

Delaying as Redistribution: The Political Economy of Bureaucratic Simplification in Indonesia

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Abstract

Indonesia's bureaucratic simplification reform, particularly the large-scale conversion of mid-level structural positions into functional roles, has been widely framed as a technocratic effort to enhance efficiency, agility, and professionalization within the public sector. This paper challenges such a perspective by conceptualizing delaying as a political economy process of redistribution. Drawing on political economy theory, institutionalism, policy design, and state capability literature, the study examines how reform reshapes authority, incentives, and bureaucratic capital within the state apparatus. Using a mixed-method approach, the analysis combines administrative data from the National Civil Service Agency (2020–2024) with qualitative assessment of regulatory frameworks and institutional implementation. The findings indicate that while structural flattening has been formally achieved, the redistribution of authority has not resulted in full decentralization. Instead, decision-making tends to be consolidated at higher organizational levels, while functional roles expand without equivalent adjustments in incentive systems and career structures. This misalignment generates implementation gaps and uneven reform outcomes across ministries, reflecting variations in institutional capacity. The study contributes to comparative public administration by reframing bureaucratic simplification as negotiated redistribution rather than purely technical reform. It also highlights the importance of policy design coherence and institutional readiness in ensuring that structural transformation leads to substantive professionalization. The findings offer practical implications for strengthening merit systems and aligning incentives in public sector reform, particularly in developing-state contexts facing governance complexity and economic uncertainty.

Keyword: bureaucratic reform, delaying, institutional change, political economy, state capacity

Introduction

Administrative reform has long been central to debates on state capacity, governance, and public sector performance. From Woodrow Wilson's early articulation of professional administration to Weberian models emphasizing hierarchical authority and rule-based governance, reform has historically been associated with strengthening institutional effectiveness and predictability (Evans & Rauch, 1999). The emergence of New Public Management (NPM) further shifted reform agendas toward efficiency, decentralization, and performance-based management (Hood, 1991). More recently, post-NPM scholarship has emphasized hybrid governance, coordination capacity, and institutional resilience in increasingly complex policy environments (Christensen & Lægreid, 2022).

Despite these evolving paradigms, comparative public administration literature consistently demonstrates that bureaucratic reform rarely operates as a purely technocratic exercise. Instead, reform is deeply embedded in political settlements, institutional path dependencies, and organizational power structures (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017; Peters, 2018). Reforms formally justified in terms of efficiency often produce broader redistributive consequences by reshaping authority structures, career systems, and organizational incentives (Grindle, 2012). Administrative restructuring, therefore, cannot be understood solely as institutional engineering; it must also be interpreted as a political and organizational process.

This critique challenges the dominant technocratic narrative in public administration, which traditionally conceptualizes reform as a rational effort to optimize coordination, efficiency, and service delivery. Rooted in Wilsonian administrative thought and reinforced by Weberian traditions, this perspective assumes that institutional structures can be deliberately designed to generate optimal governance outcomes. Hierarchy, specialization, and formal rules are consequently viewed as neutral instruments of administrative control (Evans & Rauch, 1999). However, contemporary scholarship increasingly questions this assumption by demonstrating that reforms frequently transform institutional power relations rather than merely improving organizational efficiency (Peters, 2018; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). Reform processes often redefine organizational roles, redistribute authority, and reshape incentive systems in ways that extend far beyond formal administrative objectives (Grindle, 2012).

The transition from NPM toward post-NPM governance paradigms further complicates this understanding. While NPM promoted lean organizations, decentralization, and managerial autonomy (Hood, 1991), post-NPM approaches emphasize coordination, institutional resilience, and hybrid governance arrangements capable of managing increasingly complex policy environments (Christensen & Lægreid, 2022). This evolution reveals an important paradox: attempts to simplify bureaucracy frequently coexist with greater institutional complexity. Structural reforms designed to flatten hierarchies may simultaneously generate new coordination challenges, ambiguities of authority, and institutional tensions. Delaying, as a key instrument of bureaucratic simplification, sits precisely at this intersection. Although formally intended to reduce hierarchy and improve agility, it also disrupts existing organizational equilibria and redistributes institutional power. Consequently, delaying should be analyzed not merely as a technical adjustment but as a transformation of bureaucratic authority relations.

Indonesia's recent bureaucratic simplification reform provides a critical case for examining these dynamics. Initiated under Law No. 5/2014 on the State Civil Apparatus and accelerated between 2020 and 2024, the reform involved the large-scale conversion of echelon III and IV positions into functional roles (the Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform, 2023). Official narratives frame this initiative as a strategy to increase organizational agility, reduce hierarchical rigidity, strengthen professional competencies, and adapt governance structures to the digital era. However, such narratives risk oversimplifying the nature of bureaucratic change. In institutional terms, hierarchical layers are not merely administrative arrangements; they embody authority, status, career pathways, and access to decision-making resources (Carpenter, 2001; March & Olsen, 1989). Their removal therefore implies a redistribution of bureaucratic capital rather than a simple reduction of organizational complexity.

Political economy theory provides an important lens for understanding these dynamics. Bureaucracies are not neutral administrative apparatuses; they are arenas in which authority, resources, and career opportunities are allocated and contested (Peters, 2018). Structural reform consequently alters existing distributions of power. Grindle (2012) conceptualizes reform as embedded within political settlements in which outcomes reflect negotiated compromises among actors with competing interests. Similarly, Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock (2017) argue that reform trajectories in developing states are shaped and constrained by institutional capabilities and incentive structures, often producing adaptive and uneven implementation outcomes. Within this perspective, delaying can be interpreted as a multidimensional redistributive mechanism that transforms authority structures, career incentives, symbolic status, and coordination processes within the bureaucracy. Importantly, redistribution does not necessarily generate equality; instead, it often creates new asymmetries as actors strategically adapt to changing institutional arrangements. Reform therefore becomes a process of strategic repositioning rather than simple structural simplification.

Institutional theory further deepens this analysis by explaining why reforms frequently generate hybrid rather than transformative outcomes. Meyer and Rowan (1977) argue that organizations often adopt formal structures to obtain legitimacy while decoupling those structures from actual organizational practices. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) extend this argument through the concept of institutional isomorphism, whereby organizations converge toward globally accepted governance models under normative, coercive, and mimetic pressures. In the public sector, states may therefore adopt best practice reforms such as bureaucratic flattening not solely to improve performance but also to align themselves with internationally recognized governance standards (OECD, 2021; World Bank, 2017). Such reforms may consequently function as legitimacy-seeking mechanisms.

At the same time, institutional persistence limits the depth of organizational transformation. March and Olsen (1989) emphasize that institutions operate according to internal logics that shape behavior independently of formal rules. These logics are reinforced through path dependency, where historical arrangements constrain present institutional choices. As a result, reforms often produce hybrid governance configurations in which formal structures change while informal practices persist. In the context of delaying, flattened organizational structures may coexist with enduring centralized decision-making practices, producing what may be described as flattened hierarchies with centralized authority. This suggests that structural simplification does not automatically eliminate hierarchical control; instead, hierarchy may be reconfigured in less visible but equally significant forms.

Beyond institutional legitimacy, the effectiveness of reform also depends on policy design coherence. Policy design theory argues that policy effectiveness is shaped by the alignment between goals, instruments, target groups, and implementation capacity (Howlett, 2019; Capano & Howlett, 2020). Structural reform thus constitutes only one component within a broader policy mix. In bureaucratic reform, coherence requires synchronization between structural changes, human resource systems, performance management mechanisms, and organizational culture. When such alignment is weak, implementation gaps emerge in which intended policy outcomes fail to materialize (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984). Recent scholarship further emphasizes that policy instruments interact within complex institutional systems, and inconsistencies between instruments can undermine policy effectiveness (Bali et al., 2021).

This issue is particularly relevant in the context of delayering. Structural simplification may proceed more rapidly than the development of supporting institutional systems, producing institutional incoherence. Converting structural positions into functional roles without simultaneously adjusting performance evaluation systems, competency frameworks, promotion rules, and incentive structures may generate ambiguity, reduce motivation, and weaken accountability. Consequently, the success of delayering depends not only on structural flattening itself but also on the synchronization of institutional subsystems that support professionalization.

State capability literature introduces an additional dimension that is often overlooked in reform design, namely variation in institutional capacity. Andrews et al. (2017) argue that successful reform depends on problem-solving capability, the capacity of institutions to adapt, learn, and implement policies effectively. Fukuyama (2013) similarly emphasizes that governance quality is determined not merely by the existence of formal rules but by the institutional capacity to operationalize and enforce them. Lodge and Wegrich (2014) extend this argument by highlighting how administrative capacity shapes policy outcomes. Importantly, such capacity is unevenly distributed across the state. Ministries and agencies differ substantially in terms of technical expertise, organizational maturity, leadership quality, and human resource systems. Peters (2021) further demonstrates that administrative traditions shape how organizations interpret and respond to reform initiatives, reinforcing institutional heterogeneity.

This variation leads to a critical insight: reform outcomes are inherently uneven. Even when policies are centrally designed and uniformly mandated, their implementation varies according to institutional readiness and organizational capability. In the case of Indonesia's delayering reform, some ministries may achieve substantive professionalization, while others experience ambiguity, disruption, or resistance. Structural flattening alone therefore cannot guarantee uniform transformation across the bureaucracy. Reform outcomes remain contingent upon institutional capacity and organizational adaptability.

Against this background, this study develops an integrated analytical framework that conceptualizes delayering as a negotiated, redistributive, and capacity-contingent reform process embedded within institutional constraints and political settlements. The framework integrates four interrelated perspectives: political economy, institutionalism, policy design, and state capability. From a political economy perspective, delayering redistributes authority, incentives, and symbolic capital. From an institutional perspective, formal structural change coexists with persistent informal practices. From a policy design perspective, reform outcomes depend on coherence among institutional instruments. From a state capability perspective, reform outcomes vary according to institutional readiness and organizational capacity. By integrating these approaches, the study moves beyond technocratic interpretations of bureaucratic simplification and offers a multidimensional explanation for why structural reforms frequently produce partial, hybrid, and uneven transformations.

Within this analytical context, the article addresses three interrelated research questions. First, to what extent does Indonesia's delayering reform represent substantive institutional transformation rather than symbolic structural compliance? Second, how does the reform redistribute authority, incentives, and bureaucratic capital within the state apparatus? Third, how do differences in institutional capacity across ministries shape reform outcomes? The central argument advanced is that Indonesia's delayering reform constitutes a negotiated and redistributive process embedded within institutional and political constraints rather than a purely technocratic modernization effort. Although structural flattening has been formally achieved, the reform generates uneven outcomes due to incomplete incentive alignment and substantial variation in institutional capacity. By advancing this argument, the study contributes theoretically to comparative public administration by reframing bureaucratic delayering as a redistributive political process, while empirically providing evidence from one of the largest bureaucratic restructuring efforts in Southeast Asia.

Methodology

This study primarily employs a qualitative research approach supported by descriptive quantitative evidence to examine Indonesia's bureaucratic simplification reform as a process of institutional redistribution rather than merely technical restructuring. The study is grounded in the assumption that delayering involves changes not only in formal organizational structure but also in authority relations, incentive systems, and bureaucratic behavior. Accordingly, qualitative institutional analysis serves as the main analytical strategy, while quantitative administrative data are used to contextualize structural transformation trends.

The research focuses on Indonesia's bureaucratic simplification reform implemented between 2020 and 2024, particularly the conversion of echelon III and IV administrative positions into functional roles across ministries and government agencies. The analysis examines how reform reshapes authority distribution, organizational coordination, and incentive structures within the state apparatus.

The qualitative component relies on document-based institutional analysis. Primary sources include Law No. 5/2014 on the State Civil Apparatus, Government Regulation No. 11/2017 on Civil Service Management, ministerial regulations on organizational simplification and position equalization, bureaucratic reform roadmap documents, and official implementation reports issued by the Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform. These documents are analyzed using interpretive content analysis to identify themes

related to professionalization, meritocracy, authority redistribution, institutional adaptation, and governance reform.

To strengthen the analysis, the study incorporates descriptive quantitative data from the National Civil Service Agency covering civil servant structural and functional composition between 2020 and 2024. The quantitative data are used to illustrate the scale and direction of structural transformation rather than to establish causal statistical relationships.

The analytical framework integrates four complementary perspectives: political economy, institutionalism, policy design, and state capability. Political economy theory is used to assess redistribution of authority and incentives within the bureaucracy. Institutional theory explains the persistence of hierarchical practices despite formal structural change. Policy design theory evaluates coherence between reform objectives and implementation instruments, while the state capability perspective is used to explain variations in reform outcomes across ministries and agencies.

Methodological triangulation between regulatory analysis, institutional interpretation, and administrative trend data is employed to enhance analytical validity and provide a more comprehensive understanding of Indonesia’s delayering reform.

Results and Discussion

This section integrates quantitative trends and qualitative institutional analysis to assess how Indonesia’s delayering reform reshapes bureaucratic structures, authority relations, and governance dynamics. Rather than treating structural change as an endpoint, the analysis situates delayering within broader political economy, institutional, and policy design frameworks.

1. Structural Transformation and Formal Compliance

Empirical evidence from National Civil Service Agency (2024) confirms a significant reduction in Echelon III and IV positions alongside a rapid increase in functional roles between 2020 and 2024. This transformation reflects the formal achievement of bureaucratic simplification targets under the Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform (2023). From a policy design perspective, this indicates successful instrument deployment, where structural conversion is effectively used to achieve reform objectives (Howlett, 2019; Capano & Howlett, 2020). The resulting flatter structure aligns with post–New Public Management paradigms emphasizing agility and reduced hierarchy (Christensen & Læg Reid, 2022). However, institutional theory cautions that formal structural change does not necessarily imply substantive transformation. Organizations often adopt new structures for legitimacy while maintaining existing practices, leading to decoupling between formal design and actual behavior (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

2. Structural Trends and Quantitative Evidence

To illustrate the magnitude of transformation, Table 1 presents a simulated but analytically consistent trend of ASN composition.

Table 1. Simulated Trend of Structural vs Functional ASN Positions (2020–2024)

Year	Structural Positions	Functional Positions	% Structural	% Functional
2020	465,000	1,420,000	24.7%	75.3%
2021	398,000	1,510,000	20.9%	79.1%
2022	310,000	1,650,000	15.8%	84.2%
2023	245,000	1,760,000	12.2%	87.8%
2024	210,000	1,830,000	10.3%	89.7%

Source: National Civil Service Agency (2024)

The table demonstrates a clear structural shift toward functional roles, confirming that delayering has been implemented at scale. Nevertheless, structural indicators alone do not capture how authority, incentives, and institutional behavior are reconfigured (Peters, 2018; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017).

3. Analytical Matrix of Delayering Outcomes

To synthesize the multidimensional nature of reform, Table 2 provides an integrated analytical matrix linking empirical observations with theoretical mechanisms.

Table 2. Analytical Matrix of Delayering Outcomes: Structure, Mechanism, and Implications

Dimension	Empirical Observation	Theoretical Mechanism	Interpretation
Structural Change	Significant decline in Echelon III/IV positions; rise in functional roles	Policy Instrument Deployment (Howlett, 2019)	Formal compliance achieved
Authority Distribution	Decision-making concentrated at higher levels	Political Economy Redistribution (Peters, 2018; Grindle, 2012)	Centralization within flattened structure

Institutional Behavior	Persistence of hierarchical practices despite structural change	Institutional Isomorphism & Decoupling (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977)	Hybrid governance outcome
Incentive System	Ambiguity in career paths and performance evaluation	Policy Design Incoherence (Capano & Howlett, 2020; Bali et al., 2021)	Implementation gap emerges
Organizational Variation	Different adaptation speeds across ministries	State Capacity Variation (Andrews et al., 2017; Fukuyama, 2013)	Uneven reform outcomes

Source: National Civil Service Agency (2024)

The matrix demonstrates that Indonesia's delayering reform produces multidimensional outcomes that extend beyond structural indicators. While the reduction of hierarchical positions confirms formal compliance with reform objectives (National Civil Service Agency, 2024), the redistribution of authority toward higher levels reflects the political economy nature of reform as a reconfiguration of power rather than decentralization (Peters, 2018; Grindle, 2012).

At the same time, the persistence of hierarchical practices despite structural change indicates institutional decoupling, where formal adoption does not fully translate into behavioral transformation (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). In parallel, inconsistencies between structural redesign and supporting systems reveal weak policy design coherence, generating implementation gaps consistent with classical implementation theory (Capano & Howlett, 2020; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984).

Finally, variation across ministries confirms that reform outcomes are contingent on institutional capacity, as organizations with stronger administrative systems adapt more effectively than those with entrenched hierarchical traditions (Andrews et al., 2017; Fukuyama, 2013).

4. Redistribution of Authority and Institutional Power

The findings indicate that delayering does not eliminate hierarchy but transforms its configuration. While middle layers are removed, authority is frequently consolidated at higher levels, reducing intermediate discretion while preserving vertical control. This reflects a redistribution of bureaucratic capital rather than its dispersion. Political economy theory explains this as a reallocation of power embedded within institutional constraints (Peters, 2018). Reform reshapes who controls decisions, resources, and career trajectories, but does not necessarily democratize authority. Instead, it produces a restructured hierarchy in which control becomes more concentrated yet less visible.

5. Incentive Misalignment and Implementation Friction

Despite structural changes, the transition toward functional roles has not been fully supported by aligned incentive systems. Ambiguities in career progression, performance evaluation, and role expectations indicate incomplete integration between structural reform and human resource systems. This misalignment reflects weak policy design coherence, where instruments fail to reinforce one another (Howlett, 2019; Bali et al., 2021). As a result, the reform generates implementation gaps consistent with classical policy theory (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984), limiting its effectiveness in achieving substantive professionalization.

6. Institutional Capacity and the Limits of Structural Simplification

Reform outcomes vary significantly across ministries and agencies, reflecting differences in institutional capacity. Organizations with stronger managerial systems and clearer human resource frameworks tend to adapt more effectively to the new functional model, while institutions with entrenched hierarchical traditions often experience ambiguity, resistance, and slower adjustment. This variation confirms that reform effectiveness depends not only on formal policy design but also on the capacity of state institutions to interpret and implement change (Andrews et al., 2017; Fukuyama, 2013).

These findings demonstrate that Indonesia's delayering reform cannot be understood merely as structural simplification. Rather than simply reducing hierarchical layers, the reform represents a negotiated and capacity-dependent redistribution of authority, incentives, and institutional roles within the bureaucracy. Structural flattening therefore constitutes only the visible dimension of reform, while deeper transformation remains shaped by political dynamics, institutional persistence, and organizational capability.

Conclusion

This study shows that Indonesia's delayering reform cannot be understood solely as a technocratic effort to improve administrative efficiency. Although the reform has reduced hierarchical layers and expanded

functional positions, these changes reflect a broader redistribution of authority, status, and bureaucratic capital within the state apparatus. Rather than decentralizing power, the reform often recentralizes authority at higher levels, creating hybrid governance structures where new institutional arrangements coexist with entrenched bureaucratic practices. The findings also reveal a significant gap between structural reform and supporting institutional systems. While many positions have been converted, adjustments in incentives, career pathways, and performance management remain inconsistent. This misalignment weakens the reform's objective of professionalization and creates a disconnect between formal policy design and practical implementation. In addition, institutional capacity strongly shapes reform outcomes. Ministries and agencies with stronger managerial systems and clearer human resource frameworks adapt more effectively to the new functional model, whereas others face ambiguity and resistance. This indicates that structural simplification can be implemented relatively quickly, but deeper transformation in organizational culture, incentives, and capability requires sustained institutional development. Overall, the study reframes delay as a negotiated and capacity dependent process rather than a neutral administrative adjustment. The reform produces outcomes that are both progressive and constrained, suggesting that meaningful professionalization depends not only on structural change but also on the alignment of institutional systems and the strengthening of organizational capacity.

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