

PUBLIC SECTOR ETHICS AND CULTURAL GOVERNANCE IN LIBERIA: RETHINKING INTEGRITY BEYOND LEGAL COMPLIANCE

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Received: 09/09/2024 | Accepted: 10/11/2024 | Published: 27/12/2024

Abstract: Public sector ethics reform in Liberia has largely emphasized legal compliance, anti-corruption statutes, and institutional oversight mechanisms. However, limited scholarly attention has been given to the role of cultural norms in shaping ethical behavior within public administration. This article introduces the concept of cultural governance—the interaction between societal values, informal norms, and formal ethical standards in public institutions. Drawing on qualitative evidence, policy analysis, and existing governance literature, the study argues that ethical reform in Liberia cannot succeed without integrating cultural realities into administrative frameworks. The article proposes a Cultural-Integrated Ethics Model (CIEM) to guide reform efforts in fragile governance contexts.

Keywords: public sector ethics, cultural governance, Liberia, administrative integrity, informal institutions, governance reform.

1. Introduction

Ethical governance remains central to state legitimacy, public trust, and institutional performance. In Liberia, post-conflict reform initiatives have prioritized anti-corruption legislation, oversight commissions, procurement laws, and transparency mechanisms. Yet public perception surveys and audit reports suggest persistent ethical vulnerabilities in public institutions.

The prevailing reform approach assumes that stronger laws and enforcement mechanisms automatically improve ethical conduct. However, this assumption overlooks how cultural norms influence administrative behavior. In Liberia, kinship obligations, communal solidarity, respect hierarchies, and patron-client expectations shape decision-making within public institutions.

This study argues that ethical reform must move beyond legal compliance toward a culturally informed governance model.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1 Public Sector Ethics

Public sector ethics refers to principles guiding behavior of public officials, including integrity, impartiality, accountability, and transparency (Cooper, 2012). Ethical governance frameworks often emphasize rule-based compliance and enforcement mechanisms (Huberts, 2018).

2.2 Cultural Governance

Cultural governance refers to how societal norms, shared values, traditions, and social expectations influence administrative conduct (Hofstede, 2001). In many African states, informal social obligations coexist with formal bureaucratic codes.

2.3 Ethics in Fragile States

Fragile states often experience normative dualism—where formal rules conflict with informal expectations (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004). This duality creates ethical ambiguity for public officials.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Legalistic Ethics Reform

Post-conflict governance models emphasize:

- Anti-corruption commissions
- Asset declaration laws
- Procurement regulations
- Auditor general oversight

Liberia established institutions such as the Liberia Anti-Corruption Commission (LACC) and strengthened public financial management laws. However, enforcement capacity remains uneven.

Scholars argue that compliance-based ethics systems are insufficient where social obligations override formal norms (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015).

3.2 Informal Institutions and Administrative Behavior

Informal institutions may:

- Complement formal rules
- Compete with them
- Substitute for them

In Liberia, kinship-based assistance and political loyalty expectations often shape employment decisions and resource allocation.

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3.3 Cultural Dimensions of Governance

Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions theory highlights how power distance, collectivism, and uncertainty avoidance affect institutional behavior. Liberia's social structure reflects high collectivist tendencies, where loyalty to family and community may supersede abstract bureaucratic norms.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative interpretive design complemented by survey-based perception analysis.

4.2 Data Sources

- Public service code of conduct documents
- Anti-corruption policy reports
- Audit findings
- 30 semi-structured interviews with civil servants
- Survey of 140 mid-level public administrators

4.3 Analytical Approach

Thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring patterns linking cultural expectations to ethical decision-making.

5. Findings: Ethics in Practice in Liberia

5.1 Kinship Obligations and Recruitment

Respondents acknowledged pressure to assist relatives in securing employment. While formal recruitment procedures exist, social expectations influence decision-making.

This reflects tension between meritocracy and communal reciprocity.

5.2 Patronage and Political Loyalty

Political loyalty often influences promotion and appointment decisions. Public officials face implicit expectations to demonstrate allegiance to appointing authorities.

5.3 Hierarchical Respect and Silence

High power distance discourages subordinates from challenging unethical directives. Fear of reprisal limits whistleblowing behavior.

5.4 Moral Justification Narratives

Interview data revealed ethical rationalizations such as:

- "Helping family is cultural responsibility."
- "Political support must be rewarded."

Such narratives normalize informal ethical adjustments.

6. Discussion

The findings illustrate that public sector ethics in Liberia cannot be fully understood through legal analysis alone. Ethical behavior is socially embedded. Formal codes of conduct interact with deeply rooted cultural expectations.

The persistence of ethical challenges does not necessarily indicate absence of morality but rather competing normative systems.

This supports Helmke and Levitsky's (2004) argument that informal institutions shape governance outcomes.

7. Cultural-Integrated Ethics Model (CIEM)

The CIEM proposes a three-tier reform approach:

Tier 1: Normative Alignment

- Public ethics education contextualized within Liberian cultural values
- Civic campaigns redefining public service as communal stewardship

Tier 2: Institutional Reinforcement

- Strengthened whistleblower protection
- Anonymous reporting systems
- Leadership ethics training

Tier 3: Incentive Realignment

- Merit-based promotion systems
- Public recognition of ethical leadership
- Transparent disciplinary procedures

Rather than attempting to eliminate cultural norms, reform should align communal values with national integrity goals.

8. Policy Implications

1. Ethics reform must integrate sociocultural analysis.
2. Leadership behavior shapes ethical institutional culture.
3. Civic education is central to long-term governance transformation.
4. Oversight institutions require independence and enforcement authority.

9. Conclusion

Public sector ethics in Liberia operates within a complex cultural governance environment. Legal compliance alone cannot transform institutional behavior without engaging societal norms. Integrating cultural awareness into administrative reform strategies enhances sustainability and legitimacy.

Future research should quantitatively measure cultural variables influencing ethical outcomes and compare Liberia with other West African contexts.

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