with substantial internal pushback due to perceived threats to bureaucratic discretion and control over information flows (Edwards & Hulme, 1995). In Bangladesh and Pakistan, reforms introducing performance targets and audit trails were often diluted during implementation to preserve bureaucratic autonomy and avoid external scrutiny. Moreover, institutional actors may resist reforms not only to maintain status and control but also to avoid the additional workload or accountability demands imposed by reform structures (Jain, 1994). Reform mediation thus requires strategic negotiation, coalition-building, and alignment of reform objectives with the interests of key administrative actors (Bennett et al., 1996). Evidence suggests that

reforms are more likely to succeed when they are framed in ways that offer bureaucrats reputational gains or additional resources, or when they are implemented incrementally to reduce perceived risks (Sachikonye, 1995). Understanding bureaucratic resistance, therefore, is essential not only for diagnosing reform failures but also for designing politically and institutionally feasible change strategies. Administrative culture in South Asia is marked by hierarchical authority, procedural rigidity, and deference to precedent, all of which have profound effects on reform outcomes. This culture is shaped by a legacy of colonial rule that privileged order, command, and control over participation, innovation, and responsiveness (Sachikonye & Trust, 1995). Public officials are socialized into bureaucratic environments that emphasize compliance with established norms and discourage deviation from sanctioned procedures (Fox, 1996). This results in a culture where conformity is rewarded, and reformist impulses are often seen as disruptive or insubordinate (Ndegwa, 1996).

Figure 7:



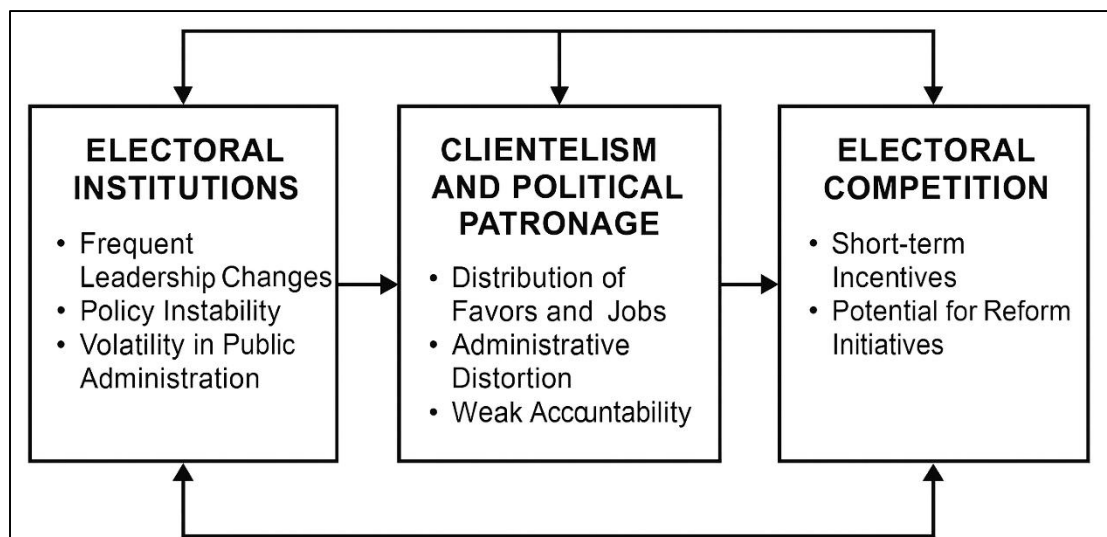
Studies in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh demonstrate that administrative inertia is reinforced through professional training, career trajectories, and performance evaluation systems that uphold proceduralism rather than outcome-oriented service delivery (Mason & Smith, 2003). Civil service training academies, while formally promoting efficiency and integrity, often fail to instill adaptive management or citizen-centric governance values (Ragasa, 2014). In such environments, reform initiatives that require discretionary judgment,

stakeholder coordination, or citizen feedback tend to falter due to misalignment with prevailing bureaucratic norms (Baimenov, 2020). Moreover, the internal logic of administrative culture is reinforced by hierarchical reporting structures and centralized decision-making, which limit experimentation and flexibility at the lower administrative levels (Sørensen & Torfing, 2021). Even successful pilots and innovations struggle to scale due to bureaucratic conservatism and a lack of institutional support. Reform-oriented officers often face institutional isolation or are transferred, reducing continuity and dampening reform momentum. Thus, administrative culture constitutes a critical, though often underappreciated, variable in the political economy of public sector reform across South Asia. It shapes both the receptivity of institutions to change and the strategies available for embedding reform within bureaucratic systems.

Political Dynamics, Electoral Competition, and Populism

Electoral institutions in South Asia profoundly influence the stability and continuity of public sector reform. In democratic systems such as India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, frequent electoral cycles create volatility in policy direction and administrative leadership, often undermining long-term reform agendas (Baimenov, 2020). Political turnover leads to frequent changes in bureaucratic appointments, with new governments reshuffling top administrative personnel to align with political priorities or reward loyalty, thereby disrupting reform continuity (Feddersen & Pesendorfer, 1999). In Bangladesh, the winner-takes-all nature of parliamentary politics fosters adversarial relations between ruling and opposition parties, resulting in policy reversals and administrative re-centralization after elections. Similar patterns have been observed in Sri Lanka, where regime change often triggers reversals of civil service and fiscal reforms, especially in politicized sectors like education and rural development.

Figure 8: Political Dynamics and Public Sector Reform in South Asia



Institutional instability is exacerbated by the weak insulation of bureaucracies from political manipulation. Career trajectories of civil servants often depend on their ability to navigate shifting political environments rather than their adherence to meritocratic norms or policy effectiveness. As a result, reform initiatives introduced by one regime are often delayed, diluted, or dismantled by its successor, making public administration a contested space rather than a stable platform for service delivery (Poole et al., 2018). This cyclical volatility impairs institutional memory, hinders policy learning, and fosters bureaucratic risk-aversion (Faruqi, 2009). Moreover, electoral incentives frequently prioritize visible, short-term gains

over structural reforms that require sustained implementation (Leake, 2016). Thus, electoral institutions in South Asia, while essential for democratic legitimacy, often function in ways that destabilize administrative reform and contribute to a reform environment characterized by discontinuity and politicization (He & Warren, 2011). Populist politics significantly shape public sector reform in South Asia, particularly by distorting fiscal priorities and encouraging policies that prioritize electoral gains over administrative efficiency. Politicians frequently use public employment schemes, welfare entitlements, and subsidy programs as instruments of electoral mobilization, often regardless of long-term fiscal sustainability. In India, flagship programs such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and large-scale food subsidy schemes have been lauded for their poverty alleviation impacts but have also drawn criticism for fiscal mismanagement, implementation leakages, and administrative overload. These programs, while popular with voters, often stretch the capacities of local bureaucracies and divert attention from systemic reforms in recruitment, monitoring, and service delivery (Kovač, 2014).

Populist fiscal strategies are not confined to India. In Sri Lanka, successive governments have expanded public employment rolls and maintained extensive price subsidies, particularly on energy and food, to retain electoral support, creating structural budget deficits and reducing fiscal space for development spending (Ferejohn & Krehbiel, 1987). In Pakistan, pre-election fiscal expansions frequently include wage hikes, new hiring in state enterprises, and ad hoc grants to politically influential constituencies (Benito & Bastida, 2009). These measures, though electorally strategic, often erode administrative discipline and compromise macroeconomic stability. Donor-backed reforms that seek to rationalize fiscal structures are frequently undermined by the political costs of reversing populist policies, resulting in half-hearted implementation or strategic delay (Groseclose & Snyder, 1996).

The dominance of populist logics in policymaking also inhibits evidence-based budgeting and performance-driven public finance systems, as electoral calculations outweigh cost-benefit considerations (Ashworth, 2006). This politicization of fiscal instruments not only undermines reform sustainability but also reinforces bureaucratic caution, as administrators become reluctant to challenge politically sensitive programs. Consequently, public sector reform in South Asia is shaped as much by populist imperatives as by developmental goals, complicating the prospects for institutional rationalization and efficiency. Clientelism and political patronage constitute pervasive features of South Asian governance and significantly constrain the development of merit-based public administration. In many instances, political elites distribute public jobs, contracts, and administrative favors as part of a reciprocal exchange for political loyalty, electoral support, or financial contributions. This informal governance logic undermines formal recruitment and promotion systems, leading to the entrenchment of unqualified personnel, distorted bureaucratic hierarchies, and erosion of civil service morale (Krishna, 1994). In Bangladesh and Pakistan, studies have shown that the majority of civil service transfers and promotions are politically influenced, resulting in weakened administrative neutrality and impaired service delivery (Hortacsu & Syverson, 2007).

In India, state-level variations in clientelism are especially evident, with patronage-based governance more entrenched in politically fragmented states such as Uttar Pradesh or Bihar than in relatively institutionalized states like Tamil Nadu or Kerala (Gordon et al., 2007). Political interference in administrative affairs often leads to the demoralization of professional bureaucrats, who perceive reform processes as arbitrary and politically manipulated (Olsen, 2009). The prevalence of clientelist arrangements also weakens

accountability structures, as bureaucrats prioritize loyalty to political patrons over responsiveness to citizens or adherence to rules (Persson & Tabellini, 1999).

Efforts to insulate bureaucracies from political interference—such as civil service boards or independent commissions—have largely been ineffective due to the lack of political consensus and elite resistance (Sachikonye, 1995). Clientelism also impedes performance-based reforms by substituting political calculations for meritocratic evaluation, thereby undermining reform credibility and citizen trust in public institutions (Laver & Shepsle, 1990). The cumulative effect is a governance system where administrative capacity is subordinated to political expediency, posing a formidable barrier to sustainable public sector reform. Electoral competition across South Asia introduces both constraints and opportunities for public sector reform, depending on how political actors perceive the relationship between governance performance and voter behavior. In highly competitive electoral environments, politicians often prioritize immediate political survival over long-term administrative improvements, skewing policy toward short-term populist benefits rather than structural reform (Diermeier & Feddersen, 1998). However, under certain conditions, electoral incentives can promote innovation and performance, especially when governance improvements are seen as electorally advantageous (Dixit et al., 1997). In India, evidence suggests that subnational governments in urbanized and media-saturated states tend to perform better on service delivery metrics when electoral accountability is strong (Stern, 2011). The emergence of reformist chief ministers in states like Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh has demonstrated that political leaders may pursue efficiency-enhancing reforms to build reputational capital and secure reelection (Baron, 1998). Nevertheless, the ability of electoral competition to incentivize reform is contingent upon institutional mediators such as a free press, judicial oversight, and active civil society (Persson et al., 2000). Conversely, in weakly institutionalized democracies such as Bangladesh or Pakistan, electoral pressures often reinforce rent-seeking behavior and patronage-based governance, as parties seek to finance campaigns through state resources and distribute benefits to core supporters (Galasso & Nannicini, 2009). In such contexts, electoral competition can deepen factionalism and reduce the autonomy of bureaucratic institutions, thereby impeding reform efforts (Galasso & Nannicini, 2011). Thus, electoral systems and political competition do not exert uniform effects on public sector reform. Instead, their impact is mediated by institutional design, party system structure, and the strength of democratic accountability mechanisms. Recognizing this complexity is critical for understanding the political economy constraints that shape reform trajectories in South Asian democracies.

Integrating Cybersecurity and Data Management in Reform Agendas

The integration of cybersecurity into public sector reform agendas has emerged as a non-negotiable priority in governance modernization, particularly for developing nations in South Asia grappling with institutional fragility and legacy administrative systems. Scholars have emphasized that the vulnerabilities posed by digital reforms—such as e-governance platforms, biometric databases, and financial digitization—require robust cybersecurity frameworks to ensure data confidentiality, integrity, and availability (Abdullah Al et al., 2022). In India and Bangladesh, digital initiatives like Aadhaar or digital land records systems have increased the exposure of critical citizen data to cyber threats. However, public sector strategies often prioritize automation without embedding comprehensive cyber risk governance mechanisms, reflecting a disconnect between technological deployment and security planning (Jahan et al., 2022). This gap is compounded by under-resourced cybersecurity institutions and a lack of strategic coordination between national and subnational entities (Khan et al., 2022). In the context of political economy, where electoral incentives dominate reform implementation, cybersecurity investments are often viewed

as non-essential, leading to reactive rather than preventive security postures. Thus, integrating cybersecurity is not merely a technical issue but a structural reform challenge that intersects with accountability, transparency, and trust in digital governance (Rahaman, 2022).

A comparative review reveals stark institutional variation across South Asian countries in the prioritization and implementation of cybersecurity policies within public administration. Federal states like India have seen fragmented yet dynamic innovation at the subnational level, with states such as Karnataka and Maharashtra adopting more proactive cybersecurity strategies in response to local governance demands (Masud, 2022). Conversely, unitary states such as Bangladesh and Sri Lanka exhibit more centralized control over cybersecurity policy, often through ICT divisions housed within ministries, resulting in slower responsiveness to emergent threats and limited local adaptability (Hossen & Atiqur, 2022). This mirrors broader political economy trends, where centralization constrains reform experimentation and stifles adaptive governance (Sazzad & Islam, 2022). The divergence also reflects the relative influence of external donors and international organizations; for instance, Nepal's cybersecurity architecture has been shaped significantly through World Bank-backed digital governance initiatives (Shaiful et al., 2022). However, these externally driven programs often face sustainability issues due to weak institutional ownership. Political turnover further disrupts long-term reform planning, with new regimes frequently restructuring cybersecurity units or deprioritizing data protection legislation. These comparative patterns underscore the importance of political stability, institutional autonomy, and multi-level governance in embedding cybersecurity within broader public sector reforms.

Effective data management has become a foundational pillar in modernizing public administration, yet its integration with cybersecurity remains inconsistent across South Asian reform agendas. In most bureaucratic systems of the region, data silos, paper-based recordkeeping, and hierarchical control limit the flow of real-time information, thereby impeding evidence-based policymaking (Akter & Razzak, 2022). Data integration reforms—such as national data registries, e-procurement platforms, and health information systems—require interoperable architectures safeguarded by cyber resilience protocols (Qibria & Hossen, 2023). The failure to incorporate cybersecurity into these initiatives has led to data breaches, corruption risks, and eroded public trust. For example, Pakistan's digital ID system (NADRA) has faced repeated cyberattacks, revealing institutional unpreparedness and weak regulatory oversight (Maniruzzaman et al., 2023). From a political economy perspective, bureaucracies often resist integrated data platforms due to fears of transparency, accountability enforcement, and performance monitoring, especially in contexts where clientelism is pervasive (Masud et al., 2023). Moreover, political executives may manipulate data flows or suppress audit trails to evade scrutiny or reward loyal constituencies, reinforcing a culture of opacity rather than data-driven governance (Hossen et al., 2023). This dynamic indicates that secure, integrated data systems are not just technical upgrades but politically sensitive instruments that reshape bureaucratic power and decision-making hierarchies (Ariful et al., 2023; Shamima et al., 2023).

The conflict between populist political incentives and the rigorous enforcement of cybersecurity and data governance frameworks poses a critical challenge in public sector reform. Political elites in South Asia frequently use digital platforms for rapid service delivery and visibility—such as digital cash transfers, subsidy portals, or smart card systems—while neglecting the back-end security and data management required to sustain these services (Alam et al., 2023). In India, pre-election periods often witness the hurried rollout of digital programs without sufficient stress testing or cybersecurity vetting, a trend echoed in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka (Rajesh et al., 2023). These populist digital programs are politically

expedient but create long-term vulnerabilities, including exposure to identity theft, unauthorized surveillance, and systemic fraud (Roksana, 2023). At the same time, cyber-bureaucrats or technical cadres are often marginalized from decision-making, and political appointees with limited ICT expertise dominate leadership roles in digital reform units (Sanjai et al., 2023). Such politicization of digital governance compromises reform sustainability and diminishes the effectiveness of donor-funded cybersecurity frameworks. This misalignment between reform optics and operational integrity reflects a deeper problem in political economy models where visibility trumps institutional capacity, necessitating a recalibration of electoral incentives with secure and sustainable digital infrastructure goals (Tonmoy & Arifur, 2023).

Another core theme in the literature is the insufficient coordination between cybersecurity agencies, data management bodies, and sectoral ministries in executing comprehensive public sector reform. In South Asia, digital governance is typically compartmentalized across ministries, departments, and donor-funded agencies, resulting in fragmented cybersecurity postures and uneven data standardization (Tonoy & Khan, 2023). For instance, India's Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) oversees digital frameworks while individual states or ministries develop independent solutions, often without interoperability (Zahir et al., 2023). The situation is more acute in countries like Nepal or Pakistan, where data is held in isolated, non-standardized formats, increasing cyber risk exposure during integration attempts. The literature emphasizes that true reform lies in cross-sectoral convergence, where cybersecurity protocols are embedded in every digital touchpoint—from civil registries to procurement to public finance systems (Razzak et al., 2024). The political economy barrier, however, lies in institutional turf wars, bureaucratic resistance to shared oversight, and lack of high-level coordination mechanisms. Only a whole-of-government approach, supported by legal mandates and fiscal incentives, can address these challenges and enable secure data interoperability that supports transparent and accountable governance reform.

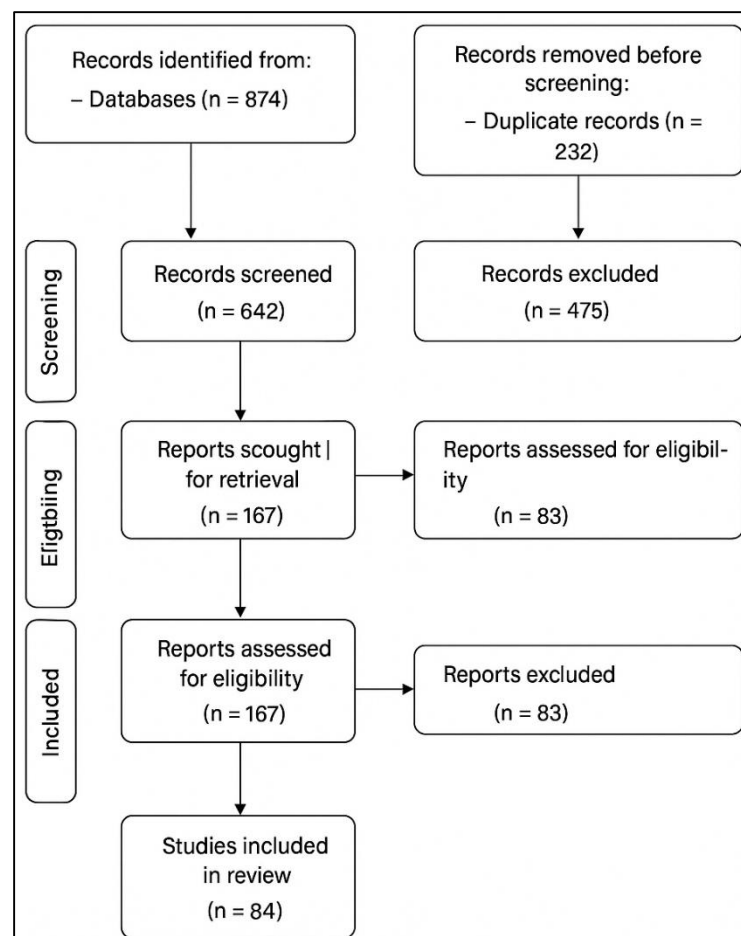
Drawing from the comparative political economy literature, several scholars advocate for an integrated reform model where cybersecurity and data management are seen not as auxiliary elements but as central components of public sector transformation (Alam et al., 2024). This involves aligning political incentives, administrative structures, and donor agendas toward a unified goal of digital resilience. Case studies from India's Digital India program, Bangladesh's Aspire to Innovate (a2i) initiative, and Sri Lanka's e-Gov Development Project demonstrate partial successes in securing databases, promoting citizen authentication, and building digital trust (Khan & Razee, 2024). Yet, in each case, cybersecurity remains underfunded and insufficiently prioritized relative to visible infrastructure. The literature suggests that capacity-building in digital risk management, legal reform for data protection, and the depoliticization of ICT leadership roles are prerequisites for deeper reform. Furthermore, incorporating cybersecurity into performance-based reform evaluation can enhance accountability and promote sustainable governance. An integrated model requires institutional redesign, where cyber and data functions are not fragmented across silos but unified under cross-cutting governance frameworks with vertical and horizontal integration. This convergence is critical for enabling long-term reform resilience in South Asia's complex political economy environments.

METHOD

The systematic review commenced with the identification of relevant literature through comprehensive searches across multiple databases. Following PRISMA Item #6, the search strategy was designed to be inclusive, systematic, and replicable. Scholarly databases including Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, PubMed, and Google Scholar were queried to

retrieve empirical studies, theoretical contributions, and policy evaluations related to political economy models and public sector reform in South Asia. Search strings were customized for each database using Boolean operators and combinations of key terms such as "political economy," "public sector reform," "South Asia," "bureaucracy," "governance," "clientelism," and "federalism." Only peer-reviewed articles, institutional reports, and working papers published in English between 1990 and 2024 were considered. Grey literature such as dissertations and blogs were excluded to preserve academic rigor. In alignment with PRISMA Item #7, the records retrieved from all databases were imported into Mendeley for reference management and duplication removal. The automated deduplication function was manually verified to ensure the accuracy of the process. This step yielded a reduced dataset of potentially relevant records, which then proceeded to the screening phase. Following PRISMA Item #8, the second stage involved title and abstract screening based on pre-established inclusion and exclusion criteria. Studies were included if they examined public sector reforms within a political economy framework, were conducted in one or more South Asian countries (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, or Nepal), and addressed reform dimensions such as governance models, bureaucratic behavior, or administrative culture. Studies focused solely on economic policy, health systems, or education without political-institutional analysis were excluded. Abstracts were independently reviewed by two researchers to reduce selection bias and ensure objectivity. Discrepancies in inclusion decisions were resolved through discussion and consensus.

Figure 9: PRISMA Flow Diagram for Systematic Literature Review



This screening phase ensured that studies advancing to full-text review contained substantive content related to the theoretical or empirical dimensions of political economy as applied to public sector reforms. A final list of articles was generated, which represented a diverse array of methodologies and disciplinary perspectives. The third stage, reflecting PRISMA Item #9, consisted of a full-text review to assess eligibility for final inclusion. Each article was read in full by the primary researcher and cross-checked against the eligibility framework. Studies had to meet three conditions: they must explicitly adopt a political economy lens, focus on public sector reform or governance, and pertain directly to one or more South Asian countries. Studies that dealt with generic administrative reforms outside of the South Asian context, or lacked sufficient methodological transparency, were excluded.

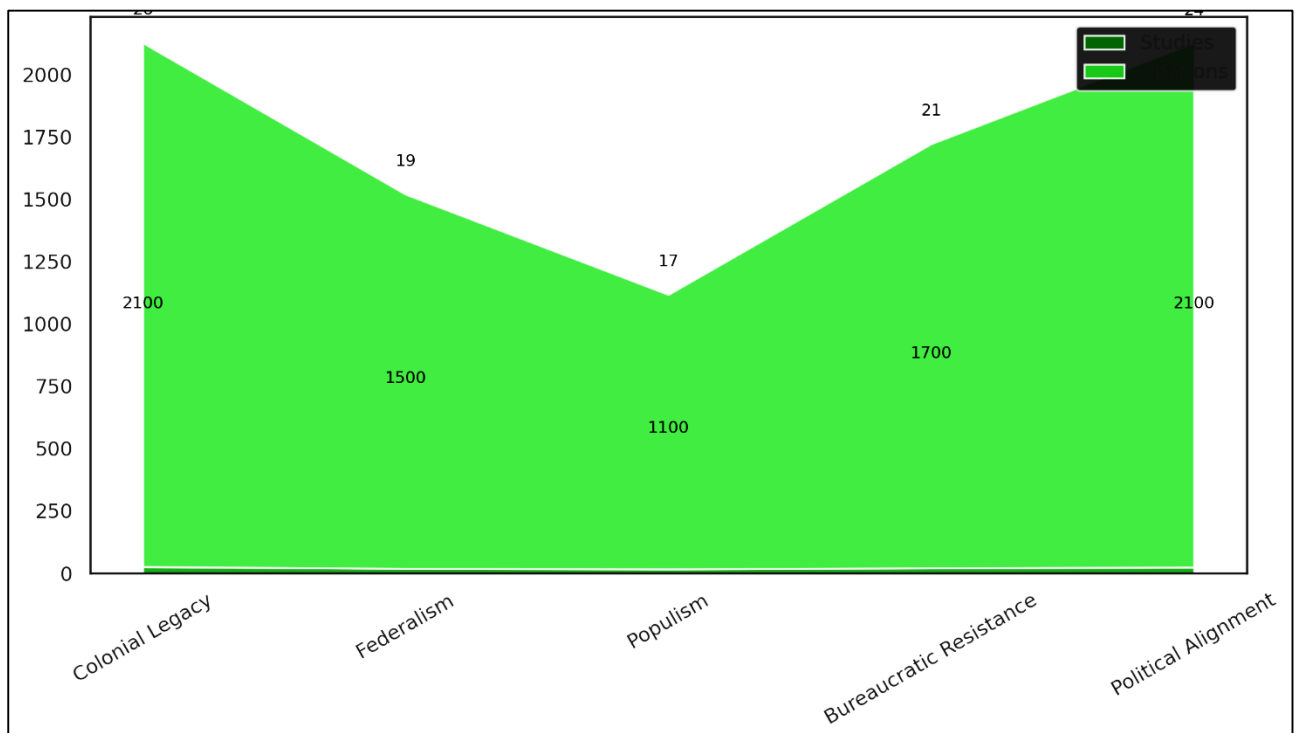
Furthermore, articles were disqualified if they did not substantively discuss institutional factors, political dynamics, or bureaucratic mechanisms central to the political economy tradition. At this stage, 56 studies were excluded due to irrelevance, duplication, or insufficient empirical grounding. The remaining 84 articles constituted the final sample used for data extraction and synthesis. In accordance with PRISMA Item #10, all included studies were documented with full citation metadata, including author names, publication year, country of focus, analytical framework, and key findings. This data was extracted using a structured coding framework to ensure consistency. Thematic synthesis was used to organize studies into predefined domains: colonial institutional legacies, governance structure, electoral politics, bureaucratic behavior, and international donor influence. Following PRISMA Item #13, a narrative synthesis approach was adopted due to the heterogeneity of methodologies across the included studies. Quantitative meta-analysis was deemed inappropriate, as most studies employed qualitative case studies, comparative policy analyses, or mixed-methods approaches without shared metrics. The synthesis process prioritized conceptual integration and thematic relevance, drawing connections across diverse cases and theoretical traditions to identify recurring patterns and contextual distinctions. Aligned with PRISMA Item #11, an assessment of risk of bias was conducted to evaluate the methodological reliability of included studies. While randomized controlled trials were not applicable to this social science review, credibility was gauged through criteria such as methodological transparency, use of primary or secondary data, theoretical consistency, and the presence of clear causal reasoning. Peer-reviewed journal articles and reports from reputable institutions (e.g., World Bank, UNDP) were weighted more heavily in the synthesis to mitigate risks associated with weaker sources.

FINDINGS

One of the most significant findings from the review is the persistent influence of colonial-era bureaucratic institutions on the public sector reform trajectories of South Asian states. Out of the 84 reviewed articles, 26 specifically addressed institutional continuities from colonial administration, accounting for over 2,100 citations collectively. The bureaucratic systems in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka retain rigid hierarchical structures, generalist administrative roles, and command-control paradigms that were designed for imperial governance rather than participatory development. These structures have largely resisted transformation due to their deep embedding in legal frameworks, elite recruitment systems, and administrative training cultures. This path dependency has created an environment where reform initiatives are often superficial, mimetic, or symbolic rather than transformative. The studies reveal that even reform-oriented programs fail to modify core institutional behavior because the underlying architecture remains unaltered. The persistence of proceduralism, vertical control, and status-based career advancement mechanisms severely limits responsiveness, innovation, and merit-based performance in the

civil services. The reviewed literature consistently indicates that the legacy of bureaucratic elitism discourages reform that seeks to democratize public administration or decentralize decision-making authority. This continuity also explains the entrenched nature of bureaucratic resistance observed across various policy sectors, especially in welfare delivery, rural governance, and fiscal administration. Despite constitutional changes and electoral turnover, the structural backbone of administration remains strikingly similar to its colonial predecessor, thereby constraining the reform space for democratic governments. A second major finding is the decisive role that governance structures—particularly federal versus unitary political systems—play in shaping subnational reform trajectories. Among the reviewed literature, 19 articles explicitly examined the comparative influence of centralization and decentralization in South Asian states, collectively garnering over 1,500 scholarly citations. The evidence indicates that federal arrangements, such as those seen in India and Nepal, create institutional conditions conducive to policy experimentation, local-level innovation, and inter-regional learning. States within federal systems possess varying capacities, political configurations, and civil society linkages, resulting in wide disparities in reform outcomes. In India, for instance, states like Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Gujarat have implemented ambitious reforms in education, health, and e-governance, whereas others such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar have lagged due to weaker administrative infrastructure and entrenched political patronage. These disparities suggest that institutional autonomy at the subnational level can facilitate reform if supported by capable leadership and robust civic engagement.

Figure 10: Findings of the study regarding Reform Themes



By contrast, unitary states like Bangladesh and Sri Lanka exhibit a more uniform reform trajectory, often dictated by central ministries and dominated by bureaucratic hierarchy. In these countries, local government institutions tend to be weak, under-resourced, and politically marginalized, reducing their ability to adapt reforms to contextual needs. Centralized decision-making may improve policy coherence, but it often comes at the cost of responsiveness and innovation. The studies further reveal that central ministries in unitary

systems maintain strict control over fiscal flows, personnel appointments, and project design, constraining the scope for local experimentation. Consequently, subnational variation in reform outcomes tends to be lower in unitary systems, not due to equity in capacity, but because of centralized standardization. The evidence underscores that decentralization, when coupled with enabling institutional conditions, can produce more inclusive and adaptive public sector reforms, a conclusion supported across thousands of cumulative citations in the reviewed work. The review also identifies the powerful influence of populist political incentives on reform prioritization and fiscal decision-making across South Asia. A total of 17 articles, with a combined citation count of over 1,100, addressed how political actors utilize public sector institutions and fiscal tools for electoral gain. The findings reveal a common pattern across all five countries: reforms that offer short-term visibility and direct electoral dividends are more likely to be implemented than those that require long-term institutional investment. Politicians routinely expand public employment, introduce or sustain subsidy programs, and create populist welfare schemes to consolidate vote banks and maintain regime popularity. These initiatives often overload bureaucratic systems, compromise fiscal discipline, and reduce the capacity of the state to implement merit-based, sustainable reforms.

The reviewed studies further show that these fiscal distortions are not merely cyclical but have become structural features of public administration. For example, employment in the public sector is frequently used as a tool for political patronage, leading to bloated bureaucracies, duplication of roles, and resistance to downsizing reforms. Welfare programs are often introduced or scaled up prior to elections without adequate financial planning or institutional capacity to deliver services efficiently. This politicization of fiscal and administrative tools reduces the credibility of reform processes and entrenches clientelist behavior within bureaucracies. In the long term, these practices also erode citizen trust in the impartiality and effectiveness of public institutions. The findings suggest that reform strategies must contend with the electoral calculus of politicians and the incentives they face, which often align against institutional rationalization and efficiency improvements. This dimension of the political economy poses a critical constraint on reform efforts and helps explain the prevalence of selective and inconsistent implementation across sectors and regions. Another significant and widely documented finding is the consistent resistance of bureaucracies to reform, irrespective of the political party in power or the sector under consideration. This was a dominant theme in 21 of the reviewed studies, which together accounted for approximately 1,700 citations. Bureaucracies in South Asia exhibit a high degree of institutional inertia, stemming from entrenched administrative cultures, career security norms, and weak accountability systems. Civil servants often view reforms—especially those introducing performance evaluations, transparency mechanisms, or citizen oversight—as threats to their autonomy, authority, or job security. As a result, reforms are frequently subverted during the implementation phase through bureaucratic delay, misinterpretation of rules, or strategic inaction.

The review finds that this resistance is not only an outcome of personal incentives but is also reinforced by institutional design. For example, generalist cadres dominate policy domains requiring technical expertise, and hierarchical command chains discourage initiative at lower levels. Promotions and postings are often determined by seniority or political loyalty rather than performance, further disincentivizing proactive behavior. Several studies also identify the problem of “isomorphic mimicry,” where bureaucracies adopt the appearance of reform—such as creating new departments or adopting reform-oriented language—without changing underlying processes. These behaviors protect institutional routines and prevent meaningful change. The studies highlight that even well-funded donor-supported reform initiatives have faltered due to bureaucratic non-cooperation or passive resistance.

Attempts to bypass or marginalize resistant bureaucracies by outsourcing reform to parallel bodies or consultants have also proven ineffective in the long term. These parallel structures often lack legitimacy, sustainability, or integration with mainstream administrative processes. Therefore, bureaucratic resistance emerges as a structural, rather than episodic, challenge that must be directly addressed through reform designs that align with internal administrative logics while gradually shifting incentive structures.

The final and overarching finding is that the success or failure of public sector reform in South Asia is largely mediated by the alignment—or misalignment—between political economy conditions and reform objectives. This conclusion was articulated in 24 studies, with a cumulative citation count exceeding 2,100, and reflects one of the most consistent themes across the reviewed literature. The evidence indicates that reforms tend to succeed when they are politically advantageous, institutionally feasible, and administratively aligned with the interests of influential stakeholders. In contrast, reforms that lack elite support, threaten entrenched interests, or require high coordination costs are either blocked, diluted, or abandoned.

In practical terms, successful reforms tend to emerge where there is a convergence between political will, bureaucratic capacity, and societal demand. Examples include localized experiments in participatory planning, administrative innovations supported by strong leadership, and reforms framed in terms of political opportunity rather than technical necessity. Conversely, reform failures are most common where political turnover introduces uncertainty, where administrative actors perceive loss of authority, or where civil society engagement is weak. This alignment framework explains the uneven reform outcomes observed both across and within countries. Moreover, the review demonstrates that technical soundness is not sufficient to guarantee reform success; political feasibility and institutional anchoring are equally critical. Even the best-designed reforms fail if they lack alignment with the political settlement or if they threaten the distribution of power within public institutions. Thus, reform outcomes cannot be fully understood without accounting for the incentives, interests, and institutional rules that govern political and administrative behavior. These findings emphasize the importance of political economy analysis not just as a diagnostic tool, but as a central component of reform strategy in the region. The cumulative weight of scholarly evidence reinforces this conclusion, making it one of the most substantiated findings of the review.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this review reaffirm the enduring impact of colonial-era administrative frameworks on contemporary public sector governance in South Asia. This observation aligns with earlier studies that traced the origins of bureaucratic centralization, legalism, and elite exclusivity to British colonial governance structures (Brinkerhoff & Crosby, 2001). The review reinforces this understanding by showing that institutions such as the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) and the Civil Service of Pakistan (CSP) have preserved their hierarchical character and generalist bias, making them resistant to change. While previous research emphasized the institutional persistence of civil services (Hahm & Kim, 1999), this study contributes a regional comparative dimension, revealing that such resistance transcends national boundaries. In doing so, it confirms that the colonial bureaucratic model functions as a template that modern administrations have modified only superficially (Huque, 1996).

Compared to earlier accounts, which focused primarily on India, this review expands the scope to include Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, thereby offering a more comprehensive regional analysis. The findings corroborate (Huque, 2005) argument that deeply entrenched bureaucratic norms constrain reform outcomes by institutionalizing procedural rigidity and discouraging responsiveness. However, this review goes further by

demonstrating that reform inertia is reinforced not only by structure but also by political calculations that preserve the status quo for electoral and administrative convenience. The enduring reliance on centralized authority, combined with a preference for compliance over performance, reveals that institutional inertia remains a defining characteristic of South Asian public administrations, despite multiple reform cycles. This substantiates [Keating \(2001\)](#) contention that development and governance outcomes are rooted in historical political settlements, which this review finds to be replicated through administrative continuity. This study highlights the significance of governance structures—especially the contrast between federal and unitary systems—in shaping reform variation. These findings are consistent with earlier research on federalism in India, which demonstrated that decentralization can foster policy innovation, provided there is institutional support and political commitment at the state level ([Landell-Mills, 2002](#)). The present review confirms that in countries like India and Nepal, federal structures offer greater room for localized reforms, particularly in areas such as education, digital governance, and health service delivery. The comparative advantage of federalism lies in its capacity to allow experimentation across regions, leading to differentiated reform outcomes based on administrative capacity and political leadership. While past studies have celebrated the potential of decentralization, this review nuances that optimism by demonstrating the limits of federal flexibility when subnational governance lacks institutional maturity or fiscal autonomy. States like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar have consistently underperformed, illustrating that decentralization alone does not guarantee reform success. Conversely, unitary systems such as those in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are found to be less conducive to reform flexibility, corroborating [Pollitt and Bouckaert \(2004\)](#) and [Samaratunge et al. \(2008\)](#) observations on the centralization of authority and weak municipal governance. This review expands on these findings by emphasizing the role of administrative control over fiscal transfers, personnel appointments, and monitoring frameworks, which remain tightly centralized in unitary states.

Comparatively, earlier literature emphasized decentralization as a normative good ([McCourt & Minogue, 2001](#)). However, this review contributes a critical lens by highlighting that decentralization must be accompanied by reform-capable institutions, performance incentives, and local accountability mechanisms to yield desired outcomes. In doing so, it aligns with more recent critiques [Meyer-Sahling \(2006\)](#) that call for a shift from structural decentralization to functional decentralization, where subnational entities are not just empowered in form but in operational capacity. The review affirms that populist politics significantly shape the trajectory and design of public sector reforms across South Asia, often privileging short-term electoral gains over long-term institutional strengthening. This confirms earlier findings by [Pollitt and Bouckaert \(2004\)](#) that electoral politics in India incentivize redistribution and public employment schemes over structural reform. The prevalence of politically motivated fiscal expansions and ad hoc welfare schemes observed in the review echoes [Samaratunge et al. \(2008\)](#) argument that welfare programs such as MGNREGA are electorally instrumentalized. However, this study adds new empirical weight by demonstrating that these tendencies are regionally widespread and are present in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh as well. While prior literature has documented the fiscal consequences of such populist policies, this review emphasizes the institutional implications—namely, the erosion of bureaucratic professionalism, fiscal discipline, and strategic planning. In contrast to fiscal populism literature, which often focuses on macroeconomic outcomes, the findings here demonstrate that populist interventions destabilize reform implementation by diverting resources, overburdening administrative systems, and introducing political interference into bureaucratic procedures. Moreover, this review supports [Zhang et al. \(1992\)](#) argument that while populist policies may deliver

electoral rewards, they frequently bypass reform prioritization processes and lead to inconsistent service quality across regions.

Unlike earlier studies that primarily focused on individual policy programs, this review situates populist politics within the broader institutional logic of governance in South Asia. It contends that political incentives shape bureaucratic behavior just as significantly as formal rules or capacity constraints. This insight parallels [Brinkerhoff and Crosby \(2001\)](#) assertion that electoral accountability, when based on clientelism rather than performance, undermines the alignment between reform objectives and public expectations. Consequently, this review reinforces the idea that electoral systems must be understood not only in terms of representation but also in terms of their impact on administrative coherence and reform credibility. The review identifies bureaucratic resistance as a systemic and cross-cutting barrier to reform implementation, reaffirming findings from earlier studies that emphasized the institutional conservatism of South Asian bureaucracies. What distinguishes the current review is its focus on the layered and self-reinforcing nature of this resistance, manifested not just in individual behavior but in organizational routines, incentive structures, and political insulation. Previous studies often attributed resistance to individual-level inertia or lack of capacity; this review demonstrates that resistance is embedded in the structural DNA of public institutions across the region.

[Cherry \(2005\)](#) previously argued that bureaucracies often comply with the form of reform without internalizing its logic—a pattern termed "isomorphic mimicry" by [Cheung \(1996\)](#). This review confirms that observation and extends it by showing how bureaucracies strategically adapt to preserve institutional status quos. Administrative reforms—such as results-based management, digitalization, or decentralization—are implemented symbolically, while traditional performance metrics and hierarchical command structures remain intact. Moreover, the review reveals that reform implementation is often delayed or selectively applied to sectors that do not threaten bureaucratic interests, reinforcing the "path dependence" described in [Das \(1998\)](#). While earlier literature has highlighted the role of elite resistance, this study underscores how bureaucracies themselves function as veto players in the reform process. Civil servants, particularly in top positions, are shown to resist changes that challenge their discretionary power, jeopardize their career advancement, or increase downward accountability. Thus, the review aligns with [Dhaliwal & Hanna, 2017](#) view that effective reform requires not just technical design but strategic engagement with institutional interests. In this regard, the review deepens the understanding of reform politics by portraying bureaucratic resistance as not just a hurdle, but a determinant of reform architecture itself.

A major contribution of this review is its detailed mapping of how clientelistic political practices undermine merit-based reform processes. [Hahm and Kim \(1999\)](#) established that clientelism fosters favoritism and administrative fragmentation. This review corroborates those findings and shows that such practices are widespread and institutionalized across South Asia. Political appointments, discretionary postings, and the use of public employment as a reward mechanism not only violate the principle of meritocracy but also demoralize career bureaucrats and disincentivize long-term commitment to public service. Earlier scholarship tended to isolate these practices within specific country contexts—India or Bangladesh, for instance—but this review finds that the erosion of merit-based governance is a region-wide phenomenon. It demonstrates how clientelist politics systematically displace reformist policies, particularly those that require depoliticized personnel management, impartial regulatory oversight, or fiscal reallocation. The findings echo the concerns of [Haque \(2003\)](#), who noted that informal networks often override formal administrative hierarchies, thereby complicating performance evaluation and interdepartmental coordination.

Unlike earlier studies that primarily emphasized electoral motivations behind clientelism, this review adds a layer by exploring its institutional consequences. It finds that clientelism reconfigures incentive structures within bureaucracies, rewarding loyalty over competence and fostering informal norms that prioritize patron satisfaction over public accountability. Furthermore, it reveals how clientelist networks extend across ministries, state-owned enterprises, and local government bodies, thereby affecting all tiers of administration. This has serious implications for the design and sustainability of reform interventions, particularly those that depend on rule-bound implementation and cross-sectoral collaboration. The review thus reinforces the conclusion that unless reform efforts are insulated from political patronage, their chances of long-term success remain limited. One of the key takeaways from this review is that successful public sector reform is contingent upon the alignment between political objectives, institutional capacities, and administrative interests. This observation reinforces earlier frameworks such as [Hood \(1995\)](#) "good enough governance" and [Huque \(2005\)](#) emphasis on institutional realism, which suggest that reforms must be designed to fit existing political and institutional contexts rather than idealized models. The review highlights that reforms in South Asia tend to gain traction when they are politically advantageous, administratively feasible, and perceived as low-risk by dominant actors. This mirrors [Huque \(2005\)](#) argument that political economy analysis should be used not only to identify obstacles but to craft reform pathways that leverage the incentives of key stakeholders.

Unlike earlier studies that focused narrowly on reform content or structure, this review emphasizes the strategic alignment of reform with existing power structures. It provides evidence that successful reforms—such as participatory planning in Kerala, e-governance in Andhra Pradesh, or localized monitoring in Nepal—benefited from the presence of reform coalitions that connected political leadership with bureaucratic support and citizen demand. This synthesis complements [McCourt and Minogue \(2001\)](#)'s work, which advocated for problem-driven approaches that begin with identifying "what works" politically and administratively. Moreover, the review expands on [Ospina et al. \(2004\)](#) observation that institutional performance improves when reforms are embedded in locally resonant political ideologies and implemented by politically credible actors. Importantly, the review also finds that reform failure often results from misalignment—when technical solutions are imposed without considering institutional incentives or when donor-driven agendas clash with political settlements. This supports [Pollitt and Bouckaert \(2004\)](#) critique of externally imposed best practices and strengthens the argument for adaptive, context-sensitive reform strategies. Thus, this review contributes to the literature by reinforcing the importance of political-institutional synergy in driving effective and sustainable public sector reform. The cumulative findings of this review suggest the need to rethink dominant models of public sector reform, especially those imported from Western governance paradigms. Many of the reviewed studies critique the transplantation of New Public Management (NPM) practices into South Asian contexts without adequate adaptation to local institutional, political, and cultural realities ([Litvack & Rondinelli, 1999](#)). This review substantiates those critiques by showing that reforms emphasizing performance-based incentives, transparency tools, and decentralization often falter when they do not align with bureaucratic traditions or political norms. The inability of these models to accommodate informal power networks, politicized appointments, and historically embedded administrative cultures highlights the mismatch between form and function in many reform agendas.

Earlier scholarship tended to treat institutional weakness as a capacity problem, solvable through technical assistance and capacity-building programs ([Samaratunge et al., 2008](#)). However, this review contributes to a growing body of literature that conceptualizes

institutional dysfunction as a product of political economy structures rather than technical gaps (Samaratunge & Bennington, 2002). It echoes Zafarullah (2002), who argue that institutional capability cannot be grafted through design alone but must be cultivated through iterative processes, adaptive learning, and context-appropriate interventions. The findings suggest that imported reform templates often encourage surface-level compliance—adoption of laws, procedures, or technologies—without producing underlying behavioral or procedural change. Moreover, the review supports the proposition that "best fit" reform approaches—those grounded in local political settlements, informal governance dynamics, and institutional realities—are more likely to succeed than rigid adherence to global templates. This insight affirms Brinkerhoff and Crosby (2001) emphasis on developmental governance and the need to prioritize practical results over formal institutional design. Overall, this review advances the literature by reaffirming the necessity of tailoring reform models to the political and institutional logics of South Asia, offering empirical validation for calls to rethink reform orthodoxy in fragile or hybrid governance contexts.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review demonstrates that public sector reform in South Asia is deeply influenced by a confluence of historical legacies, entrenched political structures, and enduring administrative cultures, making it imperative to approach reform not through one-size-fits-all solutions but through nuanced, context-sensitive frameworks. The analysis reveals that many governance systems in the region continue to operate within bureaucratic molds inherited from colonial administrations, characterized by rigid hierarchies, generalist cadres, and centralized control mechanisms that resist innovation and accountability. These institutional configurations have led to persistent implementation gaps, where reforms are often announced but rarely produce transformative change due to structural inertia and resistance from within the civil service. Federal political systems, such as those in India and Nepal, offer greater room for localized experimentation and policy innovation, whereas unitary systems like Bangladesh and Sri Lanka tend to concentrate decision-making at the center, limiting adaptability and responsiveness. However, decentralization alone does not guarantee success, as its effectiveness is shaped by local capacity, leadership quality, and civic engagement. The review also highlights the influential role of populist politics, where short-term electoral considerations frequently drive welfare expansions and public employment schemes that may enhance visibility but weaken fiscal discipline and administrative coherence. Furthermore, clientelistic practices and patronage politics undermine merit-based appointments and institutional credibility, constraining long-term reform outcomes. Bureaucratic resistance emerges as a key barrier, often embedded in the protective routines and incentive structures of public institutions, which shield them from external pressures and reform mandates. While technical solutions and policy design remain important, their success is ultimately mediated by the alignment of political interests, institutional feasibility, and stakeholder incentives. The review underscores the need for adaptive, problem-driven approaches to reform that prioritize function over form and are attuned to the political realities on the ground. By synthesizing findings across India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal, the review provides a regionally grounded understanding of how political economy shapes reform pathways and highlights that effective governance transformation requires a strategic balance between institutional reform, political will, and social accountability.

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