

Core Values, e-Government Implementation and Its Progress in Brunei

Dr. Patrick Kim Cheng Low
Dr. Mohammad Habibur Rahman
Dr. Mohd. Nabil Almunawar
Dr. Fadzliwati Mohiddin
Mr. Sik-Liong Ang, MBA
University Brunei Darussalam
Gadong, Brunei

Abstract

In this article, e-Government and national cultures of the island-Republic of Singapore and the Sultanate of Negara Brunei Darussalam (we will cite Brunei henceforth), both small countries, are examined, and the authors discuss the salient core values in the two national cultures that enable e-Government to be successfully implemented or at least have the potential success ingredients, and thus make progress.

Introduction

The aims of the paper are to examine e-Government and the role of national cultures and its core values in Singapore and Brunei that enable e-Government to be successfully implemented, and thus make e-progress and assist economic growth and development.

To put it simpler terms, e-Government can be defined as the administrative processes of the government as well as the latter's facilitative interaction with the public or the citizenry. And e-Government is used to serve citizen, supporting businesses and strengthening societies. (Lee, 2007)

A culture is usually taken as ‘the way we do things around here’, and values about “how things ought to be” are shared amongst the people. (Mead, 1994 cited in Hill, 2009). Hence, national culture can be defined as a set of core values held by its people and these core values are the people’s key beliefs or convictions, something very close to their hearts (Low, 2005).

In e-Government, culture is one of the critical factors in enabling economic growth by streamlining government processes, providing better access to information and promoting a suitable enterprise environment to further facilitate greater business growth.

e-Government, National Culture & Supporting Core Values for e-Government

At the outset, it is appropriate to appreciate this point – English is the lingua franca of ICT, and what at the first level helps and reduces the challenges in e-Government is that the use of the English language is commonly used in both Singapore and Brunei Darussalam.

e-Government modernises business processes by enabling more accurate, 24/7 responses to citizen requests, and linking transaction accounts in different agencies (Dutton, 1996). It, in fact, fortifies good governance practices which include managerialism, accountability, transparency and freedom of information, rule of law, and combating corruption. These may be stimulated by commitments under international agreements, and by competitive pressures.

Some countries adopt e-Government in ways that normally reinforce traditional bureaucratic structures, cultures and links from administration to citizens and politics; in Singapore case, e-Government makes its civil bureaucracy more responsive. In this aspect, the core values of efficiency, effectiveness (Low, 2002, cited in Low, 2005; Low, 2009; 2008) and reliability (Mahizhnan and Andiappan, 2002) of Singapore are an asset when implementing e-Government. These values have been said to assist the city-state Singapore to be successful in implementing its e-Government (Mahizhnan and Andiappan, 2002). Singapore, as a city-state, has been known for its efficiency and effectiveness in its administration.

Besides, in achievement-oriented and pro-active Singapore (Low, 2009), e-Government enables service integration while this has yet to be developed in Brunei Darussalam. The island-Republic has jurisdictions that enable comprehensive systems where a web-portal or smart card integrates information and services from various government agencies to help citizens and other stakeholders get seamless service without needing to know about the responsible government agency. Thus, users can obtain services across different geographic

levels of government within the same functional area, and across different functions. As an example of the latter, a citizen can submit a change of address on her driving license, and the change is automatically registered with the health, elections, and tax departments, thus avoiding the need for multiple or duplicate filings. Citizens can also use these portals to make payments and other transactions, obtain a checklist of things to bring when applying for services in-person, find answers to frequently asked questions (FAQs) and engage the services of relevant commercial enterprises.

Singapore's success is further augmented by its Government's continuous efforts in laying down the required support, infrastructure and amenities (Low, 2007; Low, 2005). In Brunei, His Majesty Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah Mu'izzaddin Waddaulah has been spearheading economic development and progress, bringing the country to higher heights of economic growth. In fact, Low and Yusob (2008) has argued that the national philosophy of MIB (*Melayu, Islam dan Beraja*: Malay Islamic Monarchy) has led the Sultanate to achieve much growth with good direction from the top as well as care and concern for its people's welfare. Much unity also exists, with many Bruneians seeing the Sultan as the provider, caring and showing concern for their welfare and wellbeing. Bruneians too enjoyed many benefits and these, among other things, include no income tax, free education and health services.

Brunei Darussalam is a small country with less than 400,000 people. Small can be beautiful. Like small City-state Singapore, Brunei can also tap its smallness and turning its smallness into a competitive advantage. Being small, Brunei can easily set up its IT/ICT infra-structure.

Wanting to be less dependent on petrol and gas, the Majesty's Government is also looking at ways to diversify the Sultanate's economy. It has been laying the necessary infrastructure such as the building of highways, flyovers and more roads and improving the ports to facilitate business and economic growth. Bandar's size will also be expanded (Ibrahim, 2007). The Sultanate's efficiency and administrative effectiveness can be

enhanced and, like Singapore, ‘make compact’ through the e-government process, with its people attuned to e-government acceptance and practices.

Education and investments on skills growth, training and development can bring nations to the threshold of economic success. It is generally believed that better and higher education can contribute to human capital growth and a higher level of productivity. Here, the national cultures of both Singapore and Brunei can be said to stress on education (Low, 2002, cited in Low, 2005; Said Ya’akub, 2007). In Singapore, the Government invests in university education, seeking to make local universities world-class and best in the region. The same applies to Brunei Darussalam, with various education schemes – including the Sultan’s Scholars – being implemented to boost education among the Bruneians. According to UNESCO 2007 statistics on education, 94.9 percent of adults and 99.6 percent of youths are literate in Brunei Darussalam (UNESCO 2007 statistics). “Many years ago, Ministry of Education imposed all government and private schools to have computing lessons in their curriculum starting with primary classes,” said most school teachers when interviewed.

An educated workforce and citizenry makes e-Government readily accepted with its implementation smoother. A good Bruneian example of this has been cited by Low, Almunawar and Mohiddin (2008) was the introduction of the Hariis system within the Ministry of Health. Developed purely by the Human Resource (HR) specialists of the ministry, the information system which provides portal and information communication technology (ICT) support for the Ministry is greatly accepted and widely used by the management and staff of the ministry. This reflects a good start, as it moves away from “mere data collection but also a mindset acceptance of the change to come” (input from several Ministry of Health’s staff). Besides, it also critically serves as a solid action step to move forward in e-Government implementation.

Nonetheless, unlike Singapore, which has a good IT professional pool, one of Brunei’s key challenges in the progress of e-Government is that of lack of human resources skilled in information-communications technology (ICT). The issue is expected to pose an even

greater challenge in the future when the number of e-Government projects increase (e-Government Media, 2009: 67). Singapore has various IT training bodies both in the private and public sectors, and in this regard, Brunei's institutions such as Universiti Brunei Darussalam and Institute of Technology Brunei need to train and produce a pool of IT/ICT professionals as well as developing the IT/ICT capabilities and capacities.

Key Guiding Principles for Good e-Government

Of critical importance too, the political will must be present; this is to ensure that goals and aims of e-Government is being implemented and well carried out. Through e-government, businesses are facilitated and people served – “Every service that can be delivered electronically shall be.” Overall, reflecting action-oriented efficiency and effectiveness, Singapore’s e-Government guiding principles, where deemed fit, ought to be emulated by Brunei, and they are:

- Every service that can be delivered electronically shall be
- The customer shall supply or update personal information only once.
- Those without home access shall have access to public delivery network.
- Staff must assist those who need special help like the elderly.
- All services shall be “customer-centric” and not “agency-centric”.
- Physical visits shall be kept as low as possible (Mahizhnan and Andiappan, 2002).

The Government of Brunei has as its vision “an e-smart Government in the 21st century”, its mission “to establish electronic governance and services to best serve the nation” (e-Government Media, 2009: 67), and its guiding principle, providing “Citizen-centric services”.

Potential Problems, Caveats and the Progress for e-Government Initiatives and Implementation in Brunei

The success of e-Government depends to a large extent on the public’s adoption and acceptance of a new way of doing things - an e-lifestyle. Singapore has been successful with its e-lifestyle (Mahizhnan and Andiappan, 2002). Kifle and Low (2009) has affirmed

the view that “(strong) leadership is defined in terms of directing and completing the whole implementation of e-government, getting the results as well as winning the people over in the cause and actions”, and this is tantamount to building a supporting IT culture. And what was and is true of Singapore is also relevant to Brunei. There was thus a strong need to build up “a national IT culture that involved massive public education campaign. The plan called for the involvement of schools, the mass media and other grassroots organizations to create awareness and promote IT literacy” (IDA, 2006: 5, commenting on the Singapore situation).

In Singapore, various campaigns were held annually to raise public awareness of the e-lifestyle. These campaigns in Singapore stress on the 4Es – e-Learning, e-Entertainment, e-Communications and e-Transactions – to provide Singaporeans five strong reasons why they have got to be connected to information communication technology. To move citizens from awareness to adoption of an e-lifestyle, a series of thematic online fairs are also planned to boost consumer confidence in online services such as shopping for groceries, purchasing travel packages and banking online.

However, in Brunei, more of such an e-lifestyle has yet to be part and parcel of the prevailing culture, and it needs to be encouraged. One Institut Technologi Brunei (ITB) survey shows only 31 percent of Bruneians used e-banking (Hazair, 2007). It also reported that “the popularity of personal computers and the advent of internet banking presented both an opportunity and a challenge for the banking industry”, meaning also to e-lifestyle in Brunei. The survey also reported that that 14 percent reported that “they still worried about security in online banking”. Online banking, somewhat new to Brunei, was first introduced by Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC) in 2000.

Nonetheless, a recent newspaper article has indicated a “good response to HSBC online services” (Hosni, 2009: 4). It is said that Internet banking services have made life easier and are gaining its appeal among “highly sophisticated people who are always on the move”. It is also gaining attraction among bank customers since it affords customers “the

luxury of saving a lot of time and energy by providing a new service where electricity and water bills can now be paid through Internet banking”.

As such, positively speaking, some evidence of e-lifestyle is, more or less, making a toehold, and that is very encouraging. Besides, the younger generation of school children is, in fact, pretty much exposed to ICT and e-ways. Based on interviews with four hundred and twenty-three school teachers and citizens, the feedback was that: “all youths in Brunei are computer literate and they are capable in surfing the net.”, “In most ways, our school children are IT-savvy.”; and “they are more open and oriented towards new technology.”

Evident in the researchers’ interviewees with several Singaporeans (six from the Infocomm Development Authority: IDA and Institute of System Science: ISS and four businesspersons and e-Government users during the period 21 to 26 September 2009) on the Singapore e-Government implementation and the ways in which it manages or leads the change, the prevailing views were that in Singapore:

Government initiated, felt like top down but explanations were made. (But more critically it) managed change with the benefits highlighted to the citizenry. Newspapers gave key information and highlighted benefits too.

The public buy-in was vital to ensure the smooth implementation, support and acceptance. In Singapore, another “core belief that helps the e-Government implementation process is that change needs to be well handled or managed. It is more or less about change management issues and problems” “Change is well accepted and must be managed.” (several interviewees’ input; mentioned six times).

Senior citizens who were illiterate or not well educated found it difficult to cope with technology; besides, they grew in a setting where education then was not readily available. And how these were then overcome in Singapore? (These could be lessons for

Brunei Darussalam in its e-Government initiatives and implementation which may be a topic for another article.)

In Singapore, the Government set up a number of Citizens Connect Kiosks in Community Clubs: CC, and these are strategically located in places where there are high human traffic. There are a total number of 27 such kiosks. And these include in places such as the CPF building, Income Tax building at Novena. The Citizens Connect Kiosks are manned by IT (information technology) ambassadors who trained IT personnel and they are paid IT employees to assist citizens to use the IT. A critical factor in managing the change is that these IT ambassadors lent a hand to up the high-touch factor that facilitated the change: IT acceptance and e-Government process and habit.

Similarly, in Brunei Darussalam, greater public awareness on e-government and its benefits would be useful; this is indeed much needed and it can bring about more support to the e-government process and implementation. The youth organizations can also assist to disseminate the information of e-Government efforts to its members. TelBru, several months ago, has also lowered its e-speed/Internet fees, and this means taking the Internet and things e to the people, further making easy the public's increasing e-acceptance and growing of the e-habit and ways. The e-Government media's publications in the Sultanate's major newspapers such as Borneo Bulletin are also another positive step that serves to educate the public as well as showing the determination to ensure the progress of e-Government initiatives and implementation in Brunei Darussalam.

Like Singapore (Low, 2009; 2005), Brunei indeed enjoys much peace and political stability, and this is advantageous (Mohiddin and Low, 2008). After all, since the more stable is the organisation (nation), the more stable would be the information systems providing better and effective service to the end-users. In this regard, Mohiddin's (2007) study supports the point that peace and stability indeed helps in e-implementation.

Stability in Islam is in the faith of following the religion, and what is critical and helpful in e-Government is the fact that Islam is not against modernisation as long as it is not

against it. The Islamic teachings in Brunei continued to be reinforced in every possible ways without neglecting the progress and development of the nation globally (Mohiddin and Low, 2008). The influence of Islam is more visible in the public sector compared to private; nevertheless the private sectors are continuously trying to adapt the Islamic way of life as much as possible. Non-Muslims are expected to give their due respect.

In Brunei, the need arises to reduce the amount of paperwork that is currently said to exist in many government departments (“slow processing within the government”, an unnamed Universiti Brunei Darussalam lecturer, cited in Han, 2007: 1), and that must be done either as a prelude or alongside the implementation of e-Government. To tap synergies and generate faster processing, greater coordination among ministries is also needed (Kifle and Low, 2009), and this is vital for the smooth implementation of e-Government in Brunei.

Anecdotal evidence and talking to several expatriates and locals appear to suggest that little innovation or risk taking exists in Brunei. Although much paperwork, bureaucracy and red tapes abound, things are still rather conservative, with many regulations, laws and orders to be followed, still the positive aspects appear to exist. Bruneians are said to hold the value of risk innovation. Besides, innovation/risk taking does have positive impact on System Quality in Brunei. This might be because organisations in Brunei have to respond effectively and appropriately to present and future needs and challenges (Mohiddin, 2007). Kilfe and Low’s (2009: 274) (*italics, authors’ emphasis*) study appears to confirm this when they indicate the findings that, “innovation in Brunei Public Sector (also) comes from the lower and middle level. This is *a positive indication* that they can be creative and there is strong leadership potential from within (the ministries).”

Interestingly, just as in Singapore’s case – “the strong political will of the government leaders has led to success of the island’s Republic e-Government initiatives and implementation” (Singaporean respondents’ input; mentioned seven times), Brunei is also blessed with this; the Government of Brunei is indeed determined to have its own “e-smart Government in the 21st century” (e-Government Media, 2009: 67).

The authors here would also argue that yet another important cultural ingredient in Brunei when it comes to the implementation of e-government is its overall cultural value of people-orientation. Bruneians are also said to be feeling-oriented, and according to Mohiddin (2007), this value of people orientation has positive impact on Information Quality, System Quality, and Service Quality. Bruneians are people-orientated and hence a Collectivist society. Bruneians' strength relies on unity in whatever circumstances, and this helps as a boon when comes to implementing systems and e-government. In Brunei and in organisations within the Sultanate, a strong preference for group decisions (face-to-face meetings are still favoured) and consultative management exists, and employees act in the interest of their in-group, not necessarily of themselves. Employees usually do best in in-groups as in, for example, the introduction of the HARIIS system within the Ministry of Health mentioned earlier.

Interestingly, in implementing the e-government process, it is good to have a combination of high-tech and high-touch so that the people feel involved or engaged so that they own the process. Because of this feeling-orientation of Bruneians, generally speaking, they would ensure or at least take steps to ensure that the people factors are attended to and/ or at least be sensitive to the people issues such as job displacements/ alignments or cuts if these would occur. The people can be assured, at least, not feeling alienated.

Conclusion

To sum up, very much like Singaporeans, Bruneians should be achievement-oriented, continuously improve, and forge ahead in e-government implementation. And like any other nations, to succeed, Bruneians need to close any gaps that may exist. Besides, as pointed out by His Majesty, Bruneians ought to grow intellectually, benchmark and “not take things for granted by living extravagantly, but rather be mindful of the fortunate circumstances they (the Bruneians) find themselves in” (Said Ya’akub, 2007:1).

True, e-Government is a challenge to Bruneians yet opportunities abound. Although at this point in time, the Brunei Government’s development of e-Government may just be

starting or budding, the Sultanate's national culture has the necessary DNA and template for success, and from here, the efforts to e-Government should be an ongoing process with continuous improvement (embracing the Malay saying of “*sedikit-sedikit lama-lama menjadi bukit*”, translated, bit by bit, it eventually becomes a hill). It is a never-ending journey where destinations are only temporary stopovers; and that one-mindedness plus resilient attitude should also be adopted and built upon.

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