

# One Republic, Multiple Fiefdoms



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## *Public Administration Reform Challenges in Heterogeneous Nigeria*

By

M. J. Balogun, Isaac Obasi,  
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and Ekhosuehi Oghator

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In loving memory of Professor Adam A. Anyebe



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## FOREWORD

The Aig-Imoukhuede Foundation believes that what a nation needs most to attain national development is a public sector that is effective, values-driven, and results-oriented. However, this has eluded Nigeria and many other African countries, preventing us from providing better socioeconomic conditions for our people. Through our research, we have identified a path to transformation, focused on accountability, efficiency and collective responsibility.

The research study we sponsored, which is presented in this book, was not merely to fulfil an academic exercise; rather it serves as a call to action. Based on extensive primary and secondary research conducted across Nigeria's geopolitical zones, it offers a comprehensive analysis of past initiatives and provides a blueprint for future efforts.

This foreword serves as a testament to our unwavering commitment to facilitating the development of a public sector that is not only functional but also exemplary. The research highlights the need for methodological precision in undertaking reforms as well as the pitfalls that must be avoided. It underscores the urgent need for a comprehensive overhaul of current practices to improve governance and service delivery, a sentiment echoed by public and private stakeholders during a national workshop on public sector reforms, which we hosted.

This work is a valuable resource for policymakers, civil servants, and citizens alike, providing them with the knowledge to support and sustain successful reforms. It aims to mobilize collective accountability, responsibility, and ownership for the success of both current and future reform initiatives.

As we turn the pages of this significant study, let us remember the collective role we play in shaping the future of Nigeria's public sector. The Aig-Imoukhuede Foundation has set forth a vision of reform that is inclusive, informed, and inspired by a shared sense of purpose. We are pleased

to share the insights presented in this book. We look forward to their application in creating a more efficient and accountable public sector.

Ofowwe Aig-Imoukhuede  
Executive Vice Chair, Aig-Imokhuede Foundation  
September 4, 2024.

## PREFACE

Decades ago, the Public Service of Nigeria was an epitome of integrity, merit, and professionalism. Besides overseeing the merger of colonial departments into Ministries, it successfully “Nigerianized” the top cadres of the service, codified civil service rules of conduct, kept the apparatus of government running during the era of military rule, provided management and logistics backup services in aid of the war effort between 1967 and 1970, and diligently implemented an ambitious program of post-war reconstruction, resettlement, and development up to the mid-1970s.

Sadly, the golden era did not last. To the disappointment of its earlier admirers, the public service, especially from the late 1970s, succumbed to performance disablers such as political interference, the career officials’ steady abdication of their professional responsibilities, patronage and cronyism, capacity deficits, plain ineptitude, institution decay, sundry moral hazards and blatant ethical violations, information storage and retrieval slip-ups, and service delivery deficits.

It is not as if succeeding administrations stood by as the public service went into decline. At periodic intervals, government and public service leaders invested time, effort and valuable resources on the design and implementation of one type of reform or the other. Among these are the administrative reform initiatives of the 1960s and 1970s, the structural adjustment and “downsizing” program of the 1980s to the early 2000s, and the recent attempt to look inwards for answers to critical reform questions.

Have these reform initiatives accomplished anything? If truth be told, the reforms undertaken from the 1970s to date have largely failed to achieve their underlying objectives. They have neither enhanced the professional and service delivery capacity of the public service nor stemmed the rapid erosion of citizen faith in public officials. Despite the intermittent reform of the public service, dissatisfaction with the performance of government agencies and with service delivery quality lingers and keeps mounting.

The chasm between targets and achievements was so wide the Aig Imokhue Foundation (hereafter referred to as “the Foundation”) deemed it necessary to act. That is how in March 2023 it decided to commission a

team of experts to undertake a study aimed at identifying conditions under which the enablers of sustainable reform might triumph over, or, as the case may be, succumb to, the disablers.

The study began with literature review, followed by the generation of hypotheses and the construction of a medium-range public service reform model. Thereafter, the research team reviewed, prior to agreeing on, the survey instruments to administer on state and non-state actors in all the six geo-political zones of Nigeria. These are the South-South, South-East, South-West, North-Central, North-West, and North-East zones. The Team members collectively picked two States from each zone and designated them “the Participating States”. The team followed the same procedure in picking the Federal Ministries, Departments or Agencies to be surveyed along with their clients/service beneficiaries.

This book is a follow up to the dissemination of the study’s findings at a national workshop held under the auspices of the Aig-Imokhuede Foundation in Abuja, Nigeria, on 30 July 2024. Besides presenting a comparative overview of public service reform experiences in Africa, the book highlights the challenges facing the Nigerian public service as it attempts to reform outmoded practices while at the same time struggling to reconcile discordant claims. To bring clarity to the discourse on public service reform, the book starts by defining the key concepts and ultimately constructing a middle range model.

The multiple fiefdoms theory espoused in this book views public administration as it ought to be viewed, i.e., as cooperative action that is geared towards serving one and only one sovereign, specifically, the People of the Republic of Nigeria. In no time, the public service begins to answer to two dominions.

The first of the two dominions is located in the modern, rules-based, legal-rational, role-specific ‘soft’, environment. The second is domiciled in the traditional, exceptionalist, entitlement-oriented, informal, anything-goes, ‘hard’ environment. The ‘hard’ environment truly deserves to be so described. The environment is ‘hard’ in the sense that it can only be manipulated (to achieve narrow personal or sectional ends). It cannot be bent or broken without triggering stiff resistance from vested interests, that is, from those that stand to gain from its preservation and much to lose from its demolition. Those profiting from the foibles of the hard environment will not cease persuading the suffering citizens to look at the “bright side”, meaning, the benefits, largely vicarious, that their affiliation

with ethno-religious and other primordial arrangements confer. This subtle brainwashing goes hand in hand with the hard environment's flexible definition of logic, truth and virtuous conduct.

Due to the hard environment's uncommon attributes and overbearing influence, what starts as a dyarchy (that is, as a cohabitation of the modern with the traditional) soon mutates into a collection of fiefdoms. Allegiance to a fiefdom may be based on ethnic affinity, shared religious belief, harmony of political and economic interest, or a combination of various identity markers. Getting the fiefdoms to work together and as indivisible units of a cohesive republic is the kernel of the multiple-fiefdoms theory espoused in this book.

Needless to add that the hard environment's heterogeneity breeds role ambiguity which, besides impeding the clockwork operation of the public service, almost invariably nullifies any effort invested in reform.

In such a chaotic situation, the primary responsibility for the imposition of order and for the implementation of sustainable reform inevitably and squarely falls on leadership. It is up to government and public service leaders to deploy the soft environment's power and resources either on the accumulation of welfare gains or the gratification of the hard environment's contradictory, short-term, sometimes, frivolous, urges and demands. The leaders' choices will either steer the public service towards performance and productivity or end up squandering opportunities for welfare gains accumulation. Needless to add that performance improvement opportunities will continue to elude any nation where the leaders and their followers choose laxity over discipline and habitually pander to the whims and caprices of the hard environment.

Neither the day-to-day running of the public service nor the reform of dysfunctional practices is a one-off, time-barred, activity. Unless viewed as a continuing process, investment in public administration reform will yield little or no return. Sustaining the reform momentum accordingly entails identifying, and building a consensus around, the core public service values, notably, those of integrity, professionalism, merit, accountability, and inclusiveness. Sustainable reform further implies the establishment of institutional mechanisms for the transmission and preservation of these values across alternating leadership generations and regimes.

The book is not all theory. Apart from its tour d'horizon of public service reform experiences across countries (among them, Mauritius, Ethiopia,

South Africa, Ghana, eSwatini, and Nigeria), the book presents the findings of the field survey carried out in all the six geo-political zones of Nigeria. The book's strength lies in the two portraits obtained from the survey. The first is the picture of public administration as painted by non-state actors, and the other is the 'selfie' of public service processes and challenges taken by political officeholders and career officials.

Noting the limitations of models founded on non-African experiences, the book begins in the opening chapter with a medium-range reform theory, one that mirrors the prevailing realities and takes due cognizance of Nigeria's unique circumstances. The multiple fiefdoms theory describes a nation that starts off as one republic only to be torn between and among rival fiefdoms and conflicting allegiances. In the absence of a proactive move towards national consensus, such a republic is most unlikely to have a working public administration system or implement gainful and sustainable reform.

The second chapter is basically a comparative survey of public service reform experiences across African countries. It showcases Mauritius's progress in taming the 'hard' environment and ensuring that it does not constitute a drag on the implementation of reform. Another notable feature of reform in Mauritius is the broad measure of consensus that rival political parties have forged and abided by over the years. This ensures the long-term sustainability of reform. Mauritius's experience thus contrasts sharply with many African countries' where changes of government almost invariably presage policy reversals or the abandonment of predecessors' reform agenda.

The third chapter examines the antecedents to the renewed interest in reform in Nigeria. It traces the public service's descent from the height of merit, professionalism, and due process in the early post-independence period, to the abyss of institutional decay of recent years.

Why the public service continues to slide downhill and reform programmes keep achieving little or nothing is the question that the fourth chapter attempts to answer. According to the chapter, the clue to the perpetual frustration of reform efforts lies in Nigeria's 'hard' environment. The environment's dominant attributes (cynically mismanaged heterogeneity and the accompanying role ambiguity) constitute roadblocks to sound administration and to outcome-oriented reform. The co-existence of the modern with the traditional institutions, is actually not the problem. The problem is the traditional, hard, environment's overbearing, largely

corrosive, influence on its modern, soft, counterpart. Whatever change the soft environment plots is most likely to be foiled or reversed by its 'hard' opposite number.

The fifth chapter undertakes a critical analysis of the lessons learnt from the design, implementation, and periodic recalibration of public service reform in Nigeria. The lessons deemed pertinent are those that speak directly to the enablers and disablers of reform.

The sixth chapter is a collection of case studies on public service reform. Each case study represents a snapshot of the progress and challenges in the implementation of assorted reform projects, e.g., Integrated Personnel and Payroll Information System, revenue and tax administration, integrated financial management information system, food and drug administration, and road safety management.

The seventh chapter presents the response of state actors (political officeholders and career officials) to wide-ranging public administration and reform questions. The divergence in the opinions of political officeholders vis-a-vis career officials comes out in bold relief in this chapter.

The focus of the eighth chapter is on the response of non-state actors to questions on public administration and reform challenges facing Nigeria. Readers will find the non-state actors' responses to questions (bordering on the readiness and capacity of government agencies to deliver essential services in a timely and cost-effective manner) highly revealing. The responses differ markedly from the state actors', especially, political officeholders', sunny view. The non-state actors' opinions on issues that should be covered in future reform programmes are also captured in this chapter.

While the seventh and the eighth chapters present the state and the non-state actors' perspectives respectively on dominant public administration and reform questions, the remit of the ninth chapter is to pull together and compare the opinions of both classes of respondents.

The tenth and final chapter summarizes the lessons learnt from the study. Of all the conclusions reached in the book, one stands out. Axiomatic as the truth affirmed in the conclusion might be, it deserves special mention due to the truth's frequent disavowal by the rulers and the ruled in Nigeria. The self-evident but often denied truth is this: *reform opportunities and gains will continue to elude any nation whose leaders and citizens choose laxity over discipline, divisiveness over inter-group bridge building, and*

*pandering to the whims and caprices of the hard environment over uncompromising enforcement of the codes of virtuous conduct.*

Clearing the obstacles to gainful and sustainable reform at the minimum warrants building a broad measure of consensus on the measures to adopt to delink the soft environment from its hard counterpart. At the same time, it is necessary to embark on measures aimed at allowing the 'soft' environment to concentrate on its civilizing mission while its 'hard' counterpart resolves its internal contradictions. Above all, the leaders, in collaboration with their followers, should move decisively to salvage decaying values, and to stabilize what is to all intents and purposes a troubled society.



# CHAPTER 1

## PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION REFORM AND SELF-SUSTAINING DEVELOPMENT: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### **Introduction**

Almost every country has experimented with varieties of public service reform. However, the results have been uneven across countries. This raises the question “Why”. Why is it that state and public service reform brought substantial gains to some countries but nothing, except possibly, poverty, destitution, and misery, to others?

As argued in this chapter, what makes the difference between success and failure in reform is not the wish to be seen as reforming like everyone else, but the determination by government and public service leaders to conceptualize, own, and build a consensus around, on-going change processes, while at the same time replicating what works and quickly abandoning what does not. If public service reform has not made much difference in Nigeria, it is partly because a coalition of reforming minds is yet to be formed, but to a large extent, because of the failure to de-link the reform-oriented ‘soft’ environment from its tradition-bound opposite number.

In making the case for an alliance of reforming minds within each state and in every public service agency, this chapter starts with operational definitions of key terms. It then proceeds to examine contending reform models, notably, the structuralist perspective, with its implicit faith in the developmental capability of the state, the neoliberal, public choice theory with its advocacy of individualist, private-led growth, and the “corporatization” or “managerialist”, NPM, model, which seeks to apply private sector prescriptions and techniques to right public sector wrongs. With the synthesis of the competing paradigms as its point of departure and based on the realization that the search for a systematic theory of public service reform is still ongoing, the paper suggests a middle range theory

which, besides tracking the linkages between and among the intervening variables, mirrors the prevailing realities and demonstrates a high capacity to predict the fate of reforms in Nigeria and in countries similarly placed.

## **Definition of terms**

To ensure that we have a common understanding of public service reform and of the interrelated issues, it is advisable to start with the identification and clarification of key terms. Among these are ‘change’, ‘administrative improvement’, ‘administrative reform’, ‘restructuring and reorganization’, ‘reform’, ‘public service reform’, ‘institution or systemic reform’, reform in the ‘hard’ and the ‘soft’ environments.

Change is a broad, possibly, nebulous, term in the reform dictionary. Most often loosely used, it could be taken to mean mutation, evolution, adjustment, alteration, modification, reform, transformation, revolution, progress, back-sliding, improvement, deterioration, and, in the Nigerian context, movement towards “true federalism”, or “restructuring”. In a nutshell, it is a value-neutral term and could imply change for better or worse. While differences in pace and direction mark one type of change from another, each change exemplar is marked by the image that it conveys, especially, that of motion, momentum, or activity. Regardless of how it is viewed, change is the opposite of stagnation, inertia, drift, stillness, and motionlessness. It connotes transiting, within a time and space horizon, from one form or state to another (Balogun, 2022:3).

In contrast to the overarching nature of change is improvement’s practical and unidirectional push for amelioration, meaning, the push towards a better, more congenial, more equitable, more acceptable state of existence. Improvement becomes compelling when the *status quo* is either not working as expected or is seen as not working as it should. Public service improvement, for instance, is a form of change aimed at enhancing the capacity of public service agencies to deliver quality service expeditiously and at least cost. In other words, public service improvement seeks nothing less than the attainment of welfare gains. These welfare gains can be measured against at least four indices of governmental effectiveness, viz:

- (a) Rising output-input ratios (increase in the quantity and value of public goods or services delivered in return for decreased or fixed production/delivery costs; increasing rates of return; increasing revenue to GDP ratio);

- (b) Falling input-output ratios (decreasing production cost; savings in overhead costs; declining debt-service obligations; reduced governance cost);
- (c) Steadily increasing time-and-motion gains (length of time taken to complete the construction of x km of highway, freight/passenger wagon turnaround time, and the time taken to investigate crime and dispense justice);
- (d) Rising public trust in the quality, reliability, cost-effectiveness, and timeliness of services delivered, and above all, in the integrity of public officials (including public confidence in rules interpretation and application, in the clarity of eligibility criteria, and in the consistency and predictability of decisions)<sup>1</sup>.

Reform is a term that is as broad as change, but its normative orientation places it on the same pedestal as improvement. Where change, as a value-neutral option, may be directed towards the fulfilment of noble or ignoble objectives, both improvement and reform seek to accumulate welfare gains. This raises an interesting question. If 'improvement' and 'reform' want the same thing (accumulation of welfare gains), does that mean one can be substituted for the other? Are both interchangeable? Do 'improvement' and 'reform' mean the same thing? The answer is, for the reasons stated in the next paragraph, no.

Improvement's time-horizon is limited, whereas that of 'reform' is open-ended. If welfare gains can be equated with degrees of rationality at different time intervals (or along a timeline), improvement will, as an episodic quest, reach for stop-go, 'incremental rationality', in contrast with reform's ambitious quest for unending fulfilment. The aim of 'improvement' is to ameliorate an existing and specific condition, while the overriding goal of reform is to make the world better than it is *now and in the future*. Obasi (1993: 41-59) sums the essence of reform as follows:

"A reform is simply a purposeful change introduced with a view to totally eliminating (or just attenuating) certain identified vices and imperfections existing in any system or organization."

De-concentration (as in the transfer of authority and resources from Ministry headquarters to service delivery centers in various communities) falls conceptually under the heading of 'administrative improvement'. Other exemplars of public service 'improvement' are the 'restructuring

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<sup>1</sup> Balogun, M J, 2002, *Towards a Habitable Nigeria: an agenda for change*, John Archers, Ibadan, p. 60.

and reorganization' of Ministries and Departments, the regrading of posts, the conduct of time-and-motion studies, and the re-engineering of service delivery processes. The replacement of apartheid with black majority rule, by contrast, is a reform of no mean significance. The same applies to the overthrow of feudal rule and absolute monarchy by liberal democratic forces. The substitution of an unjust or otherwise dysfunctional cultural practice with a more equitable and efficient one is reform in its purest sense.

The public service provides a good illustration of reform's moral and forward-looking inclinations. It is true that public service reform sometimes manifests narrowly, either as 'administrative reform' or as 'public service improvement'. However, since public service processes and socio-cultural practices are, in some societies, closely intertwined, the aim and scope of reform must, at least in the developing societies, be wider than the shuffling of names in boxes and the redrawing of organization boundaries. Public service reform must, under such circumstances, proceed *pari passu* with the reform of the interlocking, reform-disabling, cultural practices. Examples of cultural mores capable of hindering the implementation of reform are ethnocentric interpretations of 'the truth' and of virtuous conduct, the constant rationalization of corrupt and anti-social behavior, blind defense of a fellow kinsman's bad behavior, and the public's leaning towards mediocrity and disdain for excellence.

The cultural factor in reform in any case suggests another reform ideal-type, i.e., institution reform. Institution or systemic reform proceeds from the underlying assumption that a system is never "suddenly" corrupt, incompetent, or broken, but must have taken its time to acquire, perfect, entrench, and implicitly legitimize, or at least, condone, unhealthy habits (Balogun, 2022:12). Endemic and pervasive corruption, for instance, is a disease without a miracle cure. It is like cancer. Checking its growth warrants that attention be paid to parts of the body to which it might have spread over time. Making the patient whole again requires sustained application of a holistic therapy, and the adoption of follow-up measures, including the observance of strict dietary rules.

Examples of challenges that call for systemic reform are the caste system; endemic corruption; nepotism and discriminatory, wrong-headed, recruitment practices; technology obsolescence; air and seabed pollution, toxic waste dumping; emergence of new diseases like Ebola and avian flu; growing cases of drug addiction and escalating mental health crisis.

In essence, institution reform entails reconfiguring the ‘soft’ and the ‘hard’ environments and aligning both with the underlying reform goals. By the ‘soft’ environment is meant the combination of institutional arrangements that are amenable to change. The line up of Ministries and Departments at any point in time is an example of a ‘soft’ environment, more so, as agencies can be increased, merged or abolished without going through elaborate rituals. In contrast, a ‘hard’ environment is impervious to change. Changing the latter, the hard environment, will probably require a plebiscite, a major constitutional amendment, an outright revolution, or as a last resort, Divine intervention.

Religious beliefs and practices are entrenched in the ‘hard’ environment. The rules that are enacted to safeguard the right to freedom of belief or to control the spill-over effects of religious practices belong in the ‘soft’ environment.

The ‘federal character’ clauses of the 1999 Constitution are part of the ‘soft’ environment, the ‘hard’ but interlaced parts being Nigeria’s ethno-religious diversity, the habitual politicization of the fault-lines (including the habit of milking the fault lines for personal, sectional, or political gain), and the all too frequent tendency to equate personal foibles and sectional preferences with either the will of God or with the universal notions of truth and reason! At the same time, the laws and the policies that are enacted from time to time to ensure just, non-controversial, implementation of the Constitution’s federal character provisions and to manage Nigeria’s diversity belong in the ‘soft’ environment.

## **Contending reform perspectives**

Explaining shifts in service standards over time requires the application of sharp analytic tools, and possibly, a theory that can be tested against empirical evidence. While there are grand ideas regarding the role which the typical state is properly and best suited to perform, there is, up to now, no empirically grounded theory of public service reform or improvement. As noted by Boyne, et al,

“When viewed ... from the service improvement perspective the public management reform agenda has moved faster than academic theory and evidence. Despite calls for evidence-based policy and practice ... few of the policies that have been adopted have been underpinned by a clear causal logic or a body of supportive empirical results” (Boyne, Entwistle, and Ashworth, 2010:2).

To be sure, the public administration or management literature has identified at least three perspectives with reform implications. The first is the structuralist, “development administration”, or maximalist perspective. The second is the minimalist, neoliberal model that touts the ability of the Invisible Hand to correct “state failure” and to ensure efficient allocation of resources. The third is the “corporatization” ideal type which sees a role for the state but insists on the state applying private sector techniques to right its own wrongs. None of these models can by itself predict the success or failure of public service improvement plans, talk less of explaining why a specific reform yielded high dividends in one situation but failed woefully in another.

### **Maximalist perspective in public sector reform**

John Maynard Keynes commanded great influence in policy circles during the latter part of the Great Depression and after the Second World War. His advocacy of state intervention was favourably received not only in the Western industrialized economies, but also in the newly emerging states. Thus, besides the Harrod-Domar formulation which regarded fixed capital investment as the critical variable in economic growth, Keynes’ General Theory exerted considerable influence on the development models and planning techniques adopted in the developing countries of Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa.

Keynes holds that private sector decisions sometimes trigger inefficient macro-economic outcomes. To lessen the impact of “market failure”, he advocates public sector intervention, including the adoption of *monetary* policy by the central bank to control the money supply and to check inflation, and *fiscal* policy by the government to stimulate economic activity and employment in slack times (Keynes, 1995:322).

For the developing economies of Africa, the absence of an entrepreneurial middle class further increased the appeal of Keynesian economics. The prevailing view in the region was that without the state leading the way and lessening the dependence on export of primary commodities<sup>2</sup>, neither growth nor self-sustaining development was achievable.

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<sup>2</sup> The belief that developing countries stand to gain from manufacturing rather than primary commodities was strengthened by the Presbisch-Singer hypothesis which holds that economies totally dependent on export of primary commodities are liable to be held back by constantly deteriorating terms of trade. Industrialized

Where the state is assigned a significant developmental role and entrusted with a steadily rising proportion of national resources, reform efforts would naturally target the capacity of executing agencies—notably, the capacity to engineer growth, to manage large-scale innovation, and to cope with the traditional forces’ resistance to change. Yet, simple as the task would first appear, it could not be undertaken without adequate theoretical guidance. At least four schools of thought proffered different solutions to the reform challenges encountered by post-colonial “development administration” regimes (Ilchman, 1965:315; Riggs and Weidner, 1963; Balogun, 1975; Anyebe, 2017).

The first two (the structural-innovative, and the structural-consolidative) schools responded directly to the immediate post-independence challenge, that is, the challenge of how to manage the “revolution of rising expectations”. The last two (the integral-consolidative, and the integral-innovative) schools were ahead of their time, more so, as it is only in later years that public management scholars and practitioners began to address the questions raised by the two schools (notably, the questions whether the state has any role in development, and, if so, what changes it needs to make to acquit itself creditably).

The first, the structural-innovative, school proceeds from the premise that the post-colonial public administration starts grossly disadvantaged. As a modern institution with external roots, the public service lacks the wherewithal (including the expertise) to tackle the mammoth challenges facing its immediate society. Its institutions are liable to be too immature to uphold the underlying values of integrity, professionalism, competence, and efficiency, and too fragile to withstand internal and external cross-pressures.

Still, and in contrast to the “unbalanced” administrative reform strategy favoured by the gradualists, that is, by the adherents of the structural-consolidation school, the structural-innovative school argues that anything less than a Big Push in the directions of ‘administrative reform’ or “administrative improvement” would simply not do. From the radical school’s standpoint, shortage (or even total lack) of “executive capacity” was no reason to abandon plans for rapid and wholesale modernization of post-colonial administrative systems. As the structural-innovative argument

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economies, by contrast, are not so handicapped since the income-elasticity of the demand for their manufactured items tends to be high relative to the demand for primary commodities. The hypothesis did not reckon much with the contribution of the services sector.

goes, the challenges facing the typical post-colonial society were of such a magnitude as to require wholesale and across-agency assimilation of innovative structures, processes, techniques, and competencies.

Overall, structural innovation suffers from one major limitation—the predominant focus on *structures* to the neglect of the socio-cultural environment in which these structures are to function, along with the failure to interrogate the mindset, or examine the predisposition, of leaders towards the structures. The omissions explain the mixed results of the experiments in structural innovation across countries and regions. Whereas post-colonial efforts at public service modernization yielded substantial dividends for the Asian Tigers and the Little Dragons, the same attempts merely set the stage for economic decline and, inevitably, downsizing, and structural adjustment, in many African countries. We shall return to this later.

For their own part, adherents of the structural consolidation strategy do not dispute the submission that the challenges facing the post-colonial societies were such that required the adaptation and even modernization of the administrative systems.

However, from the structural-consolidation standpoint, there is a limit to the development, and therefore, innovative capacity, of newly emerging public administration systems. Such systems lacked the skills needed to respond effectively to complex socio-economic development challenges. Large-scale importation of skills was not a viable option, as this would place further pressure on the already scarce resources and deny local personnel the opportunity to “learn by doing”. Besides, the skills gaps would always manifest as the public service imports the techniques and “knowhow” that indigenous staff could neither fully master nor instantly apply.

The structural-consolidation school is not totally averse to innovation, but it counsels caution in embarking on the project. Instead of relying on the indiscriminate importation and large-scale diffusion of modern management techniques and processes, the school advises relatively young public administration systems to invest their limited resources on targeted innovation projects—meaning, projects with minimum implementation risks and maximum overall pay-off. In place of the “balanced”, across-the-board, innovation strategy advocated by the structural-innovative school, structural consolidation canvasses support for change in a few but critical institutions, particularly, central coordination organs with cross-cutting



mandates. Examples of such institutions are the Ministry of Finance, the Central Bank, Establishments and Human Resources Management Departments, as well as Audit, Accounting, Organization and Methods Units.

In effect, structural consolidation warns against going beyond strengthening selected, improvement-leveraging, agencies and proceeding to an all-out modernization of the entire public sector. Among the risks in moving hastily towards a comprehensive public sector innovation/reform are:

- failure of institutional “heart transplants” (as reflected in the sometimes weird or bizarre behaviour of Western institutions in non-Western developing societies);
- erosion of local institutions’ confidence, due to weak “absorptive capacity” and widening performance gaps;
- stacking of ‘paper plans’ (or plans launched with fanfare but with little prospect of implementation);
- accumulation of “white elephants” (projects that consume lots of scarce resources but bring little productivity or welfare gains); and
- perpetual reliance on foreign aid and expertise.

Appealing as the gradualist argument might sound, it too is badly flawed. For a start, its fixation on *structures* prevents it from appreciating the impact of the environment and of the role of leaders in shaping both the environment and the structures. Besides, the ‘unbalanced’ development model ignores the fact that, as an all-embracing exercise, reform has the best chance of succeeding where its underlying values and messages are imbibed, nay, internalized, by all the actors.

### **Integral-consolidation model: the advent of minimalism**

The second perspective in public sector reform goes beyond acknowledging the obstacles to successful transfer of “management technology”, to questioning the logic underpinning “development administration” as a concept. In a twist of irony, it was a leading public administration scholar, F.W. Riggs, who aimed the first salvo at the discipline, and gave its opponents in the neoliberal camp the opening and the ammunition needed to mount a sustained attack on the very essence of organized government.

Riggs proceeds from the methodology and underlying assumptions of micro-economic analysis (supplemented with the techniques of multi-variate and multi-disciplinary analysis) to argue the proposition that, at least, in developing societies, the tendency would be towards the concentration of power in the hands of the bureaucratic class. In contrast to other social institutions, the bureaucracy enjoyed undue advantage—including privileged access to technology, information, and organizational capacity. It is this ‘heavy weight of bureaucratic power’ that accounts for ‘ego-centric normlessness’ (a euphemism for corruption and abuse of power).

In his 1964 book, Riggs starts by grouping societies under three broad headings—the fused, the refracted, and the “prismatic” (Riggs, 1964). The fused ideal-type corresponds to traditional, agrarian societies—that is, societies in which one structure exercises multiple mandates and performs several different functions simultaneously. The authority of the traditional ruler, for instance, extends beyond law-making and includes law enforcement, and adjudication. He owns the land and the wealth that flows from it. By virtue of his presumed proximity to the gods (and considering other supernatural attributes he is invested with), he is entitled to parts of animals, like the head of a sheep, or the thigh of a chicken, offered for sacrifice by his subjects<sup>3</sup>.

The lack of specialization in a typically fused society contrasts sharply with the division of labour in modern, refracted societies. As the economy of the traditional society grows, the chances are that new occupational groups (with specialized capital formation knowledge and skills) will emerge to challenge the monopoly of the ruling class. Over time, the power to legislate will be separated from the authority to execute, and both from the judicature. Separation of Powers may have reached its apogee with Baron de Montesquieu’s tract of 1748<sup>4</sup>, but the refraction process began much earlier.

Societies making the transition from “agraria” to “industria”, as Riggs termed both, fall under the “prismatic” heading. As a society suspended between *tradition* and *modernity*, the prismatic ideal type combines the best (and the worst) of both worlds. On the one hand, its social structures

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<sup>3</sup> See Fortes, Meyer, and Evans-Pritchard, E.E. 1940. *African Political Systems*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; and Daryll Forde. 1951. *The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples of South-Western Nigeria*. London: International African Institute; and Isaac Schapera, 1967, *Government and Politics in Tribal Societies* (C.A. Watts)

<sup>4</sup> On the Spirit of the Laws, 1748

are rooted in the past, meaning those holding positions of authority would continue to be held in awe and treated as gods incarnate. On the other hand, the modern institutions that the authority figures inherit from the colonial rulers require the former to eschew old ways (like tribalism, clannishness, sectionalism; acceptance of bribes and gratifications which, as “tributes”, were formerly regarded lawful; fictive thinking and evasion of responsibility; lax attitude to work and to time; tolerance of mediocrity and slippages). At the same time, the new age obliges the rulers (and officials) to imbibe and personify “modern” values (among them, those of reason, universalism, objectivity, professionalism, accountability, non-partisanship, loyalty to the state, “scientific management”, and unending search for perfection)<sup>5</sup>.

As products of a split personality, the prismatic society’s public administration systems cannot but be pulled in two different directions at the same time—that of tradition and that of change. In Riggs’ view, it is well-nigh impossible for public officials in prismatic societies to break free of traditional hold and implement change that is beneficial to the economy and to the people at large. Riggs attributes the “egocentric normlessness” and “administrative prodigality” to the imbalance between the public sector, on the one hand, and the rest of society (including the political establishment and the private sector) on the other<sup>6</sup>. The bureaucracy may be staffed by individuals from traditional backgrounds, but, in Riggs’ view, it has a monopoly of management knowledge and skills, and exercises near total control on modern technology and means of communication. The rest of society, by contrast, is not only intimidated by the power and methods of the bureaucracy but lacks the means to hold the later to account.

Unfortunately, instead of applying the skills (as well as modern technologies, processes, and techniques) acquired on the job to serve society, public officials are likely to divert these capacities to personal or sectional ends. In other words, the monopoly that the public sector enjoys (over skills, knowledge, and application of modern processes and

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<sup>5</sup> The values differentiating modern from traditional societies are encapsulated in Talcott Parsons’ “pattern variables”, that is, collectivity versus particularistic orientation, affective-neutrality versus personal or ethnic bias, etc. See Talcott Parsons. 1951. *The Social System*. Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press; and Parsons, Talcott, and E.A. Shils (eds). 1959. *Toward a General Theory of Action*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

<sup>6</sup> Riggs, F. W. 1964. *Administration in Developing Countries: The Theory of Prismatic Society*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.

technology) is likely to be turned into a personal advantage rather than deployed to society's (or the economy's) overall benefit.

Convinced that the "heavy weight of bureaucratic power" breeds nothing but corruption (and inefficiency), Riggs cautions against investing in the expansion and modernization of the public sector. The sector is, according to him, already too powerful, and needs to be caged. This is the background to the *balanced* social growth strategy that he forcefully argues and stoutly defends. His prismatic theory basically gives up on the feasibility and likelihood of success of public service reform projects. The theory views public officials as robots endlessly pulled against their will from 'industria' to 'agraria' and conversely.

The notion of a robotic official is contrary to our understanding of human nature, especially, our knowledge of human freewill. Even against the backdrop of historical determinism, the human being is endowed with the capacity to choose between right and wrong and between rational and irrational courses of action.

As it so happens, Riggs' linkage of bureaucratic power with laxity and corruption in "prismatic" societies is not borne out by the experience of the Asian Tigers, the Little Dragons, and the lone African Panther, Mauritius. The reason for the gap between the "prismatic" theory and the Asian reality is not difficult to fathom—the theory's failure to account for the role of leadership in championing the cause of public sector reform, and in viewing public service improvement as a major springboard to development.

## **Public choice theory**

Like Riggs, adherents of public choice theory proceed from the underlying assumption that the tools of economic analysis are directly applicable to the study of politics, and by extension, to the analysis of public policy. Contributors to public choice literature fall under two broad headings—the mainstream, neo-classical and the neo-Marxist schools.

Seizing upon the individual quest for maximization of returns on outlays, mainstream contributors to the public choice theory hold that the best (and most rational) policy option is that which empowers the individual to take decisions on resource allocation (Buchanan and Tullock, 1962; Olson, 1965). The Invisible Hand, they insist, is to be preferred to the meddling, clumsy, and irrational hand of the state leviathan. The free market is thus

perceived as a better method of satisfying human needs and aspirations than reliance on government<sup>7</sup>.

The neo-Marxist school does not dispute the fact that the individual plays a key role either in economics or politics. However, while downplaying the historical determinist viewpoint in the Marxian dialectic, the neo-Marxist scholars reinterpret the public choice's concept of individualism, arguing that the individual most frequently finds it 'rational' to suppress egoistic impulses and to rely on *group* identity to pursue his own interest. Besides, rather than leave her/his fate in the Invisible Hand of the market, the individual would network with others in the same underclass status, and, in the process, get the now reconstructed state to redress inequities.

Public choice theory springs directly from market theory. Like the latter, it employs economic analytic tools and methodology in the study of politics and policy sciences. It also highlights the limitations of the democratic process—emphasizing instead the role of market competition in “correcting imperfections” in state-led resource allocation systems and mitigating the risks of “state failure” (Niskanen, 2017; and Black, 1987).

Public choice theory has been touted as a “powerful new paradigm” on the proper scope and limits of government (Peter Self, 1993). However, it is hardly “a new paradigm”, let alone a “powerful” one. At the most, what the so-called mainstream scholars have done is to employ the rhetoric of change and give right-wing conservatism a semblance of academic respectability. With neo-classical economics as a springboard, public choice theorists elevate Thatcherism and Reaganomics to the status of economic and political science. In the process, they committed fatal conceptual errors.

The main contentions of public choice theory are as follows:

- (a) Political behaviour is analogous to economic behaviour;
- (b) Understanding both (political and economic behaviour) requires the application of a common methodology—the methodology of micro-economics;
- (c) The individual (rather than the group or society of which s/he is part) is the only unit and object of analysis;
- (d) The ‘selfish gene’ in the individual makes him a rational, economic being—one who looks out for her/himself always, and whose

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<sup>7</sup> Friedrich A. von Hayek, 1994, *The Road to Serfdom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press)

worship of “self-interest” neither threatens nor cancels out the interest of others;

- (e) The self-seeking individual is more rational than the state, even though the latter most frequently pretends to be ‘rational’ by hiding behind altruism, or to be precise, false altruism;
- (f) Democracy (based on majority rule) is an illusion, in so far as the method applied in obtaining the mandate of this majority is, at best, suspect, at worst, grossly irrational;
- (g) When decisions are taken *collectively*, there is plenty of room for mischief-making—that is, for oligarchic monopoly of access to information, for the exploitation of mass ignorance and/or apathy, for misuse/abuse of power and of bureaucratic authority, and for gross misallocation of resources and corruption;
- (h) In light of the ‘imperfections’ in the state system, the less the decision-making power that is entrusted to it the better for the cause of ‘rationality’ and development;
- (i) By the same token, the market (made up of ‘rational’, ‘economic’, and ‘competitive’ individuals) should have an increasing share of resource allocation power.

## Rebuttal to minimalism

Is there any merit in the argument that what the world needs is less government and more robust private sector leadership in resource allocation?

Public choice theory’s accent on individualism may appear seductive on the surface. Its leaning towards the individual will particularly recommend it to freedom and liberty enthusiasts. On close examination, however, fierce contest between the meek majority and the ruthless minority is all but certain to end in favor of the latter. The social Darwinist tendencies that follow will, by restricting opportunities for participation and inclusiveness, defeat the cause of good governance as championed by scholars and development partners (Mothusi, 2020; European Union, 2015; De Vries, 2013).

As regards the public choice theory’s equation of political with economic behaviour, reason and empirical evidence refute this hypothesis<sup>8</sup>. That

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<sup>8</sup> M J Balogun. 2001. “Performance Improvement and Customer Satisfaction as a Focus of Public Service Reform: Trends and Challenges in Africa”. *Public Administration Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 3, Fall.