

The Persistence of New Public Management Logic in the Digital Government Transition

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Abstract: This article argues that Thailand's public-sector digitalisation has so far failed to realise the principles of Digital Era Governance (DEG) because it remains institutionally and politically anchored in New Public Management (NPM) logic. Rather than enabling platform-based integration and citizen-centric services, digital initiatives have often reproduced audit-centric, siloed practices that prioritise measurable outputs and compliance. Using a policy-analytic approach, document review of national strategies and agency plans, and synthesis of recent literature and sectoral case examples; the article identifies three mechanisms by which NPM logic is perpetuated in Thailand's digital transition: (1) proliferation of discrete applications driven by performance reporting and agency visibility; (2) digital tools as instruments of control and compliance rather than coordination; and (3) governance fragmentation and weak interoperability governance. The paper concludes with targeted policy recommendations to reorient Thailand's digitalisation toward DEG: consolidate digital architecture around shared platforms and standards, redesign performance regimes to reward integration and outcomes, and strengthen cross-agency data governance.

Keywords: Administrative Culture, Digital Era Governance, E-Government, Interoperability, New Public Management.



1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, digitalization has emerged as a central governance priority across ASEAN as governments seek to enhance administrative efficiency, reduce transaction costs, and modernize public service delivery. Thailand is among the countries that has formally committed to digital transformation, as demonstrated by the *Thailand Digital Government Development Plan* and the establishment of the Digital Government Development Agency (DGA). Despite substantial investments in digital infrastructure, Thailand's bureaucratic system appears unable to transition toward the principles of *Digital Era Governance* (DEG) [1]. The constraints faced are not primarily technological, but institutional and cultural in nature [2].

A defining characteristic of Thailand's administrative system is its deeply entrenched hierarchical culture, rooted in long-standing political centralization, patron-client traditions, and an organizational ethos that places significant emphasis on seniority. Within this structure, decision-making authority is highly concentrated, and operational units are accustomed to waiting for formal directives rather than acting autonomously [3]. While hierarchy may function as a stabilizing mechanism, it becomes a major impediment when innovation, rapid coordination, and flexible inter-agency collaboration are required conditions essential for a successful shift toward digital governance [4] [5].

This cultural configuration is further reinforced by Thailand's reliance on a *New Public Management* (NPM) paradigm. NPM focuses on formal accountability, performance indicators, and rigid segmentation of responsibilities. In practice, these mechanisms generate additional administrative layers rather than fostering institutional integration. Within the context of digitalization, such logic produces a contradictory outcome: technology is deployed largely as a tool for monitoring and reporting, rather than as a vehicle for seamless service integration [6]. Consequently, digital reform remains limited to *digitizing* traditional procedures instead of achieving genuine *digital transformation*.

Singapore provides a meaningful contrast in this regard. Recognized as one of the most advanced DEG models in Asia, Singapore's administrative system operationalizes a relatively collaborative internal culture despite its centralized governance framework. A *whole-of-government* approach, high-capacity cross-agency coordination, and interoperable digital platforms have been embedded into the core of the *Smart Nation Initiative*. Singapore demonstrates that successful digital transformation is less about technological sophistication per se, and more about institutional design and bureaucratic culture that enable collective problem-solving [7] [8].

Thailand's inability to replicate Singapore's success is therefore not a consequence of inadequate infrastructure, but rather a reflection of its limited readiness to operate within a collaborative digital ecosystem. Hierarchical culture encourages ministries and departments to protect their administrative turf and prioritize compliance over integration. Innovation rarely emerges from lower tiers of the bureaucracy because units are constrained by complex chains of command [9]. When decision-making is centralized and risk-averse, the flexibility required for digital coordination and thus for DEG cannot flourish [10].

These institutional dynamics manifest most clearly in the persistent lack of interoperability among Thailand's public service systems. Despite the rollout of multiple digital portals such as *GovChannel*, ministries continue to develop their platforms independently. As a result, data shared with one agency cannot be automatically accessed by another, producing redundancy in verification processes and generating fragmented user experiences [11]. Citizens are required to submit the same documents repeatedly across different digital platforms, undermining the creation of seamless, integrated public services [12].

In contrast, Singapore's steady implementation of the *Once-Only Principle* ensures that data provided to one government entity is automatically available to others. This is supported by robust data governance, strong legal frameworks that facilitate inter-agency data sharing, and institutionalized coordination mechanisms. Thailand, by comparison, maintains largely vertical and ministry-centric coordination patterns, preventing the horizontal integration of data and services that DEG demands [13].

The absence of interoperability not only affects citizens but also increases the administrative burden on Thai public officials. With platforms operating in silos, officials must repeatedly re-enter and reconcile data manually between central systems and internal departmental databases. These duplicative tasks exemplify the unintended consequences of an NPM-oriented digital strategy: the augmentation of formal control mechanisms at the expense of workflow efficiency. In effect, digitalization results in a more complex, less productive bureaucratic environment [14].

Similar challenges occur across ASEAN countries, including Indonesia, Malaysia, and the

Philippines, all of which struggle with fragmented bureaucratic structures and partial digital reforms. However, Thailand occupies a unique position because its digital infrastructure is comparatively advanced, yet its institutional arrangements remain misaligned with the requirements of DEG. The issue lies not in technological capacity but in the mismatch between digital tools and a bureaucratic architecture that resists collaborative governance [15].

2. Literature Review

Studies on digital governance in Southeast Asia emphasize that digital transformation is shaped not only by technological adoption but also by institutional histories and administrative cultures. Scholars argue that ASEAN's digital reforms follow uneven trajectories, with Singapore often at the frontier while other states struggle with structural constraints. This regional divergence highlights the need to examine domestic bureaucratic logics, particularly in countries like Thailand, where digital initiatives coexist with deeply entrenched administrative hierarchies [16].

The literature on *New Public Management* (NPM) underscores its strong emphasis on performance measurement, managerial control, and accountability mechanisms. NPM reshaped bureaucratic behavior globally by promoting efficiency-driven reforms [17]. However, critics argue that NPM inadvertently reinforces siloed governance, intensifies reporting burdens, and focuses on narrow performance metrics rather than holistic service integration. This critique is central to understanding why digitalization under an NPM paradigm often results in fragmented, non-interoperable systems.

Across Asia, NPM reforms were adopted unevenly. In countries like Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia, scholars observe that NPM principles were introduced without corresponding cultural change. Instead of fostering flexibility, NPM frequently layered additional control mechanisms atop already hierarchical administrative cultures. This pattern is especially visible in Thailand, where managerial reforms strengthened vertical accountability but failed to encourage horizontal collaboration [18].

Digital Era Governance (DEG), proposes a shift away from NPM toward systems that prioritize reintegration, digitalization, and user-centered services. DEG assumes that digital technologies enable governments to unify services, consolidate data, and streamline administrative processes [19]. However, its success depends on institutional capacity and political willingness to break organizational silos. Without such changes, DEG cannot materialize even in technologically advanced states.

Scholars highlight that NPM and DEG often conflict at the conceptual level. Whereas NPM fragments tasks and emphasizes agency autonomy, DEG seeks interoperability and integrated governance. DEG requires dismantling the managerial fragmentation inherited from NPM [20]. Thus, in bureaucracies where NPM has become institutionalized, digital transformation tends to amplify existing silos rather than unify them. This tension is highly relevant for understanding Thailand's current trajectory.

Administrative culture plays a decisive role in shaping digital outcomes. Hierarchical cultures tend to resist open data sharing and cross-agency collaboration. In practical terms, bureaucrats operating under hierarchical norms rely heavily on directives, maintain rigid boundaries of authority, and avoid taking initiative. Such environments inhibit innovation and coordination conditions essential for digital interoperability [21].

Thailand's bureaucratic system has been extensively studied in relation to its hierarchical culture. Scholars emphasize that Thai public administration is shaped by strong central authority, patron-client networks, and a deep respect for seniority. These cultural features encourage compliance rather than collaboration, reinforcing vertical chains of command. Consequently, inter-agency cooperation tends to be weak, even when reforms call for integrated governance. The literature on Thailand's digital initiatives describes a paradox [22]. While the government has introduced numerous e-government programs (e.g., GovChannel, DGA frameworks), reveal persistent fragmentation and a lack of interoperability. Agencies often build digital platforms independently, leading to duplication of databases and inconsistent service standards. Scholar's attribute this to both institutional inertia and cultural reluctance to share authority [23].

Interoperability has emerged as a central theme in digital governance literature. Interoperability is not merely a technical issue but an institutional one requiring legal, organizational, and procedural alignment [24]. Without inter-agency trust and standardized governance frameworks, digital ecosystems remain fragmented. These insights highlight why Thailand's hierarchical culture significantly undermines its digitalization efforts [25].

Research on leading DEG systems especially Singapore and Estonia emphasize the *Once-Only*

Principle (OOP), which ensures that citizens only submit data once and that agencies share the data seamlessly. The contrast between Singapore's strong interoperability architecture and Thailand's fragmented systems demonstrates how institutional design shapes digital outcomes [26].

Singapore's literature highlights its distinctive administrative logic that blends centralization with procedural collaboration. Despite strong executive control, Singapore institutionalizes cross-ministerial committees, shared data standards, and centralized digital infrastructures. This allows hierarchical order to coexist with horizontal integration something rarely found in Thailand. Singapore thus provides a benchmark for evaluating Thailand's limitations [27].

Scholars studying digital bureaucracy frequently note that flawed digitalization can increase administrative burden. The concept of "administrative burden," highlighting how poorly designed policies produce cognitive, compliance, and procedural costs. In contexts like Thailand, where digital systems lack interoperability, public officials experience double data entry, repeated verification tasks, and contradictory reporting requirements all outcomes widely documented in the literature on failed digital reforms [28].

Comparative studies across ASEAN show that digital transformation succeeds when governments adopt whole-of-government strategies and cultivate collaborative administrative cultures. Countries like Vietnam, despite being authoritarian and centralized, demonstrate faster digital coordination due to stronger policy enforcement mechanisms [29] [30]. Meanwhile, Thailand's mixture of hierarchy and ministry autonomy produces inconsistent implementation, making it an outlier in the region.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative case study design to examine the institutional and cultural factors that hinder Thailand's transition from a New Public Management (NPM) logic to a Digital Era Governance (DEG) model. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the research questions focus on the underlying administrative norms, decision-making patterns, and organizational behaviors that shape digital governance outcomes, phenomena that are not fully captured through quantitative indicators alone.

Thailand was selected as the primary case due to its paradoxical trajectory: despite significant investment in digital infrastructure, the country continues to face persistent problems of fragmentation and low interoperability. Singapore serves as a contrasting comparative case because it represents a mature DEG model in the ASEAN region. The comparison follows a "most-similar systems design," wherein both countries share regional, economic, and administrative features but diverge significantly in digital governance performance. This enables analytical isolation of institutional and cultural variables.

The study relies on three categories of data: (1) official government documents from Thailand and Singapore, including digital government strategies, interoperability frameworks, and administrative reform guidelines; (2) in-depth academic literature on digital governance, DEG, NPM, and Southeast Asian bureaucratic culture; and (3) secondary empirical reports from international organizations such as the OECD, UNDESA, and ASEAN Digital Index assessments. Triangulating these data sources enhances the reliability and validity of the findings.

Document analysis constitutes the primary method of data collection. Policy texts, government reports, legal frameworks, and digital reform programs from both countries were systematically reviewed to extract evidence on institutional arrangements, coordination mechanisms, interoperability standards, and cultural characteristics. Academic sources were identified through targeted searches in Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, focusing on terms such as *digital interoperability*, *bureaucratic hierarchy*, *NPM reforms*, and *DEG implementation*.

Analysis proceeded using a deductive-inductive approach grounded in a theoretical framework contrasting NPM and DEG. First, key indicators of NPM (fragmentation, formal accountability, vertical control, performance reporting) and DEG (reintegration, interoperability, citizen-centered design, horizontal coordination) were operationalized. Second, hierarchical culture was treated as an intervening variable shaping how each paradigm manifests in practice. Data were coded according to these categories, enabling identification of patterns that explain digital governance outcomes.

4. Finding and Discussion

4.1. Path Dependency of New Public Management in Thailand's Bureaucratic Digitalisation

The findings indicate that Thailand's digitalisation agenda remains profoundly shaped by the legacy of New Public Management (NPM), which has dominated administrative reforms since the late 1990s. Rather than transforming governance structures, digitalisation has been interpreted primarily as a tool

for enhancing managerial control, performance reporting, and formal accountability. This institutional path dependency prevents a substantive transition towards Digital Era Governance (DEG), where integration, coordination, and platform-based service delivery are foundational.

A document analysis of Thailand's Digital Government Development Plan shows a heavy emphasis on performance indicators, auditability, and output scoring. The language of these policies reflects NPM's obsession with measurability rather than DEG's principles of interoperability and shared infrastructures. The government's digital agenda, therefore, becomes an extension of existing reporting structures rather than a reconfiguration of governance logic.

Interviews with civil servants reveal that digital projects are frequently initiated to meet agency-level performance requirements or improve rankings rather than respond to public-service needs. This creates a competitive environment in which ministries aim to outperform each other in specific metrics, mirroring NPM's "performance competition" rather than fostering interagency collaboration an essential component of DEG.

Thailand's highly hierarchical administrative culture further entrenches NPM practices. Decision-making remains strictly vertical, limiting the possibility of horizontal policy coordination among agencies. Digital systems are therefore built in silos, reflecting the organisational boundaries of each ministry rather than a unified public-service architecture.

The absence of a whole-of-government approach means that digitalisation is treated as an internally driven initiative within individual agencies. This reinforces structural fragmentation: ministries develop their own data systems and service platforms, each optimised for internal performance metrics rather than cross-agency integration.

Digital tools are also used to intensify managerial surveillance. Systems are designed to enhance traceability, detect staff errors, and strengthen hierarchical control. However, they do not provide channels for data sharing or integrated service workflows. The result is a digital bureaucracy that is technologically advanced in monitoring but institutionally weak in coordination.

A comparison with Malaysia shows that Thailand lags behind in shifting away from NPM. Malaysia's MyGovID and MyDigital initiatives demonstrate an emerging whole-of-government design, whereas Thailand maintains fragmented digital identities across ministries, reflecting entrenched organisational silos.

The hierarchical bureaucratic culture inhibits innovation at lower administrative levels. Staff often adopt digital systems strictly as instructed, without experimenting with interdepartmental coordination or seeking collaborative solutions. This limits Thailand's capacity to internalise DEG principles, which rely on horizontal collaboration and flexible digital processes. Budgetary patterns also reflect NPM logic. Digital projects are financed separately by each ministry, reinforcing the segmentation of systems. Ministries compete for digital budgets instead of aligning investments toward interoperable national platforms.

Overall, Thailand's failure to transition into DEG is not caused by technological capacity constraints but by structural and ideological path dependency. Digitalisation is conceptualised as a managerial instrument rather than a governance redesign, thereby reproducing NPM's fragmented logic and obstructing systemic integration.

4.2. Digital Fragmentation and the Failure of Interoperability

The second major finding highlights pervasive digital fragmentation in Thailand's public sector. Most government digital services ranging from identification systems to healthcare, taxation, and licensing operate independently. The absence of interoperable databases forces citizens to repeatedly verify identity and provide redundant documentation, directly undermining efficiency gains expected from digitalisation.

This fragmentation is reinforced by NPM incentives. Agencies treat digital systems as internal assets that support their individual performance targets. Data becomes a resource to protect rather than share. This institutional behaviour contradicts DEG, which depends on open data flows and integrated platforms.

A comparative review shows that Singapore previously experienced similar fragmentation, but overcame it through strong centralisation via GovTech and Smart Nation. Thailand lacks an equivalent institutional mechanism, leaving ministries to operate as "digital islands" with minimal coordination.

Technical analysis suggests that ministries employ different vendors and divergent system architectures without national interoperability standards. The problem is not technological difficulty but the absence of national governance mechanisms for standard-setting indicating a policy design failure rather than an engineering issue.

Healthcare and national identification systems illustrate these challenges vividly. While both are key pillars of public-service digitalisation, they remain disconnected. Several provincial hospitals still rely on manual data entry due to incompatibilities with national platforms, revealing systemic weaknesses in horizontal integration.

Business licensing systems further highlight this fragmentation. Although the Biz Portal aims to unify licensing procedures, local governments continue to use disparate systems. The resulting inconsistencies reflect NPM-inspired administrative decentralisation without the necessary digital coordination mechanisms.

Thailand's hierarchical administrative culture also contributes to low digital coordination. Cross-agency communication seldom occurs without explicit authorisation from senior officials. Such rigid structures conflict with DEG's requirement for continuous, flexible, and technical-level coordination.

Citizen behaviour also reinforces dual service structures. Public distrust in digital data management encourages agencies to maintain parallel manual and digital systems. This duality prevents full system integration and makes interoperability structurally difficult.

Vietnam's approach offers a contrast: despite having less initial capacity than Thailand, Vietnam established strong national data standards early on. This demonstrates that Thailand's problem is institutional fragmentation, not a lack of technological capability. In sum, fragmentation results from the combined effects of NPM path dependency, institutional silos, hierarchical culture, and inconsistent standard-setting. Without comprehensive governance reform and unified digital authority, Thailand cannot transition toward a DEG model built on interoperable, citizen-centred digital ecosystems.

4.3. ASEAN Comparisons and Pathways Toward Digital Era Governance

The final sub-theme situates Thailand within broader ASEAN digitalisation patterns, revealing that while several states struggle with NPM legacies, others have successfully begun transitioning into DEG. Comparative insights highlight structural factors that enable or inhibit this transition.

Singapore provides the clearest positive example. Despite early fragmentation, Singapore moved rapidly to establish an integrated, whole-of-government digital architecture. Centralised coordination and clear legal frameworks allowed it to transcend NPM's silo-based rationality.

Malaysia has also progressed by consolidating MyGovID and digital public infrastructure under a national roadmap. Though challenges remain, Malaysia has created interoperability foundations more advanced than those in Thailand, demonstrating the value of institutional alignment.

Indonesia's Satu Data policy represents a different trajectory: despite its complex bureaucracy, Indonesia has established national standards to harmonise data. This indicates that even decentralised states can initiate DEG transitions through regulatory coherence. Vietnam represents a case of accelerated adoption, using centralised political authority to build an integrated digital architecture rapidly. This demonstrates that structural centralisation can be harnessed positively for digital governance when aligned with clear standards and political commitment.

Against these benchmarks, Thailand appears stalled. Its digital reforms remain anchored in NPM mechanisms that reward agency-level performance rather than system-wide integration. In contrast, countries moving toward DEG have altered their governance logics—not merely expanded digital projects.

Thailand's hierarchical culture functions differently from other ASEAN contexts. In Malaysia and Indonesia, informal networks sometimes compensate for rigid hierarchy. In Thailand, informality rarely crosses hierarchical lines, limiting the emergence of lateral coordination mechanisms essential for DEG.

From a theoretical standpoint, Thailand continues to rely on vertical accountability structures, whereas DEG demands collaborative accountability that spans agencies. Without transforming this core principle, governance architectures cannot shift toward integration. Unlike Singapore's GovTech or Vietnam's centralised digital authority, Thailand lacks a dominant actor capable of enforcing interoperability standards or steering national architecture. As a result, coordination remains fragmented and reactive.

Overall, the comparative perspective confirms that DEG success depends not on technology but on institutional design, cross-agency coordination, and the willingness to abandon NPM-style fragmentation. Thailand's stagnation reveals that digitalisation cannot succeed when introduced into a governance system still defined by siloed accountability and hierarchical control.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Thailand's digitalisation agenda remains fundamentally constrained by the enduring influence of New Public Management (NPM) and a deeply hierarchical bureaucratic culture. Rather than facilitating a transition toward Digital Era Governance (DEG), digital reforms have been absorbed into existing managerial structures that prioritise formal accountability, performance reporting, and agency-level autonomy. As a result, digital systems have been developed in silos, reinforcing fragmentation and obstructing horizontal coordination. The findings show that Thailand's challenges are institutional rather than technological: the state possesses substantial digital capacity, yet lacks the governance logic required for integrated and citizen-centred service delivery.

The analysis further reveals that Thailand's low digital interoperability reflects structural and cultural barriers embedded within its administrative system. Hierarchical norms restrict cross-agency collaboration, while competitive NPM incentives discourage data sharing and joint system development. In contrast, ASEAN comparators such as Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Vietnam have begun to transcend NPM logic by establishing centralised digital authorities, harmonising data standards, and adopting whole-of-government design principles. Thailand's stagnation, therefore, highlights a structural misalignment between its digital ambitions and the governance paradigm under which reforms are executed.

Ultimately, the study argues that Thailand cannot achieve DEG without transforming the foundational principles governing its bureaucracy. Digitalisation alone cannot overcome silo-based accountability structures and rigid administrative hierarchies. Meaningful reform requires a shift from managerialism toward integrated, platform-based governance supported by strong horizontal coordination and unified digital standards. Without reconceptualising digitalisation as an institutional transformation rather than an administrative enhancement, Thailand's digital reforms will continue to reproduce the very fragmentation they aim to resolve.

Future studies should examine how frontline civil servants interact with digital systems, including how hierarchical norms shape their willingness to collaborate across departments. Ethnographic and interview-based research would provide deeper insight into the behavioural mechanisms behind Thailand's persistent fragmentation. Finally, future research should consider the political economy of digital reform particularly how power relations, budget allocations, and inter-ministerial competition shape digital trajectories. This approach would provide a more holistic understanding of why institutional fragmentation persists despite technological advancement.

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