

Informal Institutions: Do They Matter?

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It is typically argued that despite increasing urbanization, state bureaucracies in Africa still sit atop mostly rural populace determined to elude the best efforts of the state to fully incorporate it into its fold. This failure of the state to fully penetrate society has resulted in the proliferation of and the salience of informal rules even though this does not mean there is a complete absence of rules and regulation.

In contrast to the general depiction of the African state and its bureaucracies as highly corrupt, inefficient operations unable to deliver basic services to their citizens, countries like Botswana and Mauritius have gained a reputation for their administrative integrity and capability, reputations that preceded their impressive rapid economic growth. An argument could be made that Botswana and Mauritius have been democratic and stable polities since independence and could thus be atypical cases for Africa. However, countries like Ghana, and Malawi and until recently Uganda, the Ivory Coast and Kenya were considered fairly well administered state even if they constitute a second tier in comparison to Botswana and Mauritius. Herein lies the interesting puzzle: why then do some African states acquire relatively effective states? Most African bureaucracies operate with all but a modicum of rationality and even though efficiency as a goal seldom ranks high for bureaucrats, why do these bureaucracies function relatively well?

My research answers this question in three stages. I hypothesize that state capacity is largely shaped by the interaction between formal and informal rules, and the choices of state elites at critical junctures. To test these hypotheses I spent the summer of 2009 in Ghana building on my previous research on bureaucratic performance in select Ghanaian ministries in an effort to tease out in a systematic fashion the role, if any, informal institutions played in



state development. To this end I focus on four key ministries - Agriculture, Education, Health and Transportation - theorized in the state building literature as important for the development of state capacity, which is largely dependent on the ability of the state to penetrate and rule over its territory. I spent the summer combing the libraries of the Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration (GIMPA), the Ministry of Finance and the Head of Civil Service as well as the Resource Center at the Center for Democratic Development (Ghana).

The aim of this summer research trip was to collect more qualitative and historical data to complement survey data collected in 2008. I also spent the summer conducting extensive multiple

interviews with upper level bureaucrats and some politicians deemed by the bureaucrats in the ministries of interest as being very effective ministers or deputy ministers. I am still analyzing my data, but my initial impressions are that while informality is quite pervasive, evaluation and favoritism of the well-performing bureaucrat was quite common.

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