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## **Public Administration Reform in Lebanon from the Leadership Perspective**

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*This paper analyzes the challenges and prospects of public administration reform in Lebanon from the lens of the organizational leader, and explores the role of information and communications technology (ICT), and digital transformation. The paper relates a historical count of the public administration in Lebanon, and then compares theoretical frameworks to actual attempts undertaken by leaders of government agencies.*

*The research finds proof that efforts to reform the public administration is possible when the approach of the organizational leader is both pragmatic and inclusive. The findings support the recommendation to*

*adopt inclusive organizational development (OD) methods to engage constituencies in the reform venture.*

**Key-words:** *Public Administration Reform – ICT - Digital Transformation - Organizational Development (OD).*

*Ce document analyse les défis et les perspectives de la réforme de l'administration publique au Liban du point de vue du dirigeant de l'organisation, et explore le rôle des technologies de l'information et de la communication (TIC), et de la transformation numérique. Le document relate un décompte historique de l'administration publique au Liban, puis compare les cadres théoriques aux tentatives réelles entreprises par les dirigeants des organismes gouvernementaux.*

*La recherche apporte la preuve que les efforts de réforme de l'administration publique sont possibles lorsque l'approche du dirigeant de l'organisation est à la fois pragmatique et inclusive. Les résultats appuient la recommandation d'adopter des méthodes de développement organisationnel (DO) inclusives pour faire participer les groupes d'intérêt à l'entreprise de réforme.*

**Mots-clés:** *Réforme de l'administration publique - TIC - Transformation numérique - Développement organisationnel.*

*En este documento se analizan los desafíos y las perspectivas de la reforma de la administración pública en el Líbano desde la perspectiva del líder de la organización, y se explora el papel de la tecnología de la información y las comunicaciones (TIC) y la transformación digital. El documento relata un recuento histórico de la administración pública en el Líbano y luego compara los marcos teóricos con los intentos reales emprendidos por los dirigentes de los organismos gubernamentales.*

*La investigación encuentra pruebas de que los esfuerzos por reformar la administración pública son posibles cuando el enfoque del líder de la organización es a la vez pragmático e inclusivo. Las conclusiones respaldan la recomendación de adoptar métodos de desarrollo organizativo (DO) inclusivos para hacer participar a los grupos de interés en la empresa de reforma.*

**Palabras-clave:** *Reforma de la administración pública - TIC - Transformación digital - Desarrollo organizativo.*

## **Background and Motivation**

Synonymous to government is the struggle to improve government. As societies change, knowledge improves, and communication media proliferates and becomes faster, information becomes ubiquitous and people's needs evolve; eventually all governments become "subject to decay over time. The real issue is their ability to adapt and eventually fix themselves" (Fukuyama, 2014, p.546). Governments stand on three pillars: (1) the bureaucratic state, (2) the rule of law and (3) democratic accountability. Defining democracy as the "complex set of disaggregated, pluralistic interactions between [...] citizens and the state" (Carothers, 2006, p.9), and determining successful states as the ones relying on legitimate authority rather than coercion, propel the first pillar of government, the bureaucratic state to the forefront. Successful states "rely more heavily on authority, that is, voluntary compliance with the state's wishes based on a broad belief in the government's legitimacy" (Fukuyama, 2014, p.302). This contrasts with governments that use coercive force "hidden behind layers of law" (Fukuyama, 2014, p.302). Bettering government thus, commands improving its bureaucracy, the public administration per se. The natural tendency of public organizations, i.e. public administration or government agencies, to evolve towards extremely complex situations (D'Aveni & MacMillan, 1990; Markides, 2010; Morin, 1995), is greatly augmented by the interactions with the rule of law and democratic accountability, and the relationships with the remaining dimensions of social development: social mobility, economic growth, and justice (Fukuyama, 2014). Reality in the world of organizations is complex and multidimensional (Bartunek, 2011; Bonnet, Zardet, Savall, & Peron, 2016). The attempt to understand the problems of the public administration tends to become more complex as it comes closer to reality (Bonini, 1963). The incomplete or contradictory knowledge, the number of people and opinions involved, the large economic burden, and the interconnectedness of these problems with other problems renders wicket the resolution of public administration problems (Kolko, 2012; Rittel & Webber, 1973).

Measured by "its ability to make and enforce rules" (Fukuyama, 2014, p.435), the precarious situation of the public administration in Lebanon is in a vicious cycle. The decreasing quality of government reduces the confidence of citizens in the ability of the

administration to reform, and to deliver better and impartial services. In turn, the lack of trust hampers the will of the reform-minded stakeholders to act. Previous attempts to reform were deductive, top-down approaches led by the central power, yielding none or non-lasting results. This research attempts to analyze the Lebanese context of public administration from the local perspective. Reversing the cycle into a virtuous cycle of improving the quality and impartiality of public services, would strengthen the state, and subsequently increase citizens' demand for better service delivery. The paper is limited in scope and objectives. Its purpose is to look closer into the effectiveness of localized reform, and to demonstrate the ability of agency leaders to bring about reform when the will, wit, and tools are gathered. The proposition that this paper advances stipulates that:

*By contextualizing their approaches and deploying societal tactics, public servants in leadership positions can improve the performance of their agencies despite challenging environments. The adoption of digital means requires the same path.*

The data was collected from two years of a weekly talk-show episodes running until 2016 on a Lebanese radio station and appended by off-air non-formal interviews with public servants, civil society activists, and experts from all boards. Descriptive in nature, the analysis, constructivist and phenomenological, uses thematic analysis, literature readings, and observations, to describe the actual situation of the Lebanese administration and the reform minded civil servant from the lens of several theories. The reasoning approach followed an abductive path, with continuous back and forth between the inductive findings and applicable theories. The sampling procedure was purposive to include heterogeneous views (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The findings, thoroughly describing complex phenomena, are presented narratively in actionable format to make sense of them for the practitioner audience (Argyris, 2000; Weick, 1988, 2012). Quotes from respondents are embedded in-text in the paper's narrative to support the findings to enhance the reliability, but also the construct and conclusion validity (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Mimi & Adler, 1999).

Echoing the call for scholarship to be further engaged with the real world (Van de Ven, 2000; Tom Cummings, 2007, AOM Presidential Address), this research is driven by the belief that a vigilant

and engaged citizenship leads to government and governance betterment, and to re-align the socio-political issue in Lebanon from a power struggle towards the effective management of public endowments, the essence of liberal democracies (Messarra, 2013). The remainder of the paper briefly describes the historical path of the administration in Lebanon and its actual situation. It then discusses the pivotal role of local leadership, the societal tensions, and the problems plaguing the reform of public agencies. The paper closes with an analysis and recommendations regarding the approach to venture reform, and then considers the potential for information and communication technology.

## **Understanding the history and the present of public agencies**

Repository of the ancient heritage of Justinian's Roman school of law in Beirut, Lebanon perpetuates a tradition of jurisprudence and civil law (Hall, 2013). However, the more recent history is replete with somber episodes. This section provides a brief historical count of the public administration in Lebanon, and comparative cases from the US administration.

The four centuries of Ottoman rule until 1915, flattening much of the Levantine cultures, did not take hold in the semi-autonomous Mount Lebanon that developed ties with European powers and distinct cultural characteristics. The local princes swayed their administration closer to what they witnessed in Florence, France, Rome and other Enlightenment capitals. The divide-and-rule politics exercised by the Ottomans, supplemented by the struggle between the powerful European nations over controlling the weakening Ottoman Empire's territory, threw off the princes and seized the local system (Traboulsi, 2012). A bureaucracy molded on the French third republic during the quarter century French mandate until 1943, replaced the nepotistic system instituted during the last years of the Ottoman rule. However, the inherited confessional divisions and nepotistic kinship still plagued the modernized administration (Delvolvé, 1971; Hokayem, 1992; Couland, 2005).

On the other hand, the modern education system introduced by American and European missionaries and the dense links with the modern world, supplemented the nascent state with the human capacity

and exposure to modernize the public administration. The young, though [fairly] functioning democracy allowing rotation of power and burgeoning of new leaders, was battered by massive and disruptive security and political events in the Middle East region (El-Khazen, 2000). The most sizable leap in public administration reform came in the late 1950s and 60s, allowing the professionalization of the bureaucracy, instituting control and accountability, building capacity and training, and witnessing the rise of the principled and proud bureaucrats. They perceived themselves as bigger and know-better than politicians. These public servants were motivated by a sense of equity and achievement, and regarded themselves as the guardians of the common good (Nassif, 2008; Salibi, 1966). The public function's image in the Lebanese society soared and became detached from nepotism and clientelism some fifty years after the beginning of a similar process in the US public administration. Gifford Pinchot, appointed by President Theodore Roosevelt at the head of the United States Forest Service, was the pioneer of the professionalization of the American public administration, shielding his bureaucracy from political clientelism and nepotism. The impartial and professional delivery of public services in the US followed suit (Fukuyama, 2014).

More recently and after years of armed conflicts, a crowd of foreign armies, partial and full occupation of the Lebanese territory, and a plethora of armed groups thriving in Lebanon, the actual state of the public administration is again beset by nepotism and clientelism. After the end of the civil war, the line separating the national bureaucracy from the political power game was further blurred starting the 1990s, and remains very porous (El-Khazen, 2003). Though comprising talented people and enjoying a fairly good system and structures that lay the ground for a professional and impartial public function, the reality on the ground reflects a public perception of an inefficient and corrupt bureaucracy. This is persistent despite the fact that strides of modernizing aspects were introduced (Adwan, 2004; Beck, 2015; Leenders, 2012). Additionally, and most importantly, the clientelistic reality of the public administration impels the constituency towards established politicians to mediate the delivery of their essential and rightful services from government. This bequeaths citizens in a situation of dependence or moral indebtedness towards the politicians who leverage them into electoral support. It is not dissimilar from what

has been witnessed in better-established democracies. The case of “Byrd machine” in the US state of Virginia is a notorious example that lasted half a century until the mid-1970s (Tarter, 2013). The electoralism of political parties and the clientelism of the bureaucracy, therefore, perpetuate a “corrupt establishment” by means of a mutual reinforcement mechanism (Carothers, 2006). This prevented serious attempts in Lebanon to produce new political leaders or actual change, despite the vivid public sphere, the active civil society, free press, and the socially integrated and critical media. The battle ground to enhance democratic achievements, and to instill a sustainable social development is thus centered on a bedrock of public administration (Fukuyama, 2014; Zakaria, 1997). The numerous attempts to change the public administration in Lebanon in recent years fell short of producing more than short-term improvements. Institutionalizing change, in the sense of “structures that have attained resilience” (Scott, 1995, p.33) and relative stability over time (Savall & Zardet, 2011), requires addressing three elements: the regulative, the normative and the cognitive/cultural (Frynas & Stephens, 2015; Owen-Smith & Powell, 2008; Scott, 1995; Scott & Christensen, 1995; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). In the same vein, advancing the thesis of “new institutionalism” supports the behavioral over rationality and isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991) through plurality of action, linkages and “the multiplier effect of strengthening people’s own capacities and leaderships” (Edwards, 2014, p.95). The Lebanese society has what it takes to sustain an impartial and effective public administration and a sustainable democracy, namely a resilient and relatively large middle class (Moore, 1966), a good deal of individualism (Fukuyama, 2014; Zakaria, 1997), mass political participation (Carothers, 2006), a well seated educational level (Fukuyama, 2014), and an active public sphere (Habermas, 1971). However, to succeed a transformation and an institution process, one must uncork the reality on the ground and to take into consideration the informal powers of employees (Savall & Zardet, 2011; Savall & Zardet, 2012), the nature of the organization as a meaning-making system (Shani, Coghlan, & Cirella, 2012), the need to accord with local values and traditions (Fukuyama, 2014).

Beyond the “isomorphic mimicry” (Pritchett, Woolcock, & Andrews, 2013) of copying western institutions, and in line with the postmodern view of the organization (Boje, Gephart, & Thatchenkery, 1995; Senge, 1994), initiating change and institutionalizing reform is

an exercise to be broached “with” rather than “on” public officials (Shani et al., 2012; Savall & Zardet, 2011, 2012; Bonnet, Savall, Savall, & Zardet, 2018), circumventing defensive reflexes (Argyris, 2000; Cummings & Worley, 2014). The following section will look at the public administration intermittently from the viewpoint of civil society and the reform-minded public servant. It integrates respondent quotes with literature excerpts to attempt an analysis from the lens of theories addressing motivation, leadership, and organization development theories.

### **The pivotal role of local leaders in reforming public agencies**

This section makes the case for a pragmatic approach to public agency reform. It then combines theory excerpts with respondents’ quotes to analyze the motivational drives of stakeholders, and the equilibration dynamic that agency leaders face to advance reform.

The pressure to corrupt and the pressure to reform are omnipresent and coexist in the public service. Reform is a transformational change in the sense of behaviors, structures, processes, human potential and leadership approach (Boulding, 1956, 1958; Parsons, 1956). It requires a teleological-planned method that refers to the explanation of phenomena by the purpose they serve rather than by postulated causes. It views “development as a repetitive sequence of good formulation, implementation, evaluation, and modification of an envisioned end state” (Van de Ven & Sun, 2011, p.61). Therefore, transformation requires a pragmatic approach in the sense of bringing applicable solutions to real problems (Argyris, 2000). It also requires the active support of the most significant of the organizational stakeholders that is the leader (Cappelletti & Baker, 2010) and her thorough understanding of the reform motivations. The leader commands the narrative, weighs on the ante narrative, and controls the organizational agenda (Boje, 2008). The pressure to reform whether top-down, coming from the higher echelon of the hierarchy, or bottom-up coming from the grassroots of society, or internal from within the service itself, needs the buy-in of the agency leader. The motivations to demand change could be separated into three categories: the instrumental -the material reward and punishment, the normative - social pressure from significant others, and the moral -ethical considerations. Their analysis at four levels -personal, organizational, national and transnational- yielded multiple elements of pressure. The

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following table provides examples of pressure elements towards reform. The categories were inspired by the theory of multi-level social change in organizations (Aguilera et al., 2007) and aggregated from respondent quotes.

Level Motive	Individual	Organizational	National	Transnational
Moral	Personal ethics	Organizational Raison d'être- Servicing the citizen	Stewardship of public endowments	Stewardship of global endowments
Social	Respect in society	Citizens' pressure	Effectiveness of the administration	Leveling the administration to international standards
Instrumental	Legal pressures	Attract Resources, Wield Power	Efficiency of the administration	Reducing dependence on aid

Figure 1 – Pressure Elements Towards Reform

The a priori motivations that underlie the reform ventures are substantively different from one level to the other. The instrumental motivations at the individual level seem to be caught by concerns of legal accountability, while at the organizational level, the interest lies in resource availability and the influence that the agency yields in matters of public policy. Reforming agencies are perceived to be able wield power and attract more resources. At the national level, the instrumental motivation reflects resource efficiency, while transnational agencies aim at public agencies reducing their dependence on aid. The social motivation seems to be the most pressure yielding. The perception that "*public service is a social stature*" insinuates that agency leaders are keen on societal respect. The organizational motivation is, however, subject to citizens' pressure demanding better services. The national motivation is an expression of effectiveness,

where agencies are demanded to deliver their allotted services. The transnational motivation exhibits the will to bring local agencies to international standards. At the individual level, the emphasis on personal ethics as moral motivator comforts the religious character of the Lebanese society. At the agency level, it is expressed in the terms of servicing citizens, while national and transnational motives are expressed in terms of stewardship of public endowments. The pressure to reform builds up on the agency, and then transfers to the leader to take action when crossing a certain threshold. The leader acts following her guiding principles formed from experience and values (Woiceshyn, 2011). For this reason, many government agencies in Lebanon “*do not succumb to the surrounding degradation*” of the public service. These organizations are big and small, national and local, traditional and technology driven, mainstream and special status, and most importantly they are geographically and religiously diverse. However, the multiplicity of motivators demonstrates the degree of complexity that agency leaders have to grapple with, when venturing into reform. The “*religious and confessional factor plays a nefarious role in promoting nepotism*” and limits legal action or democratic accountability (Haase, 2018). The geographical belonging “*plays a role in kinship favoritism and endorses the rift between the developed center and the less favored peripheral regions*”. Despite these pressures, reforming organizations have become effective in the “*impartial delivery of services*”, and demonstrate “*top tier organizational efficiency compared to the public sector in general*”. They could serve as examples for the reform minded agency leader wishing to drive change in a turbulent environment. Attributes of the reform leader presupposes personal mastery in identifying a vision, comparing it to the reality of the organization and creatively attempting to bridge the gap between vision and reality (Rumelt, 2011; Senge, 1994). It entails personal characteristics and dedication to active listening and reflexive thinking, interpersonal skills and overcoming prejudice (Luft & Ingham, 1955). The reforming organizations are led by seasoned or young public servants who demonstrate the artistry of equilibration, which is preserving a dynamic equilibrium that balances competing values (Quinn, 2015). Analyzing the equilibration dynamic of the effective managers from the lens of the competing values theory (Quinn, 2015) yields a projection into the four quadrants that relatively reflects the following:

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- The person of the reform-minded leader competes, exhibiting productivity and efficiency in the organization. She develops an “*ambitious, though realistic vision*” of the organization, identifies the organization with the vision and “*rallies her subordinates around the vision*”. She is extroverted, addresses the media and speaks frequently to the public to deliver a clear message and a sense of purpose. To the internal public, the design and organization are made clear, usually centered around her person, and the “*objectives are broken down to realizable quants*” to the dismay of some [utopian] civil society actors.
- The collaborator in the reforming leader nurtures her subordinates and often “*encourages their capacity building*”. The latter has been a common feature in the Lebanese public administration for the last three decades, with visible results for the employees. Nevertheless, the multi-confessional recruitment process delivers a heterogeneous community with divided allegiances along the political lines. The exercise of “*listening to understand the sensitivities and apprehensions of the diversity*”, and the eventual transformation of “*inherent conflicts*” into cooperation yields an organization that can operate effectively across all communities and regions in Lebanon.
- Creating change and encouraging adaptability to the changing environment, is an especially valuable quality of the effective leader in the changing political environments, with changing ministers, and their incoming powerful advisors. Ministers have “*outsized powers in their ministries and have developed, since the 1990s, a practice that allows them to bypass some of the high ranking public servants*”. The leaders wishing to protect their organizational reform circumvent this challenging atmosphere. Through “*constant communication with political leaders*”, they are allowed a free hand in negotiating arrangements and clinching commitment from their employees.
- Balancing the participatory managerial act with the competing control function, especially with defensive and cynical employees is the hardest in mastering reform. The reform-minded leader, while centering the organization on her person,

assures “*stability and continuity through an active flow of information*” enabling communication, coordination and cooperation across her agency’s functions. Most importantly, a public organization is “*subjected to a rigid structure of rules and control institutions*”. Maintaining the spirit of camaraderie and innovation in her organization, while “*imposing compliance with governing rules and regulations assures her continuous control of the organization on the one hand, and the flow of resources on the other*”. Another challenging equilibration exercise stems from “*international standards that do not always comply with local rules*” and regulations. A common problem in the public administration, is when international development agencies coming from the UN, US, EU, and others, bring in different processes and standards to help the Lebanese agency reform; the competing standards are found to create dysfunctional processes because of the hybridity of the rules. The transnational agencies usually requiring compliance with international standards, add to the challenge of the reform minded leader. The compliance challenge is usually overcome by the reform leader through the steady flow of information, and the transparency engagement she was capable to forge among her employees, thus inspiring confidence and traceability.

The competing values frame shows the delicate task of the reform-minded leader in the Lebanese public administration. The fact that “*several have succeeded in instilling change*” in their organizations proves that reform could happen with the proper set of skills, artefacts, and tenacity of agency leaders. They could bring an evolution to an otherwise stalled bureaucracy, mired in challenging the rule of law and democratic accountability, and protected by an ossified “*political system around political parties that look more like families than political institutions*”. The unwholesome political environment proves to be a source of friction that considerably augments conflict inside the organization.

## **Agencies are representative microcosms of societal tensions**

This section provides an explanation of societal tensions that reproduce themselves within public agencies, and how the reform-minded leaders were able to navigate them. The natural state of any social group, though consensual in theory, is confrontational in practice (Savall & Zardet, 2011). Organizations are relational constructs where the representation of the world is fragmented and diverse (Boje, Gephart, & Thatchenkery, 1995). This phenomenological and interactive representation (Fisher, 1982) is at the source of conflict. However, in the interactionist view of the organization, conflicts are considered as a source of human energy and social change (Boje et al., 1995; Coser, 1967), greater creativity and a way to release innovation (Adelman, 1993; Argyris et al., 1985). Conflict may also be a source of participation and critical thinking in organizational leadership (Hutton & Liefoghe, 2011). The challenge remains in how to transform the conflictive energy into collaboration and potential for actual change; for that an elaborate set of skills and managerial artefacts are required from the leader. Strategic thinking, interpersonal skills and the not so obvious group process skills -facilitating, negotiating through interests, managing conflict, building consensus (O'Leary, Gerard, & Bingham, 2006). Broaching reform in the Lebanese government agencies conceivably generates conflict at the intra-organizational, interpersonal and inter-organizational levels. The analysis of the source of conflicts against the backdrop of complex layers of the relational (Morrow & Brown, 1994), the ethnographic (Gephart, 1978), and the resource view (Wernerfelt, 1995) reflects predominantly generic factors, and contingent issues.

The public administration is a microcosm of the Lebanese society, which should not be regarded as a monolithic culture, rather a diverse set of cultural representations. The diversity in the public sector, as much as in community, manifests itself as a homogenized, cross-pollinated, open and tolerant society that developed an admirable "living-together". A heterogeneous reverse side of the diversity protrudes in acute conflicts, when the political narrative escalates to protect the positions and benefits of the political powers, hence the resistance to the reform of the bureaucracy. The ones that stand to lose and the reform skeptics usually "*resort to the confessional delineations to resist change. This conflict is often latent, hidden under a unitarian speech*" that hardly masks the cognitive awareness and the emotional implications. To the credit of the Lebanese public administration, and

during the most divisive periods of the recent history, it was the “*tacit acceptance and adhesion to diversity in the public service, and the “living-together” social norms, manners and meanings*”, which allowed the public administration to continue functioning. It was able to maintain the “*sense of unity in the country, transcending the demarcation lines and divisions*”. This esprit-de-corps does not however prevent the eruption of the confessional and religious conflicts as defensive routine against reform. The discussion below focuses not on the resolution of generic conflicts found in other organizations, but on the specific and contingent conflicts stemming from the tandem of nepotistic politicians and related employees, and the risks of being confronted by the religious and confessional narrative.

How did the reform-minded leaders overcome these conflicts? By being realistic and pragmatic. Starting with facing “*the reality and salience of the problem, then acknowledging the need to concur with the current power structure, and building on common points of interests with the politicians*” to enlarge the field of agreement. The “*clarity of goals and limitations, and the compromises*” that the reforming leaders were willing to alternate with accommodation stances and collaboration that allowed them to devise feasible and impactful solutions (Blake & Mouton, 1971). Once the “*buy-in of the politicians was secured, the bargaining power of the managers was tremendously augmented*”, allowing them control leverage that they “*did not abuse, rather opted for collaboration*” with their subordinates. Collaboration among the leadership and the employees, seeking win-win situations, followed the path of “*improving the economic well-being of the latter, often through allowing second jobs, securing training and exposure opportunities among other things*”. Easier said than done, the success and sustainability of the endeavor is intrinsically related to the capacity of the leader to maintain an “*ongoing communication stream and dialogue with the various political parties with ever shifting power leverage, while maintaining the culturally crucial symbolic considerations of ranks and protocols*”...a daunting task.

## **The propensity of corruption to plague reform**

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This section explains elements and root causes to corruption plaguing reform. The success stories of organizational reform do not mask the fact that the *“public service suffers from nepotism, clientelism and corruption, despite all the talented people it employs”*. The democratic accountability is impeded by the *“power struggle of regional and international powers over controlling the Lebanese political scene”*. The struggle that *“perverted the integral application of democratic representation laws, and their natural evolution”*, gave outsized weight for political parties, which leveraged their *“influence by placing cronies in key positions”*. The legal accountability was undermined by the same mechanism, obviously causing irregular acts to take hold. Last but not the least, when electoral law reform occurred, the *“warmongering of a proportional electoral law transformed it into a sterile law incapable of bringing change to the political landscape”*. From another side, the laxness or agnosticism in applying the legal accountability by the judiciary, and the numerous control institutions at all levels is a survival mechanism. The legal system *“understands its limitation facing the international power struggle. The retrenchment of the legal system, short of applying its prerogatives”*, is another vicious circle that erodes the credibility of the judiciary, and its ability to attract and retain talent. Civil society, that could *“mobilize the public massively and repetitively, fell short of bringing significant change”* to the political scene, even though it was able to bring considerable advances to some causes, e.g. canceling the reference to religion on identity card and civil status extracts, domestic violence, civil marriage, etc. The crippled public administration itself did *“introduce meaningful reform initiatives e.g. more women indecision making positions and security posts, more inclusivity of women in the work environment, gender parity in the judicial positions, electronic processing of citizen services in some agencies”*, etc.

Understanding the public administration problems necessitates understanding the prevailing organizational culture, its structure and the primacy of the security issues on the Lebanese scene. Lebanon as a nation is a consensual entity that guarantees the equal representation of Christians and Muslims notwithstanding shifting demographic balances. The Lebanese society is an amalgam of religious minorities with eighteen different confessional identities officially recognized. The equal representation is *“guaranteed in the parliament, extending historically to the highest echelons of the public*

*service with posts assigned to specific confessions. The religious distribution of public posts stretches to the second echelon of public services, to assure equal representation with rotation*". The third echelon of the public service, succumbing to the tensions of the political establishment, "*recently entered the sphere of confessional distribution*". This system, prone to political meddling, invites the "*religious and confessional narrative that protects the wrongdoers and fosters the ground for failure in public service delivery and non-efficiency*". On the other hand, and despite a tradition of civil law and republican (in the sense of parliamentary republic) foundations, the civil status is legally governed by religious-confessional laws and courts of clerics. A unified -voluntary- secular civil status, and a meritocratic public service are long standing civic advocacies that face the staunch resistance of the political and religious establishments, and the current power structure. It is true that "*legitimate cultural and existential concerns, and the lack of confidence in the actual political representation, impedes the formation of an overwhelming support to drive the required change*". Between the nepotistic model of I-cover-your-back-you-help-my-clients, and the "*meritocratic and accountable government*" stands a long way of trust building and democratic deliberation.

From another perspective, difference is to be made between the written regulations and the customary practice, which might become as constraining as legal requirements. The 1990s constitutional amendments "*devolved power from the presidency to the council of ministers. Regulatory constraints on ministers were weakened*", especially because of the "*lack of enactment laws that organize the relationships at the ministerial and prime minister's levels*". The customary practice became the norm, and among other things, "*the minister's office and the plethora of advisors became able to circumvent the top echelons of the ministries*" when adversity occurred between the ministerial agenda and the general directorate. The general director in the ministry is the top-ranking official in the public service, and has legally and traditionally the highest control over her directorate. While the general director is "*constrained by a set of structural checks and balances, the minister's office navigates in grey territory*", appended by the political protection of position and confessional belonging. The doubling of the organizational command played a role in "*reducing the effectiveness of the monitoring and control*

*mechanism*” of the government, and promoted a double allegiance of the employees that “*regularly receive contradictory orders*”. Adding to the ambiguity, are the numerous “*hybrid agencies that were created inside ministries by the UNDP and other international organizations*” to help push forward development. The employees of these agencies, or offices, were “*government employees but received their salaries from the international institutions, adding to the complexity of allegiances and governance*”. This also added to the tensions between organizational silos with overlapping jurisdictions and salary differences for equal levels of employment.

An additional complexity stems from the special status of independent authorities that were created to circumvent red tape and bring rapid responses to post-war reconstruction and other pressing issues. Most of these authorities “*report directly to the prime minister’s office, paralleling the work of ministries, with some notable exceptions*”. The status of the employees of these authorities is different from the generic public function, the payment echelon is higher, nor are they governed by the pre and post control structures of the Lebanese government. This makes them “*highly politicized and practically unaccountable, except for petty corruption and misdemeanor*”. Not surprisingly, tensions and accountability dilemmas arise from their functioning, especially that the largest projects and foreign funding were channeled through these authorities and agencies. This invites the talk about big-ticket corruption, and the collusion of contractors and public servants. The Lebanese economy is dominated by the construction market, especially infrastructure tenders, and the banking sector. Despite the enactment of regulations and the implementation of the international standards of tendering and contracting, the “*familiarity between the public servants managing the tendering operations and the contractors, makes that collusion have found ways to preserve the appearance of impartiality, but are intrinsically corrupt*”. This is appended by the fact that contractors have close ties with ruling politicians, if not directly related to them, and the lack of serious judicial scrutiny (explained at the beginning of the paragraph). Public knowledge of the facts is widespread, but the “*burden of proof falls on the judiciary and the political will to remove the political cover of the wrongdoers. This is not the case*”. Similar schemes exist in the major nodes of the economy, like banking, energy, communication, and others. The existence of big-ticket corruption discourages legal action

taking, and encourages judicial laxness. Big-ticket corruption involves “*encroachments on public endowments though covered by rush or covert government decisions, in the form of specific laws, legal amendments, regulatory exceptions and ministerial decisions*”. This is a demonstration of the layers of complexity that face the reform-minded agency leader, and the wickedness of the reform venture.

### **Evolution not Revolution: A socio-economic OD approach**

In this section, emphasis is given to the recommendations that protruded from the concurrence of theoretical and empirical streams. The degrading public service delivery and rampant corruption drove many people and civil society activists into the streets amidst recurrent political gridlocks. A vivid example is the 2015 crisis related to the environmental and public health concerns of solid waste [mis] management. The standoff between government and the citizenry did not yield hoped-for results. The request for the “*demise of the political class and the wholesale rejection of the public administration’s solutions to the problem, without bringing a realistic alternative*” turned sour<sup>1</sup>. In the face of stressful local economic prospects, and the demand for better public service, the data suggests that local action by public agency leaders is amenable to deliver results. The solution remained in “*bringing evolutionary and incremental change “with” the existing structure*” lead by pragmatic though reform driven local leaders. In this sense, the leader exhibited an understanding of the functional interaction between external insights, and internal management competencies (Savall & Hillon, 2017). An analysis of the political frame bolstered the ability of the leader to shield her organization from political pressure. Filtering external interventions was probably the most weighing among other ventures. Reducing the influence of the politicians inside the organization did not happen overnight, rather it was a gradual endeavor that happened naturally as the organization got stronger, interdependent, confident and autonomous (Huntington, 1968). For the reforming agencies,

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<sup>1</sup>The October 2019 civil movement against economic hardship exhibited similar patterns, though the full picture has yet to unfold. The government response to the Covid-19 crisis restored some faith in the public administration, and demonstrated the effectiveness of local action, particularly through the engagement of municipalities.

preventing the interference of politicians happened when the head of the organization initiated a candid “*dialogue with them, whether implicit or explicit, to develop a common understanding*”. The leader then “*monopolized the relationship with political leaders*” and her agency. With time, this helped “*re-center the allegiance of the organizational employees towards their organization*”. In the internal power play, the leader got a sizable advantage once the communication with the politicians was channeled through her. The concern was to prevent the side stepping of politically connected employees from the entrainment process to gradually levy organizational allegiance. From another standpoint, the popular pressure for reform, manifesting in civil society activism, was “*leveraged in the face of politicians. Politicians increasingly sensitive to civil society were seeking the support of non-governmental organizations as their influence grew*”. Aligning the advocacy of the citizenry with the autonomy of the public service added considerable bargaining power for the reformer.

The recommended and somehow long path requires the concurrent mobilization of internal stakeholders to “*reverse the culture of the public administration and to change its image*”. From the underdog of the tandem politicians-bureaucrats, the public administration is restored the posture and “*the social regard of the proud public servant, custodian of the public good, and expert of the kind*”. The collective problem solving and the idiosyncratic image construed about their organization and its place in society is governed by the complex set of relations with each other, peer organizations, the community, and the political leadership, all greatly influenced by the agency leader. Her acknowledgment of the multiplicity of motivations, and the equilibration exercise henceforth described, are a mandatory path to plan actual change and reform. Moreover, the incremental change, based on critical data driven decision-making and strategic vigilance, requires the command of interplay between external insight and internal management competencies (Savall & Hillon, 2017).

It follows from the previous analysis that despite challenging and degrading macro environments, public servants in leadership positions are likely to succeed their reform venture when they contextualize their approaches and deploy societal tactics. In this sense, the analysis of motivations at multiple levels is symbiotic to an anthropological analysis of internal and external stakeholders (Savall &

Zardet, 2011). The equilibration of competing values (Quinn, 2015), and the balancing of stakeholder demands including competing standards, is amenable to a pragmatic approach (Cappelletti & Baker, 2010). The active communication and continuous negotiation with stakeholders, including the informal, and the collective engagement of agency actors point towards a participatory organizational development principles (Boje et al., 1995). The observation of generic factors and contingencies, the transformation of conflictive energies into participation, and the critical data-driven management, all invite parallels with socio-economic OD approaches (Savall & Zardet, 2012).

The success of the reforming public servants merits dissemination with the concurrence of methodologically robust approaches that exhibit the same critical success ingredients. Reform ventures were broached in sensitive public agencies using socio-economic methodologies in Lebanon (Bassil, 2012), France (Savall & Zardet, 2012), Mexico (Hillon, Hillon, & Bunch, 2015) and other countries. The aggregate analysis of these ventures confirms the genericity of most problems plaguing administration, and the importance of contextualization in bringing reform.

## **The potential for ICT and Digital Transformation**

This section addresses the issue of information and communication technologies and the prospect of digital transformations in general to supplement reform. In the post-industrial world, it is obsolete to think transformation or development without thoroughly considering digital technology. The digital innovations are transforming the world with unprecedented speed and scale, including how people work, interact and perceive the world around them. The information and communication technologies (ICT) offer prospects to “achieve greater trust in government, including through responsiveness and transparency, and by providing opportunities for greater engagement by service users and citizens in general” (OECD, 2016). The digitization of Lebanese government agencies was undertaken starting the 1990s. Government agencies in Lebanon recognized the importance of digital transformation, and intermittently introduced digital solutions in all four categories defined by literature: Government-to-Citizen (G2C), Government-to-Business (G2B), Government-to-Government (G2G) and Government-to-

Employee (G2E) (Bai, 2013; Fang, 2002). However, the delivery of services through electronic means is stalling and lags considerably behind the needs of the public and the modern age. In fact, Lebanon's position in developing E-Government ranked as 99th out of 193 countries in 2018 versus 73th in 2016, according to the UN E-Government Knowledge Base (retrieved from the United Nations E-Government Development Index data). Notwithstanding their importance, the mitigated results of introducing digitalization show that they should follow the same recommendations as reform ventures. They should be adapted to the relational, normative, and the incumbent procedural specificities of the organization (Savall & Zardet, 2011), at the risk of rejection by users, saturation or facile externalities (The Economist, March 2017). Thus, the contextualization of ICT away from isomorphic mimicry, and deploying societal tactics and OD methodologies, are requisites of success and acceptance by internal and external stakeholders.

## **Conclusion**

The findings seem to confirm the premise that reforming the public administration in Lebanon faces an uphill challenge. However, it is far from desperate, as demonstrated by several reform-minded agency leaders. Yet, wholesale top-down and confrontational ventures to overhaul the bureaucracy were unsuccessful. On the other hand, attempts of localized public administration reform and digital service deliveries have succeeded in challenging social, economic, and political environments. These localized attempts of participatory, emotionally intelligent and systemic approaches, have yielded sustainable results, especially where the concurrence of leadership skills, civil society activism and seeds of reform-minded employees were met with citizen confidence. Due to the degree of education and technology literacy of the public servant, the technocratic capacity of the public servant is not a worrying front. Whereas, the concurrence with local sensitivities and political traditions summarize the challenges of reform. The political narrative on reform, coupled with the momentum that pressure from civil society and dire economic conjuncture, offers a window of opportunity to prime public administration reform. Moreover, the current situation tends towards focusing reform around idiosyncratic resources, and therefore benefiting from the local experiences and

lessons learned, and away from mimicking other countries. The same is true about the potential that ICT and digitalization offers, both to improve public service delivery, and prospects of economic growth. The recommendation is to empower leaders of public agencies in transforming their agencies, through the contextualization of reform initiatives and the accompanying digital solutions. A viable path forward is offered by the deployment of socio-economic approaches where the academic, civil society and bureaucratic worlds collude to bring actionable, scalable, and transferable results.

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Level	Individual	Organizational	National	Transnational
Motive				
Moral	Personal ethics	Organizational Raison d'être- Servicing the citizen	Stewardship of public endowments	Stewardship of global endowments
Social	Respect in society	Citizens' pressure	Effectiveness of the administration	Leveling the administration to international standards
Instrumental	Legal pressures	Attract Resources, Wield Power	Efficiency of the administration	Reducing dependence on aid

Figure 1 – Pressure Elements Towards Reform