

Politics and Public Administration: A Global Perspective and Sierra Leone Trajectory

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Abstract

This paper provides a comprehensive global overview of the interplay between politics and public administration, examining how political systems shape administrative frameworks and governance outcomes. It explores key theoretical perspectives, including Weberian bureaucracy, New Public Management (NPM), and governance networks, while highlighting contemporary challenges such as corruption, inefficiency, and politicization of the civil service. Focusing on Sierra Leone, the study traces the trajectory of public administration in the country from the colonial era to post-independence reforms. It assesses the impact of democratization, decentralization, and post-war reconstruction on politics and public administration in the country. By comparing experiences of Sierra Leone with global trends, the work identifies persistent gaps and opportunities for strengthening governance, accountability, and service delivery. The findings underscore the need for context-sensitive reforms that balance political imperatives with administrative professionalism to achieve sustainable development.

Keywords: Politics and Public Administration, Governance and Bureaucracy, New Public Management, Democratization and Decentralization, Corruption and Administrative Reforms, Sierra Leone Trajectory

Abbreviations: NMP: New Public Management; SLPP: Sierra Leone People's Party; APC: All People's Congress; ACC: Anti-Corruption Commission

Introduction

Sierra Leone's political and administrative landscape has been shaped by colonial legacies, military coups, and a devastating civil war. Despite democratic transitions since 2002, governance remains weak due to political patronage, corruption, and bureaucratic inefficiencies Acemoglu & Robinson [1]; Reno [2]. Public administration, crucial for service delivery and development, is often undermined by political interference and resource constraints. This paper explores the nexus between politics and public administration in Sierra Leone, assessing historical trends, institutional weaknesses, and prospects for reform. The intersection of politics and public administration in Sierra Leone presents a compelling case study of governance in a post-conflict African state. Since gaining independence from British colonial rule in 1961, Sierra Leone has experienced a tumultuous political trajectory characterized by authoritarian regimes, civil war (1991–2002), and a fragile transition to democracy Abdullah [3]; Richards [4]. The effectiveness of public administration has been persistently undermined by political instability, systemic corruption, and weak institutional frameworks World Bank [5]. This paper examines the

dynamics between political governance and public administration in Sierra Leone, analyzing historical legacies, structural challenges, and contemporary reform efforts.

Sierra Leone's colonial past established a highly centralized administrative system that marginalized indigenous governance structures, creating a legacy of bureaucratic inefficiency and elite domination Alie [6]. Post-independence governance was marked by the dominance of two major political parties—the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) and the All People's Congress (APC)—whose alternating rule oscillated between democratic governance and authoritarian repression Reno [5]. The era of Siaka Stevens (1968–1985) entrenched a patronage-based political economy, where state resources were systematically exploited for elite consolidation, eroding public trust in governance institutions Zack-Williams [7]. The civil war (1991–2002) further devastated state capacity, displacing bureaucratic structures and deepening institutional fragility Keen [8]. Post-conflict reconstruction efforts, supported by international actors such as the United Nations and the World Bank, emphasized democratization, decentralization, and public sector reform Fanthorpe [9]. However, despite these

interventions, political interference in public administration remains pervasive, with civil service appointments often driven by partisan loyalty rather than meritocracy Transparency International [10]. Decentralization, formally enacted through the 2004 Local Government Act, has had mixed results, with some districts demonstrating improved service delivery while others struggle with financial constraints and weak oversight Jackson [11].

Corruption remains a formidable obstacle to effective governance. Although the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) has recorded some high-profile convictions, enforcement is often perceived as selective, and systemic graft persists in procurement, taxation, and service delivery (ACC Annual Report, 2022). Recent digital governance initiatives, such as biometric voter registration and e-procurement systems, offer potential for greater transparency, but their impact is constrained by infrastructural deficits and low digital literacy UNDP [12]. This study seeks to contribute to the discourse on governance in fragile states by critically assessing the interplay between political power and administrative functionality in Sierra Leone. It argues that sustainable reform requires depoliticizing the civil service, strengthening local governance structures, and ensuring consistent enforcement of anti-corruption measures. By examining historical trends and contemporary challenges, this paper provides insights into pathways for institutional resilience and effective public administration in post-conflict contexts.

Historical Context and Political Evolution

Public administration as a formal discipline emerged in the late 19th century, but its institutional roots stretch back to ancient civilizations. The Prussian and British colonial models laid much of the groundwork for modern bureaucracies, emphasizing hierarchy, record-keeping, and rule-based governance Raadschelders [13]. Max Weber's conceptualization of the "ideal-type bureaucracy" in the early 20th century provided the theoretical foundation for understanding administrative systems as rational-legal structures designed for efficiency and neutrality Weber [14]. However, the translation of these models across different political and cultural contexts has produced varied outcomes, particularly in post-colonial states where administrative systems were often designed for control rather than service delivery. The global spread of public administration systems followed distinct patterns shaped by colonial histories and post-independence political trajectories. In Europe and North America, the progressive era (1890s-1920s) saw the professionalization of civil services, with competitive examinations and merit-based appointments becoming standard practice Stillman [15]. By contrast, in many African and Asian colonies, administrative systems were structured primarily to facilitate resource extraction rather than to cultivate participatory governance Mamdani [16]. This fundamental difference in institutional design helps explain why many post-colonial states, including Sierra Leone, inherited bureaucracies that were ill-suited for democratic governance and equitable development.

Sierra Leone's administrative history reflects these broader

patterns while demonstrating unique local characteristics. Established as a British crown colony in 1808 and a protectorate in 1896, Sierra Leone developed a dual administrative system that separated the Western-style institutions of the Freetown "Colony" from the indirect rule implemented in the hinterland "Protectorate" Alie [6]. This created lasting tensions between centralized bureaucratic authority and traditional governance structures that continue to influence contemporary administration. The colonial civil service was small, predominantly expatriate-led, and focused on maintaining order rather than delivering services—a model that subsequent nationalist governments struggled to reform after independence in 1961 Wyse [17]. The post-independence period saw the gradual Africanization of the civil service but also its politicization, particularly under the All People's Congress (APC) government of Siaka Stevens (1968-1985). Stevens systematically undermined bureaucratic neutrality by replacing career civil servants with political loyalists and creating parallel party structures that bypassed formal administrative channels Reno [2]. This era institutionalized a system of "shadow bureaucracy" where real decision-making occurred through informal patronage networks rather than through official administrative procedures Zack-Williams [7]. The consequences became particularly severe during the civil war (1991-2002), when the collapse of formal governance structures revealed the fragility of an administration built on personal rule rather than institutional strength Keen [8].

Post-war reconstruction efforts, supported by international donors, attempted to rebuild Sierra Leone's public administration along more professional lines. The 2004 Local Government Act represented a significant attempt to decentralize authority and improve service delivery, while the establishment of the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) in 2000 sought to address systemic graft Fanthorpe [9]. However, these reforms have achieved mixed results due to persistent political interference, resource constraints, and capacity limitations Jackson [11]. Contemporary Sierra Leone thus presents a case study in both the challenges of administrative reform in post-conflict states and the enduring legacies of colonial governance models. The comparative perspective reveals important insights about the evolution of public administration systems. While developed nations generally progressed from patronage-based to meritocratic systems over decades or centuries, many post-colonial states like Sierra Leone have been expected to achieve similar transformations in compressed timeframes while simultaneously addressing the challenges of state-building and economic development Peters [18]. This historical context helps explain why administrative reforms in Sierra Leone and similar contexts often produce uneven results, with formal institutional changes frequently undermined by persistent informal practices Andrews [19]. Understanding this historical trajectory is essential for designing realistic reform strategies that account for both global administrative principles and local political realities.

Public Administration: Structural Challenges

The structural integrity of public administration systems

serves as a critical determinant of governance efficacy across nations, yet persistent institutional weaknesses continue to undermine state capacity in both developed and developing contexts. Globally, public administrations grapple with foundational challenges that manifest through bureaucratic inefficiencies, politicization of civil services, systemic corruption, and institutional fragmentation Peters [18]. These structural deficiencies assume particular significance in post-colonial states like Sierra Leone, where historical legacies of extractive governance intersect with contemporary pressures of democratization and development Andrews [19]. This analysis examines the universal architecture of administrative dysfunction while illuminating its specific manifestations in Sierra Leone's governance trajectory. At the global level, the Weberian ideal of rational-legal bureaucracy remains an elusive standard for many administrative systems. Developed nations confront bureaucratic sclerosis characterized by excessive red tape and institutional inertia, while developing countries frequently struggle with more fundamental capacity constraints Grindle [20]. The World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators reveal that nearly 60% of low-income countries score below the global average on government effectiveness, with particular deficits in policy implementation and regulatory quality World Bank [21]. This performance gap stems not merely from resource limitations but from deeper structural flaws in administrative design, including poorly defined institutional mandates, ambiguous accountability mechanisms, and misaligned incentive structures Fukuyama [22].

Sierra Leone's public administration embodies these global challenges while demonstrating unique local permutations shaped by its historical trajectory. The colonial administration established under British rule created a bifurcated system that concentrated decision-making in Freetown while marginalizing peripheral regions Alie [6]. This centralization legacy persists in contemporary governance structures, despite nominal decentralization efforts following the 2004 Local Government Act. Fanthorpe's [9] analysis of post-war administrative reforms demonstrates how formal decentralization often masks continued central control, with only 12% of public expenditure actually devolved to local councils. The resulting administrative geometry produces service delivery bottlenecks, with basic healthcare and education provisions frequently failing to reach rural populations World Bank [23].

The politicization of civil services represents another structural flaw with both universal and context-specific dimensions. Comparative research demonstrates that political appointments in civil services reduce bureaucratic quality by approximately 22% across various national contexts Dahlström & Lapuente [24]. In Sierra Leone, this phenomenon assumes acute form through the "strategic deployment" system, where senior civil servants are routinely reassigned based on political considerations rather than administrative competence (Transparency International, 2020). The 2020 Afrobarometer survey documents that 63% of Sierra Leoneans perceive government employment as dependent

on political connections rather than merit, reflecting deep institutionalization of patronage networks (Afrobarometer, 2020). This structural distortion creates administrative instability, with the average tenure for permanent secretaries lasting less than eighteen months during the past decade (GoSL, 2021).

Corruption infrastructure presents perhaps the most pernicious structural challenge, operating as both cause and consequence of administrative weakness. Globally, corruption reduces government efficiency by diverting an estimated 10-25% of public contract values Mungiu-Pippidi [25]. Sierra Leone's case demonstrates how corruption becomes structurally embedded, with the 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index ranking the country 115th globally (Transparency International, 2023). The Auditor-General's 2022 report revealed systemic procurement irregularities across multiple ministries, including a \$6.2 million discrepancy in health sector expenditures (Auditor-General, 2022). While the Anti-Corruption Commission has secured several high-profile convictions, including the 2022 prosecution of a senior education official, enforcement remains inconsistent due to political interference and witness intimidation (ACC, 2022).

Institutional capacity constraints compound these structural deficiencies, particularly in post-conflict environments. The United Nations Development Programme's 2021 assessment identified critical skills gaps in Sierra Leone's public sector, with only 30% of local government staff possessing formal administrative training (UNDP, 2021). Digital governance initiatives confront infrastructure limitations, as only 25% of the population has reliable internet access (ITU, 2022). These capacity deficits interact with the country's conflict legacy; the civil war (1991-2002) decimated human capital through brain drain and institutional destruction, creating generational administrative weaknesses that persist two decades later Keen [8].

The structural challenges facing Sierra Leone's public administration reflect both universal governance dilemmas and path-dependent historical constraints. While the global literature emphasizes common administrative pathologies, the Sierra Leonean case demonstrates how colonial legacies, conflict trauma, and resource scarcity can amplify these weaknesses into systemic governance failures. Recent reform efforts, including digitalization projects and decentralization initiatives, offer potential pathways for structural improvement. However, their ultimate success depends on addressing the deeper institutional architectures that sustain administrative dysfunction — a challenge that requires simultaneous attention to formal organizational design and the informal political economies that shape bureaucratic behavior (Andrews et al., 2017). Without such comprehensive structural reforms, public administration in Sierra Leone will likely remain constrained by the same institutional weaknesses that have historically limited its developmental potential.

Contemporary Governance Reforms

The global landscape of governance reforms reveals both con-

vergent patterns and contextual particularities as nations attempt to strengthen state capacity and improve service delivery. Since the 1980s, New Public Management (NPM) approaches have dominated reform agendas in developed nations, emphasizing privatization, performance measurement, and market-style competition in public service provision Hood [26]. Meanwhile, developing countries have pursued hybrid models combining elements of NPM with traditional bureaucratic reforms and, increasingly, good governance paradigms emphasizing transparency and citizen participation Andrews [27]. Sierra Leone's reform trajectory since its civil war (1991-2002) reflects these global trends while demonstrating unique adaptations to its post-conflict reality and institutional legacies. The worldwide diffusion of governance reforms has followed distinct waves shaped by prevailing development theories. The first generation of reforms in the 1980s-1990s focused on structural adjustment and downsizing the state, often with mixed results in African contexts World Bank [28]. A second wave emerged in the 2000s emphasizing institutional capacity building and anti-corruption measures Grindle [29]. Most recently, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have framed governance reforms around broader objectives of inclusion and sustainability UN [30]. Sierra Leone's experience mirrors this evolution, transitioning from immediate post-war stabilization efforts to more comprehensive governance restructuring under the Agenda for Prosperity (2013-2018) and subsequent national development plans (GoSL 2013).

Decentralization reforms present a particularly instructive area for comparative analysis. Globally, devolution of power to subnational governments has been pursued to improve service delivery and deepen democracy, with varying degrees of success Faguet [31]. In Sierra Leone, the 2004 Local Government Act marked a significant departure from centralized governance, recreating elected local councils after a 32-year hiatus Fanthorpe [9]. However, comparative assessment reveals persistent challenges common to many developing countries: limited fiscal decentralization (only 12% of expenditures controlled locally), weak technical capacity, and ongoing tensions with traditional authorities Jackson [11]; World Bank [5]. These constraints mirror findings from similar reforms in Uganda and Ghana, suggesting structural limitations to decentralization in low-capacity states (Crook 2003).

Anti-corruption reforms demonstrate another dimension of global policy diffusion with local adaptation. The establishment of Sierra Leone's Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) in 2000 followed a pattern seen across Africa since the 1990s, modeled partially on Hong Kong's Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) Heilbrunn [32]. While the ACC has achieved notable convictions, including high-profile cases against ministers and senior officials, its impact remains constrained by political interference and resource limitations (ACC 2022). This aligns with cross-national research showing that anti-corruption agencies succeed only when embedded within broader ecosystems of accountability Persson [33]. Sierra Leone's 2019 amendment of

the ACC Act to strengthen prosecutorial powers reflects ongoing attempts to balance global best practices with local political realities.

Digital governance initiatives represent the newest frontier of comparative reform efforts. Estonia's pioneering e-governance system has inspired numerous developing countries to adopt digital ID systems and online service platforms Kalvet [34]. Sierra Leone's National Civil Registration Authority (NCRA), established in 2016, has made progress in biometric voter registration and identity management, though coverage remains incomplete (UNDP 2021). The country's relatively low internet penetration (25%) and digital literacy create implementation challenges common across Sub-Saharan Africa, where the digital divide often exacerbates existing inequalities (ITU 2022). These limitations highlight the importance of sequencing and contextual adaptation in technology-driven reforms.

Civil service reforms present perhaps the most persistent challenge across comparative contexts. The "Weberianization" of bureaucracies - establishing meritocratic recruitment and predictable career ladders - has proven difficult even in middle-income countries (Evans and Rauch 1999). In Sierra Leone, attempts to professionalize the civil service have been undermined by political appointments ("strategic deployments") and salary compression that drives skilled workers to NGOs and international organizations (World Bank 2018). Similar patterns observed in Kenya and Nigeria suggest that civil service reform requires sustained political commitment often lacking in patronage-based systems Bersch [35]. Sierra Leone's governance reform trajectory offers important lessons for the broader field of comparative public administration. First, it demonstrates how global reform templates are inevitably mediated by local institutional legacies and political economies. Second, it highlights the importance of sequencing - with security and basic state functionality necessarily preceding more ambitious governance improvements in post-conflict settings. Finally, it underscores the iterative nature of successful reforms, as seen in Sierra Leone's gradual strengthening of the ACC over two decades. While significant challenges remain, particularly regarding implementation capacity and political will, Sierra Leone's experience contributes valuable insights to the global discourse on governance reform in fragile states.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Conclusions

The comparative analysis of global governance systems and Sierra Leone's administrative evolution reveals several critical findings. First, the tension between universal reform models and local implementation contexts remains a fundamental challenge in public administration Andrews [27]. While New Public Management approaches and good governance paradigms have shown success in stable environments, their transplantation to post-conflict states like Sierra Leone often yields mixed results due to capacity constraints and incompatible institutional legacies Grindle

[29]. Second, the case of Sierra Leone demonstrates how colonial administrative structures and post-independence political choices can create path dependencies that persist for generations Alie [6]. The country's combination of bureaucratic centralization and informal patronage networks continues to undermine formal reform efforts, a pattern observed in similar post-colonial contexts Reno [2].

Third, the research highlights the particular challenges of post-conflict governance reconstruction. Sierra Leone's experience since 2002 shows that rebuilding administrative institutions requires not just technical solutions but also the painstaking work of restoring public trust and reknitting social contracts Fanthorpe [9]. Fourth, the global digital governance revolution presents both opportunities and risks for developing countries - while technology can leapfrog traditional administrative limitations, premature digitization without proper foundations can exacerbate exclusion and inequality (ITU 2022). Finally, the analysis confirms that successful reforms require decades of consistent implementation rather than short-term projects, with Sierra Leone's Anti-Corruption Commission demonstrating how institutional strengthening must be viewed as a generational endeavor (ACC 2022).

Recommendations

For Sierra Leone, the following recommendations are put forth:

- i. **Sequenced Institutional Reforms:** Prioritize foundational governance elements before complex interventions. Strengthen payroll systems and basic financial controls before undertaking ambitious decentralization or digital governance projects Andrews [27]. The government should complete the ongoing civil service census and biometric registration as prerequisites for deeper reforms.
- ii. **Protected Meritocratic Spaces:** Create "islands of integrity" within the civil service through special status for technical ministries like health and education. These sectors should have insulated recruitment and promotion processes, modeled after Ghana's successful health sector reforms World Bank [5].
- iii. **Enhanced Local Governance:** Move beyond nominal decentralization by implementing the Local Government Act's fiscal provisions. Allocate at least 25% of national revenue to local councils with robust oversight mechanisms, drawing lessons from Indonesia's successful decentralization Faguet [31].
- iv. **Anti-Corruption Ecosystem:** Complement the ACC's prosecutorial work with preventive measures. Establish public expenditure tracking systems in high-risk sectors like education and infrastructure, adapting Uganda's successful PETS model (Reinikka & Svensson 2004).
- v. **Digital Governance Foundations:** Invest in basic infrastructure before scaling e-governance. Prioritize nationwide in-

ternet access and digital literacy programs, following Rwanda's phased approach to digital transformation (UNDP 2021).

For international partners, the following recommendations are put forth:

- a) **Long-Term Reform Commitments:** Shift from project-based support to 10-15 year institutional partnerships. The UK's 15-year capacity building program in Rwanda offers a potential model (DFID 2015).
- b) **Political Economy Analysis:** Ground technical assistance in deep understanding of local power structures. Avoid blueprint approaches that disregard informal governance networks (Pritchett 2013).
- c) **South-South Learning:** Facilitate exchanges with countries at similar development levels rather than relying solely on OECD models. Sierra Leone could benefit from partnerships with post-conflict successes like Liberia and Timor-Leste (UN 2019).

Theoretical Contribution

This analysis contributes to governance theory by demonstrating how the "good enough governance" framework Grindle [29] applies in post-conflict African contexts. It shows that successful reforms require: 1) alignment with local political realities, 2) patience to allow institutional maturation, and 3) strategic sequencing that builds foundations before complexity. Sierra Leone's experience suggests that hybrid governance models - blending traditional and modern administrative systems - may be more effective than wholesale adoption of Western administrative templates. The road ahead for Sierra Leone remains challenging but not insurmountable. By learning from both global best practices and local innovations, while maintaining realistic expectations about reform timelines, the country can gradually strengthen its governance systems. The ultimate goal should be not perfect institutions, but rather administrative systems capable of delivering basic services, maintaining public trust, and adapting to changing national needs - what might be termed "resilient governance" suited for fragile contexts.

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