

Political Reform, Social Change, and Stability in the African Sahel

LEONARDO VILLALÓN



A three-year grant from the highly selective Minerva Research Initiative program will help establish the University of Florida as a key academic institution for research and training on the countries of the Francophone Sahel. The Minerva Initiative is a university-based social science research program intended to increase understanding of countries and topics of importance to U.S. national interests. It is funded by the Office of the Secretary of Defense. In the 2012 competition some ten projects were selected for funding from the initial submission of 330 proposals. Over the three years, the grant to UF will sponsor talks, conferences, visiting scholars from the region, and other activities, as well as support field research by UF faculty and graduate students in six Sahelian countries: Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad.

The overarching goal of the research project is to study the factors affecting the political stability of the countries that stretch across the arid Sahel region. Collectively they are among the least developed countries—and present some of the most significant governance challenges—in the world. At the same time, several have been in many ways “laboratories” for democracy in the Muslim

world, and all have experimented in recent years with reforming institutions in the name of democracy. Unfortunately, recent developments in the region, including the actions of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and especially the consequences of the collapse of the Qaddafi regime in Libya, have placed significant pressures on these states. Indeed, in the time between the submission of our proposal and the funding of the grant, these pressures led directly to a coup and the effective collapse of Mali, with tragic and still unfolding consequences for the peoples of the region.

The research will be guided by 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 hence shape the prospects for stability or instability. As with virtu-

ally 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 being shaped by those forces.

The project will involve a variety of activities, to be undertaken by the members of our newly formed Sahel Research Group. Throughout these activities we seek to work closely and collaboratively with scholars from the region. In Spring 2013 we will hold a conference/workshop on “The Politics of Institutional Reform in the Sahel,” at which a distinguished academic from each of the six countries will present analyses of their respective cases. The core of the project will be intensive field-based research in each of the six countries, and which will be carried out primarily by three UF PhD student members of our Sahel Research Group.

This project will thus contribute to research for several individual dissertations, and collectively we trust it will allow us to institutionalize an ongoing center for understanding the challenges and the potential of the countries of the Sahelian region.

Leonardo Villalón is associate professor of political science and former director of the Center for African Studies. He serves as principle investigator on the Minerva Initiative grant and coordinator of the Sahel Research Group.