Public administration and politics meet turbulence

Public governance has always been challenged by turbulence, defined as "situations where events, demands, and support interact and change in highly variable, inconsistent, unexpected or unpredictable ways". Social conflicts, economic recession, and political leadership contests create turmoil and chaos to which governments aim to respond with a mixture of repression, concession, reform, and regime change to maintain or restore some form of social, economic, and political order. Political philosophers such as Machiavelli and Hobbes depicted history as a circular movement where the rise of relatively stable regimes predicated on the excise of hard power ultimately gives way to decadence, corruption, and ruin that erode the social and political order. In contrast, Hegel and Marx portrayed history as a linear trajectory governed by the rational unfolding of a dialectics whereby new, contradicting developments challenge the old, stable structures, thus leading to turbulent transitions that bring society to higher and higher stages. Despite their different views on history, they all agreed that order is temporary and invariably disturbed by short spells of crisis and heightened turbulence occurring at regular intervals but tending to foster a new period of relatively stable rule.

Today, there seems to be a new sense that turbulence has become a chronic and endemic condition for modern governance. This new condition cannot be traced to any single factor, arising instead from multiple interacting developments. A first factor is that acute or creeping crises seem to be arising more frequently, affecting a wider range of sectors, spilling across political boundaries, and possibly producing multiple interacting crises. A second factor is how social, economic, and political interactions among widely distributed, multi-level parties are accelerating—producing interactions of surprising speed, scale, and scope. Communication and information technologies create lightning-fast information exchanges demanding a rapid and timely response to far-flung citizens, suppliers, stakeholders, and decision-makers who may not have even been part of the administrative picture until recently. Keeping up with potentially destabilizing, mediatized events can easily devolve into a constant stream of fire drills. A third source of turbulence arises from an intensification of political conflict that challenges existing norms and mechanisms of conflict mediation. While public organizations are familiar with politics and conflict, they must now adapt to shifting political issues, polarized populations, rapid leadership turnover, clashing reform agendas, and uncertain planning horizons – sometimes all at once.

Although the concept of turbulence implies the need to respond and adapt to change, it refers to a certain kind of adaptation and certain kind of change. When change is slow and steady, when shifts and trends can be clearly anticipated, and when important parameters change in observable, understandable, and relatively discrete ways, we are not in a turbulent world. When we have the leisure to respond to change through planned adaptation, when we seek to optimize structures or processes through comprehensive system reforms, or when we tweak operations to adapt to expected variance in resources, supplies, or personnel, we are generally not in a world of turbulence; instead, turbulence describes a state in which change is sudden, surprising and difficult to understand or track. It describes a world where we must deal with multiple, simultaneous changes, each demanding our immediate attention, often creating

contradictions and dilemmas. Adaptation to turbulence can be like a group of strangers rapidly assembling a puzzle, where the picture is blurry and the pieces fit together poorly.