

POLITICAL REFORM, SOCIAL CHANGE, AND STABILITY IN THE AFRICAN SAHEL

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Long on the margins of both policy and academic discussions, recent events have brought new attention to the little-studied countries of the West African Sahel. This research project, funded by a grant from the Minerva Research Initiative, has attempted to understand the factors affecting political stability in the six Francophone countries—Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad—stretching across this arid region of West Africa. Collectively these are among the least developed countries in the world, and they present some of the most significant governance challenges anywhere. While several have been in many ways successful laboratories for democracy in Muslim societies, developments following the NATO intervention to remove the Qaddafi regime in Libya in 2011 produced destabilizing pressures across the region. Since the project began in 2012, the Sahel has been rocked by the overthrow of governments in Mali and Burkina Faso, the proliferation of an assortment of Islamist jihadi groups active across the region, and very tenuous political situations in other countries.

The overarching goal of the research project is to understand the points of vulnerability as well as sources of resilience in the region, and to examine the variations in these factors among the six countries. The project undertakes this via an analytic framework that examines the interactive and reciprocal effects of institutional reform on social change, in an iterative process of “micro-transitions” that cumulatively build to potentially more substantial transformations in state capacity, and that hence shape the prospects for stability or instability.

As with virtually all of Africa, the Sahelian states were directly affected by the intense pressures for political reform in the name of “democracy” of the early 1990s. While their initial responses were quite varied, all were obliged to undertake

significant liberalization, reflected primarily in reduced state capacity to shape and control social forces. As a result, in all six countries significant social transformations were set in motion, and their political systems today are still in many ways being shaped by those

forces. The collapse of Mali as the project began in 2012, however, followed by the French-led international intervention to attempt to restore the country’s territorial integrity and rout the jihadi groups that had benefited from the power vacuum, also set in motion new dynamics affecting the entire region. These have significantly complicated the analysis.

In each of the six countries, the interactive processes of institutional reform and social change that were carried out in the name of democratization led to our initial grouping of the six countries into three pairs on the basis of an observed outcome on the democracy dimension in the two decades from 1991-2011: Senegal and Mali (democracies); Chad and Burkina Faso (electoral authoritarian regimes) and Niger and Mauritania (unstable efforts at democratization). Our research in the first stage of the project—underlined by developments in the region—clearly demonstrated that the processes and patterns of democratization do intersect with processes of building resilient state institutions, but in complex ways that are in the end independent of the outcome on the democracy dimension. Within each of our pairs, then, we identified one country where the two decades of political debates on reform appears to have strengthened state



structures and another where it had not done so, despite similarities in terms of the democracy variable. The relative resilience of the state in Burkina Faso during the tumultuous period of political transition in 2014-15 following the collapse of the 27-year regime of Blaise Compaoré would seem to support this observation.

Villalón has led the project as P.I. on the Minerva grant, but the majority of the field research was carried out by three UF Ph.D. students in political science: Mamadou Bodian, Ibrahim Yahya Ibrahim, and Daniel Eizenga. Each has carried out intensive fieldwork in a different set of three of the six countries, collectively representing some 46 months of fieldwork in the entire region. In addition to our collaborative activities, this fieldwork provides the bases for their respective dissertation projects (discussed elsewhere in this report).

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