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# Varieties of state-building in Africa: Elites, ideas and the politics of public sector reform

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## Abstract

Why do some states in Africa seem to be stuck in a spiral of corruption and institutional weakness? Why do others somehow build effective bureaucracies that are able and willing to tackle the challenges of development? The public sector remains the inescapable anchor of development, whether for good or ill, but our understanding of the politics of public sector reform remains shackled by concepts that do not allow for variation or change over time. This paper presents a theoretical framework for understanding variations in public sector reform (PSR): centring the analysis on the intersection of power relations and ideas, the paper shows how the stability of a country's elite settlement and the coherence of its developmental ideology interact with reform ideas in the PSR policy domain. This framework is explored through a structured-focused comparison of reform experiences in three Sub-Saharan African countries with different elite settlements: competitive Ghana; weakly dominant Uganda; and dominant Rwanda. In Ghana, where successive regimes have focused on political control for partisan purposes, it has been quick reforms compatible with top-down control that have achieved political traction. In Uganda, high-visibility reforms were introduced to secure donor funding, as long as they did not threaten the ruling coalition's power. In Rwanda, lastly, the regime has fostered and protected various public sector reforms because it envisioned them as instruments for domestic legitimation as constituent elements of an impartial developmental state. In combination, policy domain, elite time horizons, and ideational fit allow us to move beyond blanket statements about isomorphic mimicry or neopatrimonialism, and towards a more nuanced understanding of the varieties of state-building in Africa.


**Keywords:** Public sector reform, state-building, Ghana, Rwanda, Uganda, policy domains, political settlements

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## Introduction

Why do some states in Africa seem to be stuck in a spiral of corruption and institutional weakness? Why do others somehow build effective bureaucracies that are able and willing to tackle the challenges of development? The public sector remains the inescapable anchor of development, whether for good or for ill, but our understanding of the politics of public sector reform remains shackled by concepts that do not allow for variation or change over time. That conceptual limitation accounts for our puzzlement when we observe the occasional diffusion and uptake of international best practices, while the same transnational ideas barely move beyond formal adoption in most places. This paper presents a theoretical framework for understanding variations in public sector reform (PSR): centring the analysis on the intersection of power relations and ideas, the paper shows how the stability of a country's elite settlement and the coherence of its developmental ideology interact with reform ideas in the PSR policy domain. This framework is explored through a structured-focused comparison of reform experiences in three Sub-Saharan African countries with different elite settlements: competitive Ghana; weakly dominant Uganda; and dominant Rwanda.

The argument has three prongs. First, public sector reform is conceptualised as a policy domain shaped by the interactions – whether contentious, collaborative or collusive – between regime or elite actors, on the one hand, and policy actors, on the other. As an 'upstream' policy domain, PSR tends to be highly dependent on the political regime, which puts an onus on understanding elite behaviour. Second, the mechanisms of policy change are constrained by the stability or instability of a country's political settlement, understood as the informal distribution of power and elite interactions that underpins institutional configurations. In particular, whether the ruling coalition is subject to competitive alternation or is dominant has an effect on the time horizons of regime actors: whereas competition breeds partisanship and a search for quick wins, dominance pushes away the shadow of the future and allows elites to pursue longer-term objectives. Third, the regime's governing ideology – a mix of normative and cognitive programmatic ideas – shapes what reform objectives are seen as legitimate, whatever the time horizon. Sometimes these ideas are compatible with policy solutions that enhance public sector management and compliance; sometimes they are not. The role of ideas is crucial for understanding how ruling elites understand and process new institutional templates. In combination, policy domain, elite time horizons, and ideational fit allow us to move beyond blanket statements about isomorphic mimicry or neopatrimonialism, and towards a more nuanced understanding of the varieties of state-building in Africa.

The paper proceeds as follows. The first section offers a general review of the seemingly intractable questions of public sector reform in Sub-Saharan Africa, summarising trends in aggregate data as well as a summary of alternative explanations proposed for explaining these trends. The following section presents the theoretical approach to the politics of PSR: the nature of the PSR policy domain, the determinants of elite time horizons, and the fit between policy ideas and programmatic ideas. Then follow three brief analytic narratives of PSR in Ghana, Uganda and Rwanda, covering the period 2000-15, a structured comparison based on original primary research. The paper concludes with a summary of findings and implications for future research.

## Ongoing quest for state capacity in Sub-Saharan Africa

The public sector has had a difficult political history in Sub-Saharan Africa. At the time of independence, few countries had the local skilled personnel or capacity necessary to make the state strong (Herbst 2000). This original problem was compounded when politics began overrunning notions of public service: by the 1980s the state had been severely weakened by clientelistic practices and a tendency to use public resources as a form of private enrichment and coalition management (Callaghy 1984; Médard 1982; Bates 1981), to the extent that some states had become little more than an empty shell buttressed by international recognition (Jackson and Rosberg 1982; Jackson 1990). When the debt crisis hit in the late 1970s and 1980s, many countries in the region were forced to resort to international financial institutions which at the time were preaching a drastic retrenchment of the rentier state (Krueger 1974; Williamson 1975; Lal 1983): finding themselves trapped ‘between a rock and a hard place’ with an already depleted state, many governments resorted to ‘ritual dances of reform’ through which they attracted donor funding in exchange for promises they could not possibly keep (Callaghy and Ravenhill 1993; van de Walle 2001). In its zeal to cleanse a public sector that had been eroded by patrimonial politics, the international community had decided it was simply easier to kill the state.

As it turned out, throwing out the baby with the bath water did not actually do much good, and a pendulum shift in the early 1990s provoked renewed interest in the state under the aegis of good governance, institutional economics and new public management (World Bank 1997; Batley and Larbi 2004). This newfound role for the public sector continued to grow through its links with broader developmental goals like private sector growth, sustainability and poverty reduction (World Bank 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005). The result was a development agenda of public sector reform comprising such familiar ingredients as civil service management, public expenditure and financial management, tax administration, anti-corruption, transparency, decentralisation, participation or co-production (Bukenya and Yanguas 2013).

Despite international support, continued expressions of political commitment, and a general agreement on the desirability of a strong public sector, the public sector reform agenda is better known for its many failures than for its limited successes (World Bank 2008). The available cross-national data – however limited – paint a disparaging picture. According to the Worldwide Governance Indicators, Africa trails every other region of the world in Government Effectiveness and Control of Corruption. In a scale ranging between -2.5 and +2.5, the average Sub-Saharan African score actually went down for Government Effectiveness between 1996 and 2014 (-0.74 to -0.84), with only four countries score above 0. The trends for Control of Corruption are only slightly better, with seven countries scoring above 0, but the overall trend is also negative (-0.59 to -0.69). It is hard to find cases of countries whose public sectors have actually improved over time. According to the WGI, only Rwanda has made significant strides in terms of Government Effectiveness and Control of Corruption. Other countries, like Ethiopia and Mozambique, exhibit a mixed pattern of slight improvement in the former, with stagnation or even worsening of the latter. Cases like Liberia only look like success stories in the data because they started the period at a low level of utter institutional collapse and simply could not fall any further.

The data are an aggregate reflection of the tough challenges involved in public sector reform. Politically salient reforms like anti-corruption have consistently floundered in the face of powerful informal institutions (Blundo and Olivier de Sardan 2006; Doig, Watt, and Williams 2007; Helmke and Levitsky 2004); but so have more seemingly technical reforms, like salary scales or performance incentives arising from new public management (Therkildsen 2006; Devarajan, Dollar and Holmgren 2001; Crook 2010). In highly corrupt countries, the usual prescription has been to remove key public sector agencies from the political game by making them constitutionally and financially autonomous (Taliercio 2004; Santiso 2006). Indeed, semi-autonomous agencies have been created to manage tax revenue or keep the public sector in check, but by and large they remain beholden to presidents through the power of appointment or budget (Ayee 2008; Fjeldstad and Moore 2009; Blum, Manning and Srivastava 2012). With so much depending on executive discretion, a lot of attention has focused on opening up the black box of political will (McCourt 2003; Brinkerhoff 1999), with the added temptation of categorising some regimes as intrinsically developmental (Booth and Golooba-Mutebi 2012). Besides the conventional institutional story, some scholars argue that the failure of PSR is caused by the diffusion and adoption of ‘best practice’ formal templates without any real incentive to implement them (Andrews 2012, 2013); however, a more critical reading of cases of home-grown experimentation reveals a huge role for pre-existing political commitment (Klitgaard 2013).

In a general sense, the literature supplies two distinct but interconnected explanations for the failure of public sector reform and state-building more generally across Sub-Saharan Africa: historical legacies; and a mismatch between formal and informal institutions.

From a historical standpoint, the African region did not see the creation and proliferation of endogenous bureaucracies like the ones seen in Western Europe or East Asia. Pre-colonial states were not territorial in the modern sense, and colonial authorities generally constrained state-building to the capital and to key services related to economic exploitation (Herbst 2000). With only a few exceptions, where modern states mapped onto traditional kingdoms, independent Africa saw the birth of juridical states afforded all the privileges and protections of the modern international relations system, but which did not actually have the kind of empirical statehood that was assumed to be a precondition for sovereignty (Jackson and Rosberg 1982;

Jackson 1990). By the turn of the century, African states exhibited a paradoxical form of incapacity: on the one hand, on average they employed fewer public servants per capita than states in any other region; but, on the other hand, they were also more likely to shirk from enforcing administrative constraints on discretionary spending or corruption (Goldsmith 2000). The average African state was both insufficient and ineffective.

The historical evolution of post-colonial African states generated a broad pattern of institutional mismatch that came to be known as 'neopatrimonialism'. Taking inspiration from Max Weber's different modes of legitimate domination, scholars argued that states like Zaire, Nigeria or Kenya had formally adopted the trappings of impersonal, technocratic bureaucracy, while retaining a deep-seated patrimonialism that saw public office and resources as benefits derived from a clientelistic and prebendalist form of political authority (Médard 1982; Callaghy and Ravenhill 1993; Reno 1995). Even when many governments were forced by international financial institutions to tackle disruptive structural adjustment programmes in the 1980s and 1990s, still political leaders across the region managed to create the appearance of reform without actually upsetting the patrimonial balance of power (Callaghy and Ravenhill 1993; van de Walle 2001). More recent scholarship has remarked on the ease with which African states have simply borrowed institutional best practices without actually undertaking any of the functional or political transformations that such practices rely on (Andrews 2013; Pritchett, Woolcock and Andrews 2013). Ultimately this is an institutionalist explanation: informal rules effectively had displaced formal ones (Helmke and Levitsky 2004). And the result was a political and moral economy that sustained informal forms of authority, legitimation, and resource redistribution (Chabal and Daloz 1999; Olivier de Sardan 1999; Blundo and Olivier de Sardan 2006).

However compelling historical and institutionalist explanations are, they both run into two empirical puzzles: variations in levels of neopatrimonialism, and evolving processes of change. The stylised facts of African state-building remain today much the same as they were three decades ago: pervasive ethno-clientelism in recruitment and procurement; a patrimonial form of electoral politics that sees the state as a prize; and an environment of social norms, in which everyday people expect public servants to use their position to help their relatives and dependents. However, there is variation underneath this stylised fact, both across countries and within public sectors. And a purely institutionalist account – especially one that relies only on national-level factors – cannot possibly explain the richness of African state-building.

## Theoretical approach: Domains, time horizons and ideational fit

Consider the public sector not as a set of institutions, nor as a collection of organisations, but as the expression of contentious interactions between state, regime, and societal and transnational actors; a relational understanding with intellectual roots in concepts like the organisational state, embeddedness, strong societies, or the political economy of reform (Laumann and Knoke 1987; Migdal

1988; Haggard 1990; Evans 1995). Moving beyond strictly institutionalist readings, such an approach continues a long tradition in political sociology and political economy that sees the state as both a corporate actor and as an arena for social contestation (Evans, Rueschemeyer and Skocpol 1985; Skocpol 1979; Tilly 1975, 1990), open to the influence of social and economic forces as much as it is able to shape them in turn (Amsden 1989; Wade 1990; Kohli 2004). However, a relational approach goes a step further, by moving beyond institutional and organisational constraints into the realm of contentious politics, where incumbent elites and challengers clash with each other over the shape and definition of institutional and political regimes (Tilly and Tarrow 2006).

There are three key parts to this theoretical approach: the PSR policy domains as context, the elite political settlement as constraint, and the interaction of elite and policy ideas as engine of change.

### Contested policy domains of public sector reform

Public sector reform is a policy domain: a socially constructed arena of policy contestation, in which political elites interact with actors such as organisational heads and veto players, senior public servants (appointed and career), influential technocrats, civil society advocates and foreign aid donors (see Laumann and Knoke 1987, 10–12). Disaggregating regime decision-making into distinct – if sometimes interconnected – domains and coalitions is consistent with theories of public policy as multiple parallel streams of problem definition, policy solution and political context, in which competing policy entrepreneurs aspire to influence policy-makers (Kingdon 1995; Zahariadis 2007).

In the case of the core public sector, there are two closely interconnected but analytically and politically distinct policy domains: one comprising organisations and institutions aimed at public sector management; and another comprising organisations and institutions aimed at public sector compliance. Management is defined here as the ability to guide and develop the capacity of the public sector to pursue and achieve policy goals. It includes such core functions as planning, coordination, budget formulation, public procurement or public service management. Ultimately, the management domain of the public sector is concerned with finding the means to achieve policy goals. In contrast, compliance is not about achieving any particular goals, but about ensuring that the pursuit of those goals is held accountable to the administrative rules that the public sector sets for itself. Drawing upon the classic work of Max Weber, the assumption here is that any organisation abides by its own internal rules, whether these are rational-legal or not (Weber 1978). Modern states have evolved a complex set of administrative regulations and attending enforcement mechanisms: the 21st century public sector includes such core compliance functions as monitoring and evaluation, auditing, transparency, codes of ethics and anti-corruption sanctions.

The degree of clientelism intrinsic in a political regime is likely to have an impact on management: on whether clients are recruited, cronies rewarded with procurement contracts, and powerful interest groups catered to with socially suboptimal policy choices. However, even so, the claim can be made that some forms of cronyism actually lead to growth by greasing the wheels of public policy in difficult settings (Huntington 1968; Svensson 2005; Heckelman and Powell 2010). Moreover, clientelistic management of the public sector may serve the purpose of legitimating the ruling coalition and thus ensuring stability (Callaghy 1984; van de Walle 2001). In principle, at least, a state can be corrupt and still effective. Contrast that with the policy domain of administrative compliance, which circles around the very eradication of irregular practices: almost by definition one cannot have a highly corrupt state that formally monitors and sanctions itself. That is why throughout Africa anti-corruption bodies are so likely to fail, despite repeated displays of political will and massive financial support from outside (Brinkerhoff 1999; Doig, Watt and Williams 2006, 2007). All told, there are good analytical reasons why we should expect contestation between policy and institutional choices to vary across the domains of public sector management and public sector compliance.

### Elite settlements and their effect on time horizons

The political or elite settlement of a country represents the underlying distribution of power within society, which has a significant impact on the choice of regime and institutional configuration (di John and Putzel 2009; Khan 2010; Hickey 2013; but also Haggard 1990). Similar to approaches that focus on the selectorate, the social order, or the political regime in a broad sense (Mesquita et al. 2005; North, Wallis and Weingast 2009; Tilly and Tarrow 2006), political settlements are oriented more towards interaction and contestation than equilibrium, shaped as they are by ‘regular relations among governments, established political actors, challengers, and outside political actors, including other governments’ (Tilly and Tarrow 2006, 45). In that regard, a settlement can be construed as a the highest-level strategic action field in a polity (Fligstein and McAdam 2012), vertically dominant over public policy domains and horizontally interdependent with proximate transnational domains like international trade or diplomacy. International and transnational forces often have a fundamental role in articulating domestic policy-making (Keohane and Nye Jr 1977; Moravcsik 1997; Lake 2009). While in the political settlements literature this role remains more tentative than fully developed (Hickey 2013), scholars of African public sectors have traditionally situated their subjects in a broader context of international norms, foreign donors and international financial institutions (Jackson 1990; Englebert 2009; Yanguas and Bukenya 2016). While open to the influence of proximate social fields, a political settlement is ultimately defined by its ruling coalition, comprising political leaders, ruling-party cadres, high-level public servants, and influential social and economic actors.

How does the political settlement constrain public sector reforms? Following on the footsteps of Mancur Olson’s distinction between the roving and the stationary bandit (Olson 1993), political settlements research has emphasised the effect of political alternation (or the expectation thereof) on the time horizons of ruling coalitions. Specifically, typologies of political settlements tend to distinguish between dominant, cohesive or coordinated settlements, on the one hand, and competitive, fragmented or spoils-based settlements, on the other hand (Khan 2010; Levy 2014). In clientelistic settings, the logic of time horizons is likely to apply in a fairly straightforward manner, with shorter time horizons placing a further constraint on any reform effort. That being said, while in dominant regimes policy reforms are likely to be subordinate to longer-term political goals, more competitive settings open up the possibility of reformers taking advantage of political windows of opportunity to promote change.

### Ideational fit between regime ideology and policy solutions

Elite settlements are not automata driven by some kind of optimisation algorithm: instead they are subject to bounded rationality and prone to coalesce around dominant normative and cognitive ideas (Kingdon 1995; Jones 1999; Weyland 2005). What binds ruling coalitions together is a combination of interests and ideas. Given their predominant role, ruling elites are most likely to be heavily invested in the particular institutional makeup of a country: they will be heavily adapted to current formal and informal institutions, having sunk more costs into their continued reproduction (North 1990; Haggard 1990). But their very understanding of interest and cost will be expressed in and constituted by their cognitive and normative ideas about how the world works and how it should work (Blyth 2002; Campbell 2002; Schmidt 2008). This includes paradigms about the role of the public sector in development: whether neoliberal or socialist, technocratic or partisan, intrinsic or instrumental, the constructed identity of the state is a crucial element of any political regime.

External ideas about the public sector will have a variable impact, depending on the type of political settlement and the discursive strategies of the policy coalitions advocating them (Kingdon 1995; Sabatier 1988). Transnational actors, for instance, often have more influence over reform efforts when they ‘work with the grain’ (Levy 2014). In dominant settings, normative paradigms are more likely to influence both public sector management and compliance, as they are diffused and enforced by ruling elites; even if specific policy solutions are promoted by the ruling coalition, these are likely to be steps towards the achievement of a larger normative aspiration. In competitive settings, in contrast, there is usually not enough time for ideological and normative consolidation beyond short-term partisan posturing: hungry for quick wins that may pay electoral dividends, political elites may instead be more receptive to cognitive models supplied by persuasive policy entrepreneurs. Where there is a mismatch between types of policy ideas being proposed and ruling coalition incentives, the result may simply be the cosmetic adoption of best practices as a way of appeasing the international community or preventing reputational costs (Pritchett, Woolcock and Andrews 2013).

## Comparative case analysis

The theoretical framework outlined above is explored through the following stylised narratives of reform in Ghana, Uganda and Rwanda during the period 2000-15. The three countries exhibit different kinds of political settlement – ranging respectively from more to less competitive – while retaining a common experience of informal legacies, exposure to transnational discourses about public sector reform, and interactions with foreign aid partners. The method here is structured-focused comparison (George and Bennett 2004; Bennett and Elman 2006). The analysis is structured by the three analytical legs of the framework – domains, time horizons and ideas – but also focused through an emphasis on specific reform efforts for each country and domain. Much of the data for this analysis are drawn from original empirical research carried out with support from the Effective States and Inclusive Development Research Centre (Abdulai and Appiah 2017; Bukenya and Muhumuza 2017; Chemouni 2017).

### Ghana: Competitive regime, fragmented reform

Ghana transitioned towards multiparty democracy in 1992, and has since witnessed three alternations of power between its two main parties: the National Democratic Congress (1992-2000, and again, 2008-present) and the New Patriotic Party (2000-08, 2016-present). Satisfying Huntington's 'two-turnover test' of democratic consolidation (Huntington 1993), Ghana has nonetheless failed to achieve a similar transformation in public sector effectiveness. Building on accounts of pervasive clientelism in Ghanaian politics (Lindberg 2010), a new generation of scholarship is using a political settlements lens to characterise Ghana as a 'competitive clientelist' setting in which an unstable balance of power between two elite factions undermines any attempt at longer-term institutional change (Gyimah-Boadi and Prempeh 2012; Abdulai and Hickey 2016). Distributional policies, political budget cycles and patronage appointments are all expected consequences of competitive clientelism. However, a national-level concept cannot possibly account for any variation across specific policy domains. Even if Ghana's successive ruling coalitions have tended to adopt short-term objectives that undermine state capacity, it is also necessary to look at the relative success of the policy ideas that diffused into the domains of public sector management and public sector compliance.

Successive Ghanaian governments have established various units within the Office of the President in order to coordinate, monitor and evaluate public sector policy: under the NPP regime there was a Policy Coordination, Monitoring and Evaluation Unit as well as a Policy Delivery Unit; the NDC government under President Atta-Mills then established a Policy Unit and a Policy Monitoring and Evaluation Unit; and its successor within the NDC, President Mahama, oversaw the dismantling of the latter, the integration of a Policy Coordination Unit into the Cabinet Secretariat, and the establishment of a Presidential Delivery Unit. Despite all these acronyms and units, and a not insignificant amount of support from donors like Canada and the UK, the coordination of public sector programmes remains weak (Abdulai and Appiah 2017). While every single government has set up and dismantled planning units, the constitutionally-mandated National Development Planning Commission has been subjected to electoral whims through the government's control over its appointments (Government of Ghana 2011, 69). Thus while the basic reform model of the central planning unit has taken hold of the successive ruling coalitions, short time horizons and suspicions of politicisation have undermined institutional continuity across administrations. A similar dynamic has unfolded in public service and public finance management. Despite considerable donor support, reforms like the implementation of performance contracts for chief directors have been repeatedly stalled by electoral turnovers, which made policy advocates wary of potential witch-hunts resulting from following up on evaluation reports. In terms of public financial management, a number of initiatives have failed to remedy Ghana's 'essentially ritualistic' budget process (Killick 2005). Uncoordinated and inconsistent policy planning lies at the heart of the problem, despite numerous international projects supporting the establishment of medium-term expenditure frameworks. Public procurement reforms adopted after international pressure have likewise been subverted by political elites as a way to channel public funds to party financiers and loyalists (Abdulai and Appiah 2017).

While public sector management has been hindered by the short-term horizons of successive ruling coalitions, the enforcement of compliance regulations and mechanisms has been hamstrung by organisational fragmentation, which complicates the already major challenge of brokering a reform coalition. Ghana has an auditor-general with constitutionally mandated independence, but implementation of recommendations from audit reports falls upon audit report implementation committees in each ministry, agency and local assembly. Perversely, the committees are headed by the very heads of the public agencies which they are supposed to watch, creating a major conflict of interest by 'asking them to punish themselves' (Abdulai and Appiah 2017, 22). Dependent on heads of organisations for their budgets, internal auditors are reluctant to criticise the hands that feed them. Despite constitutional independence for the auditor-general and rumblings from the Public Accounts Committee in Parliament, the implementation committees severely undermine the capacity of the auditing system to hold agencies accountable. A similar degree of fragmentation and politicisation is evident in anti-corruption. While Ghana has a comprehensive legal framework and a constitutionally mandated Commission of Human Rights and Administrative Justice, tasked with investigating public sector corruption, trends in perceived corruption have steadily increased since 2000. Patronage-driven corruption scandals are a feature of the country's competitive electoral system, and the decision to prosecute corrupt offences remains with the office of the attorney general (the Directorate for Public Prosecutions is based within the Ministry of Justice), despite recommendations for greater independence from a constitutional review commission. This virtually ensures that the enforcement of anti-corruption institutions will be a combination of partisan strategy and damage control for the elites in power at any given time.

The competitive nature of the Ghanaian political regime has undermined sustained public sector reforms in both management and compliance. Neither domain has developed a strong enough bureaucratic or advocacy coalition able to secure a modicum of autonomy from the successive regimes, which have in fact demonstrated a surprising degree of kinship and continuity in their ability to undermine and fragment potential reform efforts. Without autonomous state actors able to drive the agenda, the role of foreign donors like Canada, the UK or the World Bank has been limited to supporting the reform flavour of the day. Donors have been more influential when policy solutions were consistent with partisan goals – such as the establishment of delivery units under the presidency – but the lack of consistency over time and coherence across the public sector has limited the sustainability and ultimate impact of those reforms.

### Uganda: Decaying regime, cosmetic reform

Poster child of the international development community in the 1990s, Uganda has experienced a marked deterioration in its reputation as a performer in the 2000s, with particularly damning scandals affecting the core public sector (Andrews and Bategeka 2013). The country has been ruled since 1986 by the National Resistance Movement (NRM), but the regime's hold on power has been steadily weakening since the early 2000s, as a result of an increasingly competitive political landscape and growing internal disaffection by segments of the NRM power base, some of which have defected to mount political challenges (Golooba-Mutebi and Hickey 2013). As a result, what could be characterised as a dominant political regime in the 1990s has gradually evolved into a weakly dominant settlement (Khan 2010). This has had significant implications for the public sector, combining already existing populist measures with the political pursuit of ever narrower interests aiming at keeping the ruling coalition in power (Asiimwe 2013).

Until relatively recently, the Ugandan public sector did not really operate in a coordinated fashion. It was only in 2003 that cabinet approved a coordination framework, followed two years later by a monitoring and evaluation strategy with financial support from African Development Bank, UK, Ireland, World Bank and European Union. Although formally under the control of the Office of the Prime Minister, public sector coordination is in fact shared with the President's Office, Ministry of Finance and National Planning Authority, an arrangement that creates ample opportunity for friction, but also enables the regime to keep its eye on government business (Bukenya and Muhumuza 2017). Institutional rivalry between all these organisations continually undermines the implementation of national policy coordination (Government of Uganda 2013). A similar pattern appears in public financial management. Assessed purely on a formal institutional level, the Ugandan system for budgeting, public expenditure and financial accountability is strong and consistent with international standards (Andrews and Bategeka 2013). This is not surprising, considering massive financial support from the World Bank and a complete legal overhaul of all PFM systems between 2001 and 2015. However, a focus on actual practice reveals the limits of formal institutional reform: many public agencies simply do not comply with public procurement rules, and government budgets lack credibility due to underestimation of expenditures (Basheka and Sabiiti

2011; Joseph Mpeera Ntayi et al. 2012; IMF 2014). Supplementary budgets often benefit organisations linked to regime maintenance, like the Office of the President and the Ministry of Defence, or towards election campaigns (Bukenya and Muhumuza 2017, 17). The mismatch between mandate and practice is also evident in the management of the public service. Again, donors have sponsored ambitious reform efforts like the Public Sector Reform Programme (2005-06 and 2010-11), a sector-wide approach aiming to create effective leadership, introduce results-oriented management, and establish a comprehensive performance assessment system; and again these efforts have only produced 'moderately unsatisfactory' outcomes (World Bank 2015). Even if meritocratic recruitment appears to be on the rise in the Ugandan public service, seniority and political affiliation continue to trump performance, with appraisals regarded as a formality more than a sanctioning mechanism (Bukenya and Muhumuza 2017, 13). The Ministry of Public Service, meanwhile, is widely considered a pre-retirement post for weak and politically inconsequential elite members, which is consistent with the historical aversion of the NRM to the civil service as a colonial leftover that is suspected of anti-regime bias (Bukenya and Muhumuza 2017).

Transgressions in public sector management could be curtailed by a strong compliance domain, but unfortunately in this regard the Ugandan regime is notorious for its inability or unwillingness to fight corruption (Tangri and Mwenda 2006). On the one hand, a strong policy coalition has evolved around auditing over the past decade, reinforced by a new Audit Act in 2008. The Office of the Auditor General has control over its own budget and salary structure, which simultaneously prevents interference from the Ministry of Finance and allows it to attract qualified and motivated professionals. The Office is buttressed by certified internal auditors throughout public agencies as well as sectoral audit committees that include independent and respected members of civil society. On the other hand, the anti-corruption system has been characterised by lacklustre performance and constant politicisation. Much like in public financial management, the legal framework for curbing public corruption is notably comprehensive and considered to be world-class by some external observers (Global Integrity 2011). Uganda has a fully independent inspectorate of government tasked with investigation, arrest and prosecution of corruption, and its mandate has been strengthened over time. Nevertheless, evidence points to an increase in corruption since the mid-2000s, with an implementation gap between written law and actual practice that is the highest in East Africa. The main reason is the president's continued ability to appoint 'politically compliant' individuals as heads of all the relevant anti-corruption organisations (Tangri and Mwenda 2006, 108): instead of ensuring compliance in the public sector, these gatekeepers provide the ruling coalition with leverage to remain in power by targeting dissenters and rivals. Most high-profile corruption scandals actually involve figures close to the regime, but their punishment takes the form of 'publicly orchestrated rituals' intended to appease public concerns (Mwenda 2012). Overall, while there is an increasingly vocal advocacy coalition around public sector compliance, the dominant settlement continues to limit its impact on actual enforcement.

Why would the government of Uganda undermine costly systems which have taken a decade or more to build? A closer look at reforms reveals that many of them responded to donor-sponsored diagnoses, were stimulated by donor-funded programmes, and ultimately responded to donor-originated concerns. Formal compliance with these demands was the only logical response for a dominant regime starved of resources, even if long-held normative beliefs of the NRM militated against some of the objectives of such reforms. The gradual opening of the political space, however, has led to a more direct use of the public sector for partisan hegemony, whether by ensuring popular support, buying out powerful elite members, or delegitimising rivals. As long as the ruling coalition felt secure, it could toy with the idea of adopting foreign principles as a reputational investment; now that chinks begin to appear in its armour, however, regime elites have systematically curtailed the prospects of public sector reforms having a long-lasting impact. A scandal in the management of international funds by the Office of the Prime Minister in 2012 did trigger a more severe kind of donor response: after details about the irregular use of aid money were unveiled and published by the auditor general, some donors decided to suspend part of their assistance to the government. This forced the regime to, at the very least, shuffle around some of the most visible culprits. Whether increased reputational costs will effectively constrain the NRM's capture of the state is hard to foresee, but at the very least the 2012 scandal signalled a greater willingness by donors to advocate for public sector effectiveness by engaging directly with the ruling coalition.

### Rwanda: Dominant regime, directed reform

If any one country stands out in cross-national datasets about public sector performance in Africa, it is certainly Rwanda. Despite the high degree of polarisation in academic debates about the country, 'the regime's achievements in this field are undisputable' (Reyntjens 2013, xvi). After a four-year civil war and subsequent genocide, in which most civil servants either died or fled, the regime of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) has spent the last two decades building a coordinated and capable bureaucracy able to use donor funds in an efficient and relatively corrupt-free manner. Despite an early period of military threats and popular distrust against the new Tutsi-dominated elite, Rwanda has become a fairly consolidated dominant settlement, in which the ruling coalition does not have a significant challenge from alternative factions, and where potential challenges from below are pre-empted or defused through a host of participatory processes seeking to avert the kind of ethnic hostility that led to state collapse in the first place (Chemouni 2017, 32). A focus on reducing poverty and fostering continued growth has led some to characterise the regime as 'developmental patrimonialist' (Booth and Golooba-Mutebi 2012; Kelsall and Booth 2010). But the experience of public sector reform is explained by more than sheer regime dominance: there is something fundamentally different about the dominant settlement of Rwanda from that of Uganda, and the case of the public sector helps us understand what that something is.

Rwanda exhibits a particularly coherent and impactful national planning system. First, objectives are tangible and well defined, and the performance of public servants is constantly assessed against their achievement. Second, planning strategies are symbols of a broader political programme: the Rwandan Vision 2020, for instance, has been characterised as 'the only hymn sheet to which everyone needs to abide' (Campioni and Noack 2012, 5), and references to it are ubiquitous in the country, from official speeches to shop names in Kigali. Together with performance contracts and the 'Imihigo' accountability system, a Leadership Retreat of senior public servants and a participatory National Dialogue put pressure on ministries to achieve their targets (Chemouni 2017, 10). The system is not without its contradictions, however: while this creates strong incentives for compliance, the fear of political reprisal actually leads to an unknown amount of fudging of reported results.

Stronger public service management has also emerged as a core goal of the government's vision for the state: fair, transparent and merit-based recruitment was one of the salient issues at the post-genocide Urugwiro dialogues, later enshrined in the 2003 constitution. In 2007 a public service commission was created to recruit for the entire central government, but by 2010 its role was limited to oversight and appeal; to ensure its independence, the commission has administrative and financial independence from the rest of the state. As a result, formal mechanisms ensuring transparent and meritocratic recruitment are generally applied, with a very limited role for contract-based employment. It is important to note that some segments of the population still suspect preferential treatment for Tutsi candidates in central government jobs, but while there is still clientelism in the Rwandan state, these perceptions are probably grounded more in a legacy of ethnic distrust than in a widespread pattern of discrimination (Chemouni 2017, 21). Other aspects of public sector management are also driven by core regime priorities. Animated by an Organic Budget Law adopted in 2006, the Ministry of Finance has successfully established a budget formulation process that involves line ministries and is sensitive to sectoral priorities (World Bank 2014). If anything, the system is so technical that some international actors think it beyond the capacity of the public bureaucracy to manage (Chemouni 2017, 12). The public procurement framework has also evolved in line with international best practices, securing the highest scores in public expenditure and financial accountability (PEFA) evaluations since 2007. Donors have had a major role in these public financial management reforms, but not in the way that we would usually expect. The World Bank's first PEFA evaluation of the country in 2007 shaped government perceptions about the methods and indicators for ensuring an efficient use of resources, resulting in an 'ideology' of public financial management, which was identified by the government as a way to strengthen donor trust, enable an eventual transition away from aid, and in the meantime further Rwanda's international reputation (Chemouni 2017, 17).

Overall, the ruling coalition is willing to tolerate weaker aspects of public sector management, like massaged performance assessments, because it relies on its compliance systems to investigate and punish administrative misconduct. The Office of the Auditor General, created in 1998, has only been strengthened over time, attaining political independence under the 2003 constitution and legal, financial and administrative autonomy under a 2013 law. The government does retain some control over the office: the dismissal of the auditor general and the management of salaries for its staff are controlled by presidential order, and its budget is scrutinised and capped by the Ministry of Finance instead of Parliament. However, the number and quality of reports produced by the Office has improved significantly over time with donor support. The public accounts committee that receives these reports is widely considered not just powerful, but also prestigious, enjoying frequent coverage in the media (Chemouni 2017, 24). The Office of the Ombudsman is Rwanda's main anti-corruption organisation. Animated by the perception that, historically, violence had resulted from nepotism and corruption, the creation of a specialised agency arose in the late 1990s, with awareness raised both within RPF ranks and by the World Bank. The government decided to adopt a modified version of Sweden's ombudsman model, but giving it powers of investigation, arrest and – since 2013 – prosecution. While the Ministry of Justice resisted the granting of these powers, a combination of parliamentary outcry and appeals to the Office of the President resulted in a strengthened ombudsman. The evolving institutional framework has led to tangible progress in practice. Available indicators point to a lower incidence of corruption now, and public servants report a high level of fear, given the government's norm of zero tolerance (Chemouni 2017, 28). Convictions for corruption tend to result in prison sentences, and arrests of high-level public servants are regularly covered by the media. However, a lack of capacity and resources limits the state's ability to enforce compliance regulations on some notoriously corrupt organisations, like the traffic police. There is also a focus on small and petty corruption, and the dominant position of the ruling coalition will always cast doubts over its ability and willingness to sanction key members of the elite (Bozzini 2013). Nevertheless, the fight against corruption has always been part of the organisational culture of the RPF, which regards the Ugandan National Resistance Movement as a cautionary tale. Corruption in the RPF is not only an illegal deed, it is also a serious moral flaw.

Across both the management and compliance domains, Rwandan public sector reforms seem to follow the same pattern: first, initiation by the regime – sometimes by the president himself – as a way to ensure the achievement of its vision and broader societal goals; second, technical and financial support by international donors, combined with a diffusion of policy ideas that were consistent with the RPF's overall normative paradigm. This last point is crucial. The dominance of the ruling coalition is not sufficient for explaining public sector effectiveness in Rwanda: reforms were initiated, adapted and enforced in compliance with a governing ideology that is missing in similarly dominant regimes such as Uganda's NRM. The RPF's own organisational and cultural history has had a significant effect on the regime's search for policy solutions and engagement with policy actors. The result has been a series of clear institutional reforms influenced by transnational diffusion, but directed and nurtured by the ruling coalition.

## Conclusion

The quality of public sector institutions is often approached as a causal or control variable for studying other phenomena: service delivery, growth, natural resource management, and so on. But the quality of institutions in itself is an enigma too: Why do some countries in Africa stay stuck in a high-corruption equilibrium, while others seem able to escape the trap? The underlying and informal political settlement is a key explanatory factor, expressed in the mechanism of elite time horizons. The cases of Ghana, Uganda and Rwanda show a relationship between competition and inconsistency of reform: when coupled with clientelism, short time horizons make political elites chase quick wins instead of long-term transformation. However, that is not enough to explain what makes Rwanda different from Uganda: even before it began facing external and internal competition, the National Resistance Movement was never as committed to effectiveness as the Rwandan Patriotic Front. Dominant ideas among ruling elites – ideologies of governance – are the ghost that animates the machine of politics.

The interaction of political settlement and elite ideas constrains the policy domains in which reformers operate. In Ghana, where successive regimes have focused on political control for partisan purposes, it has been policy solutions compatible with top-down oversight that have achieved political traction: however inconsistent and incoherent, there seems to be a growing elite consensus around public sector coordination. In Uganda, as long as the ruling coalition did not feel threatened, different policy agendas were allowed to translate into world-class legislation; however, the incentives and beliefs of the president and his comrades about the role of the public service have hindered any efforts at actually enforcing what is in the books. In Rwanda, lastly, the ruling coalition has fostered and protected various public sector reforms because it understood that they would serve their larger vision for the country. Even if the regime remains too closed and opaque for accountability mechanisms to function impersonally, the commitment to overcome sins of the past has combined with the fear of political instability to produce a more effective state.

Donors and other transnational forces have been a constant to all these reforms, but their impact has been at times cosmetic, at others ephemeral, and more often than not incapable of realigning pre-existing political dynamics. Bureaucratic models like delivery units and anti-corruption agencies are now in vogue in Accra or Kampala, but their practical implications are seldom allowed to flourish. Paradoxically, donor influence may have been the greatest in the country where their influence was most resented: by exposing the Rwandan regime to indicators and performance mechanisms, transnational actors made the ruling coalition realise the potential held in these seemingly technical systems for the continued improvement of both the Rwandan state and its reputation abroad. If in Ghana and – increasingly – Uganda, international influence has been felt in the diffusion of compatible policy solutions, in Rwanda it was normative resonance that caused internalisation.

This paper has shown that variation in public sector reform is not a structural phenomenon, but very much a contested one: institutions can be moulded by powerful agents, culture can be adapted and repurposed to fit new goals. Throughout Sub-Saharan Africa, a variety of state-building politics continues to unfold, opening and closing space for reformers to advocate and mobilise in order to secure meaningful institutional change. While the Rwandan narrative may be too specific to generalise elsewhere – let alone form the basis of any kind of 'template' – the theoretical approach presented in this paper places it within the same analytical space as lacklustre performers and outright disappointments. There are no magic bullets in public sector reform in Africa, but neopatrimonialism and isomorphic mimicry can no longer explain the diverse state-building paths that we see in the region. While political settlements and elite ideologies constrain potential for change, reformers and their backers can still search for the kind of ideational fit that will allow public sector reforms to take root and flourish. At the end of the day, it is ideas that create the space for state-building.

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