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Between Fear and Hope: The Privatization of Government Higher Education Institutions in Saudi Arabia and the Role of Leadership in Managing Change

Areej Shafai[1*]
[1]*Assistant Professor College of Business Administration, Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University, Saudi Arabia, aShafai@iau.edu.sa*

***Correspondence:** Dr. Areej Shafai; ashafai13@gmail.com

ABSTRACT- The purpose of this paper is to provide an analysis of privatization as it applies to public universities and colleges in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It also aims to critically reflect on the expected concerns due to the new environmental change resulting from the implementation of privatization and its impact on performance. There is a scarcity of existing literature on how privatization affects employee performance, and whether or not employees remain competent in their new environment. This paper also focuses on the significant role of leadership as organizations transition from public organizations to privatized ones. An in-depth content analysis of the privatization of public Saudi higher education institutions was adapted as a methodological approach to this study. Through this approach, the gap that exists between the new transformations, the leadership required, and the necessary preparations for privatization were analyzed. The major findings indicate that the idea of privatization in and of itself constitutes a great fear and anxiety for employees due to the organizational, administrative, and cultural change that privatization may bring. Higher education institutions are in dire need of influential and visionary leaders who can manage and facilitate the privatization process to ensure its success and achievement of the desired goals. The paper explores the nature, potential consequences, and concerns of privatization. It highlights the importance of leadership as a fundamental pillar of change.

Keywords: Privatization; Leadership; Change Management; Higher Education in Saudi Arabia; Transformation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Cross the world, the idea of privatization has been embraced and supported by governments in so many sectors and industries (Rizvi, 2016). As of 1980, the role of government as a dominant player in the economy rolled back in several parts of the world as a result of the employment of privatization to increase the domestic outputs and investment (Sahheen, 2010).

"The term 'privatization' was first coined by the well-known management guru Peter Drucker, before it was adopted by the then UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher" (Ram, 2012, p. 2). Privatization is defined as the transfer of ownership and responsibility for local public services to private service providers in pursuit of development and the provision of funds (Lopez-de-Silanes, Shleifer Vishny, 1995). It involves the "transfer of assets, management, functions or responsibilities previously owned or carried out by the State to private actors" (Coomans & Hallo de Wold, 2005). Privatized organizations "are no longer formally under the political control of a democratically elected council or parliament, but political control is still held through public ownership and – consequently – appointment of board representatives" (Jacobsen, 2021, p.2). Privatization is one of the strategies that public institution adopts to remain competitive (Ramamonjiarivelo & Weech-Maldonado, 2021).

In 2021, an official agreement was issued to implement the privatization system in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to help achieve the strategic objectives of government agencies, rationalize public spending, increase state revenues, raise the efficiency of the national economy and increase its competitiveness to face the challenges and international competition. This orientation supports the Kingdom's Vision 2030 to promote investment in the national economy, create attractive investment opportunities for the private sector and increase its contribution to the domestic product to enhance the sustainability of the Kingdom's economy (Privatization System, 2021, Bureau of Experts at the Council of Ministers).

Privatization is been one of the most controversial development concerning governments and citizens. For its advocators, they perceive it as a smart method to improve the quality of productions, while still others see privatization as troubled door to society threating the interest of citizens (Al-Jobory & Dhidan, 2021).

The purpose of this paper is to provide an analysis of privatization as it applies to public universities and colleges in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It also aims to critically reflect on the expected concerns due to the new environmental change and its impact on performance and production. There is a scarcity of existing literature on how privatization affects employee performance and whether or not they are still competent in their new environment. This paper also focuses on the critical role of leadership towards privatization to ensure a smooth transition from public organizations to privatized organizations.

The paper is organized around the four main sections that cover the major aspects of privatization in Saudi universities and colleges. The first section analyzes the public vs. private organization system and culture. The second section looks at privatization in Education, followed by the third section that explores the impact of privatization in employee performance. The last section focuses on the role of leadership in managing the change.

2. PUBLIC vs. PRIVATE ORGANIZATION SYSTEM AND CULTURE

A large number of studies have addressed the difference between public and private institutions, taking into account many different variables such as political culture, management, decision-making, accountability, behaviors and scope of activities. Most studies unanimously agree on the fact that private organizations have a different place culture than government organizations (Simpvic, 2015; Kwon & Cho, 2017; Rainey, 2009; Bozeman & Kingsley; Emmert & Clow, 1988; Kipo-Sunyehzi, 2020).

The distinction and differences between private and public sector has been a core question for public administration since its founding (Simovic, 2015). Simovic (2015) considered the public organization as the one that is owned and controlled by rules while the private organization is the one that is owned and guided by market forces. Based on the core approach advocates, the public organization is less efficient and unresponsive to the market needs. As for management, a great deal of effort has been made to improve public sector management by focusing on organizational performance and results. The public organization must import from the private organization the best practices in models of management and behaviors (Simovic, 2015). When it comes to incentives, since for-profit organization is result-oriented as a way to survive, good performers receive satisfying incentives such as renewing their contacts, while no strong incentives are given for non-profit organization for accomplishments and performance.

Scholars who were interested in discovering the organizational system in different sectors have found that the system in public organization is greatly different than private organization. Private institutions employ fewer people than government institutions, which is one of the main objectives of privatization (Lopez-de-Silanes, Shleifer Vishny,1995). Kwon & Cho (2017) studied public vs. private organization from the lens of the effect of management of performance. The study looked at the level of organizational performance based on the sector. The researchers found that the effect of management structure, reward philosophy, strategic orientation and culture differ between the public sector and private sector (Kwon & Cho, 2017). Public organizations lack the capacity to create a results-based management culture since they have traditionally focused on activities and inputs (Simovic, 2015).

Considering other researches on the different characteristics of both sectors, Rainey (2009) concluded that decisions in public organization are more intrusive and complex than in private organizations (Rainey, 2009). Governmental organizations tend to be more bureaucratic than private ones, as public organization is less flexible and more inclined to follow rules and procedures (Bozeman & Kingsley, 1998; Simovic, 2015; Emmert & Clow, 1988).

Bozeman & Kingsley's (1998) study examined the level of risk culture in a public organization as compared to a private organization where managers and employees take risks and promote to risk-taking. The authors believe that a culture of risk is highly dependent on managers' willingness to hand some authority and trust to employees to perform their duties. Organizations with a poorer relationship between promotion and performance, and more red tape tend to have less risky culture. This conclusion supports the assumptions that private sector managers are more risk takers than public sector managers.

Faculty performance quality is an issue in privatized organization (Holzhacker, Chornoivan, Yazilitas, & Dayan-Ochir, 2009)). Holzhacker, Chornoivan, Yazilitas, & Dayan-Ochir (2009) highlights some differences between public and private organizations. Comparing with the government t institutions, Private institutions have a hard time recruiting qualified faculties with quality performance. This is because of the high standards and expectation, and limited resources and benefits comparing to the ones that government has and offer. The whole benefits and resources seem to be different between public and private organizations as public institutions that is supported financially by governments, has away more attractive packages and benefits to employees (Holzhacker, Chornoivan, Yazilitas, & Dayan-Ochir, 2009).

3. PRIVATIZATION IN EDUCATION

In education sector, the privatization plays a significant role in both reducing the reliance on governments for the services they are no longer able to provide or in increasing the public investments as a way to respond to the market needs and concerns (Rizvi, 2016).

Scholars and researchers have different perspectives on the issue of privatizing education, whether it was in the interest of the people or the governments. Dahlan (2016) arguers that education is one of the most important basics, duties and responsibilities of the government, which must be taken care of and provided to citizens and residents for the advancement of the country. Despite his support for the economic vision to diversify sources of income, the aim to increase in local growth rates through the sale of free services provided to citizens needs reconsideration (Dahlan, 2016). Tilak (2008) believes that the initial responsibility of a government to provide education to its citizens became a moral and political duty. He stated:
... all tend to challenge the long-cherished, well-established view of many that higher education is a public good, and to

propose and legitimize the sale and purchase of higher education, as if it is a normal commodity meant for trade. The very shift in perception on the nature of higher education from a public good to a private good—a commodity that can be traded—will have serious implications (Tilak, 2008, p.1)

This line of reasoning is consistent with the argument of Cooper & Randall (2008) that advocates of public education fear privatized education. This fear has intensified as the education system has become confused due to the disappearance of differences between public and private education. Students and resources have been diverted from the traditional system to one that has yet to be proven effective. Privatization is a trend that shows declining distinction between public and private sectors in education (Lubienski, 2016).

Speaking of concerns, privatized universities are expected to make profits by adopting different activities and applying some changes in internal and external procedures and laws related to the management of the organization. Some of those revenue-generating activities could be increasing students' tuitions and enrollment, renting facilities, running long and short courses to meet market needs, and reconsidering employee benefits and packages. These changes are embraced to create a variety of income sources to reduce financial dependence on government (Lee, 1998).

This transformation and penetration into privatized culture has generated a lot of anxiety and fear among academics, as they see privatization as a restriction of their freedoms and a threat to their job stability. Not to mention questioning their inner belief in their ability to keep pace with this change and provide satisfactory performance (Lee, 1998). Yet, the advocates for privatization argue that those changes will increase the autonomy financially and administratively. More importantly, "corporatized universities may prevent the "brain drain" of academics to the private sector" (Lee, 1998, p.1). Faculty members are and will be affected by privatization and associated changes due to apprehension of the unknown.

4. THE IMPACT OF PRIVATIZATION IN EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE

Although researchers have given attention to the difference between public and private organization and the effect of privatization on economy and employment, there is limited research exploring the impact of privatization on employee performance and behaviors is both sectors (Kwon & Cho, 2017). Organizational performance contains two main aspects; the behavior of individuals and the consequences of those behaviors (Sonnentage & Frese, 2005).

The study of Pecujlija, Bojanic, Cosic, Radisic, Ivanovic, & Delic (2011) reveals that there is a direct relationship between the type of ownership and employee performance and attitudes in the work environment. Moreover, Ram (2012) supports this conclusion and argues that private ownership helps lower cost in the long run and leads to higher level of productivity and growth.

Kikeri & Nellis (2004) argue that despite the growing concerns surrounding privatization, it has proven successful in improving the performance and welfare of organizations, a critical goal. Rather than minimizing the scope of privatization, it should be properly designed and tailored to meet local conditions and impose appropriate strategies and mechanisms to achieve better results.

Cunha & Cooper (2001) looked into the privatization from employee wellbeing perspectives. The authors believed that privatization unleashed the major change happening for employees internally. This change has an impact on the employee wellbeing as it is associated with uncertainty, which may introduce higher organizational stress level and mental and physical illness. As a result of the Cunha & Cooper' (2001) study that involved three different privatized firms, regardless of fear and concerns about significant psychological and professional change that employees experience, a privatized organization appears to have better individual accountability, a stronger culture and a greater team spirit (Cunha, 2001).

Al-Zahrani' study (2019) indicated some obstacles to privatization in Saudi universities. One of the most important results of the study, which included the analysis of questionnaires filled by academic leaders from six universities, is that to facilitate the privatization process, it is necessary to attract qualified and high-performance faculty members from inside and outside the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Al-Zahrani, 2019). This result is controversial about whether the academic and administrative staff are worthy and qualified to achieve the goals, meet the standards and the expectations of the new transformed organization, namely, the privatized organization. Knowing that one of the main reasons for privatization is to use fewer people to work (Lopez-de-Silanes, Shleifer Vishny,1995). This in itself may constitute a major threat to government employees by expelling them from their jobs in order to reduce numbers and retaining only the required competencies.

Holzhacker, Chornoivan, Yazilitas, & Dayan-Ochir (2009) suggested that in order for privatized organizations to be effective and efficient, they must attract the competent employees by providing competitive working conditions, advantages and benefits that keep them motivated and satisfied. If they fail to invest in faculties, they cannot hope to provide a high-quality education. Moreover, the evaluation process is greatly different between the public and private organizations. Holzhacker, Chornoivan, Yazilitas, & Dayan-Ochir (2009) stated that the process of employee's evaluation may be exposed to corruption and injustice. To avoid this and to improve the quality of the assessment, a non-government and autonomous accreditation body can help in reducing the fraud and corruption through external institutional evaluation.

5. LEADERSHIP AND ITS ROLE IN MANAGING THE CHANGE

Privatization is not a magic wand to solve the problem of weak performance of government organizations. It cannot, in and of itself, improve the shortcomings and failures in the performance or general production of the organization. It requires an effective leadership organization and well-thought-out and codified policy and rules that serve the gradual engagement and implementation in the privatization process (Igbuzor, 2003). The mere thought of transferring ownership from the government to the private sector must be carefully studied and not be done in a hurry. All issues and problems that may be related to privatization should be taken into consideration.

Leadership is the backbone of any organization. Its success flows to the entire organization and its failure affects the whole environment. Thus, the focus on leadership practices is more crucial than ever. Speaking of the higher education leadership, Shafai (2018), stated: "Saudi higher educational leaders need to be educated in some of the bases and foundations of leadership, which are critical in reforming and developing higher education and its system" (*p. 32*). Tailored programs and professional development opportunities must be available for leaders to deal with and react to the required changes resulting from privatization.

Just a change of ownership does not mean that improving the performance of the privatized organization is a foregone conclusion. The desired results of privatization can only be achieved through the necessary arrangements and preparation (Wu, 2007).

To accelerate modernization and development, many countries have neglected their own identity and culture in return for integration and globalization. The challenge is how leadership can strike a balance between the imperative to accept global culture and the need to protect cultural identity (Lee, 1998). Indeed, privatized organizations requires a radical change as it introduces the principles of private sector organizational characteristics into the culture of government sector (Valkama, 2013).

One of those potential concerns that may result from privatization is the massive organizational change that the organization will experience. This change must be systematic, ethical and gradual so as not to lose precious human resources who are a key asset in the work environment.

Organizational change is the process of changing the overall pattern of behavior of an organization by changing the pattern of behavior of the individuals working in it, rather than focusing on the change itself. The process requires reassessing, refining and taming the content, existing goals and purpose of the organization in line with the new identity (Moran & Brightman, (2000). Theoretical and analytical organizational change is critical in explaining why change is necessary and determining the consequences of change and the consequences of not responding to it. This useful concept examines the contents and process. Contents looks at what is actually changing in the organization, while the process focuses on how to bring about change (Barnett & Carroll,1995).

Scholars have different definitions of organizational change management. Moran and Brightman (2001) described it as "a process of continuous renewal of an organization's direction, structure, and capabilities to serve the ever-changing needs of external and internal clients" (*p. 111*). Organizational change is a systematic approach that prepares, equips and leads people to engage in change successfully to achieve organizational goals (Kotter, 2012 & Burns, 2004). Such valuable change requires specific steps and processes to be followed, and this is precisely the responsibility of the leaders. The effective strategic leadership promotes institutional change as the reference and backbone of the organization.

Studies revealed that most of change failure are due to lack of management support, poor leadership, insufficient resources, inappropriate planning, and lack of monitoring and evaluation (Mosadeghrad & Ansarian 2014, Kotter, 2010, Kerber & Buono, 2005). The increasing number of change failures, which could be over 70%, is cause for concern (Miller, 2002; Mourier & Smith 2001). According to Miller (2010), only three out of four change projects meet leadership expectations, as most failures lie in the implementation phase. These conclusions call for the urgent need for strong and wise leadership as it is essential in initiating significant change.

Employing Kotter's (2010) Eight Steps in Leading Change in the Privatization Process

It is an absolute truth of the world that change is inevitable. The ability to lead successful change is a critical skill for the prosperity of an organization. As privatization brings massive change to the organization, it is very important to consider Kotter (2010)'s eight steps to lead change to ensure its success.

1- ***Establishing a sense of urgency*** is the first step in driving change. Speaking of privatization, a successful leader has the skill to publicize the need for change internally by explaining the need to act properly without delay. This includes highlighting the negative consequences that the organization may face if it does not change. The urgency needs to be associated with a clear vision to avoid false urgency. According to Kotter (1998), half of the failed changes are due to the obstruction of this stage, as he expressed "writing a memo instead of lighting a fire" (*p. 1*). This phase requires leaders to have inner belief of the positive changes that privatization will bring and launch their initiatives more urgently and seriously.

2- ***Creating a guiding coalition*** is the second step, which requires leaders to form a team to support change. A leader alone can do nothing to change the culture of the environment and the status quo including performance, expectation and standards, but with a quality committee with the right talents who can lead and support change, it can happen. The guiding coalition should represent all level of the organization due to the fact that the biggest obstacles to change come from those who hold senior management level and just a level or two below the CEO (Kotter, 1998).

3- ***Shaping a change vision*** is the third step in leading change. Leaders must formulate a clear vision for the organization, which represents the organization's future and destination. Recognizing the vision of privatization in higher education institutions and the type of changes it will bring about is crucial in creating a promising future for the institution.

4- Creating a vision is not enough to build understanding and awareness. It must be ***communicated internally*** to each potential employee. Employees cannot believe in the vision until they see it, watch it, live it and talk about it freely and openly among themselves. Spreading the vision of privatization among faculty and administrators in higher education institutions is more important than ever, as employees have the right to understand what is going on, what is happening to them and why. The communication will reduce resistance, fear, and negative thoughts in their minds about privatization, and increase support for the new change. Walk the talk is important at this stage as leaders need to embody the desirable behaviors they want to see in others. Kotter (1998) stated: "an effective change vision must include not just new strategies and structures but also new, aligned behaviors on the part of senior executives" (*p. 2*). Any attitudes wanted to be seen and practiced in the workplace environment, start from the top management as their behaviors are watched and copied by others (Spears, 1998).

5- Any change is associated with risk due to uncertainty and lack of control over outcomes. ***Getting rid of obstacles*** and paving the way for people to succeed is another critical step in managing change (Kotter, 1998). Leaders should encourage risk taking and creative ideas as a way to empower people to realize the new vision and make change. People have their own insights of implementing change. Therefore, their unconventional ideas must be respected, and their mistakes and failures accepted. This is where successful leadership stands out. In the privatization process, employees need to be empowered and have a helping hand that removes the barriers that stand in the way of their change.

6- ***Celebrating the small win*** and “declaring the victory before the war is over” (Spears, 1998, p. 1) is a great way to motivate employees and make progress in change. People talk about completing any task and look at the great achievements of difficult initiatives even if they are far from where they want to go. Celebrating results along the way is important to encourage employees to move forward and help them truly think about wrapping up and reaching goals. Preparing the organization for a new era that is very different from what it has been for years is a challenge (Kotter, 1998). Surrounding those challenging moments with positive vibes and celebrations can undoubtedly facilitate the process of transferring the culture, minds and performance of employees to match the new environment.

7- ***Consolidating and sustaining the change*** along the way is another significant step in change. After people believe in the new vision and witness the small wins, they would have faith on proceeding with the long-term goals. On this stage, leaders should open the door for ongoing communication and feedback as they provide unique data that cannot be gained but through others (Kotter, 1998). Through privatization process, leaders must listen to others who are experiencing the change by paying attention to their needs and wants, addressing their concerns, keeping the learning culture flexible and open, and meeting their needs as a top priority.

8- Last step in Kotter’s (1998) model of leading change is ***incorporating change into culture***. For a lasting effect, change needs to be institutionalized as a main pillar in an organization’s culture and identity. To ensure a successful implementation of privatization process, leaders need to do whatever it takes to keep its success. This may include involving turnover for those who are against the changes and making crucial decisions that support the new approaches and culture.

Privatization is a critical transformation of leaders and employees that changes the mindset of business and performance. Three possible reactions of people resulting from change can be seen: compliance, acceptance and resistance. These findings are based on the type of methods and tactics leaders use (Kerber & Buono, 2005). The low level of success of the change may lie in the mismatch between the given circumstances and the appropriate approach. Kerber & Buono (2005) have categorized change into three interrelated approaches; Directed change, planned change, directed change. Directed change is simply creating and declaring change from higher authority and flowing downwards using persuasive communication to accept change. The planned change creates a detailed roadmap for the entire project, which builds awareness of how people can participate effectively and contribute to the success of the project. The last category is directed change, which is based on extending and enhancing the effects of changes already underway. This method includes the following three stages; Freezing, rebalancing, and unfreezing (Kerber & Buono, 2005). With a complexity of today's work environment and the transformational change underway, visionary leaders must have a mix of directed, planned, and directed change as the situation requires.

Given the importance of privatizing higher education in the Kingdom, leadership plays the role of the mother in maintaining flexibility, facilitating procedures, removing obstacles, and refining minds to support change that benefits everyone. The role of successful leaders goes much deeper than implementing and evaluating the system. Rather, they are the influential, facilitator, supportive, and eager to see everyone succeed.

6. CONCLUSION

After the government agreed to open the door to private investment in vital sectors. The Saudis were caught between their fear that privatization could mean that they would not be able to access basic services such as health and education if they did not have the money, improve the quality of services and eliminate corruption.

Privatization in and of itself constitutes a great fear and anxiety for employees for the organizational, administrative and cultural change that it may bring. Higher education institutions are in dire need of influential and visionary leaders who can manage and facilitate the privatization process to ensure its success and achievement of the desired goals.

The main issue discussed in this paper, which needs close attention, is looking at the requirements and qualification imposed by the fundamental transformation from the public sector to the private sector. There is a direct link between ownership and the level of employee productivity, which means that as a result of privatization, employees can either be motivated, qualified to achieve the new goals or they will be incompetent anymore and fail to meet the new standards and performance.

It is one of the greatest concerns for government employees who are accustomed to a certain system, ways of working and a certain level of performance, to be asked of new standards and requirements greater than what they are accustomed to. This fear of change falls first on the shoulders of the leadership as a crucial responsibility that must be treated and tamed. Leading the change effectively will significantly help reduce employees' concerns and enable them to easily adapt and follow change. Investing time and effort in people and facilitating their paths to success is what makes leadership the backbone of any organization.

The results and discussions from this study can be a fruitful reference for the development of organizational change management in government universities and colleges to be in line with the objectives of privatization and Vision 2030. Further qualitative research will be recommended to gain post-privatization employees' experiences on measuring performance and whether their pre-privatization expectations and fears were valid.

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