

POLITICAL REFORM, SOCIAL CHANGE, AND STABILITY IN THE AFRICAN SAHEL

LEONARDO A. VILLALÓN

Dramatic events in recent years have brought new attention to the little-studied countries of the West African Sahel. This large research project of UF's Sahel Research Group, funded by a grant from the Minerva Research Initiative, is focused on the factors affecting political stability in a set of six Sahelian countries—Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad—stretching across this arid region of West Africa. Collectively these 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 the past couple of decades 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 *jibadi* groups.

The goal of the research project to understand the points of vulnerability as well as of resilience in the region, and in particular to examine the variations in these factors among the six countries. The project undertakes this via 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 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.

In the initial phase of the project the research team, led by PI Leonardo Villalón and including three Ph.D. students in political science (Mamadou Bodian, Ibrahim Yahya Ibrahim, and Daniel Eizenga), elaborated a framework for comparative analysis of the six countries, largely influenced by our ongoing analysis of the causes of the Malian collapse. Our weekly discussions in the broader setting of the UF Sahel Research Group (sahelresearch.africa.ufl.edu/) continues to serve as a forum for refining our framework and analysis. Periodic visiting scholars from the region, as well as other invited speakers regularly contribute to this effort. Other major activities have included a 2013 conference on “The Politics of Institutional Reform in the African Sahel,” featuring distinguished scholars from all six countries. In September 2014 we sponsored a symposium on “Demography and the Challenge of Social Change in the African Sahel,” as part of a collaborative project on “Development, Security, and Climate Change in the Sahel,” in conjunction with Sciences Po (Paris) and the Université Cheikh Anta Diop (Dakar). Information on other activities of the group, and a number of working papers from the project are available on our website.

In June 2014 the research team met in Senegal to finalize plans for the

fieldwork component of the project. In the historic city of St. Louis, we co-sponsored a workshop on “Islam in the Sahel: New Trends and Local Dynamics,” in collaboration with the Centre d'Etudes des Religions of the Université Gaston Berger. In August the formal field research portion of the project was launched, initially in Senegal and Chad before moving on to include all six countries.

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 our initial 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 research in the first part of the project—underlined by developments in the region—clearly demonstrated 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 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. Our fieldwork objective is 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.

Leonardo Villalón is professor of political science and dean of the UF International Center. He is also 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.