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

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The overarching goal of this large research project, funded by a generous three-year grant from the Minerva Research Initiative, is to study the factors affecting political stability in a set of six African countries—Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad—stretching across the arid Sahelian region of West Africa. Collectively they are among the least developed countries in the world, and they present some of the most significant governance challenges anywhere. 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, developments in the region in the past few years, including the actions of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and especially the consequences of the collapse of the Qaddafi regime in Libya, placed significant pressures on these states. In the time between the submission of the research proposal and the initiation of the project, the region was rocked by the overthrow of the government in Mali and the subsequent displacement of state authority in the north of the country by an assortment of Islamist *jihadi* groups.

While these events pointed to the high degree of salience of the research topic, they also necessitated some refinement of our analytic framework. Our goal is to examine 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 being shaped by those forces. The collapse of Mali, and the eventual French-led international intervention to attempt to restore the country’s territorial integrity, however, also set in motion new dynamics affecting the entire region.

Over the course of the first year of the project, the research team, led by the PI and including three Ph.D. students in political science, devoted considerable time attempting to understand the causes and the consequences of the Malian collapse, and to developing a framework for comparative analysis of the six countries. Our weekly “Sahel Seminar” served as a forum for regular discussion and debate on developing events. Other activities included sponsoring invited speakers and experts, hosting a semester-long visiting scholar from Chad, and organizing a conference on the politics of institutional reform in the region featuring scholars from all six countries. In addition, scoping trips by each team member to two or three of the Sahelian countries in summer 2013 provided a basis for the more extensive fieldwork to be carried out starting in 2014. We presented our initial findings at the 2013 meeting of the African Studies Association, in a panel entitled: “Reconfiguring the Sahel: The Regional Effects of the Mali Crisis.”

Collectively, our efforts to date have led us to an initial observation that will be key to shaping the project as we move forward. In each of the six countries, the interactive processes of institutional reform and social change that have been carried out in the name of democratization had led to a proposed 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 initial work has shown 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 have identified one country where the two decades of political debates on reform appears to have strengthened state structures and another where it has not done so, despite similarities in terms of the democracy variable. Current efforts are aimed at trying to understand the processes that produce these varied results and the variables we need to consider in trying to build a broader understanding of these processes. Our fieldwork protocols are being prepared with the goal of ensuring that we are well placed to offer strong answers to this important question.

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