

Original article

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## EVOLUTION OF THE BRAZILIAN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION\*

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**Abstract.** This manuscript analyzes the changes in Brazilian public administration over the years and the attempts to reform and improve the effectiveness of the delivery of public services. There are three main modes of operation in the Brazilian public administration: patrimonialism, bureaucratic and managerial. Even though reforms have taken some effect over the decades, all three modes subsist in different forms in the public organizations. After the democratization of the country, there has been a decentralization process and a growing influence of civil society on public affairs, but accountability is still low. Reforms were carried out by authoritarian and democratic governments from different political spectrums, but the quality of public administration and governance still suffers from ineffectiveness in the delivery of public services and patrimonialism, resulting in many cases of corruption and mismanagement. The worsening of the financial situation of the country tends to aggravate the situation in the future.

**Keywords:** Brazil; public administration; reforms; decentralization.

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### Introduction: Emerging challenges in governance and development

There is a lot of emphases in academia and practice on capacity building and the application of the best practices of public administration (PA) and management to improve public organizations and society.<sup>1</sup> Some public managers, scholars and

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\* This article was based on a previous publication of the author (Puppim de Oliveira, 2017).

policymakers in Brazil, like in other parts of the developing world, are continuously pushing for cycles of reforms aiming at improvements in the performance, transparency and accountability in public administration in order to deliver quality public services. However, one area that is missing is a critical analysis of the propagation means, the implementation and “impacts” (positive and negative) of Western and Non-Western theories of public administration and management in practice (Gulrajani and Moloney, 2012; Ashworth et al., 2013). It is important to better understand the context and the political economy of how and why ideas “travel” from one place to the other, and how they are applied and changed. I could point out three dimensions that are of particular interest to research, particularly in Brazil, since they are influencing reforms in other countries.

Firstly, one concerns the general decline of trust in public institutions everywhere, which also affects the West. Brazil, in particular, has witnessed a large number of corruption scandals in the last decades. With democratization in many countries, reform movements in both the public sector and civil society have created institutions and organizations aimed at increasing transparency and accountability, but they were unable to offset the problems of trust in public administration, and their links with the political system (Puppim de Oliveira and Berman, 2021).

Secondly, there is a growing interest in the topic of the influence of Western and non-Western PA ideas on public administration in developing countries, particularly in Africa and parts of Asia (Haque and Turner, 2013) and in Latin America (Haque and Puppim de Oliveira, 2021). The last big wave of Western ideas being exported to public administration was triggered by the propagation of New Public Management (NPM) and its mutations. However, non-Western countries such as China and Singapore are now influencing and exporting their PA ideas or practices and competing with traditional donors for soft power. Brazil was the cradle of innovative ideas such as participatory budgeting and Bus Rapid Transit (BRT), which have been adopted by hundreds of cities and countries around the world. At the same time, the competition from China and other non-traditional donors (e.g., private foundations, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and UAE) are influencing the way the traditional donors and intellectual sources of PA knowledge work with governments and academia as well.

Thirdly, there is a rising consensus about the increasing interconnectedness of countries, nations and societies. New influential actors, such as the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), bring new dynamics to the global institutions. However, public administration and management are still pretty much constrained to think about organizations that have limited action beyond their geographically determined administrative boundaries, and not connected or concerned about what goes on in other parts of the world (except for international relations and development management). The impact of BRICS in world affairs, such as human rights and climate change, implies that changing their public administrations to respond to those issues can make a worldwide difference. The question is then, with the increasing impacts of global problems will the domestic public administrations become more entrenched in the domestic self-interest? Or will there be more openness and trust to reform those institutions to think about the global collective interest together?

The dynamics of public administration are directly related to the conceptual ideas that come from different actors. Governments in developing countries are the main actors to influence public administration in terms of ideas and their implementation. However, international organizations have also played a key role in the dissemination of ideas for public administration and have used their influence to drive reforms in public administration (Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff, 2015). Public administration systems also reflect what is going on in society. Political, social, economic and cultural aspects of the context, as well as their changes, have a significant impact on shaping public administration. The political system is particularly important as it shapes who is in control of the State and its relations with society. For example, civil society groups can push for changes on the streets or through the dissemination of ideas.

This paper examines the evolution of the Brazilian public administration over the decades particularly in the last 35 years since the democratization of the country. This can bring learning lessons to the BRICS and other developing countries more broadly.

## A short history of the Brazilian public administration

The Brazilian public administration started with the organizations developed by the Portuguese colonizers to manage the exploitation of the resources in the colony. However, radical changes and intensification in construction of public administration occurred when the Portuguese royal family, fleeing from the Napoleonic threat in Europe, moved to the then Brazilian capital of Rio de Janeiro in 1808.

The Portuguese royals brought with them a large part of their courts and public administration employees from Lisbon to Brazil (about 15,000 in total). Brazil, in particular the city of Rio de Janeiro, moved from being the capital of the colony to be the center of the kingdom. This movement of the Portuguese royals has shaped Brazilian public administration over the years. Under their influence and *modus operandi*, state and public administration bureaucracies and processes created roots in the country. The Brazilian public sector continued to develop its own characteristics after King Joao VI returned to Portugal in 1821 and Brazil gained independence from Portugal in 1822.

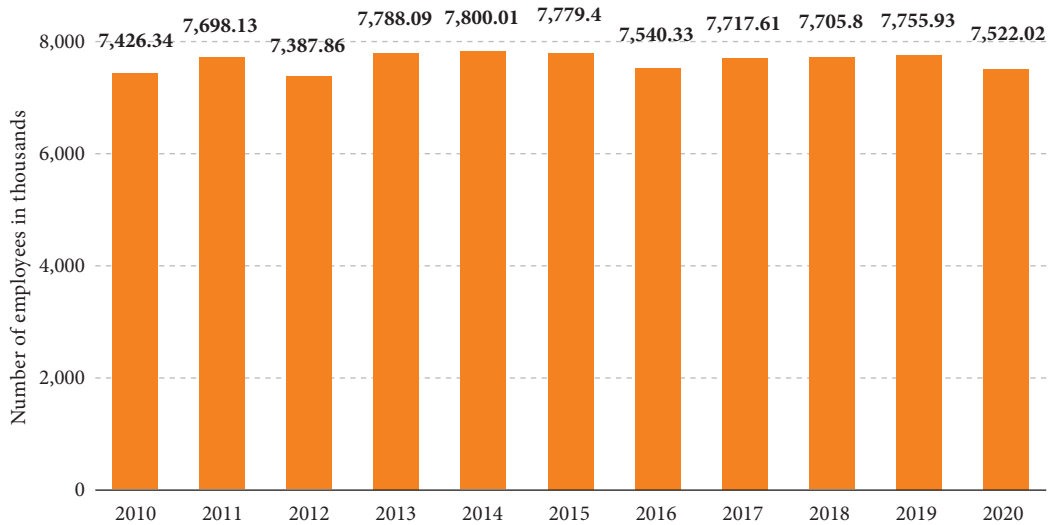
The history of Brazilian public administration and the Brazilian State can be summarized in several stages, which are described below (based on Lustosa da Costa and Lustosa da Costa, 2016, 2008):

- 1808–1822: The roots of public administration controlled by the Portuguese and under the absolutism of the regime.
- 1822–1840: Building the national State and identity. The independence (Brazil became a Kingdom/Empire by its own) and the return of part of the bureaucracy to Portugal caused the need to develop Brazil's own public administration under an absolute State controlled *de jure* by the emperors Pedro I and Pedro II but controlled *de facto* by advisors.
- 1840–1889: Development of a more representative State under the Emperor Pedro II, with some characteristics of parliamentary monarchy. Power over

- the bureaucracy was decentralized and the administration extended beyond the capital (still Rio de Janeiro at that time).
- 1889–1930. The State in the “Old Republic”. Brazil became a republic in 1889. Patrimonialism as a mode of public administration continued from the monarchy. The State became controlled by a political elite. The public administration served this elite.
  - 1930–1945: Establishment of a bureaucratic public administration under the national state controlled by a dictatorship. Getulio Vargas centralized and modernized the state by introducing the main principles of Weberian administration and the professionalization of the public administration and by creating the Department of Administration of the Public Service (DASP) and Getulio Vargas Foundation (FGV) to lead this reforming process, but roots of the patrimonialism continued in many practices (Farah, 2011; 2016). ‘National developmentalism’ was the development mode with the creation of national public companies, such as the National Steel Company (CSN).
  - 1945–1964: “National developmentalism” as the philosophy of the state continued after the end of the “New State Era” of Getulio Vargas. The State pushed for rapid industrialization and the creation of more State companies, such as Petrobras. Rapid economic development and urbanization occurred. The capital moved from Rio de Janeiro to Brasilia (1960).
  - 1964–1985: Authoritarian modernization. National developmentalism remained under the military government established in 1964. Import substitution and a private sector was protected by the State. Modernization of public administration continued under authoritarian rule with a high degree of centralization.
  - 1985–1992: Neoliberalism and dismantling of the national developmentalism. Economic stagnation and high inflation led to the neoliberal reforms in the public administration, especially under the Collor de Mello government in 1990. The government tried to introduce some ideas of the New Public Management reforms along with the liberalization of the economy. The Constitution of 1988 gave more responsibilities to the states and municipalities, which led to political and administrative decentralization and the growth of the public administration in these subnational entities.
  - 1992–2002: The state in the era of managerialism. The opening up of the economy continued gradually. Search for greater efficiency and professionalism in the public administration with an attempt to “de-bureaucratize” the State. Gradual reduction in the number of public employees took place in the federal government (Nunberg and Pacheco, 2016). Several managerial reforms were introduced initially in the federal government and later in some states and municipalities (Bresser-Pereira, 2009; 2016).
  - 2002–2016: National developmentalism returned to the agenda of the federal government. The number of employees gradually increased. Liberal trends in the economy reversed, but some of the management reforms in the federal public administration continued.
  - 2016–2022: The impeachment of president Dilma Roussef and the arrest of president Lula da Silva for corruption allegations brought about the liberal

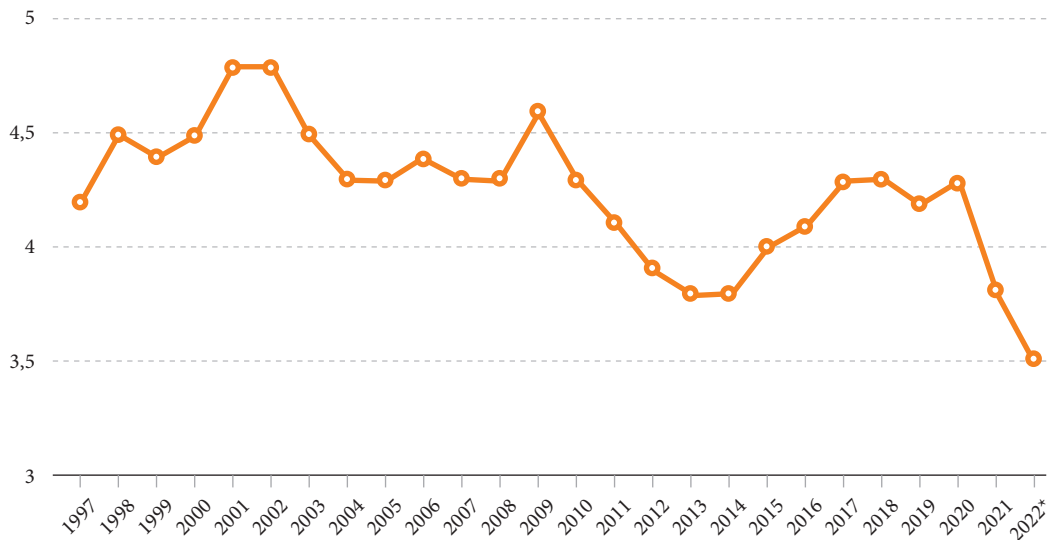
governments of Michel Temer and Jair Bolsonaro, who pushed ahead with administrative reforms and attempts to modernize the State, such as the expansion of e-government. The financial situation of the country, worsened by COVID-19, pushed for a reduction in the public sector expenses at all levels.

- 2023: The return of president Lula da Silva to power brought back the ideas of developmentalism. He has ushered in a new wave of state expansion and reversal of public administration reforms in 2016–2022.



**Figure 1. Number of employees in the public administration sector in Brazil from 2010 to 2020, in 1,000s.**

Source: (Statista, 2023)



**Figure 2. Federal personnel expenditure as a percentage of GDP**

Source: (Martello, 2022, based on Brazilian national treasury data).

There are three main modes of operation in the Brazilian public administration: patrimonialism, bureaucratic and managerial (Lustosa da Costa, 2016; 2008). Despite efforts to reform, all three continue to subsist together in a certain degree. The intensity of each of them, and the intensity of reforms, depends on the political context. Until 1930, the public administration was controlled by political elites. Public and private interests were mixed. Public employees were appointed by political leaders and other influential authorities. The first Getulio Vargas government (1930–1945) made efforts to introduce the bureaucratic and more professional form of public administration, which grew under his dictatorship together with the role of the State in the economy and society. The military dictatorship (1964–1985) consolidated some of Vargas' reforms, such as a huge productive apparatus. In the 1980s, the managerial reforms began to take root and accelerated in the 1990s, but they are still timid for the size of the state. In the last 30 years we have witnessed the waves of reforms and counter-reforms, without any particular coherence in the direction of Brazilian public administration. Bureaucratic and patrimonialistic forms still dominate the Brazilian public administration (Puppim de Oliveira and Berman, 2021). The quality of public service still suffers from deficiencies in many areas, despite the growth in public spending.

## Recent reforms

The transition from military to a civil government in the 1980s was fundamental in shaping today's public administration. The constitution of 1988 devolved power and responsibilities to the states and municipalities. They started to build their own public administrations to manage the new responsibilities such as primary education and health. However, the chaotic economy, plagued by hyperinflation in the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s (inflation reached almost 2,000% in 1989 and 2,500% in 1993), left little room for efforts for broader public administration reforms. The reforms pushed by international organizations in the context of the Washington Consensus in the 1980s and 1990s, such as privatization and deregulation of public services, further worsened the economic situation. Most of the efforts of the administration entities (Union, states and municipalities) focused on controlling their finances to prevent their money from being eaten up by inflation. The 1992 impeachment of the first directly elected president (Fernando Collor) after the democratization of the country in 1985 made the situation even more difficult to manage, as the political and economic situation was unstable. Nevertheless, the public administrations have never collapsed and have shown a certain degree of resilience to maintain certain public services despite the economic and political problems in the country.

Inflation was controlled in 1994 by the Real Plan and a new president, Fernando Henrique Cardoso (who had previously been finance minister), was elected, providing some political and economic stability. Under the principles of improving the role of the state in the economy and promoting a market economy, a series of economic and administrative reforms were carried out from the second half of the 1990s, mainly targeting the bureaucracy at the federal level. Several national companies were privatized. Cardoso created the Ministry of Federal Ad-

ministration and State Reform (MARE) in 1995, headed by Minister Luiz Bresser-Pereira, to implement administrative reforms aimed at improving the efficiency and accountability of the federal bureaucracies. The efforts were focused on the managerial reforms based on some of the principles of New Public Management (NPM). In addition, administrations were allowed to outsource certain services to 'social organizations' (NGOs). The most important impact was the reduction of the budget for personnel at the national level. Expenditure on personnel in the federal government reduced from 55% (1995) to about 30% (2002) as a percentage of current net revenues (Nunberg and Pacheco, 2016).

During the Workers' Party governments (2002–2016), initially by Lula (two mandates) and Dilma (one full mandate and she was impeached in the middle of the second mandate), the national developmentalism returned to the agenda of the federal government with a growing influence of the State in the economy and an increasing number of social policies. The number of public employees increased gradually. Nevertheless, some of the management reforms in the federal public administration continued to professionalize the public administration.

The government (2016–2018) led by Michel Temer, who was Rouseff's Vice-President, took drastic measures to reduce the growing public deficit, and new reforms were proposed to make further changes to public employees' pension schemes, in addition to the changes to the general social security (INSS). Most of the public sector employees no longer have special pension provision systems. The number of public sector employees remained stable over the years at around 7.5 million across the three levels of government (Federal, States and Municipalities) (Fig. 1). The Bolsonaro government (2019–2022) has made some attempts to reform the State, but has had little success. One area where the country made progress was in the digitalization of the government. Brazil is ranked above the OECD average in the OECD's Digital Government Index (DGI, 2020). The federal government also halted salary increases during Bolsonaro's government, reducing the federal personnel expenditure as a percentage of GDP (see Fig. 2). Nevertheless, state and municipal tax revenues were heavily impacted by the economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, which also highlighted the problems of several sub-national entities. Many of them were not able to reform their public administrations in time and now face huge financial challenges.

Together with the managerial administrative reforms, a number of reforms have been carried out over the past three decades aimed at increasing the transparency and accountability of public authorities. Most government budgets are widely open to the public now, including, for example, salaries of public employees and travel expenses. Civil society and the press have become more active in denouncing mismanagement and misappropriation of public funds. Moreover, a set of public auditing organizations and prosecutors have grown in scope and size alongside the transparency. More independence of the justice and police have happened as well. Recently, federal and state polices and public attorneys have dismantled several cases of corruption, making accountability reaching all the way to the top of the administrative and political hierarchy, even indicting or arresting some key figures that were 'untouchables' before (e.g., ministers, judges, senators, governors and including the now president Lula and former president Bolsonaro),

though those trends have been reversed in the Bolsonaro government and several politicians charged with corruption practices are back to politics. Therefore, despite the managerial reforms the bureaucratic and patrimonialistic modes prevail in Brazilian public administration with pockets of managerial modes, more in some organizations than others. In some places, the managerial reforms have never taken effect, and patrimonialism has never left the core of the bureaucracies, being some of the main posts in the public organizations chosen by politics. Signs of meritocracy are still hard to find in some organizations, though, on the other hand, some are completely professionalized.

There are some examples of innovation in the public sector. One interesting innovation in public administration is the establishment of public prosecutors' offices. Their job is to protect collective and public interests, such as the protection of the environment. Created under the 1988 Constitution, public prosecutors played a key role in bringing lawsuits against any person or organization, including public authorities. For example, they can sue a developer for deforestation beyond the legal limits, and the environmental protection agency for non-compliance the law. Their active involvement in many states, together with civil society, has pushed for more accountability and transparency in public administration. The interaction of public authorities with external stakeholders can also lead to innovation in the public sector (Zambrano-Gutierrez and Puppim de Oliveira, 2022).

After the nation's democratization in 1985, civil society actors, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community organizations, increasingly exerted pressure on governmental authorities, demanding greater accountability. The participation of local organizations was also important to ensure compliance with legislation and the implementation of environmental policies, for example (Puppim de Oliveira, 2005).

Global concerns such as climate change and biodiversity also permeate public administrations at the different levels. Brazil has ratified most of the multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) and supported the establishment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Different units of the Ministry of the Environment deal with global environmental issues. The national congress enacted the Law 12.187 in 2009 creating the National Policy on Climate Change (NPCC). States and some municipalities have also built their own institutions and organizations to manage climate change adaptation and mitigation. Some of them, such as the State of Sao Paulo, have created their own climate change policy laws and institutions to deal with climate change even before the national government (Puppim de Oliveira and Andrade, 2016). State public administrations, like the national government, also interact with each other and the international organizations to exchange information and build their capacity.

The mere identification of a problem is rarely sufficient to move the state and public administration to decisive action. There were several obstacles to expanding the capacity of governments in late democracies (Haque et al., 2021; Puppim de Oliveira and Berman, 2021). Like in other sectors, the decentralization envisioned in the 1988 constitution was undermined by the lack of resources at the subnational level. Building capacities in the public administration has been uneven across states and municipalities. Some municipal and state entities have built



strong and effective apparatus, but others have lacked behind (Puppim de Oliveira, 2005). Effective public management is more an exception than a rule (Puppim de Oliveira and Berman, 2021). For example, although municipalities control land use according to the federal constitution, many municipalities have no institutional apparatus to implement land-use controls, leading to an expansion of urban informal settlements.

Managerial reforms have not had significant impacts on the public administration. Bureaucratic modes still prevail, as most activities are tightly regulated, despite the efforts to reduce red-tape in recent years. In addition, corruption scandals and patrimonialism are also common in the field of public administration. There have been many cases of unethical behavior of public officials related to, for example, illegal logging and bribes for the issuance environmental license. For example, the head of the environmental protection agency and ministry of fisheries in one state were arrested by federal police while trying to sell fishing license for fishing companies (O Globo, 2015). The head of the agency was appointed by a political party in power. During the COVID-19, there were many cases of corruption worth several million dollars, such as the case with the state of Rio de Janeiro, which led to the impeachment of its governor (Puppim de Oliveira and Berman, 2021).

## Trends and challenges in the Brazilian public administration

There are a number of trends in the Brazilian public administration. I will highlight some of the most prominent ones. Firstly, over the past three decades, the Brazilian public administration has changed drastically and gradually began to interact more with civil society. The shape of public administrations and the way they implement public policies in Brazil is largely affected by the regime and the party in power, but some trends do not stop at changes in governments. For example, after the democratization of the country in 1980s, civil society groups gained political power and are gradually able to influence public policies, both the design and implementation. NGOs and social movements are influential in several areas of public policy, such as housing, environment, and agrarian reform. Innovative participatory processes have taken place in several instances of decision making from consultation to direct decision vote. The participatory budgeting, which started in Porto Alegre, is one of those innovations that have been spread now to several countries (Cabannes, 2004).

Secondly, financial and human resources are increasingly concentrated at the federal level, even though most of the responsibilities for public services are in the hands of the states and municipalities, generating an imbalance between resources and responsibilities. The constitution of 1988 aimed at political and administrative decentralization. It gave autonomy and power to states and municipalities, but they face increasing challenges in delivering quality public services. Even though the constitution and other reforms aimed at decentralization, the largest share of the public budget remains at the federal level. In 2014, the federal, state and municipal levels accounted for 68.5%, 25.3% and 6.2% of total government taxes respectively (Receita Federal, 2015), and this has not changed much since then.

States and municipalities now deliver the bulk of public services but are strangled financially. Most of the municipalities do not have their own revenues and depend heavily on transfers from the federal and state governments. Moreover, even though all municipalities have the same responsibilities, there is a huge difference in administrative and financial resources among them (the same for the states), both in terms of quality and quantity. There are very different municipalities, like São Paulo city (~12 million inhabitants) and Borá (825 inhabitants), both with the same constitutional responsibilities. Since their sizes and capacities vary significantly, this leads to an inequality of opportunities for the effective provision of public services, such as health and education (Avallaneda and Gomes, 2015). There are also some conflicts of jurisdiction over certain responsibilities.

Thirdly, the bureaucracy has several urgent problems to be addressed right away. The size of the State is relatively large compared to other countries in the same level of income but not the quality of public services. Although the number of employees at the federal level has not changed significantly since 1990s the amount of the revenues to cover personnel costs have steadily increased until mid of the decade of 2010s. Moreover, the number of personnel employed by governments has hardly changed in recent decades (Fig. 2). Along with financial mismanagement, the recent crises in public administration have highlighted the need for urgent reforms in the public administration. The state of public services has deteriorated. Many states are financially broken and cannot even pay their employees in times of crises, such as in the case of the State of Rio de Janeiro, which had not paid its employees' salaries of October in December 2016. Despite that mismanagement and corruption were problematic in many cases, the core reasons for the financial problems are the expansion of the activities of the state and municipalities without proportional growth in revenues and reforms to improve the efficiency of the public bureaucracies.

Finally, the issues of ethics in politics, government, and public administration have also continued to be a major problem in the Brazilian State. Despite all the reforms to professionalize public administration, patrimonialism still rules many public organizations and contracts. There are 350,000 jobs (out of a total 1.1 million public employees) filled with political appointments at the federal level costing more than US\$ 1 billion per month (O Globo, 2016). If you include states and municipalities, then this number can easily be multiplied by several times.

Most of the top managerial posts in the public administration at all three levels are filled by political appointments without requirements for minimum qualification control. Many are appointed by political parties under their 'quota' in return for political support for the government. The distribution of posts through political appointments is key in a fragmented parliament with more than a dozen parties represented. Individual and political interests influence many of the administrative decisions. Thus, it is not surprising that cases of corruption and mismanagement in state companies and other organizations, almost always involve political appointees. This is routine in the Brazilian public administration and damages the trust of the population on public administration. Nevertheless, there is a growing institutional capacity in the State and civil society to push for transparency and accountability in the last decades, which has

maintained a minimum level of checks and balances on public officials, though not enough to avoid many of the corruption scandals and the return of corrupt politicians to power, showing weak political accountability. Moreover, efforts to tackle corruption and make politicians more accountable to the law, such as the “Lava-Jato” (Car-Wash) initiative, have been dismantled in recent years, which can reduce accountability.

## Conclusions

The organizational aspects of public administration are fundamental for its effectiveness in providing the services to society. They are important but not determinant to guarantee the good functioning of public administration and the quality of public services, as public administration alone does not control society or government, and vice versa. The interactions between public organizations and other actors are crucial to how society functions and how services and goods are delivered, as in the case of Brazil. These interactions take place through the formal political system or through the engagement with civil society.

Reforms to strengthen the interaction between civil society and public administrations can address some of the aspects mentioned in the introduction. Civil society interests have grown in many developing countries, such as Brazil. They have also allied themselves in the media and within governments, linking them to the formal political and administrative system. They can help improve trust, adapt external ideas to the local context and address the increasing number of global issues. Civil society groups have disseminated new values in society and brought society’s interests and values into decision-making processes. They have campaigned for and against many causes that can potentially affect the dissemination of knowledge in society and in the public administration, such as the environmental sector. Also, many people who work for civil society organizations can later work for governmental organizations, contributing to the introduction of their values and ideas to these organizations.

Brazilian public administration has evolved rapidly in the last decades, particularly since the democratization of the country in the 1980s. Several reforms have been introduced by different governments at the three levels of government along throughout the history. The size of the public sector has grown significantly over the recent years, but the situation of the provision of quality public services is still limited and cases of corruption and mismanagement in the public sector surface almost daily. On the one hand, managerial and organizational reforms have room to improve public sector performance. Areas such as human resources and financial management are still problematic (Nunberg and Pacheco, 2016; Puppim de Oliveira and Berman, 2021). On the other hand, governance has improved to bring more accountability to the public sector and strengthen its capacity to carry out public policy. Finally, international networks, such as BRICS, or even OECD, can be an avenue for the exchange of experiences and capacity building, but also develop peer-to-peer accountability mechanisms to raise the bar for governance in Brazil and other countries, and to address the old and new challenges of public administration.

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