



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

Section: *Legal Studies***Administrative policy and strategic discretion: Contextualizing UAE's transitional bureaucracy**Abderrahim El Maslouhi<sup>1\*</sup><sup>1</sup>College of Law, UAE University, United Arab Emirates\*Correspondence: [maslouhi.a@gmail.com](mailto:maslouhi.a@gmail.com)**ABSTRACT**

This article aims to address a lacuna in our understanding of the rationales why policymakers in developing countries usually wield greater discretion over public administration compared to their counterparts in institutionalized democracies. Drawing on theoretical scholarship, UAE-focused literature and available data, it mobilizes a strategic, non-normative perspective to examine the course of the UAE's administrative policy in a transitional context, as outlined by Fred W. Riggs' prismatic model. The article shows how UAE policymakers have managed to frame administrative reforms in terms of composition rather than transition. A key reason for this is that the conditions for the dichotomy model governing political-administrative relations cannot be met in the UAE bureaucratic context, which is strongly imbued with paternalistic ideologies such as developmentalism, entrepreneurialism and patron-client politics. The UAE public management landscape has undergone three successful cycles of transition: from the traditional Weberian bureaucratic model to the New Public Management (NPM) revolution of the 1990s and 2000s, and then to the current post-NPM era. However, despite the many institutional and managerial innovations introduced, the results indicate that the neoliberal reformist agenda is still struggling to penetrate the local governance system. As the privatization program shows, many fundamental aspects of the triangular relationship between the state, the bureaucracy and businesses have been strategically spared from change. From this standpoint, policy discretion and the resilience of the prismatic configuration should be regarded as part of an assumed strategic choice rather than as a simple cultural "path-dependent" effect.

**KEYWORDS:** administrative policy, bureaucracy, dichotomy model, new public management, privatization, UAE

**Research Journal in Advanced Humanities**

Volume 7, Issue 1, 2026

ISSN: 2708-5945 (Print)

ISSN: 2708-5953 (Online)

**ARTICLE HISTORY**

Submitted: 09 August 2025

Accepted: 23 September 2025

Published: 01 January 2026

**HOW TO CITE**

El Maslouhi, A. (2025). Administrative policy and strategic discretion: Contextualizing UAE's transitional bureaucracy. *Research Journal in Advanced Humanities*, 7(1). <https://doi.org/10.58256/djn1t365>



Published in Nairobi, Kenya by Royallite Global, an imprint of Royallite Publishers Limited

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## Introduction

The present article aims to extend the study of policy discretion beyond the usual theoretical debate. With rare exceptions (Du Plessis & Lues, 2024), the conceptualization of the politics-administration interface (Epstein & O'Halloran, 1994; Huber & Shipan, 2002; McCubbins et al., 1989) has frequently been at the expense of the logics of interaction occurring in bureaucratic settings other than institutionalized democracies. This article examines the contextual and strategic drivers behind the significantly greater discretion that political leaders in developing countries have over administrative policy compared to their Western counterparts. To that end, it uses the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) course of public sector governance and administrative transition as a case study.

Mainstream literature on policy discretion can be divided into two strands: normative and non-normative. The former marks its predilection for a prescriptive-functionalist stance within the framework of Western democracies. Two analytical fixations are at the heart of this scholarship. One is a recursive focus on bureaucratic (Epstein & O'Halloran, 1994; Gailmard & Patty, 2007; Huber & Shipan, 2002; Lipsky, 1980) or judicial discretion (Cass, 2015; Koch, 1986) rather than political discretion. The second is a value-based analysis of policy discretion construed either as a threat to democratic legitimacy (Coven, 2024; Loftis, 2015) or, conversely, as a springboard for the neutrality and efficiency of public administration (Dennis, 2010; Huber, 2007; Sossin, 2005; Tummers & Bekkers, 2014).

By contrast, the non-normative strand of research focuses more on the strategies of political actors. Particular emphasis is placed on the impact of political context variables such as the balance of authority between political principals and bureaucratic agents (Bawn, 1995; Epstein & O'Halloran, 1999; Huber & Shipan, 2002), issues of politicization (Meyer-Sahling, 2006; Thatcher et al., 2023), patronage dynamics (Gailmard & Patty, 2007; Hollibaugh, 2015; Loftis, 2015; Mueller, 2015) and discretion as a blame-avoidance strategy (Catney & Henneberry, 2012; Hood, 2020; Loftis, 2015).

The present study takes the latter perspective. No so much because it adopts a non-normative stance; but rather because this perspective allows the approach to policy discretion to be reversed, moving away from the usual fixation on bureaucratic discretion towards that of politicians. Politicians in institutionalized democracies often have no shortage of formal and informal means to carve out sufficient discretionary space to wield influence within the bureaucratic sphere. This is a fortiori more evident in fledgling democracies and non-competitive systems where the interface between politics and administration is far from as institutionalized as in established democracies.

As we shall see, the UAE's political-administrative landscape has a number of peculiarities that give incumbent authorities considerable leeway in defining the contours of administrative change and the role of the bureaucracy in society. The UAE state's multifaceted nature, combining traditional neo-patrimonial governance with developmental and entrepreneurial projections, makes its bureaucratic model archetypical of Riggs' (1961, 1964) prismatic concept. Riggs' theory posits that transitional bureaucracies can be conceptualized as occurring across a "fused-prismatic-diffracted" evolutionary continuum from traditional to modern bureaucracy. A society is said to be *fused* when there is no social division of labor, i.e. where a single structure performs all state functions. Wealth is allocated on the basis of ascriptive criteria, while the distinction between private and public property is far from obvious (Riggs, 1964). At the opposite extreme of the continuum is the *diffracted* society model, which denotes a high degree of specialization, with each structure designed to perform a specific function. To Riggs, this evolutionary stage is conducive to "increasing autonomy of social systems made possible by a rising level of diffraction," i.e. functional differentiation, including between political and administrative structures. Between these two polar extremes is the *prismatic* model of society, a transitional condition in which traditionalism and modernity coexist somewhat comfortably (Riggs, 1964, 1973). Such prismatic heterogeneity makes it possible for a number of peculiar characteristics to emerge. These include poly-normativism in the decision-making process, involving the use of rational and non-rational criteria, formalism, which refers to the gap between theory and practice, and overlapping, meaning that similar functions can be performed by different institutions (Riggs, 1964).

Riggs' projection of a physics metaphor onto the development of bureaucratic institutions has prompted scholarly criticism, in particular his reliance on unilinear dichotomies and nomothetic rather than idiographic explanations of administrative transitions (Haque 2010; Peng 2008; Pollitt 2010; Subramaniam 2001). Yet

Riggs' ecology of public administration remains prerequisite for deciphering the developmental logics of a bureaucratic system. In addition to enabling a national public administration trajectory to be situated relative to its cultural, economic and political ecology, the prismatic concept extends the possibility of exploring the specifics of certain policy preferences and their underlying strategic rationales. The UAE's bureaucratic system has almost all the attributes of a Riggsian prismatic model, in particular heterogeneity, ascription, poly-normativism and overlapping. These traits also manifested early on in the UAE's neighboring bureaucratic systems, particularly in Saudi Arabia (Al-Awaji, 2071; Al-Otaibi, 1988) and Kuwait (Al Omar, 1994), which exhibit numerous structural, social and political similarities.

Nevertheless, our analysis departs from some of Riggs' normative claims. This is particularly true of the developmental, teleological bias that prevailed in the structural-functionalist scholarship of the 1960-1970s, and which Riggs explicitly asserts (1964). According to a celebrated Riggsian argument (1970), the expectation is that prismatic societies will achieve, following a developmental process, an "increasing autonomy of social systems made possible by a rising level of diffraction." Under this argument, transitional bureaucracies would, as a matter of course, be primed to gain greater discretion and autonomy from political power over years. The half-century trajectory of the UAE bureaucracy does not lend support to this linear perspective. The bureaucratic development in a developing country such as India does not bear out this claim either. Riggs' model can hardly explain the fact that, despite several decades of independence, today's Indian bureaucracy still reflects the basic structures and characteristics of the original prismatic model. (Basu, 2021). For instance, India's senior bureaucracy is recruited according to Weberian standards of transparency, impartiality and autonomy, while its actual performance still shows a reliance on informal networks of caste, class and regional ties (Basu, 2015, 2021).

Similarly, the over-time stability of the UAE state's key features, particularly the resilience of the patron-client pattern and the interconnectedness of the political and bureaucratic spheres, seem to make Riggs' envisaged transformation unlikely. It is against this backdrop that the present article introduces the concept of "strategic discretion" to contend that administrative changes in the UAE are part of a strategy of composition rather than transition. Major administrative reforms were initiated, all of which were a success from a management and organizational perspective. They have not, however, led to an increase in diffraction. Nor have they altered the "fused" structure of state and society.

This is the case because policymakers in developing countries face a different and, as it were, "enabling" institutional and strategic environment that imposes fewer constraints on them than their counterparts in institutionalized democracies. The inoperability or under-institutionalization of the politics-administration dichotomy, the weakness of bureaucratic and judicial counterweights, and most likely low level of internal democratic pressures, in the case of a rentier oil state like the UAE, affords these policymakers greater room for strategic discretion. Christensen et al. (2002) delineate a useful distinction between "intentional" change, which entails deliberate and proactive efforts to transform the structure of the administrative machinery and "incremental" change, where central political-administrative actors opt for a "muddling through" strategy. The latter option usually prevails, especially as administrative systems are more difficult to change in more than incremental, disjointed and selective ways (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). In the EAU case, we argue that both the "intentional" and the "incremental" perspectives apply, but each in its own distinct realm. Formal technical, organizational aspects of administrative change fall within the intentional politics. This explains both the rapid pace of the reforms undertaken and the notable outcomes that have been achieved on the ground, thereby solidifying the UAE as a regional exemplar in the field of governance transformation. The actual political aspects, on the other hand, are a matter of incrementalism, as the UAE leadership has opted to insulate the state structure and power balances from the ramifications of administrative change.

Thus, the unfettered discretion of the UAE's reform designers puts into perspective the popular view that administrative reform is tantamount to remapping the state itself (Caiden, 2001). The UAE administrative system has undergone three technically successful transition cycles, from the old Trucial system to the Weberian bureaucratic model, the NPM model (New Public Management) and the post-NPM model. Throughout these reforming cycles, the state structure has remained markedly limited in its potential for social and political change. Administratively, the local bureaucracy has gradually gained in functional performance and autonomy while remaining politically subordinate. In a nutshell, administrative developments in the UAE illustrate the

ability of reform designers to maintain the coexistence of “fused” and “diffracted” attributes within a single society.

Using the structure of the political-administrative nexus in the UAE as a case study, this article investigates the conditions under which policymakers in non-institutionalized democracies are given greater scope to shape administrative policy, particularly in relation to change. To achieve this, the study draws on theoretical literature and UAE-focused research. Available government and international data are used to illustrate some of the UAE’s privatization policies. The structure of this article is as follows:

Section 2 outlines the issues and strategic applications of policy discretion in Western and developing nations, especially in the light of the dichotomy model. Section 3 posits that under-institutionalized political-administrative linkages typically tip the balance towards political discretion over bureaucratic autonomy. This will show how the dual configuration of the UAE’s political-administrative interface, characterized by traditional (rentierism, neo-patrimonialism) and transformative (developmentalism, entrepreneurialism) traits, tends to grant the political branch of government unchallenged discretion, rendering the dichotomy model virtually irrelevant.

The strategic use of discretion by UAE’s policymakers and how this has shaped the administrative transition is discussed in Section 4. As we shall see, the strategy of composition has been an unchanging constant in the various stages of the UAE’s administrative transformation. Since the inception of the federal union, UAE leaders have been keen to juxtapose the more demanding technical standards of the Weberian, NPM and post-NPM transitions with the pre-Weberian pact that has historically welded the state to the bureaucracy and society. Section 5 provides a topical case study, showing how UAE reformer strategically used their discretion to implement a (technically) broad but (politically) selective privatization program that would spare the public sector’s role in maintaining existing wealth and power balances within society. The article ends with some concluding remarks.

### **Policy discretion and the politics-administration dichotomy**

Discretion is seen as an unavoidable yet divisive feature of public policy and law. It has often been equated with a form of power, connoting “the ability—sometimes the duty—of an individual or group to exercise judgement in choosing one course of action rather than another.” (Hood, 2020). Democratic concerns and the dominance of the Weberian rule-based model of bureaucracy have meant that it is usually seen as a necessary evil, and sometimes as an illegitimacy to be minimized (Hupe & Hill, 2020). To do so, there is a need for *legalization*, by subjecting upstream official decisions to predetermined rules, and for *judicialization*, involving submitting downstream official decisions to adjudicative procedures (Hupe & Hill, 2020). At the same time, policy discretion can also be seen in a positive light, as it facilitates the achievement of policy goals. Monetary policy shows, for example, that discretion may be superior to timeless perspective policymaking in that it facilitates the identification of model features that make conclusive outcomes more likely (Dennis, 2010).

Whether it’s the discretion of politicians or bureaucrats, policy discretion in institutionalized democracies is constrained by a complex interplay of rules and factors that define its scope and application. The constitutional chain of “command” (Emerson, 2021) or “dependence” (Short & Shugerman, 2024) is a foundational element in grasping the logic—others would say the illegitimacy—of the politics-administrative dichotomy. In schematic terms, policy discretion is constrained organically by a hierarchical will structure (electorate, representatives and bureaucracy), and normatively by a set of constitutional rules and procedures. This goes a long way to explaining the frequent use in public administrative research of the principal-agent theory to account for the interplay between elected and appointed officials (Hood, 1991; Svava, 2006; Overeem, 2012). While elected officials are tasked with setting objectives and defining the desired policy outcomes, bureaucrats are expected to draw on their technical competence to develop the best way to administer the policy and achieve those objectives in a politically neutral manner (Svava, 1998; 1999; 2001; Wilson, 1887).

The dichotomy model emerged from this institutionalized political-bureaucratic division of labor. Notwithstanding the theoretical and empirical criticism to which this model has been subject, the distinct constitutional and historical trajectories of Western bureaucracies nevertheless ensure its continued conceptual relevance in wealthy institutionalized democracies. In Continental European countries, to varying extents, greater emphasis is placed on legality, hierarchy, centralization and limited administrative decision-making (Du

Plessis & Lues, 2024; Oikonomou, 2019), while in the Anglo-American tradition, the dividing line between the realms of administration and politics has been demonstrated to strengthen the executive or, more generally, the administrative state (Sager & Rosser, 2022). This contextual variance can be attributed to the tendency in Continental Europe to view public administration as a part of the executive branch or at least under its control. The reason being that the dichotomy concept was developed within the Continental European tradition of abstract, deductive state theory, in contrast to the Anglo-American inductive tradition of pragmatic reformism (Overeem, 2012; Rutgers, 2001).

However, the dichotomy concept does not work in practice, enough public administrators now warn. The assumption that public officials are politically “neutral,” and insulated from the influence of politicians has been challenged as a “myth” that misrepresents bureaucracy as a somewhat impotent apparatus, devoid of any self-interest or power (Overeem, 2012; Riggs, 1991; Svava, 2001). As Hood (2002) points out, the “arms-length thermostatic control” of bureaucracy barely allows representative officials to exercise “indirect leadership.” It against this backdrop that the orthodox policy-administration dichotomy has been put on the defensive by alternative models, including the “modified dichotomy” and the “partnership model.” Such alternative models offer a more nuanced picture of the so-called dichotomy by highlighting instances where appointed officials wield real capacity to influence policymakers (Dunn & Legge 2002), an influence that can extend to agenda-setting and rule-making (Baekgaard et al., 2018). Indeed, the increase in bureaucratic discretion is largely the result of deregulation policies (Christensen & Lægheid, 2007).

Along the way, politicians in institutionalized democracies still have a number of strategies for asserting their policy discretion. First, where they are to take democratic responsibility for their decisions, “menu laws” or “catalogues of options” are adopted to insulate their policy preferences from bureaucratic interference. While opening a limited “window of discretion” for executive agencies, such a rule-making method forces them to select policy within the given limits (Gailmard, 2009, 26). In the US, for example, recent presidents have shown an increasing tendency to issue executive orders with more specific policy directives to ensure that agencies implement them as closely as possible. Drawing upon judicial precedent that the rulemaking requirements of the Administrative Procedure Act (APA) apply only to agencies and not to presidents,<sup>1</sup> presidents ensure that their policymaking authority is asserted through itemized executive orders to offset the discretion left to agencies by congressional statutes (White, 2018).

A second strategy finds application in settings characterized by corruption or patronage-based transactions between politicians and bureaucrats. In this particular instance, politicians delegate authority to trusted bureaucrats in order to maintain their policy discretion while shifting blame and responsibility for any unfavorable outcomes (Loftis, 2015; Hood, 2020). Functioning democracies have sought to curb political patronage through exclusive institutional antidotes. Merit reform movements to curtail the spoils system and cronyism in the US and Europe are part of this approach (Althaus, 2023; Carboni, 2010; Panizza et al. 2022). In this respect, the dichotomy mechanism has proven effective in insulating public administration from partisan connections, where office-bearers and members of political parties interfere in day-to-day public personnel functions such as recruitment, transfer, training, and promotion.

Undoubtedly, patronage relations in developing countries allow for more political discretion and interference in the administrative process. In such contexts, the presence of what appear to be autonomous administrative structures often serves to mask the pervasive and daily interference of the ruling elites. This phenomenon can be attributed to a combination of ecological factors, including ascriptive organizational cultures and loose constitutional and decision-making processes (Jreisat, 1997; Onder & Nyadera, 2020; Riggs, 1964). According to Du Plessis and Lues’s (2024) comparative-contextualized approach, the multifaceted range of political regimes in developing countries has produced various patterns of the political-administrative interface. The fact remains, however, that regardless of contextual contingencies, policymakers’ discretion lies primarily in the specific structure governing the day-to-day politics-administration nexus. In the context of the present discussion, the typological framework developed by Svava (2006) and refined by Dasandi & Esteve (2017) appears to be of interest. The determination of separateness between political and bureaucratic spheres comes from examining the degree of differentiation or overlap between the roles and responsibilities that an official performs. These roles include making policy versus implementing policy and allocating resources versus

managing resources (Svara, 2006). On this basis, Dasandi and Esteve have proposed a typology of political-bureaucratic interface consisting of four interaction models: Integrated, intrusive, collaborative and collusive. To Svara (2006), these models represent an ideal-typical combination of the two dimensions of interaction between the political and bureaucratic spheres: the hierarchical relationship and the differentiation of roles.

At one end of the spectrum is a configuration referred to as the “integrated” model (Dasandi & Esteve, 2017). This pertains to institutionalized democracies, wherein the bureaucratic sphere is confined to its role as an implementing arm of the elected, acting in accordance to political demands while ensuring neutrality in policy implementation. This model is emblematic of wealthy institutionalized democracies, wherein the bureaucracy is expected to exhibit both organic autonomy and functional separation from the political sphere. A second model, termed “intrusive,” (Dasandi & Esteve, 2017) applies to bureaucracies with high degree of formal separation combined with low bureaucratic autonomy. This model can be observed in more democratic developing countries, including India, Ghana, and Brazil (Dasandi & Esteve, 2017; O’Connor et al, 2021; Ray, 2020). In such settings, the political and bureaucratic apparatus has frequently been shaped by the legacy of colonial systems, giving rise to the formation of some rule-of-law-based neutral bureaucracy.

The third interaction model, described as “collaborative,” (Dasandi & Esteve, 2017) displays a low degree of role separation, combined with a degree of bureaucratic autonomy from political leadership. This pattern fits well with developmental states where governments actively promote socio-economic development through market-oriented policies. Infused with a paternalistic drive for economic transformation (Haggard, 2018; Joshi, 2012; Periera, 2008), administrative systems of developmental states are largely shaped by strong ties between political and bureaucratic elites, a culture of meritocracy and a degree of bureaucratic influence over the policy process (Dasandi & Esteve, 2017). China, South Korea and the East Asian tigers can be seen as part of this model. The same can be said with regard to the Arab Gulf states, although the extent of bureaucratic autonomy is more limited in this case.

At the extreme end of the spectrum is the fourth interaction model, characterized as “collusive” (Dasandi & Esteve, 2017). This model is typical of patrimonial and patronage-dominated systems. Leaving little or no room for role separation and bureaucratic autonomy, it can be observed in sub-Saharan Africa, Mexico and many Arab countries. In such settings, bureaucracy features a number of distinctive characteristics, including the control of the state apparatus by a small group of politicians, the prevalence of personal connections between those in key political and administrative roles and the utilization of government bureaucracy for rent-seeking purposes (Dasandi & Esteve, 2017). Another no less significant feature identified by Svara (2006) is the overlapping of roles. This means that bureaucrats are implicated in a plethora of decisions, including policy matters, whereas political leadership may be involved in administrative concerns. As a result, generalized rules versus specifics, ends versus means, higher versus lower value judgments can all be addressed by officials of both sides (Svara, 2006). Much mutual interference ultimately serves to dilute responsibilities among politicians and bureaucrats, thus negating the dichotomy that is supposed to separate these two spheres.

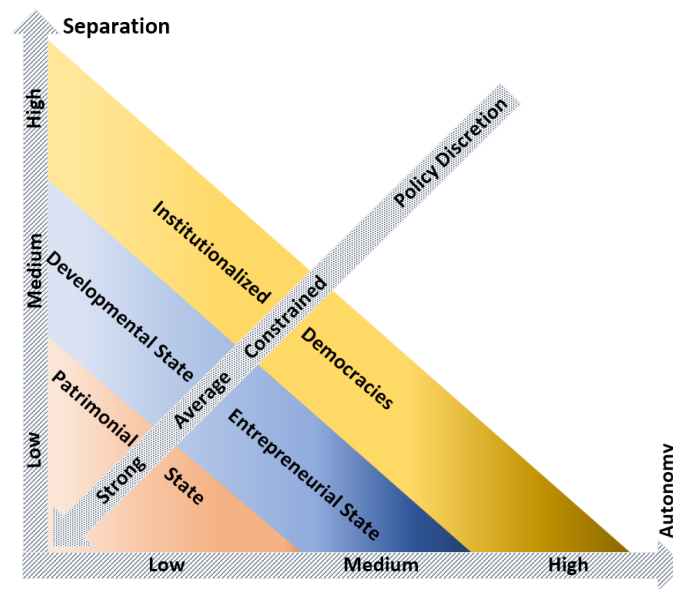
### **UAE: A multifaceted political-administration nexus**

To wield considerable discretion over administrative policy, political leaders in developing nations, especially those with non-competitive systems, strategically rely on a model of blurred dichotomy of government and bureaucratic responsibilities, driven by patronage through clientelism and politicization (Du Plessis & Lues, 2024). A neglected detail is that the making of modern administrative systems in non-Western societies is the consequence of a considerably intricate, multi-determined trajectory involving local traditions, colonial legacies and post-colonial asymmetrical isomorphism. Modern bureaucracy, as delineated in the Weberian model and reframed by NPM and post-NPM reforms, is predicated on a number of normative features, including impersonality, merit, secularism, individualism and rationality (Du Gay, 2005; Molina, 2009; Rutgers, 2008; Van Wart, 1998). It would be challenging to claim that these norms are replicated in a fully comparable way in bureaucratic systems of developing countries. Rather, different, even opposing norms shape the day-to-day operation of these systems. These include ritualism, ascriptive norms, caste structure, informality, seniority-based authority, collective responsibility, and so on (Grindle, 1997; Jain, 2006; Shamsul Haque, 1996).

Nevertheless, while these cultural features are indeed determinative, the peculiarities of the political-administrative nexus observed in developing nations are largely derived from the dual nature of political

legitimacy. Unlike their counterparts in institutionalized democracies, where Weberian ideal-type of patrimonial authority has all but disappeared, most developing states continue to *combine* bureaucratic and patrimonial modes. It is this combination, we argue, that gives the political-administrative dichotomy in transitional bureaucracies an altogether different significance. With patrimonialism and its variants being by their very nature intrusive, they unavoidably challenge the boundaries between political and bureaucratic spheres. The state's model of legitimacy (democratic, developmental-entrepreneurial, patrimonial) determines the structure of the political-administrative interface and thus the extent of the ruling elite's discretion. The more the legitimacy structure gives the ruling elite a free hand to shape policy, the less the bureaucracy is able to assert its organic and functional autonomy, and the less likely administrative change is to increase the process of diffraction within the state. This explains why political discretion moves in the opposite direction to bureaucratic separation and autonomy. This case holds true in most developing states where political legitimacy hinges on both bureaucratic (rational) and patrimonial (traditional) domination. Figure 1 below provides a schematic representation of three levels of policy discretion, inversely proportional to those of bureaucratic autonomy and separation.

**Figure 1: Inverse correlation between policy discretion and bureaucratic autonomy and separation**



The figure above hypothetically delineates the range of policy discretion (constrained, average and strong) available to those in power in different state configurations. The incomplete level of diffraction in prismatic transitional societies and thus the higher level of policy discretion afforded to the established authorities within them is due to the fact that these societies are composite in structure, with elements of the old persisting alongside the new. The issue can be considered from a path dependency perspective, where long-standing bureaucratic traditions end up creating self-reinforcing mechanisms over time to withstand change (Painter & Peters, 2010; Veggeland, 2008). The more recent dynamics of change in Western bureaucracies are no different. As Christensen & Lægheid (2011b) have observed, the transition from NPM—as a reaction to the deficiencies of the “old public administration”—to the post-NPM—as a reaction to the challenges of NPM—has resulted in a complex sedimentation or layering of structural and cultural features. Along the way, certain structural and cultural elements have remained relatively stable, thereby increasing the complexity and hybridity of the political-bureaucratic interface. The authors, however, contend that this hybridity should not be regarded as an inherent defect, but rather as a systemic attribute that can confer advantages and flexibility (Christensen & Lægheid, 2011b).

The path dependency argument has also been put forward in the context of MENA countries. A recent *Arab Administrative Elites Survey* (Schomaker & Bauer, 2020) provided empirical evidence of how the interface between politics and administration have oscillated between the resilience of the traditional patron-client pattern and NPM and post-NPM trends. Similarly, those familiar with the UAE bureaucratic system would be tempted to fall back on the path dependency argument to explain the composite structure of the UAE bureaucracy. This argument misses the bigger picture. As we shall see, there is also a strategic element to this story that points

to a deliberate choice in the right sense of methodological individualism. At any rate, the hybrid nature of the UAE bureaucratic landscape makes it unlikely to fit into just one of the four configurations proposed by Svava, Dasandi and Esteve. In this country, the politics-administration linkages, as they have developed over the past two decades, retain features derived from at least three of the four models examined. This is because the UAE state can be characterized in a number of ways: it is at once rentier (Hvidt, 2011), neo-patrimonial (Davidson, 2009; Sarker & Al Athmay, 2018), developmental (Joshi, 2012) and entrepreneurial (Ennis, 2018).

As a developmental state, the UAE can be placed within the framework of the *collaborative* model characterized by low role differentiation. UAE developmental elites, whether political or bureaucratic, share a number of common traits with their counterparts in China and South Asia. These include paternalism leadership (Mansour, 2017), a culture of meritocracy, esprit de corps and a tendency for officials to transition from bureaucratic to political positions. In a manner analogous to their counterparts in Asia, senior administrative officials in the UAE play an active role in the formulation and enforcement of policies, although bureaucratic autonomy is relatively constrained in the UAE's case. This makes the political-bureaucratic nexus in the UAE both highly hierarchized and collaborative.

On another note, the entrepreneurial orientation of the UAE state enables it to fit with the *intrusive* model, typified by a certain role delineation and a relatively low degree of bureaucratic autonomy. Many of the defining features of the bureaucracies in this model—namely India and Brazil, as identified by Dasandi and Esteve—are also evident in the UAE political-bureaucratic interface. These include the commitment of public organizations to the formal tenets of the rule of law, significant political interference in bureaucratic tasks, particularly in recruitment and career progression, and the influence exerted by other societal actors on policy-making.

Both developmentalism and entrepreneurialism force UAE policymakers to exercise only a moderate degree of discretion. The collaborative discipline required by these two styles of state governance, coupled with the need to comply with world regulatory isomorphism, serves to curtail the discretionary leeway of the UAE leaders in favor of the local bureaucracy. It should be noted, however, that these restrictions are offset by the very structure of the UAE state. The UAE leadership has kept proficiency in neutralizing the political ramifications of change, retaining only its technical dimensions. The institutional framework, particularly the prerogative of policy formulation, establishes a top-down governance structure that allows considerable UAE leadership influence over the street-level bureaucracy and the specifics of policy implementation (Vanvelzer & Chua, 2022). What's more, the UAE state lacks a key link to the establishment of a developmental/entrepreneurial state akin to India or Brazil, for example. Because the UAE lacks a competitive, partisan system of governance, its political-administrative patronage model is immune to the constraints associated with competitive politics. Lastly, the neo-patrimonial structure of the UAE state lends itself to the *collusive* model of politics-administration interface. UAE Government has long been described as hybrid in that it combines soft, patrimonial power systems with more formalized structures (Davidson, 2009; Matias, 2017). These “two-way lines of communication” (Davidson, 2009) between rulers and society ensure greater flexibility in the governance system, while allowing ruling elites considerable informal discretion. The main channel is the traditional *majlises*, open forums where citizens, including high officials and street-level servants, can raise personal or wider concerns with a sheikh or senior family member (Matias, 2017). The prevalence of personalistic linkages, as well as the rent-seeking motives that underpin the regulation and running of the public sector and the markets, leave little or no room for role differentiation and autonomy.

### **UAE administrative transition: stages and agenda**

Having examined the various facets of the UAE's political-administrative dichotomy, the focus now shifts to analyzing the choices made by political leaders to manage the key stages of the country's administrative transition. Importantly, the composite structure of the political-administrative interface in the UAE has not been an obstacle to the implementation of dramatic reforms in state governance and public administration. In the UAE, transformational leadership (Antwi-Boateng, 2020; Gouher & Al Amiri, 2022; Matias, 2017) has fulfilled this role by taking the lead in accommodating the existing structures and interests to the demands of administrative modernization. Sheikh Zayed, the founder of the UAE, is regarded as an effectual entrepreneur of standards who established a number of transformative nation-building values. He is credited with favoring

consultative and consensual governance, which helped maintain the unwritten social contract between rulers and constituencies (Antwi-Boateng, 2020; Matias 2017).

Consensus and transformational leadership actually allows for considerable policy discretion in balancing interests and selecting between available options. However, this room for discretion was not boundless. UAE's founding leaders were both constrained and enabled by institutional and structural conditions (Matias 2017). They were aware from the outset that they could not run a modern state based solely on their intuitive transformational capabilities. Awareness of this fact was the initial step before embarking on the three waves of transformation of UAE's public administration. The very first sequence of transformation consisted of adapting the existing traditional Trucial institutions into a contemporary bureaucratic structure aligned with the standards of a twentieth-century administrative state (Antwi-Boateng 2020). The UAE's post-independence administrative landscape has been marked by the introduction of a rudimentary bureaucratic structure overlaid on an essentially tribal patron-client system, and by a heavy reliance on administrators and professionals imported from other sister Arab states to cope with the severe shortage of qualified personnel (Mansour, 2017). The founding leaders' long-term transformational enterprise can be situated within Dinnen's second phase of nation-building (Dinnen 2007). Such a phase requires the development of institutional tools to incentivize statehood and solicit citizen buy-in, including a mixed market economic approach, efficient wealth distribution, future investment through sovereign wealth funds and the establishment of a hybrid administrative system at the nexus of traditional norms of governance and Weberian bureaucracy.

In the ensuing transition stage, Sheikh Zayed's successors embarked on a new path of reform by embracing the tenets of neoliberal governance, including NPM and pro-market reform. Since the turn of the millennium, UAE's public administrations have cultivated a regional reputation based on certain pillars of NPM, namely "rule of law," "limited government," "regulatory efficiency" and "open markets" (Mansour, 2017). The reform agenda included in particular: 1) the transfer of significant powers to decentralized and independent bodies; 2) the corporatization of state-owned firms, outsourcing and handing over of public services and assets to private companies; 3) the introduction of NPM procedures to improve public service delivery; 4) the introduction of user fees for public services; and 5) the introduction of performance-based budgeting (Dixon et al., 2018).

The impetus to embark on a new cycle of reform as part of the post-NPM transition became evident in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic. The UAE's undertakings in this context can be examined in twofold: technical and political. Technically, the UAE's reform agenda is notable for its extensive focus on smartization. In early 2013, a comprehensive program of smart government, also referred to as mobile government or mGovernment, was initiated with the objective of outperforming the former eGovernment strategy and attaining the smart government stage in the forthcoming years (Rahman et al., 2023; Sarker & Al Athmay, 2018). The objective was not merely to capitalize on the benefits of digital and smart systems with regard to transparency and bureaucratic corruption, but primarily to fulfil certain criteria set out for the post-NPM transition. As Dunleavy et al. (2006) argue, the transition to "digital-era governance" (DEG), as a principal aspect of the post-NPM transformation, is driven by the objective of redefining and rearticulating the functions of government. As a paradigm shift from NPM, digital-era governance has involved adopting holistic and needs-oriented structures and creating self-sustaining change across a range of closely interrelated technological, organizational, cultural, and social effects (Dunleavy et al., 2006).

In the UAE context, the advent of digital-era governance signifies, amongst other things, a revamped relationship between the state and the citizen. One of the key features in this respect is the establishment of "isocratic administration" or "self-administration" (Dunleavy et al., 2006), a model that aims to bring public administration closer to the service users through openness, engagement and integration of services. The shift from agency-centered to citizen-centered processes is intended to empower citizens and businesses to assume a more active role in managing their interactions with public administration. The Smart Government Initiative, as reflected in the UAE mGovernment Roadmap 2013-2015 and the subsequent computerization and ICT-led governance programs, has yielded immediate and potential benefits for the running of government entities, particularly in terms of public service innovation and user happiness (Alharmoodi & Lakulu, 2020; Rahman et al., 2023). For over a decade, specialist barometers such as Global Mobile Market regularly place UAE at the top list of countries offering the highest levels of intelligent services, with penetration rates frequently exceeding 80% (Alharmoodi & Lakulu, 2020). Existing literature found this initiative to be a transformative

and versatile strategy for the UAE public sector, serving as a tool for data analysis, better decision-making and improved accountability and transparency (Almuraqab, 2020; ElSherif et., 2016; Rahman et al., 2023). Today, the 2024 Zero Government Bureaucracy (ZGB) program is an initiative aimed at overhauling the structure of government work, in particular by eliminating redundant government procedures.

Along the way, the smartization of public services and spaces extends beyond the technical realm of public management to serving as a spatial governmentality mechanism. For some time now, the UAE has been one of the countries worldwide to invest heavily in biometric technologies, including fingerprinting, facial recognition and retinal scanning systems at border control points and in urban areas (Al-Khouri, 2012; Ziadah, 2024). The proliferation of state-led initiatives to monitor administrative and public spaces online and on-ground in recent years has resulted in the UAE becoming one of the most advanced case studies in the field of cyber-surveillance (Gilbert, 2010; Ziadah, 2024). Evidently, this only bolsters the capacity of the UAE's bureaucracy to address the political, social and security issues in a streamlined and cost-effective manner.

Arguably, the most striking policy outcome of the post-NPM reforms in the UAE has been the remarkable increase in the government's guidance and supervisory authority over both the bureaucracy and the market. As Christensen and Lægveid (2011a) aptly note, the return of the state as part of the post-NPM agenda assumes a specific direction in each national system, contingent on local government's permeability to external normative and internal democratic pressures. On this note, what sets the UAE government's reaction to the post-NPM movement apart is the great capacity to put reforms on the agenda and to implement them in a focused, selective and fast-tracked manner. As Levy (2015) argues, public management reforms, even within a neo-patrimonial state, have the potential to yield sustainable outcomes, provided there is sustained political commitment to the agenda and the reforms are well-targeted. Sarker et al.'s (2019) empirical investigation of public sector reform in the UAE lends support to Levy's argument. In this study, the authors identified four key drivers that shaped the UAE's administrative reform process. These are global forces, state leadership under developmental neo-patrimonialism, strategic partnerships and organizational factors. From the findings, state leadership has been the most influential factor in orchestrating the whole reform process. A very likely reason for that is the discretionary scope of UAE reformers to aggregate from a range of alternatives, to cope with various constraints and to select the implementable item of reform (Sarker et al. 2019). This is a strong way of saying that discretion, i.e. the "ability to choose among alternatives," is not unique to *diffracted* administrative models, as Riggs claimed (1970). It can also be verified in *prismatic* settings which, according to Riggs, operate under inhibiting structural, cultural and political constraints.

### **Privatization: balancing transformation and strategic discretion**

The return of the state as a salient policy effect of the post-NPM transition has not merely bolstered the managerial and supervisory capabilities of the UAE government. From a purely political point of view, it has also facilitated the consolidation of existing political arrangements. The UAE's privatization program is indicative of the extent to which reform designers have been keen to ensure that the new balance between the public sector and the market does not disrupt the patronage nexus between the ruling elite, the bureaucracy and the wider population. An initial technical overview shows that privatization has assumed various forms in the UAE. Global standardized framework includes the reduction of regulations, asset sales, share issues, corporatization, contracting, the imposition of user charges, and the removal of subsidized pricing (Hayward, 2023). According to Ward (1999), the UAE's privatization program has unfolded in a number of devolutionary ways, including an initial public offering of a vertically integrated state-owned monopoly entity, the sale of government shares of public utilities to private investors, the philanthropic zero-fee transfer of state-owned companies to less wealthy nationals, the financing and operations of infrastructure projects, the private sector management of state-owned enterprises through management services agreements, and the contracting of services previously carried out by the public sector to the private sector.

Yet it is worthwhile to examine whether the impact of the privatization program in the UAE has extended beyond the realm of technical prescriptions to influence the neo-patrimonial rentier configuration of the state. Put differently, the question is whether the isomorphic convergence of privatization has led to the emergence of new forms of securing and retaining legitimacy, rather than simply focusing on successful policy outcomes (Monios, 2017). The answer is bound to be negative. Policymakers in the UAE have been keenly aware of the

disruptive impact of privatization on the system of wealth distribution and the way the state relates to the market and society. The magnitude of the interests at stake has therefore forced them to exercise the utmost discretion to prevent public sector reform from undermining existing arrangements. As Shapiro and Willig (1991) rightly point out, privatization has been shown to have a deep strategic interconnection with the way in which power is exercised and, in particular, with the way in which resources are distributed. The labels “public ownership” and “private enterprise,” they write, suggest two discrete and very different ways of structuring economic activity and utilizing productive assets.

Normative literature on the subject (Caiden 2001; Cullis & Jones 1998) habitually associates privatization with a contraction in the size of government, state controls, and the public budget. “Privatization” is commonly identified as “a host of policies all sharing the common aim of strengthening the market and reducing the role of the public sector” (Cullis & Jones 1998). This definition does not accurately reflect the situation in the UAE. The divestment of public undertakings as part of the administrative transition has not resulted in a systematic contraction in the size of the public sector or the influence of the state on both the market and bureaucracy. Evidence of this can be seen in the UAE’s discrete policy of macro and micro-privatization. At the first level, it is common knowledge that government-owned companies have typically corporatized rather than privatized, meaning they have adopted best practices from the private sector, without the government or its leading families divesting ownership (Kemp et al., 2019). This echoes Millard and Parker (1983), arguing that it is not the transfer of ownership that is likely to increase efficiency, but exposure to competition.

Indeed, macro-privatization has been met with reluctance by UAE policymakers. Divesting large state-owned firms has not been a serious item on the government’s agenda (Sarker & Al Athmay, 2018). With the exception of electricity, water, public transport and telecommunications (Al Ameri & Al Ameri 2023), there has been no significant macro-privatization ventures in the UAE. In such cases, the government is generally content with the single “public buyer” model to mark its step towards privatization. In the energy sector, for instance, electricity is initially generated by private “independent power producers” (IPPs). These IPPs subsequently sell their electricity to a public entity that retains exclusive ownership of the transmission sector (Al Ameri & Al Ameri, 2020).

State-owned companies with high strategic assets at stake, such as oil-based industries, have been subject to a separate macro-privatization rationale. The choice has been made to restructure them into corporatized entities, exempt from the general corporate law regime and under close government supervision (Jaradt, 2019). Since the country’s independence, oil companies have taken on the role of controlling strategic assets. These entities have been shown to be politically advantageous, irrespective of their financial performance, in that they have enabled those in power to build patronage links, create employment and direct resource allocation (Amico, 2017).

By contrast, the UAE government has opted for a different course of action with regard to micro-privatization. As the companies concerned have no serious impact on strategic assets, privatization at this level has gained considerable momentum. Two directions have been taken with this method: firstly, creating internal sectoral markets by introducing limited market-oriented techniques into government operations and requiring government’s units to compete with private companies through competitive bidding and tendering. Secondly, the outsourcing of public services. This second course of action was aimed in particular at private companies run or sponsored by nationals to undertake ancillary administrative services such as processing tasks, facilities maintenance, security and staff transport (Mansour, 2008). Although the UAE is considered the least corrupt of its neighbors, the government is said to protect its citizens from the vagaries of the free market (Mansour, 2017). Within this context, the growth of micro-privatization operations can be attributed to two key factors: the private sector’s propensity to employ cheap expatriate labor, and a workforce regulatory framework that is markedly biased in favor of employers. UAE policymakers still believe that it is not yet time to abandon two non-standard practices in the operation of privatized and private enterprises: the ban on trade unions and the failure to adopt a minimum wage regulation (Sarker & Al Athmay, 2018).

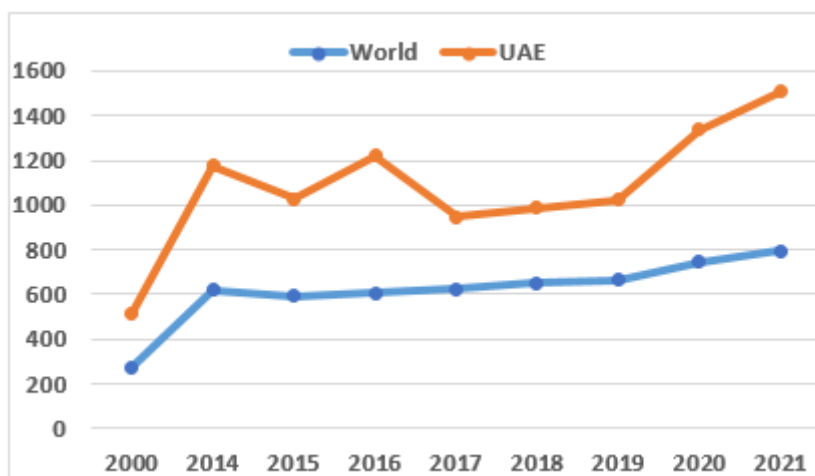
The UAE blend of macro and micro-privatization serves as a particularly relevant case study for examining how policymakers exercise their strategic discretion in a prismatic setting. Reform in this area has been selective and contingent upon the overarching parameters of the country’s political framework. In particular, attention has been paid to the entrenchment of strategic and social sectors that have a strong impact on local dynamics

of legitimization and patronage. The case of the UAE thus provides a strong counter-argument to the view that privatization, and market-oriented reforms in general, necessarily lead to reducing the size of the public sector and, by extension, to a change in the system of wealth distribution and the political arrangements that underpin it.

To see this, one only has to consider a sector as socially significant as healthcare. With a total population of around 10.48 million (2023), only 11% of whom are Emiratis, public sector facilities offer free universal healthcare to UAE nationals and a low-cost option to non-nationals (Alshamsi, 2024). With the exception of the affluent emirates of Abu Dhabi and Dubai, where private insurance has a solid base, the Ministry of Health and local government agencies remain the primary provider of healthcare services (Koorneef et al., 2017). What's more, despite the fall in oil prices in 2008 and 2014, the mean change in government healthcare expenditure has steadily increased at a higher rate compared to that of the private sector, indicating that the burden distribution of healthcare spending has shifted towards the government (Al Mustanyir, 2022). The growth in privately owned healthcare facilities over the last two decades has not halted government investment from increasing. With AED 5.745 billion (8% of the 2025 federal budget)<sup>2</sup> allocated to healthcare and community prevention services, public spending still accounts for more than two-thirds of overall expenditure in the health sector. Adding Emirate-level public spending to this share provides a solid indicator of the government fiscal stance and the limited impact of health privatization.

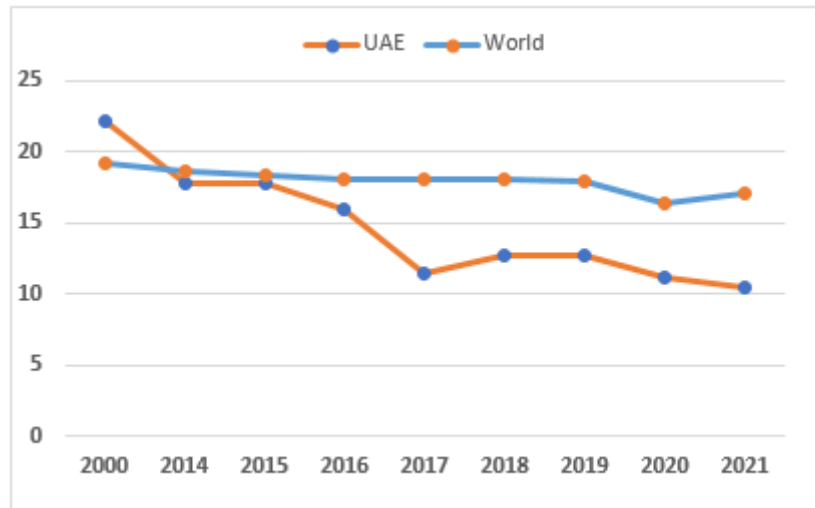
The expected outcome of neoliberal privatization is a decrease in government health expenditure with a corresponding increase in private health expenditure. That was not the case. As can be seen from graphs 1 and 2, the trend in both types of expenditure over the period 2000-2020 is an inverse one, with public sector spending still on the rise over the years and out-of-pocket expenditure declining steadily in the same period. The data also show a discernibly different trajectory when contrasted with global trends: From the one hand, government healthcare spending in the UAE continued to grow faster, outpacing by more than twice the global average. Meanwhile, out-of-pocket expenses have been on a steady downward trend, falling by around twice the worldwide average. The contrast with global trends therefore leaves no doubt that privatization is far from easing the fiscal burden on the public health sector in the UAE.

**Graph 1**  
**Domestic general government health expenditure per capita (current US\$)**  
**A UAE-World comparison**



Source: World Development Indicators (World Bank Group)<sup>3</sup>

**Graph 2**  
**Out-of-pocket expenditure (% of current health expenditure)**  
**A UAE-World comparison**



Source: World Development Indicators (World Bank Group)<sup>4</sup>

This strong discretion on the part of UAE policymakers when it comes to privatization and, more generally, to transforming public governance practices in a context of stringent neoliberal isomorphism calls for special explanation. There are three specific factors that we believe have significant explanatory value in this regard. The first of these has to do with what literature commonly refers to as “welfare dependency” (Kittay 1998; Lucie 1992; O’Connor 2001). In the UAE, as in the rest of Gulf countries (Jawad, 2021), the paternalistic distributive approach of state institutions has fostered a strong welfare drive fueled by ingrained representations of government and public sector organizations as the main, if not exclusive, providers of wealth and services. With the UAE being an extensive welfare state (Mansour, 2017; Toledo, 2013), its citizens have consistently developed high expectations of government and its perceived function as the prime source of subsidized services, handouts and employment opportunities. Two key indicators elucidate why in the UAE public sector organizations have long been considered as a conduit for social equality and public welfare (Rutledge, 2005). The first is the proclivity of UAE nationals for public employment over private sector jobs. For them, public service positions typically provide numerous benefits, including high wages, job security, fewer working hours, earlier retirement and perceived social esteem (Kemp et al., 2019; Rutledge 2005). Secondly, the UAE education system is noted for its strong reliance on the public sector to recruit graduates.

The second reason for the UAE’s leadership’s great policy discretion when it comes to reforming public sector lies in the interconnectedness of government and business community. In the UAE, as in the rest of the Gulf countries, the elites who run the government are not as detached and autonomous as one might assume. Rather, they are embedded in and reliant on various segments of society (Gray, 2016). Over time, the local bureaucratic apparatus has come to adapt, incorporating the reflexes of a truly representative bureaucracy that provides space and voice to diverse groups (Kemp et al., 2019). This peculiar form of societal corporatism has the effect of blurring the boundaries between the private and public spheres, so that the dividing line between state and private ownership is not always easy to discern (Almezaini, 2013). The strong presence of business leaders on the boards of many corporatized and state-owned firms, and vice versa, is a common occurrence that should come as no surprise (Almezaini, 2013). While it enables ruling elites and their alliances to exercise control over both the public and private economy, the interchangeability between the two sectors significantly dilutes the neo-liberal significance of privatization.

A final but not least rationale lies in the comfortable position of the UAE with regard to the pressure for reform. As Christensen and Læg Reid (2011a) aptly note, the return of the state within the context of post-NPM reforms assumes a specific direction in each national system, contingent on the degree of permeability of the government to external isomorphic and internal democratic pressures. Indeed, the absence or insignificance of

such pressure has been crucial to the entrenchment of the discretionary powers of the UAE's reform architects. This can be explained in two dimensions: local and international. Locally, discretion means that privatizations and, more broadly, all market-oriented reforms could be carried out without domestic pressure. This is because, as an oil rentier state, the UAE does not tax its people and therefore does not depend on them to fund and manage public policy. In the political economy literature about rentier states, the absence of taxation in Gulf political systems has frequently been invoked to explain the peculiar standing of these systems: "no taxation, no representation" (Arzaghi & Balthrop, 2018; Hertog, 2014; Schwarz, 2008). The political autonomy of the UAE leadership is structurally derived from its fiscal autonomy (Gibert et al., 2005; Riggs, 2009). At the international level, global agenda setters who champion fully pro-neoliberal reforms appear to have minimal influence on the UAE government's policy choices. Once again, oil revenues prove a crucial lever for discretion and autonomy. With the UAE not relying on funding from external lenders, isomorphic pressures do not extend beyond technical prescriptions, with little or no impact on the existing patronage pattern.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this article is a preliminary contextual overview of policy discretion in a prismatic (transitional) bureaucratic system. The objective was to address an analytical gap in our understanding of the rationales why policymakers in non-Western countries are more likely to exercise greater discretion in managing and reforming public administration than their Western counterparts. The following findings are noteworthy:

- The UAE case demonstrates an inverse relationship between policy discretion and the degree of institutionalization of the political-administrative interface. The further we move away from the dichotomy model of institutionalized democracies, the greater the discretion for policymakers. This highlights the irrelevance of the dichotomy model, including its "modified" and "partnership" variants, in bureaucratic systems steeped in paternalistic ideologies such as developmentalism and patronage-based politics.
- The failure of neoliberal isomorphism to penetrate established political arrangements in developing countries with similar structural traits to the UAE should not be seen simply as a cultural "path-dependent" effect, but rather as an assumed strategic choice by policymakers. This means placing administrative policy in a perspective of composition rather than transition, indefinitely maintaining the prismatic character of society.
- The resilience of the political-bureaucratic and the state-business interconnectedness in the UAE poses a challenge to Riggs' prismatic theory that administrative transitions lead to gradual diffraction, allowing social subsystems to achieve greater autonomy. This, in contrast to his claim to provide an ecologically historicized account of transitional bureaucracies, highlights the normative, teleological bias of his analysis.
- Weak incentives and pressures to reform, whether external or internal, favor not only unfettered discretion but also policy hybridization. Ultra-privatized and corporatized organizations can coexist with a vast public sector designed to perform age-old social and political functions.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author declared that he has received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Data availability statement:** The data used for this article is available online.

### **Practitioner point:**

- Impressive reform outcomes can be achieved, even within a neo-patrimonial bureaucratic framework, provided there is sustained political commitment to the agenda and the reforms are well-targeted.
- Bringing a bureaucracy up to the standards of development governance entails first tackling cultural and political barriers, notably the welfare culture and patron-client linkages.
- Investors, donors and global development organizations need to factor in local cultural and political elements when calculating the risks and likelihood of success of administrative reforms.

Weak incentives and pressures for reform, whether external or internal, favor not only political discretion but also the hybridization of public administration systems in transition.

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