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Hybrid Politicisation and the Limits of Managerial Reform: Rethinking Political–Administrative Relations in Malaysia

AHMAD FAIZ YAAKOB
Faculty of Administrative Science and Policy Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), 70300 Seremban, Malaysia
Corresponding author: ahmad405@uitm.edu.my

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Abstract

New Public Management (NPM) reforms have long been associated with the expectation that managerial governance can depoliticise public administration through performance measurement, managerial autonomy, and professional management; however, growing empirical evidence across diverse governance contexts challenges this assumption, as political influence persists despite successive reform waves. This article argues that politicisation does not merely survive reform but adapts to it. Drawing on qualitative evidence from 35 elite interviews with senior Malaysian civil servants and documentary analysis of public sector reforms, it introduces the concept of hybrid politicisation to explain the coexistence of managerial governance norms and embedded political influence within administrative systems. The Malaysian case, particularly through instruments such as Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), National Key Result Areas (NKRA), and the Government Transformation Programme (GTP), demonstrates how managerial reforms can generate symbolic compliance while simultaneously enabling indirect forms of political steering. Rather than treating politicisation as a deviation from bureaucratic neutrality, the article reconceptualises it as an adaptive and institutionalised feature shaped by institutional layering and ongoing political-administrative interaction. Empirical findings indicate that managerial instruments are frequently interpreted and operationalised in alignment with political priorities, thereby embedding political influence within formal governance structures. In doing so, it challenges binary distinctions between politicised and depoliticised administration and contributes to comparative public administration by offering a more context-sensitive framework that bridges debates on managerial reform, institutional continuity, and political–administrative relations in developing and hybrid governance systems.

Keywords: Hybrid Politicisation; New Public Management; Public Sector Reform; Malaysia; Political-Administrative Relations

Introduction

Public sector reforms across the world have been profoundly shaped by the emergence of New Public Management (NPM) as a dominant paradigm of administrative modernisation. Since the 1980s, governments have adopted a wide range of managerial instruments such as performance measurement, results-based management, decentralisation, and customer-oriented service delivery to enhance administrative efficiency, accountability, and responsiveness. These reforms reflect a broader shift towards managerialism and market-oriented governance, in which outputs, outcomes, and performance indicators increasingly evaluate public administration.

Beyond improving efficiency, NPM reforms have also been associated with a more normative expectation: that managerial governance can reduce political interference in administrative decision-making. By emphasising professional management, organisational autonomy, and measurable

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performance outcomes, NPM is often associated with the ideal of bureaucratic neutrality. Within this framework, administrative systems are expected to operate according to technical and professional standards rather than political considerations, thereby creating a clearer separation between politics and administration.

However, empirical evidence across diverse governance contexts increasingly challenges this expectation. Political influence often persists despite successive waves of managerial reform. Rather than being eliminated, political–administrative interaction frequently evolves into more complex, indirect, and less visible forms. Managerial instruments, such as performance indicators, evaluation frameworks, and monitoring systems, may themselves become channels through which political actors shape administrative priorities. Drawing on elite interviews with senior Malaysian civil servants and documentary analysis of reform programmes, this article demonstrates that political influence not only persists but is often embedded within managerial governance instruments themselves. This raises a fundamental question for contemporary public administration: if managerial reforms are intended to depoliticise governance, why does political influence persist?

This question is particularly salient in developing and hybrid governance systems, where political–administrative boundaries have historically been fluid and deeply embedded in institutional practice. Malaysia offers a compelling case for examining these dynamics. Since the late twentieth century, the Malaysian public sector has undergone multiple waves of administrative reform aimed at improving efficiency, performance, and governance outcomes. These include budgeting reforms, quality management initiatives, and performance-based governance frameworks such as Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), National Key Result Areas (NKRA), and the Government Transformation Programme (GTP). Collectively, these initiatives represent significant efforts to institutionalise managerial governance principles within the public sector.

However, despite these reforms, political–administrative relationships continue to play a central role in shaping governance outcomes in Malaysia. Decision-making processes, policy prioritisation, and organisational performance remain influenced by interactions between political leadership and administrative actors. This suggests that managerial reforms do not necessarily displace political influence but may instead coexist with, or even reinforce, existing governance dynamics.

The Malaysian case is therefore significant not only for national policy analysis but also for broader comparative scholarship. Much of the existing literature remains anchored in Western governance contexts, where bureaucratic neutrality is treated as a normative benchmark. This creates a conceptual limitation, as it underestimates how political–administrative interaction is historically embedded and institutionally normalised in many developing systems. By examining Malaysia, this article contributes to the global comparative literature by demonstrating how managerial reforms interact with institutional legacies, political structures, and administrative traditions to produce hybrid governance outcomes. In doing so, it offers a more context-sensitive understanding of reform processes in non-Western settings.

Against this backdrop, this article argues that politicisation should not be interpreted simply as a failure of reform or as a deviation from ideal administrative practice. Instead, political influence may adapt and become institutionalised within managerial governance structures.[1] To capture this dynamic, the article introduces the concept of hybrid politicisation, defined as the coexistence of formal managerial governance norms and embedded political influence within administrative systems.[2] In doing so, the article not only introduces the concept of hybrid politicisation but also reconceptualises politicisation as an adaptive and institutionalised feature of governance rather than a deviation from reform ideals. This concept shifts the analytical focus from whether politicisation exists to how it evolves and operates within contemporary governance arrangements.

The analysis is grounded in qualitative evidence derived from elite interviews and documentary sources, allowing for a contextually rich examination of reform dynamics. In addressing this argument, the article examines how political influence persists within managerial reform environments, how managerial instruments interact with informal political practices, and how these dynamics reshape our understanding of political-administrative relations in developing governance contexts. These questions are not only theoretically relevant but also carry important implications for organisational governance and reform design. As governments continue to pursue performance-based reforms, recognising the adaptive nature of political influence becomes essential to developing sustainable, contextually grounded administrative strategies.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. The next section reviews existing literature on New Public Management and politicisation. The conceptual framework for hybrid politicisation follows. A methodology section then outlines the research approach. The findings and discussion sections examine the Malaysian case in light of the proposed framework, before the article concludes with reflections on theoretical contributions and implications for public sector reform and governance.

Literature Review: New Public Management and Politicisation

Building on the introduction's identification of a tension between managerial reform and persistent political influence, this section reviews the existing literature on New Public Management (NPM) and the politicisation of public administration. It highlights four key strands of scholarship: (1) NPM and the depoliticisation assumption, (2) the persistence of politicisation, (3) political–administrative relations, and (4) institutional perspectives on reform continuity. While these strands provide valuable insights, they remain insufficient in explaining how political influence is reconfigured and embedded within managerial governance systems. Together, these strands reveal a gap in understanding how politicisation adapts within managerial governance systems.

The first strand of literature focuses on the emergence of NPM as a reform paradigm and its implicit promise of depoliticisation. NPM arose in the late twentieth century as a response to perceived inefficiencies in traditional Weberian bureaucracy. As articulated by scholars such as Christopher Hood,[3] NPM promotes managerial principles including performance measurement, output-based control, decentralised authority, and customer-oriented service delivery. These reforms were widely adopted across advanced and developing economies, including Malaysia, as part of broader efforts to modernise the public sector.[4]

A central assumption underlying NPM is that managerial governance can insulate administration from political interference. By emphasising professional management and measurable performance outcomes, NPM reforms are often associated with the normative ideal of bureaucratic neutrality. Within this perspective, administrative decision-making is expected to be guided by technical expertise and performance criteria rather than political considerations. Managerial instruments such as performance indicators and contractual accountability mechanisms are therefore seen as tools for strengthening administrative autonomy.

However, a second strand of literature challenges this depoliticisation assumption by demonstrating the persistence (and in some cases transformation) of political influence under managerial reform. Scholars such as Tom Christensen and Per Lægreid argue that NPM reforms do not necessarily reduce political control but may instead alter its form.[5] Performance management systems, for instance, can enable political executives to exert influence indirectly by setting targets, defining evaluation criteria, and monitoring outcomes. While these strands provide valuable insights, they remain insufficient in explaining how political influence is reconfigured and embedded within

managerial governance systems. Rather than diminishing politicisation, managerial reforms may therefore create new channels through which political actors shape administrative behaviour.

Empirical studies across different governance contexts support this argument. Research has shown that performance indicators and accountability frameworks are often aligned with political priorities, thereby embedding political considerations within managerial governance structures. In such cases, managerial tools function simultaneously as administrative instruments and political steering mechanisms. However, much of this empirical literature remains descriptive, focusing on the persistence of politicisation without fully theorising its adaptive and institutionalised nature. This suggests that politicisation under NPM is not eliminated but reconfigured.

The third strand of literature examines politicisation more broadly within the framework of political–administrative relations. Peters and Pierre define politicisation as the substitution of political criteria for merit-based or professional considerations in the management of public institutions.[6] This definition highlights the tension between political responsiveness and administrative professionalism that lies at the heart of public administration.[7]

Classic contributions by Aberbach, Putnam, and Rockman further complicate this dichotomy by demonstrating that political and administrative roles are often intertwined.[8] Senior civil servants do not merely implement policies; they also actively participate in policy formulation, negotiation, and interpretation. Their roles involve balancing technical expertise with responsiveness to political leadership, making it difficult to sustain a strict separation between politics and administration in practice. These insights challenge rigid dichotomies between politics and administration, suggesting instead a relational and negotiated form of governance.

Despite these insights, much of the politicisation literature remains grounded in Western administrative traditions where bureaucratic neutrality is treated as the normative benchmark. Within this framework, politicisation is frequently interpreted as a deviation from ideal administrative practice or as a symptom of institutional weakness. Such interpretations may be less applicable in governance systems where political–administrative interaction is historically embedded and institutionally normalised.

This limitation leads to the fourth strand of literature, which draws on institutional perspectives to explain reform outcomes. Institutionalism shifts the focus from formal structures to the underlying norms, practices, and historical trajectories that shape administrative behaviour. Historical institutionalism, in particular, emphasises the role of path dependency, in which past institutional arrangements constrain current reform trajectories. Administrative reforms are therefore not implemented on a blank slate but interact with existing governance traditions.

Sociological institutionalism further introduces the concept of symbolic adoption or symbolic compliance. As Meyer and Rowan argue, organisations may adopt reform practices to signal conformity with global norms while underlying practices remain unchanged.[9] In the context of NPM, this suggests that managerial reforms may be formally implemented without fundamentally altering political–administrative relationships. This raises a critical question regarding whether managerial reforms produce substantive transformation or merely symbolic alignment with global governance standards.

These institutional perspectives are particularly relevant for understanding reform dynamics in developing governance systems. In such contexts, reforms are often layered onto existing institutional arrangements, producing hybrid governance structures rather than complete transformation.[10] The coexistence of managerial governance and embedded political influence reflects this process of institutional layering.[11]

Taken together, these four strands of literature reveal an important gap. While existing scholarship acknowledges both the persistence of politicisation and the influence of institutional factors, it does not fully conceptualise how political influence adapts within managerial governance systems. Much of the literature remains anchored in a dichotomous view that contrasts a politicised with a depoliticised administration. This binary framing limits analytical understanding by obscuring the dynamic and evolving nature of political influence within reform contexts.

This article addresses this gap by proposing the concept of hybrid politicisation. Rather than viewing politicisation as a deviation from reform ideals, hybrid politicisation conceptualises political influence as an adaptive and institutionalised feature of governance that coexists with managerial reforms. In doing so, it extends existing literature by offering a more integrated and context-sensitive framework for analysing political–administrative relations. This perspective builds upon institutionalist insights while extending the literature on political-administrative relations.

By situating Malaysia within this analytical framework, the article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how managerial reforms operate in developing and hybrid governance contexts. The Malaysian case further provides empirical grounding to illustrate how these theoretical dynamics unfold in practice. It also provides a bridge between theoretical debates on politicisation and empirical observations of reform outcomes.

The next section builds on this literature by developing the conceptual framework of hybrid politicisation and elaborating its analytical components.

Theory and Conceptual Framework: Hybrid Politicisation

Building upon the literature review's identification of tensions between managerial reform and persistent political influence, this section develops the concept of hybrid politicisation as a framework for understanding how political-administrative relations evolve under New Public Management (NPM). While existing scholarship has demonstrated that politicisation persists despite reform, less attention has been given to how it adapts and becomes embedded within managerial governance systems. Drawing on qualitative insights from elite interviews and documentary evidence, this section grounds the conceptual argument within the Malaysian reform experience. This section addresses that gap by integrating insights from institutional theory and political-administrative relations, and by grounding the analysis in the Malaysian case.

At its core, hybrid politicisation challenges the conventional assumption that managerial reforms necessarily lead to depoliticised administration. Instead, it posits that managerial governance and political influence are not mutually exclusive but can coexist within the same institutional environment. This argument moves beyond a binary understanding of politicised versus depoliticised administration, emphasising instead the relational and co-evolving nature of governance systems. This coexistence is not accidental but reflects deeper structural and institutional dynamics that shape how reforms are interpreted, implemented, and sustained over time.

The starting point for this argument lies in the limitations of the depoliticisation thesis associated with NPM. As discussed in the literature, NPM reforms emphasise performance measurement, managerial autonomy, and output-based accountability. These features are often interpreted as mechanisms for insulating administrative decision-making from political pressures. However, as Christensen and Lægreid suggest, such reforms may instead reconfigure the channels of political influence rather than eliminate them. Performance targets, for example, are not politically neutral; they are defined, prioritised, and evaluated within political contexts. Empirical accounts from Malaysian administrative practice further illustrate how these targets are often negotiated and aligned with political priorities rather than purely technocratic considerations.

This observation is particularly evident in the Malaysian case. The introduction of performance management instruments such as Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and National Key Result Areas (NKRA) under the Government Transformation Programme (GTP) was intended to enhance administrative accountability and service delivery. These instruments formalised performance expectations and introduced measurable targets across government agencies. However, in practice, the selection of NKRA priorities -such as crime reduction, education outcomes, and economic development -reflected the political agendas of executive leadership. Interview evidence indicates that senior civil servants often interpret these targets as extensions of political priorities, reinforcing the embedded nature of political influence within managerial systems. As such, managerial instruments functioned not only as tools of administrative efficiency but also as mechanisms for translating political priorities into measurable governance outcomes.

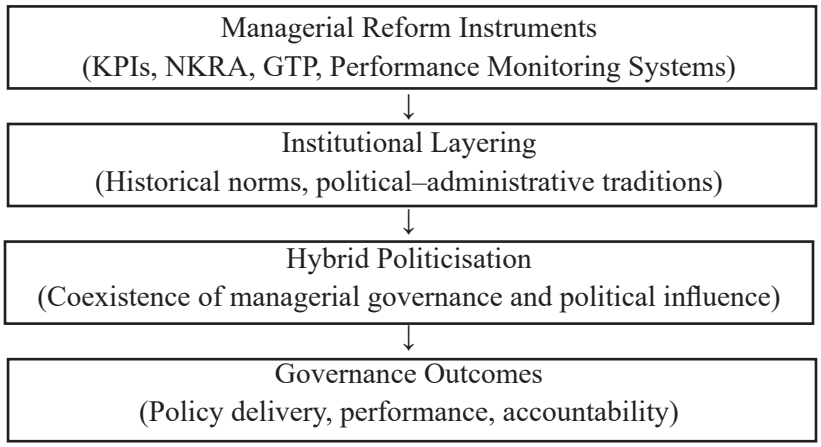

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Hybrid Politicisation.
Source: Created by the Author from various literature.

As illustrated in Figure 1, managerial reform instruments do not operate in isolation but are mediated by institutional contexts shaped by historical governance practices. In Malaysia, performance management tools such as KPIs and NKRA are implemented within a political–administrative environment characterised by close interaction between executive leadership and bureaucratic actors. This interaction produces hybrid politicisation, where managerial governance structures coexist with embedded political influence. Rather than signalling a failure of reform, this coexistence reflects the adaptive capacity of political influence within evolving governance arrangements. The framework, therefore, shifts the analytical focus from whether politicisation exists to how it is structured and sustained within reform environments.

This dual function of managerial instruments illustrates a key feature of hybrid politicisation: the embedding of political influence within formal governance structures. Rather than exerting direct control through overt intervention, political actors may shape administrative behaviour through the design and deployment of managerial frameworks. This represents a shift from visible to institutionalised forms of politicisation, which are less overt but more deeply embedded in governance processes.

To understand how such arrangements persist, it is necessary to consider the role of institutional dynamics. Historical institutionalism provides a useful lens by emphasising path dependency. Historical trajectories, including colonial legacies, state-building processes, and long-standing governance practices, shape administrative systems. In Malaysia, the administrative system has evolved within a context characterised by strong centralised authority and close coordination

between political leadership and bureaucratic institutions. These historical patterns influence how reforms are adopted and implemented.

When NPM reforms are introduced into such contexts, they do not replace existing institutional arrangements but are layered on top of them. This process of institutional layering results in the coexistence of new managerial practices with established political–administrative relationships. In Malaysia, for instance, while performance management systems have been institutionalised within government agencies, decision-making processes continue to reflect interactions between political leaders and senior civil servants. Empirical observations suggest that these interactions are not residual but actively reproduced through managerial frameworks. The persistence of these relationships suggests that reforms are mediated by existing institutional norms rather than transforming them entirely.

Sociological institutionalism further strengthens this argument by highlighting the concept of symbolic compliance. Organisations may adopt reform practices to signal alignment with global governance standards while maintaining underlying practices that reflect local institutional realities. In the Malaysian context, the adoption of NPM-inspired reforms such as KPIs and performance dashboards can be seen as part of a broader effort to demonstrate modernisation and administrative professionalism. However, the substantive functioning of these instruments often remains embedded within political–administrative networks. This raises critical questions about whether such reforms produce substantive change or primarily symbolic conformity.

Hybrid politicisation, therefore, captures the interaction between these institutional processes and managerial reforms. It conceptualises politicisation not as a residual problem to be eliminated but as an adaptive feature of governance that evolves alongside reform initiatives.

This perspective can be formalised through the conceptual framework presented in Figure 1. The framework illustrates how managerial reform instruments interact with institutional layering to produce hybrid politicisation. Managerial tools such as KPIs and performance monitoring systems are introduced as part of reform efforts. These tools are then interpreted and implemented within existing institutional contexts shaped by political–administrative relationships. The result is a hybrid governance arrangement in which managerial norms coexist with embedded political influence, ultimately shaping governance outcomes.

While Figure 1 explains the structural coexistence of managerial governance and political influence, it is also necessary to understand how these dynamics operate in practice. Specifically, managerial instruments serve as mediating mechanisms through which political leadership interacts with administrative systems. This process can be further illustrated through a politics–administration interaction model, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Politics–Administration Interaction Model.
Source: Created by the Author from various literature.

Figure 2 illustrates the dynamic interaction between political leadership and administrative implementation through managerial governance instruments. Rather than separating politics from administration, performance management systems facilitate continuous feedback loops between political priorities and administrative outcomes. This reinforces the argument that managerial governance does not neutralise political influence but reorganises its modes of operation. In the Malaysian context, this is evident in how KPIs and NKRA frameworks translate political agendas into measurable administrative targets. At the same time, performance monitoring mechanisms provide feedback that informs subsequent policy decisions. This interaction reinforces the argument that politicisation is not external to managerial governance but embedded within it.

Importantly, hybrid politicisation is not limited to formal administrative structures but also extends to organisational practices and governance networks. This is evident in the operation of government-linked companies (GLCs) in Malaysia.[12] While GLCs are structured according to corporate governance principles and are expected to operate on the basis of efficiency and performance criteria, their leadership appointments and strategic directions are often influenced by political considerations.[13] This reflects the broader pattern in which managerial governance frameworks coexist with political influence across different organisational settings.

To further clarify these dynamics, the politics–administration interaction model presented in Figure 2 highlights the role of managerial instruments as mediating mechanisms between political leadership and administrative implementation. Political actors define policy priorities, which are translated into performance targets through managerial frameworks such as KPIs and NKRA. Administrative agencies then implement these targets, and performance monitoring systems provide feedback to political leadership. This creates a continuous feedback loop in which political and administrative actors interact through managerial governance structures.

This model demonstrates that managerial governance does not separate politics from administration but instead facilitates ongoing interaction between the two. Political influence becomes embedded within governance processes, while administrative actors retain a degree of autonomy in

interpreting and implementing policy objectives. The result is a relational and dynamic system of governance rather than a hierarchical or dichotomous one.

The concept of hybrid politicisation also has broader implications for comparative public administration. By situating the Malaysian case within this framework, the analysis highlights how the interaction between global reform models and local institutional contexts shapes governance outcomes. While NPM provides a common set of managerial tools, their implementation and impact vary across different governance systems.

These variations suggest that hybrid politicisation is not an anomaly but a recurring pattern across diverse governance contexts, particularly in systems characterised by institutional complexity and political–administrative interdependence.

In Singapore, for example, strong bureaucratic professionalism and institutionalised meritocratic recruitment have resulted in a governance system where managerial reforms reinforce administrative autonomy.[14] In contrast, Indonesia's decentralised political system has produced a different form of hybrid governance, where political influence operates across multiple levels of government.[15] Malaysia occupies an intermediate position, where managerial reforms coexist with historically embedded political–administrative relationships.

These comparative insights reinforce the broader relevance of hybrid politicisation as an analytical framework. Rather than viewing politicisation as an anomaly or a transitional phenomenon, it can be understood as a structural feature of governance systems undergoing reform.

In summary, hybrid politicisation provides a conceptual bridge between existing debates on NPM, politicisation, and institutional continuity. It shifts the analytical focus from whether politicisation exists to how it is reconfigured within managerial governance systems. By integrating institutional theory with empirical insights from Malaysia, the framework offers a more nuanced understanding of contemporary political–administrative relations.

The next section builds upon this conceptual framework by outlining the methodological approach used to examine hybrid politicisation in the Malaysian context.

Methodology

Building on the conceptual framework of hybrid politicisation, this section outlines the study's methodological approach. The article employs a qualitative, theory-building research design, using Malaysia as an illustrative case to explore how political influence persists and adapts within managerial reform environments. Rather than testing causal hypotheses, the study aims to generate conceptual insights by examining the interaction between managerial governance instruments and political–administrative practices. This interpretive approach is particularly suitable for examining complex and context-dependent governance dynamics that are not easily captured through quantitative methods.

The research draws on two primary sources of qualitative data. First, the study incorporates findings from 35 elite interviews with senior Malaysian civil servants conducted between 2010 and 2015. The interviewees occupied key strategic positions within the public administration, including former Chief Secretaries to the Government, Secretaries-General of ministries, and Directors-General of major government agencies. These individuals were directly involved in the design, implementation, and oversight of public sector reforms across multiple administrations, thereby providing informed perspectives on the evolution of managerial governance in Malaysia. The selection of respondents followed a purposive sampling strategy, targeting individuals with direct experience and institutional knowledge relevant to the study's focus.

Elite interviewing was selected as a core method due to its suitability for capturing insider perspectives on complex governance processes that are not fully observable through formal documentation. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing for consistency across key thematic areas (such as performance management systems, reform implementation, and political–administrative interaction) while also enabling respondents to reflect in depth on their experiences. This approach facilitated the identification of recurring patterns regarding how managerial instruments, including Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and National Key Result Areas (NKRA), were interpreted and operationalised within the administrative system. Each interview lasted between one to three hours and was conducted under conditions of confidentiality to encourage open and reflective responses.

Second, the study employs documentary analysis of official policy documents, administrative circulars, government reports, and relevant academic literature on Malaysian public sector reform. These materials provide a longitudinal perspective on the development of reform initiatives, including the Programme and Performance Budgeting System (PPBS), subsequent budgeting reforms, and later performance management frameworks such as KPIs and NKRA under the Government Transformation Programme (GTP). Documentary analysis contextualises the interview data by tracing formal reform objectives and institutional design features. These documents were systematically reviewed to identify consistencies and discrepancies between formal policy intentions and administrative practice.

The use of both elite interviews and documentary analysis enables data triangulation, thereby enhancing the robustness of the findings. While documentary sources capture the formal articulation of reform policies, interview data provide insights into how these reforms are interpreted and implemented in practice. This combination is particularly important for examining phenomena such as politicisation, which may not be explicitly documented but are reflected in administrative behaviour and decision-making processes. Triangulation also strengthens the credibility of the findings by cross-validating insights derived from different data sources.

Analytically, the study adopts a theory-informed interpretive approach. Data from interviews and documents were examined thematically to identify patterns relating to the interaction between managerial governance instruments and political influence. The analysis followed an iterative coding process, in which interview transcripts and documentary materials were coded, categorised, and refined to identify recurring themes. These patterns were then interpreted through the lens of institutional theory, particularly concepts of path dependency, institutional layering, and symbolic compliance, to develop the concept of hybrid politicisation.

To enhance methodological rigour, the analysis emphasised transparency in the interpretation process by systematically linking empirical observations to theoretical constructs. The use of thematic analysis allows for both inductive identification of patterns and deductive interpretation based on existing theoretical frameworks.

It is important to note that the Malaysian case is employed primarily as an illustrative analytical lens rather than as a comprehensive empirical test. The objective is not to generalise findings statistically but to provide theoretically informed insights that can inform broader comparative debates on public sector reform and political–administrative relations. This case-oriented approach is consistent with qualitative research traditions that prioritise depth of understanding over statistical generalisation.

By combining qualitative depth with conceptual analysis, this methodological approach enables a nuanced understanding of how managerial reforms operate within real governance environments, thereby supporting the development of hybrid politicisation as a context-sensitive analytical framework.

Findings

Building on the methodological approach and conceptual framework, this section presents the key empirical insights from the Malaysian case. The findings demonstrate that managerial governance reforms have not eliminated political influence but have instead reshaped the mechanisms through which it operates. Four interrelated themes emerge from the analysis: (1) the politicisation of performance management, (2) institutional layering and reform continuity, (3) indirect political steering through managerial instruments, and (4) hybrid governance in organisational settings such as government-linked companies.

Politicisation of Performance Management

The first key finding concerns the role of performance management systems in mediating political influence. In Malaysia, the introduction of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and the National Key Result Areas (NKRA) framework under the Government Transformation Programme (GTP) represented a significant shift towards performance-based governance. These instruments were designed to enhance accountability, improve service delivery, and ensure measurable policy outcomes across government agencies.

However, interview data indicate that performance management systems are not politically neutral tools. Instead, they function as mechanisms for articulating and operationalising political priorities. Senior civil servants noted that the selection of NKRA priorities, such as crime reduction, rural development, and education outcomes, was closely aligned with the executive leadership's policy agenda. As one senior official reflected, "KPIs are not purely technical measures; they are often shaped by what the political leadership wants to prioritise at a given time" (Interview, former Secretary-General). As a result, performance indicators often reflect political priorities rather than purely technocratic considerations.

This dynamic illustrates how managerial instruments can embed political influence within formal governance structures. Rather than directly intervening in administrative processes, political leaders shape policy implementation by defining performance targets and evaluation criteria. Another respondent noted that "once the targets are set at the top, agencies naturally align themselves, even if the priorities shift according to political direction" (Interview, Director-General). In this sense, KPIs and NKRA serve as conduits through which political direction is translated into administrative action.

From the perspective of the hybrid politicisation framework (Figure 1), this finding demonstrates how managerial reform instruments interact with institutional contexts to produce hybrid governance outcomes. Performance management systems, while formally designed to enhance administrative autonomy, simultaneously function as tools of political steering. This dual role reflects the coexistence of managerial governance and political influence within the same institutional framework.

Institutional Layering and Reform Continuity

The second key finding relates to the role of institutional layering in shaping reform outcomes. The Malaysian public sector has undergone multiple waves of reform, including budgeting reforms, quality management initiatives, and performance-based governance frameworks. However, these reforms have not replaced existing governance practices but have been layered on top of them.

Interviewees consistently highlighted the persistence of established political–administrative relationships despite the introduction of managerial reforms. Senior officials described how decision-making processes continue to involve close coordination between political leadership and administrative actors, even within performance-driven governance systems. One respondent explained that "even with new systems in place, the way decisions are made still reflects long-standing relationships between ministers and senior officials" (Interview, former KSN). This suggests that reforms are mediated by existing institutional norms rather than transforming them entirely.

This pattern is consistent with insights from historical institutionalism, which emphasises the role of path dependency in shaping reform trajectories. In Malaysia, the administrative system has historically been characterised by strong centralised authority and close interaction between political leaders and bureaucratic institutions. These characteristics continue to influence how reforms are implemented.

The concept of institutional layering helps explain why managerial reforms produce hybrid outcomes. Rather than displacing existing governance arrangements, reforms introduce new practices that coexist with established institutional patterns. This coexistence creates a governance environment in which multiple logics (managerial and political) operate simultaneously.

Figure 1 captures this dynamic by illustrating how managerial reform instruments are filtered through institutional contexts before producing governance outcomes. In the Malaysian case, performance management systems are implemented within a governance environment shaped by longstanding political–administrative relationships. The result is hybrid politicisation rather than depoliticisation.

Indirect Political Steering through Managerial Instruments

The third finding highlights the emergence of indirect forms of political influence facilitated by managerial governance structures. Unlike traditional forms of politicisation, which involve direct intervention in administrative decision-making, contemporary governance systems often rely on more subtle mechanisms of control.

In Malaysia, managerial instruments such as KPIs and performance monitoring systems enable political leaders to influence administrative behaviour without direct interference. By setting performance targets and defining evaluation criteria, political actors can shape the priorities and activities of government agencies. Administrative actors, in turn, align their strategies and actions with these targets in order to meet performance expectations.

As one senior administrator observed, "you don't need direct instructions anymore—the targets already signal what matters politically" (Interview, senior civil servant). This process reflects a shift from direct to indirect forms of political control. Rather than issuing explicit instructions, political leaders rely on managerial frameworks to guide administrative behaviour. This form of influence is less visible but potentially more pervasive, as it operates through institutionalised governance mechanisms.

The politics–administration interaction model (Figure 2) provides a useful lens for understanding this dynamic. The model illustrates how political leadership defines policy priorities, which are then translated into performance targets through managerial instruments. Administrative agencies implement these targets, and performance monitoring systems provide feedback to political leadership. This creates a continuous feedback loop in which political and administrative actors interact through managerial governance structures.

In the Malaysian context, this interaction is evident in the operation of the GTP and NKRA framework. Performance dashboards and monitoring systems enable central agencies to track progress and evaluate outcomes, while also reinforcing alignment between administrative activities and political priorities. This demonstrates how managerial governance can serve as a mechanism for indirect political steering.

Hybrid Governance in Organisational Settings

The fourth finding extends the analysis beyond formal administrative structures to organisational settings, particularly government-linked companies (GLCs). GLCs in Malaysia operate under corporate governance frameworks and are expected to adhere to principles of efficiency, accountability, and performance. However, their governance structures also reflect the broader pattern of hybrid politicisation.

Interview data and secondary sources indicate that political considerations often influence leadership appointments and strategic decision-making in GLCs. One respondent noted that "appointments may follow corporate procedures, but political considerations are rarely absent" (Interview, senior official). While these organisations adopt managerial practices and corporate governance standards, they remain embedded within political networks that shape their operations.

This dual character of GLCs illustrates the broader phenomenon of hybrid governance. Managerial principles coexist with political influence, producing organisational arrangements that cannot be fully understood through either a purely managerial or purely political lens. Instead, they reflect the interaction between these two dimensions.

From a theoretical perspective, this finding reinforces the argument that hybrid politicisation is not confined to public administration but extends across different organisational forms. The coexistence of managerial governance and political influence is a systemic feature of governance rather than a sector-specific phenomenon.

Discussion

Building on the empirical findings, this section interprets the Malaysian case in relation to broader theoretical debates on public sector reform and political–administrative relations. The analysis demonstrates that managerial governance reforms do not eliminate political influence but instead reshape how it is exercised within administrative systems. Drawing on empirical insights from elite interviews and documentary evidence, the findings highlight how political influence is embedded within managerial governance practices. In doing so, it supports a more nuanced understanding of politicisation as an adaptive and institutionalised feature of governance.

Reinterpreting Depoliticisation under NPM

The findings challenge the conventional assumption that New Public Management (NPM) reforms lead to depoliticised administration. While managerial governance introduces new mechanisms of accountability, performance monitoring, and organisational discipline, it does not remove political influence from administrative processes. Instead, it transforms the modalities through which such influence is exercised.

In the Malaysian context, performance management instruments such as Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and the National Key Result Areas (NKRA) demonstrate this transformation. These tools were formally designed to enhance transparency and accountability, yet they also function as

mechanisms through which political leadership defines, prioritises, and monitors policy objectives. Political influence is therefore embedded within managerial governance structures rather than external to them. As reflected in the empirical findings, performance targets are often interpreted by administrative actors as extensions of political priorities rather than neutral technical instruments.

This finding supports the argument advanced by Christensen and Lægreid that managerial reforms may produce new forms of political control rather than reducing it. As illustrated in Figure 2, managerial instruments mediate the interaction between political leadership and administrative implementation, enabling political actors to influence outcomes indirectly through performance targets and evaluation systems. Depoliticisation under NPM, therefore, should be understood not as an achieved outcome but as a reconfiguration of political–administrative relations.

Politicisation as an Adaptive Institutional Feature

The analysis further suggests that politicisation should be reconceptualised as an adaptive and institutionalised feature of governance. Rather than representing a temporary deviation from bureaucratic neutrality, political influence evolves alongside administrative reforms and becomes embedded within governance structures.

This perspective aligns with institutionalist theories that emphasise continuity and adaptation. The Malaysian case demonstrates that political–administrative relationships are not easily displaced by formal reforms; instead, they are reconfigured within new governance frameworks through processes of institutional layering. As illustrated in Figure 1, managerial reform instruments interact with existing governance norms to produce hybrid outcomes, rather than replacing them entirely. Empirical evidence from interviews further indicates that these institutional patterns are actively reproduced through everyday administrative practices.

The persistence of political influence in Malaysia reflects historical patterns of governance characterised by strong executive leadership and close coordination between political and administrative actors. These institutional characteristics shape how reforms are interpreted and implemented, resulting in governance arrangements that combine managerial and political logics.

Hybrid Politicisation as a Conceptual Contribution

The concept of hybrid politicisation provides a useful framework for integrating these insights. By focusing on the coexistence of managerial governance and political influence, the framework moves beyond binary distinctions between politicised and depoliticised administration that dominate much of the existing literature.

Hybrid politicisation captures the dynamic and relational nature of governance systems, in which political and administrative actors operate within interconnected institutional environments. It emphasises that managerial reforms do not operate in isolation but are embedded within broader governance contexts shaped by historical trajectories and institutional norms.

Importantly, the Malaysian case demonstrates that hybrid politicisation is not merely a descriptive concept but an analytical lens that explains how political influence is structurally embedded within managerial governance systems. In this sense, hybrid politicisation contributes to public administration theory by bridging three strands of scholarship: NPM reform, politicisation, and institutionalism. It provides a conceptual lens for understanding how political influence is reconfigured within managerial governance systems, particularly in developing and hybrid contexts where institutional diversity is significant.

Comparative Implications

The Malaysian case also offers broader implications for comparative public administration. While Malaysia presents a specific institutional context, similar patterns of hybrid governance can be observed in other systems, including Singapore and Indonesia.

In Singapore, strong bureaucratic professionalism and institutionalised meritocratic recruitment have produced a governance system where managerial reforms reinforce administrative capacity. However, political leadership continues to play a central role in shaping policy direction. In Indonesia, decentralisation and democratic reforms have introduced managerial governance tools within a more fragmented political environment, resulting in diverse forms of political influence across different levels of government.

Malaysia occupies an intermediate position between these models, combining elements of centralised authority with managerial governance reforms. This suggests that hybrid politicisation is not an isolated phenomenon but reflects broader structural dynamics present across many governance systems, particularly in the Global South.

Implications for Organisational Governance and Reform Design

Finally, the findings carry important implications for organisational governance and the design of public sector reforms. Policymakers often assume that managerial reforms can reduce political interference by strengthening administrative autonomy and performance accountability. However, the Malaysian experience suggests that such assumptions may be overly simplistic. Empirical findings from this study indicate that managerial instruments frequently operate in tandem with political priorities rather than independently of them.

Effective reform strategies should acknowledge the persistence of political–administrative interaction and focus on structuring it within transparent, accountable, and well-defined institutional frameworks. Rather than attempting to eliminate politicisation, reforms should aim to manage its influence in ways that support policy effectiveness and organisational performance. This implies a shift from the unrealistic goal of depoliticisation towards the more pragmatic objective of governing political–administrative interaction.

From an organisational foresight perspective, recognising hybrid politicisation allows policymakers and administrative leaders to anticipate how future reforms may interact with existing governance structures. This can lead to more realistic and context-sensitive reform strategies that balance managerial efficiency with political accountability.

In sum, the Malaysian case demonstrates that managerial governance and political influence are not mutually exclusive but are deeply intertwined within contemporary administrative systems. This reinforces the need for reform frameworks that explicitly account for, rather than ignore, the embedded nature of political influence. Understanding this relationship is essential for both theoretical development and practical reform design in public administration.

Conclusion

This article set out to re-examine the relationship between managerial reform and politicisation in contemporary public administration. Moving beyond conventional assumptions about New Public Management (NPM), it has been argued that the persistence of political influence should not be interpreted as a failure of reform but rather as a reflection of deeper institutional dynamics. In doing so, the article shifts the analytical focus from whether politicisation exists to how it is configured and

sustained within evolving governance systems.

At the centre of this argument is the concept of hybrid politicisation, which captures the coexistence of managerial governance norms and embedded political influence. This framework challenges dichotomous models that treat politics and administration as separate domains and instead emphasises their ongoing interaction within institutional settings. As demonstrated through the Malaysian case, this interaction is not incidental but structurally embedded within governance practices. By conceptualising politicisation as adaptive rather than aberrant, the article offers a more context-sensitive understanding of governance processes, particularly in systems shaped by historical continuity and institutional complexity.

The Malaysian case provides an important empirical and analytical anchor for this contribution. As a governance system that has undergone extensive managerial reforms while retaining strong political-administrative linkages, Malaysia illustrates how institutional legacies mediate reform trajectories. This reinforces the need to situate public administration theories within diverse empirical contexts rather than relying predominantly on Western-derived models. In this regard, the article contributes to the growing body of comparative scholarship that highlights variation in reform outcomes across different governance systems.

Beyond its empirical relevance, the article makes three broader theoretical contributions. First, it problematises the depoliticisation thesis associated with NPM by demonstrating that managerial reforms may reconfigure rather than reduce political influence. Second, it advances an institutional perspective that foregrounds continuity, adaptation, and layering in shaping reform outcomes. Third, it introduces hybrid politicisation as an integrative framework that connects debates on managerial governance, politicisation, and institutional theory. Together, these contributions extend existing scholarship by offering a more dynamic and context-sensitive understanding of political–administrative relations.

Importantly, these contributions also carry forward-looking implications for public sector governance. As governments continue to pursue performance-based reforms, digital governance initiatives, and data-driven decision-making, the interaction between political authority and administrative systems is likely to become more complex, not less. From an organisational foresight perspective, recognising hybrid politicisation enables policymakers and administrative leaders to anticipate how new governance instruments may interact with existing institutional arrangements. This awareness can support the design of reforms that are both effective and contextually grounded.

Rather than seeking to eliminate political influence from administration (an objective that may be neither realistic nor desirable) future reform efforts should focus on structuring political–administrative interaction within transparent, accountable, and well-regulated frameworks. Such an approach acknowledges the inevitability of political involvement while safeguarding the integrity and professionalism of administrative systems.

In conclusion, hybrid politicisation provides a useful analytical lens for understanding contemporary governance systems in which managerial reforms and political realities coexist. By grounding this concept in empirical analysis, the article demonstrates its relevance not only as a theoretical construct but also as a practical framework for understanding real governance dynamics. By reframing politicisation as an inherent and evolving feature of governance, the article opens new avenues for research. It offers a more nuanced foundation for both theory and practice in public administration.

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Notes

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