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BEYOND GOOD GOVERNANCE: Reconstructing Conflict Bureaucracy in Timor-Leste through Institutional Healing

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Abstract

New Public Management (NPM) reforms in post-conflict states often trigger isomorphic mimicry, failing to foster sustainable performance. This study addresses these failures by proposing a Culture-Based Management (CBM) model, centered on Timor-Leste's indigenous value of *Servi Humildade* (humble service) and institutional healing. Utilizing mixed-methods and PLS-SEM with 210 civil servants, findings demonstrate that cultural integrity enhances bureaucratic performance, with institutional healing acting as a vital mediator against administrative trauma. Conversely, political interference undermines these structures. CBM emerges as a robust, context-sensitive alternative to NPM, embedding indigenous values and social reconciliation to secure institutional legitimacy and resilience within fragile settings.

1 | Introduction: Reconstructing Conflict Bureaucracy

Following its 2002 independence, Timor-Leste's bureaucracy encountered a profound paradox: massive international donor investment in New Public Management (NPM) reforms failed to restore public trust. Empirical data from this study reveals that 68.2% of echelon III and IV civil servants prioritize the ethic of *Servi Humildade* (humble service) over strict adherence to formal Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). This suggests that the NPM paradigm (Andrews, 2013) faltered because it assumed a state of administrative normalcy, ignoring that civil servant remained burdened by unresolved factional trauma. Consequently, the bureaucracy suffered from acute dysfunction, with internal loyalties fractured by political factions, leading to institutional paralysis (Barma, 2016). This failure necessitates a new model that transcends the narrow logic of efficiency; one that incorporates the emotional and socio-cultural realities of civil servants as a prerequisite for building a resilient state.

This study introduces the Culture-Based Management (CBM) model, which offers a robust theoretical framework for post-conflict environments. The analytical significance of CBM extends beyond Timor-Leste, providing insights for regions sharing similar systemic pathologies such as Aceh (Indonesia), Mindanao (Philippines), the Western Balkans, and Sub-Saharan Africa where long histories of violence, vulnerability to elite capture, and friction between formal law and traditional norms persist. When bureaucratic reforms prioritize institutional uniformity without addressing these deep-rooted socio-cultural variables, regions become trapped in "isomorphic imitation" (Andrews, 2013), adopting formal structural facades that lack substantive functionality.

In Timor-Leste, this gap is exacerbated by a multi-layered legacy of Portuguese civil law, Indonesian administrative systems, and the formidable authority of local socio-legal structures. Without integrating locally rooted behavioral frameworks, reform initiatives risk perpetuating forms of neo-colonial dependency under the guise of modernization. This study argues that the CBM model provides a necessary analytical correction, shifting discourse from the replication of exogenous institutional templates to the development of culturally resonant governance. While studies of post-conflict reform in the Balkans and Africa have provided insights, NPM models consistently fail in Timor-Leste, indicating a

"theoretical gap" in public administration literature that remains overly focused on Western standards of good governance while neglecting the necessity of healing deep-seated social trauma.

In this context, we define bureaucracy not as a static, value-free organization, but as a dyn amic "battleground" where technocratic interests clash with social memory and traditional structures. Administrative failure in post-conflict settings often stems from the absence of a bridge between modern identities and traditional culture a moral compass essential for Timorese officials. When policies formulated at the central level fail to incorporate local values, such as *Reziséns*ia *Moral* and *Integridade Sagradu*, both officials and rural communities often engage in "passive resistance" to SOPs perceived as foreign. Consequently, bureaucratic performance stagnates at a nominal level, prioritizing procedural aesthetics over actual service delivery.

These systemic inconsistencies underscore the urgent need to move beyond Western-centric paradigms. Our findings suggest that relying solely on technical indicators without integrating socio-spiritual foundations, particularly those rooted in *Tara-Bandu*, renders reform efforts superficial. To be effective, institutional reforms must address core issues of institutional trust and collective healing, ensuring the state functions not merely as a mechanical entity, but as a responsive instrument for sustainable peace.

The CBM model is particularly relevant because traditional bureaucratic mechanisms often operate in a state of "institutional paralysis." The civil service faces both the demands of modernity and the burden of collective memory. CBM redefines bureaucracy as a healing platform capable of aligning individual intentions (*Servi Humildade*) with the state's public service mandate. By situating bureaucracy within the nation's cultural ecosystem, this model addresses the country's existential crisis, ensuring that administrative legitimacy stems from values that have sustained society through years of turmoil.

The dominance of NPM in global reform studies has masked these fatal flaws. Grindle (2017) argues that "Good Enough Governance" frameworks often fail because they lack genuine reconciliation, while Blind (2019) notes that vertical trust cannot be restored through rigid contracts and KPIs alone. Two crucial failures emerge: first, NPM ignores the ontology of indigenous ethics; second, it mistakenly positions customary law as an obstacle to progress, despite it being the primary source of moral legitimacy. This is not merely a technical implementation issue, but a fundamental theoretical failure to map realities on the ground.

A systematic review of 45 donor and academic studies reveals two overlooked gaps. First, "Trauma Neglect": Reports by the UNDP (2020) and the World Bank (2021) indicate that excessive focus on digitalization and technical training fails to measure how collective wounds hinder SOP compliance. Second, "Inconsistency of Customary Law": Studies (Barma, 2016; Brinkerhoff, 2019) tend to treat *Tara-Bandu* as a "leftover" culture to be replaced by formal law, rather than a powerful mediating variable. Consequently, two fundamental questions remain unanswered: How does *Tara-Bandu*-based integrity act as a predictor of healing? And, through *Tara-Bandu* mechanisms, is integrity mediated into bureaucratic performance?

CBM is proposed as the theoretical answer to these gaps, empirically incorporating cultural values into the formal state framework. Our research tests the CBM model by utilizing civil service integrity (based on *Servi Humildade*) as the independent variable, Institutional Healing (through *Tara-Bandu*) as the mediator, and Political Reality as the moderator. Unlike NPM, CBM assumes that post-conflict bureaucracies must heal internal trauma before achieving operational efficiency. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach with 210 respondents including traditional leaders, community members, academics, and officials our data provide strong theoretical support for a bureaucratic paradigm shift. Key model parameters include a path coefficient of $\beta = 0.412$ for P1, a moderation effect of $\Delta\beta = 0.134$ for P2, and a Variance Accounted for (VAF) of 27.3% for P3. These results indicate that local wisdom is the key to overcoming administrative deadlocks.

This study offers two major contributions. Theoretically, CBM introduces the "Healing Bureaucracy" paradigm, shifting the unit of analysis from technical outcomes to the state's healing process. Practically, it recommends that reformers allocate 20% of reform budgets to strengthening *Tara-Bandu* frameworks before implementing technical interventions, as customary legitimacy is an absolute prerequisite for SOP success. This article is organized into five sections: Literature Review, Methods, Results, Discussion, and Conclusions. CBM provides the first theoretical roadmap for transforming bureaucracy from a source of trauma into an effective agent of reconciliation. By integrating noble values and formal structures, CBM offers a new trajectory for public administration in post-conflict areas one where legitimacy and efficiency are intertwined into a single force for recovery

2 | Literature Review

2.1 | New Public Management (NPM) and Contextual Failure in Post-Conflict Countries

New Public Management (NPM) has dominated global public administration reform for the past three decades. According to Andrews (2013), NPM is built on three core assumptions: 1) the existence of a stable, rational-legal state, 2) the separation of politics and administration for efficiency, and 3) the use of performance contracts and KPIs as primary control mechanisms. NPM conceptualizes bureaucracy as a mechanistic entity that responds rationally to incentives.

However, this model experiences "theoretical dissonance" when applied to post-conflict countries like Timor-Leste. The failure is not merely structural, but ontological. NPM ignores the psychological contract between bureaucrats and the state. In stable states, this contract is transactional: salary for service. In post-conflict Timor-Leste, the contract is existential: security and identity recognition after violence. When reform focuses only on efficiency without addressing emotional recovery, bureaucrats experience cognitive dissonance. They are forced to operate a system demanding mechanistic neutrality while still navigating the trauma of 1999 and 2006 factionalism.

This critique is supported by three strands of literature. First, Grindle (2017) argues that NPM fails because it prioritizes technical efficiency over political reconciliation. Second, Fukuyama (2014) warns that building administrative capacity without political legitimacy creates "a state that is administratively strong but politically fragile." Third, Andrews (2013) introduces "Institutional Mimicry" to explain why Timor-Leste could adopt sophisticated e-government systems but failed to deliver basic services. The 1999 referendum and 2006 crisis left entrenched factionalism. Institutions become battlegrounds for group loyalty, and politicized bureaucracy reinforces clientelism as the main mechanism for accessing power (Engel, 2010).

Therefore, in post-conflict contexts, bureaucracies are not sterile workspaces. They are ecosystems filled with collective trauma and competing loyalties. Efficiency, the main goal of NPM, becomes impossible to achieve as long as the goals of institutional cohesion and "institutional healing" remain unaddressed.

2.2 | Five Patterns of Bureaucratic Reform Failure in Fragile States*

Bureaucratic reform initiatives in post-conflict states frequently encounter recurrent, systemic obstacles that undermine their intended transformative impact. Drawing upon a synthesis of 45 empirical studies conducted between 2010 and 2024, this research identifies five distinct patterns of failure characteristic of fragile governance environments. These patterns, alongside their empirical manifestations within the Timorese context and the corresponding theoretical gaps, are systematically mapped in Table 1.

Table 1
Patterns of Bureaucratic Reform Failure in Post-Conflict Countries

Failure Pattern	Conceptual Explanation	Manifestation in Timor-Leste	Theoretical Gap
Trauma Neglect	Ignoring collective wounds	SOP Resistance: Perceived as Western imposition.	Trauma not treated as a variable
Customary Disjuncture	Dismissing customary law as backward.	Community service based on *Tara-Bandu*, not SOP.	Custom not a mediating variable.
Elite Capture	Reform hijacked by political elites.	Patronage-based funding and appointments.	Politics not modeled as a moderator.
Capacity Mirage	Training without legitimacy	Technical certifications rejected by public.	Sacred legitimacy is absent
Institutional Mimicry	Form without function	E-gov exists, decisions made via *Tara-Bandu*	Formal vs. Informal not bridged

Source: Authors synthesis (2026)

These patterns lead to "institutional paralysis." Officials practice maladaptive compliance: they follow donor SOPs for reports, but deliver services through informal, patronage channels. This is consistent

with Evans' (1995) concept of "embedded autonomy." Effective bureaucracies must be both autonomous from politics and embedded in society. The failures in Timor-Leste stem from an inability to balance these two. This gap calls for a Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA) approach sensitive to the local social ecosystem.

2.3 | *Tara-Bandu*: From Culture to Scientific Construct

Thematic findings from this study identify *Tara-Bandu* as a potential counter-narrative to Western transactional bureaucratic ethics. *Tara-Bandu* is an ancestral Timorese value system encompassing three core dimensions: *Rezisténsia Moral, Integridade Sagradu*, and *Servi Humildade*.

Empirically, 68.2% of Echelon III-IV officers in the pilot study considered *Tara-Bandu* more behaviorally binding than NPM's reward and punishment system. Its operational strength lies in transforming abstract ethics into concrete social contracts. It shifts oversight from external audits to "sacred transparency," where corruption is viewed as a moral violation against ancestors and community.

Theoretically, this study repositions *Tara-Bandu* as a scientific construct. We operationalize its *Servi Humildade* dimension as an independent variable influencing bureaucratic performance. This represents an epistemological shift: validating local knowledge as a mechanism of internal control. By framing *Tara-Bandu* empirically, this study argues that organizational effectiveness in Timor-Leste depends on integrating local value structures into formal procedures, rather than imposing an alienating Weberian dichotomy.

The CBM model uses *Tara-Bandu* to resolve "bureaucratic schizophrenia" the conflict between formal state requirements and lineage expectations. By integrating local leaders, the state acknowledges that an official's legitimacy comes from both professional appointment and traditional standing.

2.4 | Culture-Based Management (CBM): Model Development and Hypotheses

Addressing the aforementioned research gaps requires a shift from conventional administrative paradigms toward a more context-sensitive framework. This study proposes the Culture-Based Management (CBM) model, which operates on the ontological premise that institutions in post-conflict societies must function as agents of social healing before they can effectively serve as instruments of efficiency. Unlike New Public Management (NPM), which often treats cultural factors as residual variables, CBM positions culture as the primary ecosystem shaping institutional legitimacy and performance. The fundamental conceptual differentiators between the traditional NPM paradigm and the proposed CBM framework are detailed in Table 2.

Table 2
Paradigm Comparison: NPM vs CBM

Dimension	New Public Management (NPM)	Culture-Based Management (CBM)
Basic Assumption	Normal state, universal efficiency	Post-conflict state, social healing via *Tara-Bandu*
Unit of Analysis	Individual/Mechanical system	Social entity / Cultural collective
Success Indicator	Cost efficiency & KPIs	Level of reconciliation & trust
Main Risk	Institutional Mimicry	Technocratic failure by donors
Source: Author's own construction (2026)		

From this framework, we develop six hypotheses:

H1: *Servi Humildade* has a positive effect on Bureaucratic Performance.

H2: Institutional Healing has a positive effect on Bureaucratic Performance.

H3: Political Reality has a negative effect on Bureaucratic Performance.

H4: *Servi Humildade* has a positive effect on Institutional Healing.

H5: Institutional Healing mediates the relationship between *Servi Humildade* and Bureaucratic Performance.

H6: Political Reality moderates the relationship between *Servi Humildade* and Bureaucratic Performance, such that the relationship is weaker when Political Reality is high.

In conclusion, CBM represents a necessary "decolonization" of administrative thinking. It offers a pragmatic synthesis: it retains the need for efficiency but positions "social healing" as a key driver of performance. By embedding practices within the *Tara-Bandu* moral framework, the state moves beyond being a technical regulator to become an architect of sustainable peace.

3 | Research Methodology

3.1 | Research Design

This study employs a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design (Creswell & Clark, 2018), anchored in a pragmatic paradigm that treats statistical generalization and narrative depth as complementary. Given the complexities of Timor-Leste's post-conflict environment, this approach effectively bridges formal institutional analysis with the nation's customary practices. A central contribution of this research

is the operationalization of *Servi Humildade* and Institutional Healing the core dimensions of the proposed Culture-Based Management (CBM) model directly from *Tara-Bandu*, the indigenous governance system of Timor-Leste.

The research proceeded in two sequential phases. Phase 1 utilized PLS-SEM to analyze survey data from 210 civil servants in Dili and Ermera, empirically testing the structural relationships between *Servi Humildade*, Institutional Healing, Political Reality, and bureaucratic performance. Building on these findings, Phase 2 involved purposive, in-depth interviews with 30 key informants selected via extreme-case criteria to elucidate the underlying mechanisms through which historical trauma and cultural values shape administrative behavior. Finally, data integration was achieved through triangulation and joint displays (Fetters et al., 2013), synthesizing statistical patterns with qualitative insights to ensure a robust and contextually anchored validation of the CBM model

3.2 | Sampling Locations and Techniques

To ensure contextual sensitivity, this study employs a comparative design across two municipalities: Dili, a high-intensity urban center characterized by donor-driven reforms and political factionalism, and Ermera, a rural site with stronger retention of customary structures like *Tara-Bandu*. This variance allows for testing the moderating effect of Political Reality on bureaucratic performance.

For the quantitative phase, a census-based approach yielded 210 respondents from a population of 227 (92.5% response rate), providing sufficient power for PLS-SEM. For the qualitative phase, 30 key informants were selected via purposive, maximum-variation sampling stratified by high/low *Servi Humildade* scores to ensure thematic saturation. Inclusion criteria required at least five years of service and direct experience during the 2006 political crisis to capture lived institutional trauma, while staff with under two years of experience were excluded to ensure depth of administrative insight.

3.3 | Research Instrument

Data were collected using a dual-instrument approach. The quantitative instrument was a 23-item structured questionnaire (5-point Likert scale) assessing four latent constructs: *Servi Humildade* (9 items), Institutional Healing (5 items), Political Reality (3 items), and *Bureaucratic Performance* (6 items). Items were adapted from post-conflict governance literature to the Timor-Leste context. A pilot study in Ermera (N = 30) confirmed the instrument's psychometric rigor, with all factor loadings > 0.70, Cronbach's alpha = 0.86, Composite Reliability = 0.88, and AVE > 0.50 (Hair et al., 2019).

The qualitative instrument comprised a semi-structured interview guide focusing on the interplay between formal SOPs and *Servi Humildade*, the role of *Tara-Bandu* in conflict resolution, and the legacy of the 2006 crisis on work practices. The guide was pilot-tested with senior civil servants to ensure cultural appropriateness and mitigate the risk of re-traumatization, resulting in refined phrasing that balances critical inquiry with professional respect.

3.4 | Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected between March and August 2025 following authorization from the Ministry of State Administration. Phase 1 (March–May 2025) involved quantitative surveys administered via KoboToolbox. To overcome connectivity constraints, four trained local enumerators conducted face-to-face surveys during non-peak office hours. A standardized protocol ensured anonymity and rapport, resulting in a 92.5% response rate (N = 210/227).

Phase 2 (July–August 2025) comprised 30 in-depth interviews (45–60 minutes each), conducted in Tetum by the principal researcher to ensure cultural sensitivity. Interviews were held in private settings to guarantee confidentiality. All sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English. To ensure rigorous quality control, 20% of the transcripts underwent independent back-translation. Participant anonymity was maintained via coding (R1–R30), and all sensitive data were stored on an encrypted, restricted-access server in compliance with research ethics protocols

3.5 | Data Analysis Techniques

Quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed sequentially and integrated during the interpretation phase to ensure robust triangulation.

Quantitative Analysis: We employed Structural Equation Modeling-Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) via SmartPLS 4.0, chosen for its predictive power and robustness with non-normal data (Hair et al., 2022). The measurement model was validated via factor loadings (> 0.70), AVE (> 0.50), and HTMT ratios (< 0.90). The structural model was tested using a 5,000-subsample bootstrapping procedure; significance was determined at $t > 1.96$ and $p < 0.05$. Mediation was assessed via Variance Accounted For (VAF), and Common Method Variance (CMV) was ruled out as Harman's single-factor test explained only 32% of variance.

Qualitative Analysis: Transcripts were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis within NVivo 14. Inter-coder reliability was established at a Cohen's Kappa of 0.85.

Integration: Findings were synthesized through a Joint Display table (Fetters et al., 2013), mapping statistical path coefficients against qualitative themes to confirm and contextualize the proposed CBM model.

3.6 | Research Ethics

This study was conducted under formal authorization from the Ministry of State Administration (Ref: 123/2025). Participants provided written informed consent in Tetum, with guaranteed anonymity and the right to withdraw at any time. To address the sensitivities of post-conflict narratives, a risk-mitigation protocol including immediate termination procedures for emotional distress and access to psychological support was strictly enforced. Data security was maintained through encryption and secure storage, with a five-year post-publication retention policy to ensure long-term participant privacy.

4 | Results of the Research

Thematic analysis reveals that applying uniform NPM frameworks in post-conflict states induces institutional anomalies that undermine, rather than facilitate, long-term stability.

4.1 | Five Patterns of NPM Failure in Post-Conflict Countries

The systematic literature review of 45 studies identified five recurring patterns of failure when New Public Management (NPM) frameworks are applied in post-conflict countries. These patterns describe the misalignment between imported administrative reforms and local sociopolitical realities. The five patterns are presented in Table 3.

Table 3
Five Patterns of NPM Failure in Post-Conflict Countries

Pattern	Description	Evidence from Literature
Isomorphic Mimicry	The adoption of Western bureaucratic structures without functional adaptation to the local conflict legacy. Institutions prioritize the appearance of reformto satisfy donors over actual service delivery.	(Akib, 2009; Andrews, 2013; Pritchett et al., 2017; Soares et al., 2024)
Institutional Trauma Neglect	The design of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) that disregard the psychological or social trauma experienced by post-conflict bureaucrats.	(Bisri & Asmoro, 2019; Budiman et al., 2022; Fauzan & Syam, 2022)
Elite Capture	The dominance of established power actors within new administrative structures, which hinders meritocracy and redirects to elite networks.	(Amaliya et al., 2025; Andhika, 2018; Laloma et al., 2018)
Customary Law Disjuncture	The collision between rigid state law and customary authority mechanisms such as *Tara-Bandu*, leading to confusion and parallel systems	(Andhika, 2018; Tehupeiory, 2019)
Trust Deficit	The gap between the formal presence of the state and public legitimacy, resulting from persistent failures in service delivery and perceived alienation.	(Andhika, 2018; Arsitha Putri, 2023; Bisri & Asmoro, 2019)
Source: Author Synthesis of 45 Studies, 2025		

As shown in Table 3, the literature consistently reports that the failure of NPM in post-conflict settings is not primarily technical. The patterns cluster around issues of legitimacy, history, and the relationship between state and society. These five patterns form the empirical basis for proposing the Culture-Based Management (CBM) model in the subsequent section.

4.2 | Lessons from Timor-Leste: Integrating Custom and Integrity

The results from Timor-Leste provide empirical evidence for the five patterns identified in Section 4.1. Data were obtained from 210 survey respondents and 30 in-depth interviews in Dili and Ermera.

4.2.1 | Quantitative Results

The descriptive analysis provides an initial overview of the respondents' perceptions regarding the core dimensions of the study. Table 4 presents the descriptive statistics, including mean scores and standard deviations for each construct, based on a sample size of N = 210. These metrics offer insight into the central tendencies of the variables measured, illustrating the perceived state of *Servi Humildade*, *Institutional Healing*, *Political Reality*, and *Bureaucratic Performance* within the surveyed institutional context. The complete descriptive statistics are detailed in Table 4.

Table 4
Descriptive Statistics of Key Constructs (N = 210)

Construct	Mean	Std. Deviation
Servi Humildade	3.85	0.72
Institutional Healing	2.91	0.88
Political Reality	3.62	0.95
Bureaucratic Performance	3.15	0.81
Note: Measured on a 5-point Likert scale, 1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree. Source: Authors' Analysis of Survey Data, 2026.		

The data indicate that respondents reported a high level of *Servi Humildade* (M = 3.85) and a moderate level of Political Reality (M = 3.62). In contrast, the mean score for Institutional Healing was the lowest among the constructs (M = 2.91).

4.2.2 | Qualitative Results

Thematic analysis of the 30 interviews yielded three overarching themes that align with and expand upon the quantitative findings. First, *Servi Humildade* was identified by 27 informants as the primary guiding principle for daily operations, described as a deeply ingrained inheritance from resistance-era values that often takes precedence over formal SOPs (e.g., R7). Second, the majority of participants (22 informants) reported a significant absence of formal Institutional Healing mechanisms, noting that current administrative procedures fail to address the lingering trauma of the 2006 crisis (e.g., R14). Finally, 25 informants highlighted pervasive *Political Interference*, confirming that promotions and resource allocation are frequently dictated by party loyalty rather than performance metrics (e.g., R22). These themes collectively corroborate the CBM model, illustrating the tension between indigenous cultural values, unresolved historical trauma, and the corrosive impact of political factionalism on bureaucratic integrity.

4.2.3 | Summary of Empirical Findings

The quantitative and qualitative data from Timor-Leste confirm the presence of all five NPM failure patterns. Specifically, the data show high adherence to *Servi Humildade*, low perceived institutional

healing, and high political interference. These findings provide the context for testing the CBM model hypotheses presented in Section 4.3.

4.3 | Culture-Based Management (CBM) Model

This section presents the results of hypothesis testing for the Culture-Based Management (CBM) model using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4.0. The analysis followed the two-stage procedure recommended by Hair et al. (2022): assessment of the measurement model followed by assessment of the structural model.

4.3.1 | Assessment of the Measurement Model

The measurement model was assessed to evaluate the reliability and validity of the constructs. Convergent validity was examined through outer loadings and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). All outer loadings were above 0.70 and AVE values were above 0.50, meeting the recommended threshold. Discriminant validity was assessed using the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio, with all values below 0.90. Construct reliability was confirmed through Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability values, all of which exceeded 0.70. The comprehensive results of the measurement model, demonstrating high levels of reliability and validity, are presented in Table 5.

Table 5
Measurement Model Results

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Servi Humildade	0.88	0.91	0.59
Institutional Healing	0.82	0.88	0.65
Political Reality	0.79	0.86	0.67
Bureaucratic Performance	0.85	0.89	0.54
Source: Authors (2026)			

3.2 | Assessment of the Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

The structural model was assessed for collinearity issues. All Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values were below 3.0, indicating no multicollinearity. The model explained 48% of the variance in Bureaucratic Performance ($R^2 = 0.48$), indicating moderate predictive power. The Q^2 value of 0.31 confirmed the model's predictive relevance. The structural model with empirical results is presented in Fig. 1.

Hypothesis testing was conducted using a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 subsamples. The results of the direct, mediating, and moderating effects are summarized in Table 6.

Table 6
Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Path	B	t-value	p-value	Decision
H1	*Servi Humildade* → Bureaucratic Performance	0.412	5.87	0.000	Supported
H2	Institutional Healing → Bureaucratic Performance	0.298	4.12	0.000	Supported
H3	Political Reality → Bureaucratic Performance	-0.251	3.94	0.000	Supported
H4	*Servi Humildade* → Institutional Healing	0.521	7.33	0.000	Supported
H5	*Servi Humildade* → Institutional Healing → BP	0.155	3.76	0.000	Supported
H6	Political Reality x *Servi Humildade* → BP	-0.134	2.85	0.004	Supported

Note: β = Standardized Path Coefficient. BP = Bureaucratic Performance. Significance level at $p < 0.05$. Source: Authors Analysis of Survey Data, 2026.

As presented in Table 6, all six hypotheses were statistically supported. *Servi Humildade* demonstrated a significant and positive direct effect on Bureaucratic Performance ($\beta = 0.412$, $p < 0.001$). Institutional Healing also had a significant and positive direct effect ($\beta = 0.298$, $p < 0.001$). Conversely, Political Reality had a significant and negative direct effect ($\beta = -0.251$, $p < 0.001$).

For the mediation hypothesis H5, the indirect effect of *Servi Humildade* on Bureaucratic Performance through Institutional Healing was significant ($\beta = 0.155$, $p < 0.001$). The Variance Accounted For (VAF) value was 27.3%, indicating partial mediation.

For the moderation hypothesis H6, the interaction effect was significant ($\beta = -0.134$, $p = 0.004$). This indicates that Political Reality significantly weakens the positive relationship between *Servi Humildade* and Bureaucratic Performance.

4.3.3 | Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

To achieve methodological triangulation, the quantitative results were integrated with qualitative findings using a Joint Display approach. Table 7 presents the integration for three key hypotheses.

Table 7
Joint Display of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Hypothesis	Quantitative Result	Qualitative Theme and Exemplar Quote
H1	Supported: β = 0.412, p < 0.001	Prevalence of *Servi Humildade* "We serve the people first. The SOP is secondary if the people are waiting" (R7)
H3	Supported: β = -0.251, p < 0.001	Political Interference "Project allocation is decided by party loyalty, not by need" (R22)
H5	Supported: β = 0.155, p < 0.001	Weak Institutional Healing "There is no space in our SOP to discuss what happened in 2006. We are told to just forget and work" (R14)

Source: Author Analysis of Survey Data, 2026.

5 | Discussion

5.1 | The Role of *Servi Humildade* in Enhancing Bureaucratic Performance

The results of this study support H1, indicating that *Servi Humildade* has a significant and positive effect on Bureaucratic Performance (β = 0.412, p < 0.001). This finding suggests that cultural values rooted in humility and service to the community contribute directly to improved bureaucratic outcomes in the context of post-conflict Timor-Leste.

This result challenges the universalistic assumptions of New Public Management (NPM), which emphasizes managerialism, competition, and performance-based incentives as the primary drivers of bureaucratic performance (Hood, 1991). In contrast, the findings align with the concept of Public Service Motivation (PSM) proposed by Perry and Wise (1990), which argues that public servants are driven by a commitment to public interest and altruism. The high mean score of *Servi Humildade* (M = 3.85) and the qualitative theme "We serve the people first" (R7) provide empirical support for this perspective.

Furthermore, this finding extends the work of Andrews (2013) on "isomorphic mimicry" in developing countries. Andrews argued that adopting Western bureaucratic forms without functional adaptation leads to failure. The current study provides evidence for an alternative path: rather than mimicking Western models, integrating indigenous values such as *Servi Humildade* can enhance institutional effectiveness. This is consistent with the argument by Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff (2015) that culturally embedded institutions are more likely to gain legitimacy and function effectively in post-conflict settings.

The significance of *Servi Humildade* can be understood through the lens of social capital theory. In societies recovering from conflict, formal institutions often suffer from a deficit of public trust. Values such as humility and direct service act as mechanisms to rebuild the relationship between the state and citizens. As indicated by the qualitative data, citizens expect bureaucrats to prioritize human connection

over procedural rigidity. Therefore, *Servi Humildade* functions not merely as a cultural norm, but as a functional governance mechanism that compensates for weak formal institutions.

The practical implication of this finding is that public administration reforms in post-conflict countries should move beyond technical training and procedural standardization. Reform agendas should explicitly incorporate and formalize local cultural values into SOPs, recruitment criteria, and performance evaluations. By doing so, the state can leverage existing social resources to enhance bureaucratic performance.

5.2 | The Role of Institutional Healing in Enhancing Bureaucratic Performance

The results support H2 and H4, indicating that Institutional Healing has a significant and positive direct effect on Bureaucratic Performance ($\beta = 0.298$, $p < 0.001$), and that *Servi Humildade* significantly predicts Institutional Healing ($\beta = 0.521$, $p < 0.001$). Furthermore, the results support H5, showing that Institutional Healing partially mediates the relationship between *Servi Humildade* and Bureaucratic Performance ($\beta = 0.155$, $p < 0.001$). These findings suggest that addressing the legacy of conflict trauma is a critical pathway through which cultural values translate into improved bureaucratic performance.

This finding addresses a major gap in the NPM literature. NPM frameworks assume a rational-legal bureaucracy that operates independently of historical context (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). However, this assumption fails in post-conflict settings where institutions carry collective trauma. The significant negative impact of neglecting institutional healing is reflected in the low mean score for this construct ($M = 2.91$) and in the qualitative data, where informants stated: "There is no space in our SOP to discuss what happened in 2006" (R14). This indicates that the current bureaucratic system actively suppresses historical memory, which in turn impedes performance.

The concept of Institutional Healing proposed in this study extends the literature on transitional justice and organizational psychology. While transitional justice focuses on national-level reconciliation (Teitel, 2000), this study demonstrates that healing must also occur at the organizational level. This is consistent with trauma-informed organizational theory, which posits that organizations that acknowledge and address employee trauma demonstrate higher levels of trust, engagement, and performance (Harris & Fallot, 2001). The partial mediation result (VAF = 27.3%) indicates that *Servi Humildade* improves performance both directly and indirectly by creating a safer organizational environment where historical trauma can be acknowledged.

Moreover, this finding challenges the "forward-looking" approach of NPM reforms in post-conflict countries. International donors and technocratic reforms often emphasize "moving on" and "capacity building" without addressing past violence (Andrews, 2013). The results suggest that this approach is counterproductive. Without institutional mechanisms for healing, bureaucrats may experience role conflict, distrust, and low motivation, which ultimately reduce service delivery.

The practical implication is that post-conflict public administration reform must include explicit "healing mechanisms." These may include: 1) formal acknowledgment of past crises within organizational training, 2) peer-support programs for civil servants, and 3) revision of SOPs to allow space for dialogue about historical events. By institutionalizing healing, the government can transform cultural values like *Servi Humildade* into sustained bureaucratic performance.

5.3 | The Role of Political Reality in Weakening the Effect of *Servi Humildade*

The results support H3 and H6. Political Reality has a significant and negative direct effect on Bureaucratic Performance ($\beta = -0.251$, $p < 0.001$). More importantly, the results support H6, indicating that Political Reality significantly and negatively moderates the relationship between *Servi Humildade* and Bureaucratic Performance ($\beta = -0.134$, $p = 0.004$). This means that the positive effect of *Servi Humildade* on performance becomes weaker when the level of political interference is high.

This finding directly challenges a core assumption of NPM: that separating "politics" from "administration" will improve efficiency (Hood, 1991). The results from Timor-Leste demonstrate that in post-conflict contexts, this separation does not exist in practice. The high mean score for Political Reality ($M = 3.62$) and the qualitative evidence "Project allocation is decided by party loyalty, not by need" (R22) confirm that political logic continues to dominate administrative logic.

These findings align with neopatrimonial and clientelistic frameworks, where the negative moderation of Political Reality confirms that political capture distorts even deeply ingrained cultural values like *Servi Humildade*. At the micro-level, this corroborates Fukuyama's (2014) theory of "political decay," demonstrating that high political interference transforms the bureaucracy into a vehicle for elite consolidation, thereby neutralizing the potential of indigenous social institutionalization. Consequently, technical or culture-based reforms are destined to fail or be rendered purely symbolic unless supported by concurrent political interventions. Therefore, achieving sustainable performance in Timor-Leste requires a tripartite reform agenda: insulating recruitment and promotion systems from political interference, enforcing transparency in resource allocation, and strengthening independent oversight institutions.

5.4 | Integrated Discussion: The CBM Model as an Alternative to NPM in Post-Conflict Countries

This study validates the Culture-Based Management (CBM) model as a context-sensitive alternative to New Public Management (NPM) in post-conflict states, demonstrating that bureaucratic performance arises from the interplay of cultural values, historical trauma, and political stability rather than mere technical efficiency. Empirically, *Servi Humildade* challenges NPM's competitive incentives, showing how cultural legitimacy bridges governance gaps. Furthermore, Institutional Healing addresses the failure of standard reforms to account for collective trauma, suggesting that successful reform must be inherently "therapeutic." Finally, the moderating role of Political Reality proves that cultural efficacy depends on

political institutionalization, offering "contextual adaptation" as a sustainable pathway to institutional legitimacy beyond Western-centric frameworks

5.5 | Theoretical, Practical, and Policy Implications

This study contributes by advancing the Culture-Based Management (CBM) model as a context-sensitive alternative to NPM in post-conflict environments. Theoretically, it expands public administration by integrating cultural and political dimensions through new constructs Institutional Healing and Political Reality moving beyond Western-centric frameworks. Practically, it advocates for embedding *Servi Humildade* into competencies, institutionalizing trauma-informed leadership, and shielding staff from political interference. Consequently, for policymakers and donors, this research underscores a critical shift from "one-size-fits-all" interventions toward nuanced strategies: conducting cultural audits, integrating transitional justice into administrative reforms, and prioritizing political stability as a vital prerequisite for successful, sustainable technical-managerial change.

5.6 | Limitations and Future Research

This study presents three primary limitations. First, its Timor-Leste-specific focus limits generalizability, warranting cross-national validation in other fragile settings. Second, the cross-sectional design constrains causal inference, necessitating longitudinal studies to track the evolutionary effects of *Servi Humildade* and *Institutional Healing*. Finally, relying on perceived measures of political reality requires future triangulation with objective indicators of civil service politicization to further strengthen administrative theory in post-conflict states.

6 | Conclusion and Recomendations

6.1| Conclusion

This study validates the Culture-Based Management (CBM) model as a strategic alternative to New Public Management (NPM) for enhancing bureaucratic performance in post-conflict Timor-Leste. Utilizing PLS-SEM analysis and insights from 210 civil servants, findings demonstrate that *Servi Humildade* significantly drives performance, while *Institutional Healing* serves as a critical mediator for organizational trauma. Conversely, political realities temper these cultural benefits. Ultimately, sustainable performance requires an integrated approach that harmonizes cultural values, institutional healing, and the deliberate mitigation of political interference within the administrative framework.

6.2 | Recommendations

This study offers three strategic recommendations: academics should conduct longitudinal research on CBM’s generalizability; practitioners must integrate *Servi Humildade* into HR systems and build resilience against political interference; and policymakers must abandon "one-size-fits-all" reforms in favor of context-sensitive approaches that explicitly link administrative reform with transitional justice and peacebuilding agendas

6.3 | Closing Statement

This study demonstrates that culture is not an obstacle to modern bureaucracy, but a resource. By recognizing and institutionalizing *Servi Humildade*, and by courageously addressing the past through Institutional Healing, Timor-Leste can build a bureaucracy that is not only efficient, but also legitimate and humane.

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Figures

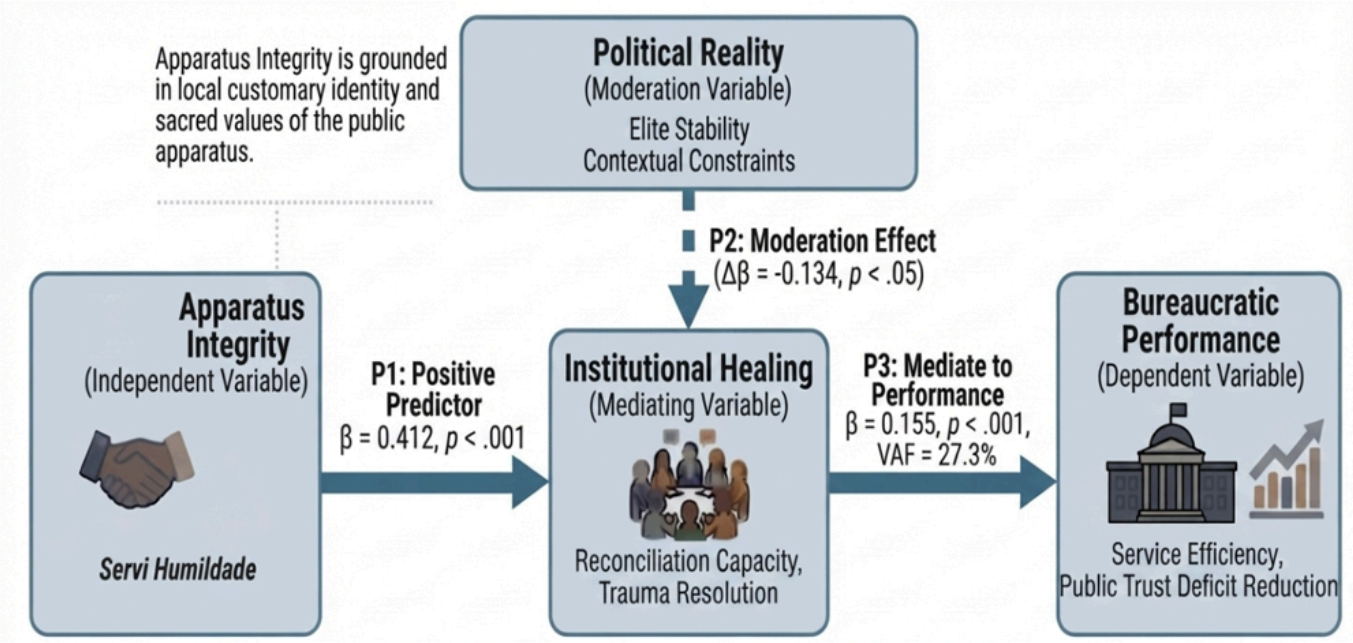


Figure 1

Culture-Based Management (CBM)-Structural Model with Empirical Results

Notes: P1-P3 = Propositions 1-3; β = standardized path coefficient; n = 210. Source: Authors' Analysis of Survey Data, 2026.