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AUTONOMOUS SYSTEMS IN THAILAND'S PUBLIC SECTOR: GOVERNANCE PATTERNS AND CULTURALLY GROUNDED PATHWAYS

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Abstract

Artificial intelligence in government is increasingly discussed in relation to digital transformation, administrative modernization, and public value, yet there remains a need for grounded empirical work that shows where autonomous and semi-autonomous systems are visible in public institutions and what their spread means for governance in practice. This article offers a descriptive mapping of autonomous and semi-autonomous systems associated with Thailand's public sector and uses that mapping to interpret institutional concentration, sectoral clustering, transparency gaps, and governance implications. Rather than treating public-sector AI as a single uniform phenomenon, the study distinguishes among different degrees of autonomy, different levels of evidentiary strength, and different forms of institutional and operational use. The findings suggest that Thailand has moved beyond simple digitization in several important domains of public administration, especially in settings linked to monitoring, verification, prediction, risk control, and operational optimization. At the same time, governance maturity appears uneven across sectors and agencies, and public visibility remains inconsistent, raising questions about legitimacy, accountability, transparency, and human oversight. The article argues that Thailand shows meaningful governance momentum, but that future progress will depend on stronger transparency, more consistent oversight, and governance approaches that are not only technically and legally credible but also socially intelligible and culturally grounded.

Introduction

1. Framing the Study

Artificial intelligence is no longer a purely future-oriented issue in government, because public institutions increasingly use digital systems for classification, detection, matching, scoring, forecasting, prioritization, and operational support across multiple sectors [1]. The literature on AI in public governance has expanded significantly, but it continues to call for more empirically grounded and public-sector-specific work that explains how these systems are distributed across institutions and what governance challenges they generate in context [2]. This matters because administrative changes often occur not only through highly visible technological breakthroughs, but also through quieter systems that reshape scrutiny, routing, verification, and decision support in routine governance settings [3].

Thailand provides a particularly useful case for examining these developments. The country combines visible digital-state development with emerging institutional mechanisms for AI governance, including initiatives aimed at translating ethical AI principles into practice and strengthening institutional capacity. Studies on Thailand's digitalization strategy further show how public sector transformation is being supported through policy-level and the institutional efforts [9] . Yet the existence of governance frameworks or innovation-oriented discourse does not by itself show where autonomous functionality is already in use, how it is distributed, or whether governance depth is consistent across sectors and agencies [8].

For that reason, this article asks three related questions: where autonomous and semi-autonomous systems are visible in Thailand's public sector; what institutional and sectoral patterns emerge from their distribution; and what those patterns imply for governance, legitimacy, and public trust [7]. The paper does not attempt to provide a definitive census of all digital systems in Thai government. Instead, it offers a structured mapping exercise intended to identify recurring patterns of autonomous functionality and to assess what these reveal about the evolving character of public administration in Thailand. The argument advanced here is cautiously positive but qualified. Thailand appears to be making visible progress in public-sector AI governance, but the mapped systems also suggest uneven transparency, uneven evidentiary visibility, and the need for more operationally grounded forms of accountability and public explanation.

2. Research Context

The wider literature supports four propositions that shape this study. First, AI in government is spreading across multiple public functions and should be understood as an administrative and governance phenomenon rather than merely a technical innovation topic. A systematic review of the field confirms that public-sector AI research must attend to institutional context and administrative practice, not just technical capabilities .

Second, public-sector AI must be studied contextually because adoption is uneven, implementation produces organizational tensions, and the meaning of "AI use" varies across sectors and institutional settings. Comparative work on AI adoption in public administration shows that diffusion patterns differ significantly across policy domains and administrative cultures. In healthcare, for instance, AI implementation faces distinct challenges related to clinical integration, professional autonomy, and patient trust, which may not appear in other sectors such as transportation or tax administration. Studies on adoption and diffusion further emphasize that organizational readiness, leadership, and technical capacity mediate how quickly and deeply AI systems penetrate public agencies .

Third, legitimacy, trust, human oversight, and transparency remain central because technical functionality and formal legal authorization do not automatically resolve questions of fairness, explainability, reviewability, or public confidence. A combined value framework for public-sector AI argues that governance must address not only efficiency and lawfulness but also broader societal

values such as dignity, non-discrimination, and democratic accountability. Experimental evidence from public administration research confirms that citizens specifically need assurance that humans remain in the decision loop; without such assurance, trust in automated systems declines significantly. Another experimental study found that even when governments adopt ethical AI measures, citizens do not automatically trust the resulting systems, suggesting that procedural transparency matters as much as formal safeguards .

Fourth, governance maturity depends not only on principles but also on practical institutional arrangements such as oversight frameworks, public-facing transparency tools, accountability structures, and implementation guidance. The development of AI transparency standards in the public sector represents one such practical step, enabling citizens and civil society to understand where and how automated systems affect administrative decisions. Similar arguments appear in the literature on ethical dilemmas in public administration, which warns that abstract principles without operational mechanisms risk becoming symbolic rather than substantive . A systemic approach to AI governance further emphasizes the need to embed human centricity across the entire policy cycle, from design to deployment to review .

These propositions are especially important for a study of Thailand. If the article relied only on strategy discourse, it would risk overstating governance maturity; if it relied only on raw case mapping, it would under-theorize what the findings mean for public administration and legitimacy. The present paper therefore combines descriptive empirical mapping with interpretive engagement drawn from public-sector AI scholarship, including work on ethical dilemmas, governance risks, and adoption challenges. A public values perspective is particularly relevant here. Governments often frame AI in terms of efficiency and improved service delivery, but these managerial values do not exhaust the governance questions raised by public-sector AI, especially where legitimacy and social trust are concerned . Research on algorithmic bias and digital government accountability in the ASEAN region further highlights the importance of context-sensitive governance frameworks that address local institutional realities. Additionally, work on futures consciousness suggests that public-sector AI governance must anticipate long-term social and ethical implications, not only immediate performance gains .

3. Data and Approach

This study is based on a manually compiled dataset of autonomous and semi-autonomous systems associated with Thailand's public sector. The purpose of the mapping exercise is not to establish a definitive census of every digital initiative in government, but to identify cases in which autonomous functionality appears to play a meaningful operational role. This approach is consistent with calls in the literature for empirically grounded work that connects public-sector AI to institutional context and governance practice. It also responds to observations that public-sector AI research has often remained at the level of general frameworks rather than detailed case evidence.

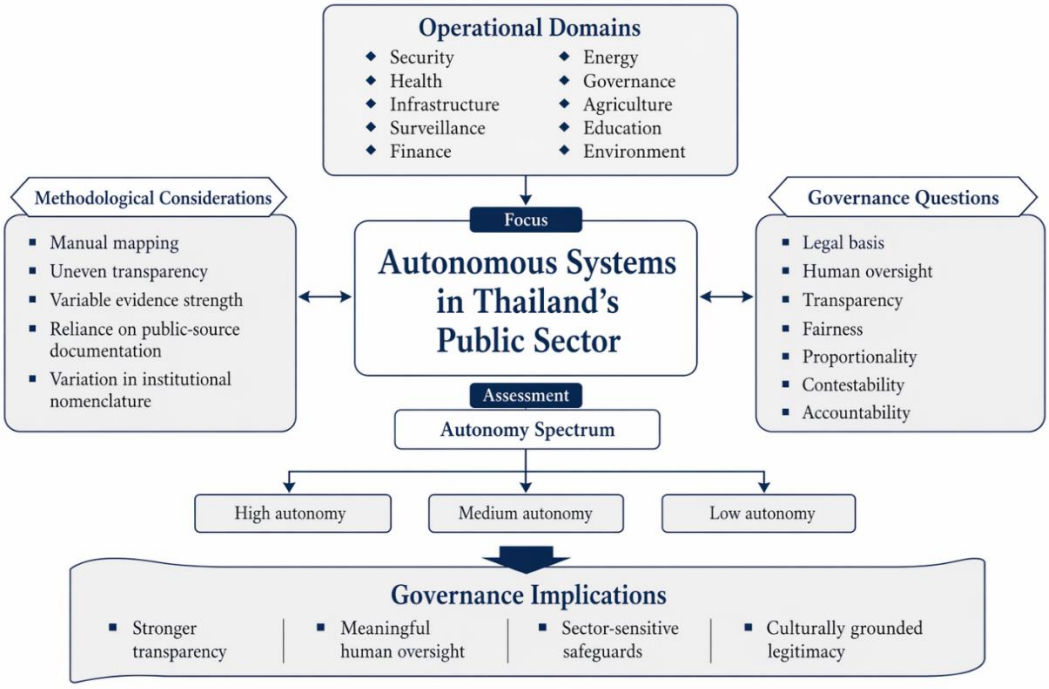

Figure 1: Analytical framework for mapping and assessing autonomous systems in Thailand's public sector.

Each mapped case was examined through a common analytical structure including institutional location, system or technology, sectoral domain, technological basis, apparent autonomous trigger or AI usage, policy or legal framing, and evidentiary strength. This coding strategy was designed to make cross-case comparison possible without assuming that all automated systems perform the same administrative role. The study also distinguishes between stronger and weaker evidentiary support. Not all public-sector AI claims are equally visible or equally documentable, and this unevenness is itself significant for governance analysis because transparency is distributed unevenly across agencies and sectors .

This methodological caution is important in the Thai case, where AI adoption may be visible in policy discourse or pilot projects without full operational transparency. Similar patterns have been observed in sector-specific implementations such as healthcare and anti-corruption systems. Research on policy issues in Thai public hospitals shows that while AI adoption is promoted at the policy level, implementation faces barriers related to data infrastructure, workforce training, and integration with existing workflows [11]. A case study of Thailand's National Anti-Corruption Commission demonstrates that AI-driven allegation screening can improve efficiency but also raises questions about procedural fairness and reviewability . These examples underscore the need for empirical mapping that distinguishes between pilot visibility and operational maturity.

Table 1: Analytical structure used to map autonomous systems in Thailand's public sector

Dimension	What was examined	Why it matters
Institutional location	Ministry, department, agency, or public body associated with the system.	Shows where autonomous functionality appears within the state.

Functional domain	Security, health, infrastructure, finance, surveillance, agriculture, governance, and related sectors.	Helps identify sectoral concentration and policy context.
Operational role	Detection, matching, scoring, forecasting, prioritization, optimization, verification, or monitoring.	Clarifies what the system does in administrative practice.
Degree of autonomy	High, medium, or low autonomy.	Distinguishes stronger autonomous influence from weaker or more supervised forms.
Evidence strength	Stronger or weaker public documentation.	Prevents overclaiming and preserves analytical caution.
Governance relevance	Legal framing, oversight, transparency, reviewability, accountability concerns.	Connects empirical mapping to public-sector governance analysis.

4. Institutional and Sectoral Patterns

The mapping suggests that Thailand's public sector has moved beyond simple digitization in several important domains. Autonomous and semi-autonomous functionality appears most visible in systems related to monitoring, verification, risk management, prioritization, prediction, and operational optimization. This pattern is consistent with wider findings in the public-sector AI literature, which show that adoption often becomes most visible where institutions value speed, detection, classification, and continuous decision support. In the Thai context, this includes systems for traffic management, identity verification, healthcare triage, and fraud detection, among others.

A second pattern concerns sectoral concentration. The better-documented cases appear especially visible in security-related settings, infrastructure management, health administration, and surveillance-linked functions. This matters because sector-specific uses of AI are not governance-neutral; they often involve different risks, different public values, and different oversight expectations, particularly in areas such as healthcare, screening, and operational control. Research on AI in public healthcare, for example, highlights the particular sensitivity of clinical decision support systems, where errors can have direct consequences for patient wellbeing . In the Thai case, the concentration of autonomous systems in security and infrastructure sectors suggests that the state is prioritizing automation where monitoring and control are most valued, a pattern also observed in other Southeast Asian digital government contexts .

In practical terms, the mapped cases suggest that autonomous functionality is being adopted most clearly where the state seeks monitoring capacity, identity verification, predictive warning, anomaly detection, and more efficient flow management. Examples include automated license plate recognition for traffic enforcement, AI-based symptom checkers in public hospitals, predictive analytics for crop insurance and disaster warning, and algorithmic screening for corruption allegations. These systems vary in their degree of autonomy: some operate with high autonomy (e.g., continuous monitoring systems with minimal human intervention), while others function as decision-support tools with human review retained.

A third pattern concerns institutional concentration. The mapped systems appear especially visible in technically capable and operationally sensitive parts of the state, including central technical institutions, health-related bodies, police- and interior-linked agencies, and transport-associated authorities. This suggests that diffusion is not even across the bureaucracy but instead tends to cluster in organizations where automation can be tied to verification, control, routing, forecasting, or continuous service management. This pattern is broadly consistent with the literature on uneven adoption and diffusion in public administration, which finds

that agencies with higher technical capacity and clearer performance incentives are more likely to adopt AI systems. Comparative research also shows institutional factors such as leadership support, regulatory mandates, and inter-agency collaboration shape adoption patterns . In Thailand, the clustering of autonomous systems in agencies such as the Royal Thai Police, the Ministry of Transport, and the Ministry of Public Health reflects both technical readiness and operational demand.

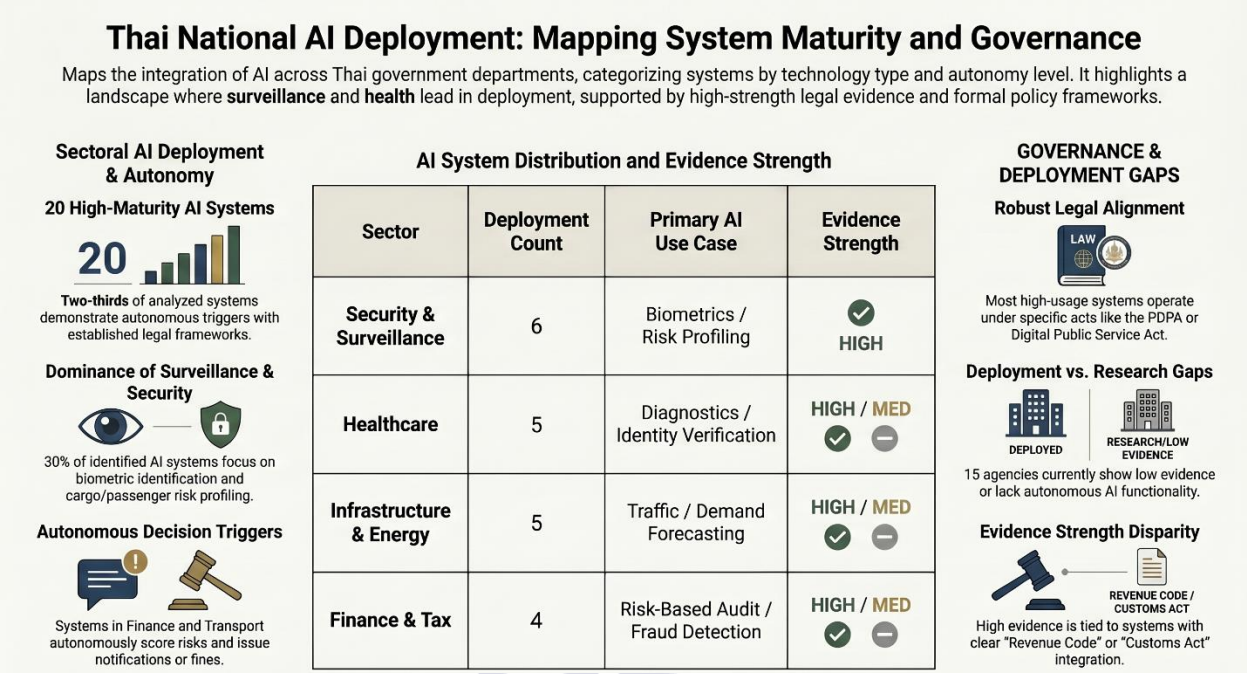

Figure 2: Distribution and Governance Maturity of 20 High-Maturity AI Systems Across Thai Government Sectors.

The dataset also points to uneven transparency. Some cases are relatively well documented and legible from public sources, while others remain harder to verify in detail. This is not merely a methodological inconvenience; it is itself a governance finding, because citizens may be affected by systems whose operational role is not equally visible or equally explainable from the outside. If automated or semi-automated systems help shape scrutiny, fraud review, verification, screening, or prioritization, then legitimacy depends not only on formal authorization but also on whether the system's influence is intelligible and accountable in practice. Work on the legitimacy gap in algorithmic decision-making argues that opaque systems risk undermining public trust even when they are technically sound. The UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of AI similarly emphasizes transparency and explainability as core principles for public-sector AI governance .

The overall interpretation is therefore balanced. Thailand's public sector appears to be making meaningful use of autonomous and semi-autonomous systems, but their spread is uneven and accompanied by uneven public visibility. The mapped landscape thus reflects both administrative capability and governance tension at the same time.

5. Governance Assessment: Is Thailand doing well?

The most defensible answer is that Thailand appears to be doing relatively well, but not yet evenly well. On the positive side, the country shows visible governance momentum through

institutional signaling, governance-oriented activity, and international engagement around ethical AI. UNESCO materials indicate that Thailand has participated in readiness assessment and governance-capacity processes, producing a detailed country report that identifies strengths and gaps in the national AI ecosystem [9] . Thailand has also engaged with the UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of AI, signaling alignment with international norms [14]. In addition, ETDA-linked initiatives such as the AI Governance Clinic reflect a practical effort to move from general principles toward implementation support, learning, and institutional coordination [13]. This clinic, developed in partnership with international experts, provides a hands-on mechanism for government agencies to assess and improve their AI governance practices .

At the same time, the dataset suggests that momentum should not be confused with deep maturity across all operational settings. A sector may operate under a formal legal or policy umbrella while still leaving unresolved questions about explainability, fairness, reviewability, appeal, proportionality, and bias in the use of particular systems, especially where automated outputs help shape scrutiny or administrative consequences [10]. Experimental evidence shows that even when governments adopt ethical AI measures, citizen trust does not automatically follow; the manner and transparency of implementation matter significantly. This point fits well with the literature on legitimacy gaps in algorithmic decision-making, which argues that technical capability and legal authorization do not by themselves secure public legitimacy. Research on AI accountability in public administration further emphasizes that formal legal frameworks must be complemented by operational review mechanisms and avenues for citizen recourse .

The broader scholarship on adoption and diffusion in public administration reinforces this cautious reading. Public-sector AI often spreads through uneven, sector-specific practice rather than through fully harmonized cross-government design, which means visible progress can coexist with variable transparency and uneven governance depth. A systematic literature review on AI adoption in public administration found that most implementations remain at pilot or early deployment stages, and that governance frameworks often lag behind technical deployment . Similar findings emerge from research on digital transformation in ASEAN countries, where policy ambition frequently outpaces institutional capacity . From that perspective, Thailand's position appears promising but transitional: the country has governance direction and institutional visibility, but the next stage requires deeper operational coherence across agencies and use cases. Studies on AI in public administration also note the importance of addressing ethical dilemmas proactively rather than reactively, a lesson that applies strongly to the Thai case. A systemic, human-centric approach to AI governance, as advocated in recent scholarship, would require Thailand to move beyond readiness assessments toward binding mechanisms for oversight and accountability .

6. Culturally Grounded Governance Pathways

If Thailand wishes to strengthen its public-sector AI governance further, it should not rely only on imported governance slogans or broad ethical language detached from administrative practice. A more effective path is to connect international governance norms with locally resonant expectations of public responsibility, legitimacy, intelligibility, and trust. This also resonates with emerging work on culture-driven AI, which argues that AI governance should not be treated as culturally neutral, but should instead be shaped in ways that reflect local epistemic traditions, social expectations, and normative frameworks [17]. From this perspective, culturally grounded governance is not an optional ethical supplement, but part of what makes AI systems publicly legitimate and socially intelligible. This is consistent both with the argument developed in the present draft and with broader work emphasizing that AI governance in the public sector must connect formal principles to social

legitimacy and public values. The following four pathways are especially relevant to the Thai context, building on the mapping findings and governance gaps identified above.

The first pathway is meaningful human oversight. In sensitive administrative settings, public confidence depends heavily on the assurance that humans remain genuinely involved in consequential decision processes rather than serving as symbolic endorsers of automated outputs [5]. Experimental work on trust in public-sector AI has consistently shown that citizens are more willing to accept AI-assisted decisions when they believe a human retains meaningful authority and the ability to override automated recommendations . An earlier study on AI chatbots in government similarly found that transparency about human involvement increases trust, even when the underlying technology is imperfect [4] . In practical terms for Thailand, this means human review should be tied to real authority, intervention capacity, and institutional responsibility rather than formal presence alone. For example, in AI-driven allegation screening at the National Anti-Corruption Commission, human investigators should have not only the right to review but also the technical capability to understand and contest AI outputs . Similarly, in healthcare AI applications, clinicians must retain final decision authority supported by adequate training on system limitations .

The second pathway is stronger public explanation. Citizens do not need access to every technical detail, but they do need understandable information about where automation is being used, what kinds of outputs it produces, what role humans still play, and what forms of recourse exist if problems arise [1]. This aligns with the growing literature on public-sector AI transparency, which stresses intelligibility and practical explanation rather than opaque managerial disclosure. Emerging governance debates increasingly show that public trust depends not only on ethical commitments or legal safeguards in the abstract, but also on whether public institutions can explain automated systems in socially meaningful and administratively accessible ways. This concern is echoed in governance benchmarking exercises such as the AGILE Index, which treat transparency, institutional capacity, and accountable implementation as core dimensions of AI readiness and governance maturity [16]. A useful comparative reference also comes from China, where AI governance has increasingly relied not only on high-level principles but also on targeted disclosure, labeling, and administrative responsibility requirements in specific regulatory areas [8]. For Thailand, the development of a public-facing transparency mechanism or registry would enable citizens, civil society, and researchers to identify which agencies use autonomous systems, for what purposes, and with what safeguards. It would also help address the transparency gaps identified in this study, turning evidentiary weakness into an area for governance improvement rather than a permanent limitation. This concern becomes even more important if AI systems are understood not merely as tools for computation, but as systems that increasingly encode particular epistemic assumptions and partial world-models shaped by the data on which they are trained [18]. That makes public explanation and cultural legibility especially important in public-sector deployments.

The third pathway is governance through public values rather than efficiency alone. If institutions focus narrowly on speed, throughput, or predictive performance, they may undervalue fairness, dignity, proportionality, wellbeing, and broader social legitimacy, all of which are central to emerging value-based public-sector AI frameworks. A combined value framework for good governance of public sector AI distinguishes between values related to "good order" (e.g., efficiency, legality, reliability) and values related to "good society" (e.g., fairness, transparency, accountability, human dignity) . Research on different perspective on country's public values shows that citizens prioritize human-centric values such as non-discrimination and explainability over purely efficiency-oriented goals. This is especially important in systems that affect screening, eligibility, verification, welfare scrutiny, fraud detection, or surveillance-linked administration.

In the Thai context, this means that performance metrics for autonomous systems should include not only accuracy and throughput but also fairness audits, bias assessments, and user satisfaction measures. Agencies should be required to publish these metrics alongside technical performance data.

The fourth pathway is the development of more practical accountability instruments. Comparative governance work increasingly points toward transparency standards, system registers, supervisory structures, public-facing governance tools, and implementation frameworks as ways to translate abstract principles into operational practice. The other approaches to responsible AI governance, for example, includes a central algorithm register, mandatory impact assessments, and a supervisory body that can investigate complaints and order corrective action. Research on AI governance in the public sector also highlights the importance of creating feedback loops that allow citizens to challenge automated decisions and seek human review . Thailand is well positioned to take such steps because it is already building governance capacity rather than starting from zero. The AI Governance Clinic represents one such building block, providing a forum for agencies to learn from each other and from international experts. However, a clinic is not a regulator. Thailand should consider moving toward a more formal oversight mechanism, whether through an existing body such as the Electronic Transactions Development Agency (ETDA) or through a dedicated AI governance office. Such a body would have the authority to audit systems, investigate complaints, and require remediation when harms are identified. Research on human-centric AI governance emphasizes that accountability instruments must be proportionate to risk, with higher-risk systems facing more stringent requirements . For Thailand, a risk-based approach that distinguishes between low-impact administrative automation and high-impact systems affecting rights or access to services would be a sensible next step.

Taken together, these four pathways offer a culturally grounded way forward. They do not simply import Western governance models but rather adapt international norms to the Thai administrative context, where institutional capacity varies, transparency is uneven, and public trust remains a work in progress. By focusing on human oversight, public explanation, public values, and practical accountability, Thailand can build on its existing momentum while addressing the governance gaps identified in this study. The alternative that is relying on current levels of uneven transparency and informal coordination, risks eroding public legitimacy over time, especially as autonomous systems become more pervasive and consequential.

7. Concluding Reflections

This article has presented a descriptive mapping of autonomous and semi-autonomous systems associated with Thailand's public sector and used that mapping to interpret institutional concentration, sectoral variation, transparency, and governance implications. The findings suggest that autonomous functionality is already visible in multiple areas of public administration and that Thailand has moved beyond simple digitization in several operationally important domains [12]. At the same time, the mapped landscape remains uneven in both institutional distribution and public visibility, which makes governance quality as important as technological uptake itself.

The broader assessment is therefore cautiously positive. Thailand appears to have governance momentum, institutional visibility, and a growing role in regional and international AI governance conversations [16]. Yet the next phase requires more than strategic visibility: it requires stronger operational transparency, clearer accountability, meaningful human oversight, and governance frameworks that are not only legally and technically credible but also socially legitimate and culturally intelligible [11].

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