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The Digital Governance Gap in Southeast Asia: A Comparative Study of Indonesia, India, and the Philippines

Junaedi Rahmansya[1], Arjun Mehta[2], Mark Joseph Bautista[3]

[1]Department of Political Science, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Hasanuddin University, Indonesia
[2]School of Public Policy, Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai
[3]Department of Political Science, University of the Philippines Diliman

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Corresponding Author:
Junaedi Rahmansya

Email:
junaedirahmansya@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

***Purpose**: This study examines the digital governance gap in Southeast Asia through a comparative analysis of Indonesia, India, and the Philippines, aiming to understand how institutional dynamics shape the uneven progress of digital transformation across developing democracies.*

***Subjects and Methods:** Using a qualitative comparative design, the research integrates institutional capacity theory with digital governance maturity models and draws on document analysis and semi-structured interviews with policymakers, ICT officials, and academic experts conducted between 2023 and 2024.*

***Results:** The findings reveal that-differences in digital governance performance stem largely from institutional and governance factors rather than technological capacity. India's centralized coordination under its national digital strategy ensures strong policy coherence but limits local flexibility; Indonesia's decentralized framework fosters innovation but leads to fragmented implementation; and the Philippines' localized experimentation enhances participation yet struggles with continuity. The discussion emphasizes that digital transformation succeeds when institutions balance standardization with adaptability and participation with authority, underscoring the role of leadership stability, bureaucratic learning, and inclusive policy design.*

***Conclusions:** Overall, the study contributes to the broader understanding of digital governance in emerging democracies by demonstrating that effective digital transformation requires building adaptive and coherent institutions as much as technological infrastructure. These insights have significant implications for policymakers seeking to promote equitable, sustainable, and participatory digital governance across Southeast Asia.*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, digital governance has become a central pillar of national development strategies, particularly in emerging economies across Asia (Priharsari et al., 2023; Kibria & Hong, 2024). The growing reliance on digital infrastructures, data-driven policy implementation, and online public services has redefined the relationship between governments and citizens. Digital governance encompasses not only the deployment of technologies but also the institutional frameworks, regulatory systems, and socio-political mechanisms that determine how digital transformations unfold (Mariani & Bianchi, 2023).

As such, it represents both a technological and governance paradigm that reshapes administrative efficiency, transparency, and public participation (Akopian et al., 2024). The digital turn in governance offers unprecedented opportunities to improve service delivery and accountability, yet it also poses risks of exclusion, inequality, and institutional fragmentation if not managed inclusively (Umeanwe, 2025). Asia's rapid digitalization underscores this duality. Southeast Asian nations, in particular, have experienced accelerated adoption of digital technologies in governance since the early 2010s, driven by expanding internet penetration, the rise of mobile connectivity, and state-led modernization agendas (He, 2024).

However, despite significant progress, the region continues to exhibit marked disparities in digital governance maturity (Waara, 2025). Countries such as Singapore and Malaysia have achieved relatively integrated e-government systems, while others like Indonesia and the Philippines face persistent infrastructural and institutional challenges. India, often compared in the same digital trajectory, has implemented ambitious programs such as Digital India, which aim to transform public administration and citizen engagement through technology (Verma, 2018; Malhotra et al., 2020).

Nonetheless, the unevenness of outcomes highlights the enduring governance gap between ambition and implementation in digital transitions across developing democracies. This growing divergence raises critical questions about the nature and determinants of digital governance inequalities. While digital transformation is widely promoted as a universal solution to bureaucratic inefficiencies, its realization is deeply contingent on governance capacity, socio-economic inclusivity, and political commitment (Kutkov et al., 2025). Research increasingly points out that digital governance gaps often mirror broader structural inequalities, such as regional disparities, resource allocation imbalances, and varying administrative capabilities (Cordella & Tempini, 2020).

In Southeast Asia, for instance, the digital divide is not limited to infrastructure but extends to policy design, institutional readiness, and the digital literacy of both citizens and bureaucrats (Munajat & Irawati, 2025). Consequently, understanding the roots of digital governance gaps requires a comparative and contextualized analysis that captures the interplay between institutional arrangements, political culture, and technological adaptation across countries. The central problem addressed in this study concerns the persistent digital governance gap among developing countries in Asia, specifically Indonesia, India, and the Philippines. Despite similar developmental aspirations and regional integration agendas, these nations exhibit significant variations in how digital governance is institutionalized and operationalized.

This disparity manifests in different levels of policy coherence, inter-ministerial coordination, and citizen engagement mechanisms. The problem is compounded by uneven capacities among local governments to adapt national digital strategies into local realities, resulting in fragmented implementation (Camorongan, 2023). Furthermore, while global indices such as the UN E-Government Development Index (EGDI) show upward trends for these countries, the qualitative dimension of governance transparency, accountability, inclusivity remains inconsistent. The general approach to addressing this problem has often been to emphasize technological upgrades and capacity building, yet such efforts may not sufficiently tackle the governance dimensions underlying the digital divide.

Governments have invested heavily in ICT infrastructure, e-service platforms, and open data initiatives, aiming to enhance transparency and public accessibility (Kniazieva et al., 2023). However, empirical evidence suggests that without institutional coherence and inter-agency coordination, digital investments tend to produce fragmented systems rather than integrated governance frameworks (Mian et al., 2025). As a result, the promise of digital transformation frequently remains unfulfilled in terms of equity and sustainability. This calls for a broader analytical approach that situates digital governance not merely as a technical process but as an institutional and political construct.

Previous studies have proposed several solutions to bridge digital governance gaps. One stream of literature highlights the need for adaptive governance frameworks that combine flexibility with accountability (Gil-Garcia et al., 2018). Such frameworks emphasize co-creation between

government and citizens, where digital systems facilitate participatory policy design rather than simply automating administrative functions. In India, for example, the use of digital identity systems such as Aadhaar has improved access to welfare services, though it has also raised concerns regarding privacy and exclusion (Bhatia & Bhabha, 2017).

In Indonesia, initiatives like SPBE (Sistem Pemerintahan Berbasis Elektronik) aim to unify digital public services through a national architecture, yet their implementation remains uneven across regions (Sundari & Sartika, 2025). Similarly, the Philippines' Digital Governance Awards encourage local government innovations, but sustainability and scalability issues persist (Camorongan, 2023). These examples illustrate that policy innovation alone is insufficient unless supported by institutional reform and capacity building.

Another strand of scholarship underscores the importance of governance maturity models and data governance mechanisms. Studies by Janssen & van (2016) argue that digital governance evolves through stages from digitization to integration and transformation requiring continuous alignment between technology and governance processes. Similarly, data governance frameworks are increasingly recognized as the backbone of effective digital transformation, ensuring interoperability, data quality, and ethical data use. Without robust data governance, e-government initiatives risk reinforcing inefficiencies through poor data management and lack of trust.

In the Southeast Asian context, these challenges are compounded by the decentralized nature of governance and varying levels of digital readiness among local institutions (ADB, 2022). The existing literature reveals several interrelated themes that form the analytical basis for this study. First, digital governance disparities are multidimensional spanning infrastructure, institutional arrangements, and socio-political capacity. Second, governance reform and digital transformation are mutually constitutive; neither can progress sustainably without the other (Cordella & Tempini, 2020).

Third, while the technological infrastructure gap is narrowing, the institutional and governance gaps persist, highlighting the importance of policy coherence and administrative capability. Finally, comparative studies across developing democracies remain limited, particularly those that systematically analyze how contextual factors shape digital governance outcomes. These observations point to a clear research gap: the lack of comprehensive comparative analysis of digital governance dynamics among Southeast Asian and South Asian middle-income countries with shared postcolonial and developmental trajectories.

This study aims to fill this gap by conducting a comparative analysis of digital governance disparities in Indonesia, India, and the Philippines. The research seeks to understand how governance frameworks, institutional capacities, and socio-political contexts influence the effectiveness and inclusivity of digital transformation. By adopting a comparative qualitative design, the study analyzes key policy instruments, implementation mechanisms, and stakeholder interactions across the three countries. The novelty of this study lies in its integrative approach, which situates digital governance within broader debates on institutional capacity and political economy.

Rather than viewing digitalization as a uniform process, the study conceptualizes it as a differentiated and path-dependent transformation shaped by local governance realities. This approach provides a nuanced understanding of why similar digital strategies yield different governance outcomes in comparable developing contexts. The scope of the research is limited to national-level digital governance initiatives and their institutional implementation patterns between 2015 and 2025, a period marked by rapid digital acceleration and post-pandemic governance adaptation.

The findings aim to contribute to both theory and practice by refining conceptual models of digital governance maturity and offering policy insights for more inclusive and coherent digital transformation strategies in developing democracies. Ultimately, by examining Indonesia, India, and the Philippines, the study underscores that addressing the digital governance gap requires more than technology adoption it necessitates institutional learning, adaptive policymaking, and governance systems that prioritize inclusivity, accountability, and resilience in the digital age.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative comparative research design to investigate the institutional and structural factors that contribute to disparities in digital governance across Indonesia, India, and the Philippines. The design is grounded in interpretive and institutional research traditions, which emphasize the importance of context, meaning-making, and process in governance transformation. A qualitative approach is used to explore how political dynamics, administrative configurations, and socio-economic conditions influence the formulation and implementation of digital governance policies. This design also supports comparative reasoning, enabling the identification of similarities, differences, and underlying mechanisms that explain why countries with comparable development trajectories produce divergent digital outcomes. Through this approach, the study seeks to uncover the complex interplay between governance culture, institutional capacity, and policy design in shaping digital transformation.

Data Sources and Collection

This study relies primarily on secondary data, including national digital strategies, government policy documents, institutional reports, and evaluations published by international organizations such as the World Bank, OECD, UNDP, and the Asian Development Bank. Scholarly literature provides additional conceptual grounding and supports the interpretation of institutional dynamics. The selection of documents is guided by relevance to digital governance, publication credibility, and temporal alignment with the reform period under study. To enhance depth and verify the accuracy of secondary sources, a set of semi-structured interviews was conducted with policymakers, ICT agency officials, and academic experts between 2023 and 2024. These interviews, lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes and conducted online, were used to clarify ambiguous policy developments, contextualize institutional challenges, and capture insider perspectives on digital transformation. All documents and interview transcripts were systematically catalogued and organized using NVivo software to maintain analytic coherence and ensure traceability throughout the research process.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis followed a thematic content analysis approach that combined inductive and deductive reasoning. The analysis began with an intensive familiarization process, during which all documents and interview data were reviewed to identify recurring issues such as policy integration, administrative coordination, and digital inclusion. Coding was then conducted to organize relevant text segments into meaningful categories that aligned with both emergent insights and the predefined analytical dimensions of the conceptual framework. These codes were further refined into broader thematic clusters, allowing the researcher to examine how patterns differed or converged across the three country cases. The cross-case comparison sought to reveal underlying mechanisms shaping digital governance disparities, while theoretical interpretation connected the empirical findings to broader institutional theories. This sequence ensured that the analysis moved beyond descriptive comparison toward a deeper interpretive understanding of causal pathways.

Validity, Reliability, and Ethical Considerations

The credibility of the study was strengthened through methodological triangulation, which involved cross-verifying information from government sources, international assessments, academic literature, and interview data. Peer debriefing sessions with regional governance scholars were conducted to review coding decisions and confirm the coherence of thematic interpretations, thereby enhancing the reliability of the analytical process. An audit trail documenting data collection, coding procedures, and interpretive decisions was maintained to support transparency and replicability. Internal validity was ensured through pattern matching between theoretical expectations and empirical observations, while external validity was reinforced through analytical generalization, allowing the findings to contribute to broader theoretical debates rather than claiming statistical generalizability. Ethical considerations were addressed by securing informed consent from interview participants, maintaining confidentiality, and ensuring responsible use and citation of public information.

Comparative Synthesis Procedures

The comparative synthesis proceeded through an inductive sequence that began with detailed country-level analyses and gradually moved toward a cross-case integration of findings. Each country's digital governance trajectory was reconstructed based on its key policies, institutional reforms, and documented implementation challenges. The synthesis then examined similarities and differences in policy coherence, administrative capacity, and citizen inclusion across the three cases. Through explanation-building and pattern matching, the analysis sought to determine why each country exhibited differing levels of success in digital transformation. This process revealed the ways in which contextual pressures, institutional strengths and weaknesses, and governance cultures interacted to shape the performance of digital governance initiatives.

Limitations of the Study

The study acknowledges several inherent limitations. The reliance on secondary data, although supplemented by interviews, may restrict the ability to capture informal practices or emerging policy developments not yet documented in official publications. Differences in data availability and transparency across the three countries may also affect the consistency of analysis. Furthermore, the focus on national-level policies does not fully capture the substantial subnational variations that influence digital governance, particularly in highly decentralized systems such as Indonesia and the Philippines. Despite these constraints, the study mitigates potential weaknesses through triangulation of data sources, rigorous analytical procedures, and careful theoretical interpretation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal the complex interplay of institutional capacity, policy coherence, and inclusivity shaping the digital governance trajectories of Indonesia, India, and the Philippines. Using thematic analysis derived from documentary evidence and semi-structured interviews conducted with policymakers, ICT agency officials, and academic experts between 2023 and 2024, this chapter presents the results of comparative investigation into three interrelated domains: (1) strategic and policy coherence in digital governance frameworks, (2) institutional and administrative capacity for digital transformation, and (3) citizen engagement and digital inclusivity. Each domain is discussed inductively, beginning with country-specific analyses before drawing cross-case insights that explain the underlying mechanisms of divergence.

Strategic and Policy Coherence

The first major finding concerns the degree of strategic coherence and policy alignment in national digital governance agendas. Indonesia's *Sistem Pemerintahan Berbasis Elektronik (SPBE)* has evolved as the central policy instrument guiding digital transformation since 2018, yet its coherence remains fragmented due to the absence of a unified inter-ministerial coordination mechanism. Interviews with officials from the Ministry of Communication and Informatics (Kominfo) indicate that despite the National SPBE Architecture, ministries and local governments often design digital platforms independently, leading to overlapping systems and data silos. As one senior Kominfo policymaker stated:

> *"SPBE provides a vision, but local agencies tend to develop their own applications without integration into national frameworks. The challenge is not the lack of innovation, but the lack of interoperability." (Interview, Jakarta, April 2024)*

This reflects a key structural weakness in Indonesia's policy design: the coexistence of ambitious national blueprints with decentralized implementation that limits integration. Recent efforts, such as the 2023 *Peraturan Presiden No. 95/2018* revision, attempt to address these gaps by standardizing digital service development and requiring central evaluation of local e-government initiatives. However, practical coordination remains difficult, particularly in regions with low administrative digital literacy.

In contrast, India's *Digital India* initiative demonstrates higher strategic coherence supported by centralized leadership under the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY). Policy coherence is maintained through flagship programs such as *DigiLocker*, *Aadhaar*, and

eKranti, which are linked under a single national vision of "transforming India into a digitally empowered society and knowledge economy". The integration of these initiatives reflects India's ability to consolidate policy direction across ministries. An ICT policy expert from Delhi emphasized this coordination success:

> *"MeitY plays a strong central role in ensuring that every digital initiative whether in health, education, or finance aligns with the Digital India roadmap. This coordination is the backbone of policy coherence." (Interview, Delhi, February 2024)*

However, this centralization also introduces bureaucratic rigidity that sometimes slows innovation at state levels. Several state-level projects struggle to align with national standards due to differences in infrastructure and fiscal autonomy. The Philippines presents an intermediate case. Its *E-Governance Masterplan 2022–2028* and the *Philippine Digital Governance Awards (DGAs)* serve as central policy frameworks, but coherence is undermined by leadership transitions and administrative turnover. A local government digital coordinator from Quezon City remarked:

> *"Our digital programs depend heavily on local leadership commitment. When mayors change, priorities shift, and continuity suffers. We lack an institutionalized national mechanism to sustain digital reforms." (Interview, Manila, March 2024)*

Thus, while national frameworks exist, implementation fluctuates with political cycles, reflecting the fragility of institutionalized digital governance in the Philippines. Cross-case comparison reveals that while all three countries recognize the strategic importance of digital governance, their policy coherence depends heavily on institutional stability and leadership structure. India benefits from centralized steering but risks inflexibility; Indonesia faces fragmentation due to decentralization; and the Philippines grapples with political discontinuity. These findings highlight that digital transformation success is not merely a function of technological advancement but of enduring institutional alignment.

Institutional and Administrative Capacity

The second major finding centers on institutional capacity and bureaucratic readiness to implement digital governance. Indonesia's institutional capacity remains uneven across government tiers. At the national level, agencies such as Kominfo and the Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform (KemenPAN-RB) have developed robust digital policy frameworks, but local implementation suffers from resource disparities. One provincial IT officer in South Sulawesi explained:

> *"Many regions lack both infrastructure and skilled personnel. Local governments are expected to digitize services, but they often lack the budget and expertise to maintain systems." (Interview, Makassar, April 2024)*

This asymmetry produces a dual-speed digitalization: urban areas advance rapidly while rural administrations lag behind. Furthermore, inter-agency coordination remains weak, causing duplication in data management and service delivery. India demonstrates stronger bureaucratic and technical capacity, largely due to its early investment in digital infrastructure through the *National e-Governance Plan (NeGP)* and *Digital India*. Central agencies such as the National Informatics Centre (NIC) provide technical support to ministries and state governments, ensuring standardized service platforms. Yet challenges persist in bureaucratic culture and digital literacy at the lower administrative levels. A senior NIC advisor stated:

> *"Technology is ready, but not every official is. We see hesitation in data sharing and platform adoption among local bureaucrats. Capacity building has improved, but behavioral change takes time." (Interview, Delhi, February 2024)*

This statement underscores that digital transformation is as much a cultural shift as a technological one. Training programs and workshops have increased, but hierarchical governance culture remains an obstacle to adaptive learning and innovation. The Philippines, meanwhile, exhibits commendable progress in localized innovation despite limited resources. The *Department of Information and Communications Technology (DICT)* supports city-level

initiatives through digital governance awards and technical assistance. Some cities, such as Quezon City and Davao, have implemented integrated e-permit systems and online citizen feedback platforms. However, institutional weaknesses persist in rural municipalities where ICT personnel are minimal and infrastructure unreliable. As a DICT regional officer described:

> *"Our national policies are ambitious, but implementation depends on LGU capacity. We can give templates, but local governments must lead. Many lack technical staff or reliable internet." (Interview, Cebu, March 2024)*

Collectively, the data indicate that institutional capacity is a decisive factor explaining differences in governance outcomes. India's centralized support model creates consistency; Indonesia's decentralization fosters local autonomy but weakens uniformity; and the Philippines' community-driven model encourages innovation but lacks scalability.

Citizen Engagement and Digital Inclusivity

The third dimension of findings relates to inclusivity and citizen participation. Indonesia has made progress through initiatives such as *Lapor!*, a public complaint and feedback platform that integrates citizen voices into policymaking. However, awareness and utilization rates remain low outside urban areas. A civil society representative interviewed in Jakarta noted:

> *"Digital participation tools exist, but citizens are often unaware of them or lack trust in whether their input makes a difference." (Interview, Jakarta, April 2024)*

This suggests that institutional mechanisms for feedback are insufficiently linked to responsive governance practices. India's digital inclusion achievements are more substantial due to large-scale initiatives like *Aadhaar* and *Digital Seva Kendras*, which expand access to digital identities and services in rural areas. Yet inclusivity challenges persist for marginalized populations, particularly women and rural minorities, due to uneven internet access and digital literacy gaps. According to an Indian academic expert:

> *"Digital inclusion is not only about infrastructure; it's about empowerment. We still see structural inequalities that limit meaningful participation." (Interview, Bangalore, February 2024)*

Similarly, in the Philippines, participatory mechanisms such as online grievance portals and social media channels are widely used but lack formal integration into decision-making processes. Local digital initiatives enhance transparency but are often ad hoc and donor-driven. A local NGO worker observed:

> *"Digital tools improve visibility, but without institutional follow-up, they don't transform governance." (Interview, Manila, March 2024)*

These insights emphasize that digital inclusivity requires not only access but also institutional responsiveness. Across all three countries, technological diffusion outpaces institutional adaptation, producing "participation without power.

Cross-Case Synthesis

The comparative synthesis indicates that digital governance disparities among Indonesia, India, and the Philippines are fundamentally institutional rather than technological. While all three countries have adopted ambitious digital strategies, their success depends on policy coherence, bureaucratic capacity, and the institutionalization of citizen participation.

Indonesia's digital governance reflects a "fragmented integration" model: policy frameworks exist, but implementation remains inconsistent due to decentralized authority and varying local capacity. India exemplifies a "centralized consolidation" model, achieving strategic coherence through strong institutional leadership but facing inclusivity and bureaucratic rigidity challenges. The Philippines represents a "localized experimentation" model characterized by innovative practices at the city level yet constrained by weak national coordination and political discontinuity.

Across all three, interview evidence reveals that leadership continuity, inter-agency collaboration, and long-term investment in digital literacy are critical success factors. The data suggest that

digital transformation succeeds when institutions are capable of adaptive governance learning from implementation feedback, coordinating across jurisdictions, and aligning incentives for reform. As one Indonesian policymaker summarized:

> *"Technology can be imported, but governance cannot. What matters is not the platform but the institution that sustains it." (Interview, Jakarta, April 2024).*

This statement underscores the broader insight emerging from the comparative analysis: that digital governance is fundamentally a capacity-building endeavor rather than a technological one. The interview highlights how institutional resilience rather than the sophistication of digital tools determines whether reforms can be sustained beyond political cycles or leadership turnover. It illustrates that technological adoption becomes meaningful only when supported by stable administrative structures, coherent regulatory practices, and a culture of continuous learning within the bureaucracy. The emphasis on governance as the core driver of digital transformation reinforces the study's finding that durable progress depends on strengthening state capability, nurturing institutional memory, and embedding collaborative norms across agencies.

Discussion

The comparative analysis of Indonesia, India, and the Philippines reveals that the disparities in digital governance are primarily institutional rather than technological. This discussion elaborates on the theoretical and empirical implications of the findings, linking them to broader debates on governance reform, institutional capacity, and digital transformation. The section proceeds inductively by discussing (1) institutional coherence and policy alignment; (2) administrative capacity and adaptive governance; (3) inclusivity and digital citizenship, and (4) theoretical implications and policy recommendations derived from the study.

Institutional Coherence and Policy Alignment

One of the most prominent findings of this study concerns the relationship between policy coherence and the effectiveness of digital transformation. The results demonstrate that countries with strong institutional coordination mechanisms, such as India, are more likely to achieve consistent and sustained digital governance outcomes. This aligns with existing theoretical frameworks emphasizing that digital transformation requires not merely technological adoption but strategic and organizational alignment (Janssen & van, 2016; Cordella & Tempini, 2020). The Indian experience under *Digital India* illustrates how centralized leadership can provide clarity of vision and coordination across ministries. However, excessive centralization also risks limiting flexibility, reducing local innovation, and reinforcing bureaucratic rigidity. In contrast, Indonesia's decentralized governance model provides greater local autonomy but results in fragmentation. Despite the national framework provided by *SPBE*, the lack of an integrated coordination mechanism weakens interoperability among agencies and regions. This supports the argument by Andrews (2013) that institutional incoherence, rather than capacity alone, can impede reform implementation.

The findings highlight the paradox of decentralization: while it promotes local responsiveness and innovation, it simultaneously complicates efforts to establish standardized systems and data integration. The Philippines presents a case where political volatility undermines policy coherence. Although the *E-Governance Masterplan* outlines comprehensive goals, leadership transitions and limited institutionalization hinder sustainability. This observation resonates with studies emphasizing that political continuity and bureaucratic professionalism are essential to sustaining digital reforms in emerging democracies (Gil-Garcia et al., 2018). The findings underscore that policy coherence is not simply a function of legal frameworks but of enduring institutional commitment and leadership stability. The cross-country comparison thus reveals that institutional coherence operates as a precondition for effective digital governance. It requires both vertical alignment between national and subnational levels and horizontal alignment across ministries and sectors. Without such coherence, digital transformation efforts risk producing isolated initiatives rather than systemic reform.

Administrative Capacity and Adaptive Governance

The second theme concerns administrative and institutional capacity as the backbone of digital transformation. The results indicate that successful digital governance depends not only on technical resources but on bureaucratic learning and adaptability. This aligns with Evans's (1995) theory of "embedded autonomy," which argues that effective institutions must balance state capacity with responsiveness to societal needs. India's bureaucratic system demonstrates this balance through its centralized technical support mechanisms such as the National Informatics Centre (NIC), which provides expertise to multiple levels of government. The consistency of national platforms like *Aadhaar* and *DigiLocker* reflects an institutional culture that values coordination and standardization. Yet, the persistence of bureaucratic resistance at local levels shows that capacity building must go beyond training to address cultural and behavioral dimensions.

Indonesia illustrates how administrative capacity is constrained by uneven resource distribution. Regional disparities in ICT infrastructure and human capital hinder uniform implementation. The interviews conducted in this study reveal that local officials often lack the technical knowledge and financial resources required to maintain digital systems. This finding resonates with the concept of "capability traps," where institutions possess formal mandates for reform but lack the functional capacity to realize them (Pritchett et al., 2013). The Philippines offers an instructive example of adaptive governance emerging from local experimentation. Cities such as Quezon and Davao have implemented innovative digital services despite limited resources. These initiatives demonstrate the value of localized learning and flexibility. However, without institutionalized mechanisms for scaling up best practices, such innovations remain isolated. This reflects the broader challenge in digital governance: balancing the need for adaptive experimentation with the requirement for policy standardization. Overall, the findings suggest that administrative capacity is not merely a matter of technical proficiency but of institutional adaptability. Digital governance reform succeeds when bureaucracies are capable of iterative learning experimenting, adjusting, and scaling solutions in response to local realities.

Inclusivity and Digital Citizenship

A third major theme emerging from the findings is the persistent gap between technological progress and digital inclusivity. Across all three countries, access to digital services has expanded, yet participation remains uneven, particularly among marginalized groups. This underscores the argument that digital transformation without inclusivity can reproduce, or even exacerbate, existing social inequalities (Norris, 2001; Margetts & Dunleavy, 2013). In Indonesia, participatory platforms such as *Lapor!* signify institutional acknowledgment of citizen engagement, yet low awareness and weak institutional responsiveness limit their impact. This highlights the difference between nominal participation and substantive empowerment. As interviewees indicated, citizens' trust in digital systems depends not only on access but also on whether feedback mechanisms lead to tangible policy responses.

India's *Digital India* initiative has made significant strides in expanding access through programs like *Common Service Centres* and *Aadhaar*-enabled services. Nevertheless, digital divides persist along gender, caste, and regional lines. This mirrors the critique that large-scale digital inclusion policies often privilege efficiency over equity, providing access without guaranteeing empowerment (Madon, 2021). The Philippines presents a unique case where digital participation is vibrant but institutionally fragile. Local governments frequently use digital platforms and social media for citizen engagement, yet these channels often operate outside formal policy frameworks. The reliance on ad hoc participation reflects what Fung (2015) describes as "thin participation," where citizens are informed or consulted but rarely share decision-making power. Collectively, these findings point to a critical insight: digital governance must move beyond technological access to foster active digital citizenship. True inclusivity requires governments to design participatory architectures that integrate citizen input into the policy cycle, thus transforming digital engagement into democratic accountability.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the disparities in digital governance across Indonesia, India, and the Philippines are primarily institutional rather than technological, reflecting differences in policy

coherence, administrative capacity, and citizen inclusivity. The findings demonstrate that India's centralized digital model ensures strategic alignment and implementation consistency, whereas Indonesia's decentralized structure produces innovative yet fragmented outcomes, and the Philippines' localized experimentation fosters civic engagement but lacks institutional continuity. These results highlight that effective digital transformation depends not merely on technological infrastructure but on the capacity of institutions to coordinate, learn, and adapt. The discussion further establishes that digital governance success requires balancing standardization with flexibility and participation with authority. By integrating institutional capacity theory with digital governance maturity models, this study contributes to the academic understanding of how governance systems in developing democracies evolve under digital reform pressures. The findings carry significant implications for policymakers, emphasizing the need for institutionalized coordination mechanisms, sustained capacity development, and inclusive digital participation frameworks. Future research should explore subnational variations and the political economy of digital transformation to deepen understanding of how institutional resilience and adaptive governance shape the trajectory of digital modernization in Southeast Asia.

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