

SHADOW GOVERNANCE IN LIBERIA'S PUBLIC SECTOR: INFORMAL NETWORKS AND THE LIMITS OF INSTITUTIONAL REFORM

Moses M. Kesselly*

Doctor of Philosophy, (PhD) in Public Administration, Gideon Robert University-Zambia.

Received: 16/11/2024 | Accepted: 11/01/2025 | Published: 22/02/2025

Abstract: Public administration reform in Liberia has predominantly focused on corruption, decentralization, and post-conflict reconstruction. However, limited scholarly attention has been paid to the phenomenon of shadow governance—the informal systems of influence that operate alongside formal bureaucratic institutions. This study examines how informal patronage networks, kinship alliances, political loyalty systems, and elite bargaining structures shape administrative outcomes in Liberia. Using a qualitative case study methodology, the research analyzes selected Liberian public institutions between 2006 and 2023. Findings suggest that shadow governance significantly influences recruitment, procurement processes, and policy implementation, often-overriding formal institutional frameworks. The study proposes an Integrated Institutional Alignment Framework (IIAF) for managing informal power structures within fragile governance systems. The findings contribute to post-conflict public administration theory and offer policy recommendations for strengthening institutional legitimacy in Liberia.

Keywords: *Shadow governance, informal institutions, Liberia, public sector reform, patronage networks, fragile states.*

1. Introduction

Since the end of Liberia's civil conflict in 2003, successive governments have implemented governance reforms aimed at rebuilding public institutions. Efforts supported by international partners have emphasized civil service reform, anti-corruption mechanisms, decentralization, and transparency. Despite these reforms, institutional performance gaps persist.

One underexplored explanation lies in the coexistence of formal administrative structures and informal power systems—what this study conceptualizes as shadow governance.

Shadow governance refers to informal, often unwritten, networks of influence that shape decision-making outside codified institutional procedures. In the Liberian context, these networks are embedded in:

- Patron-client political arrangements
- Ethnic and kinship affiliations
- Wartime loyalty networks
- Political survival strategies

This study argues that understanding shadow governance is essential to explaining why formal reforms often yield limited outcomes.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Informal Institutions and Governance

Helmke and Levitsky (2004) define informal institutions as socially shared rules created and enforced outside officially sanctioned channels. In fragile states, informal institutions may

complement, compete with, or substitute formal governance structures.

In post-conflict African states, informal governance often fills institutional voids (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997). However, empirical research on Liberia has largely centered on corruption indices and decentralization without systematically analyzing informal administrative systems.

2.2 Post-Conflict Public Administration

Post-conflict administrative reforms typically prioritize:

- Capacity building
- Anti-corruption frameworks
- Donor-driven institutional restructuring

Yet scholars argue that ignoring informal political economies undermines reform sustainability (North, 1990).

Liberia represents a critical case for examining the intersection of formal bureaucracy and informal power networks.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study integrates three theoretical perspectives:

1. Neo-Institutional Theory – Institutions consist of both formal rules and informal norms.
2. Political Settlement Theory – Elite bargains shape institutional performance.
3. Patron-Client Theory – Loyalty-based resource distribution structures administrative behavior.

A Conceptual Model: The Shadow Governance Interaction Model (SGIM)

*Corresponding Author

Moses M. Kesselly*

Email: moseskesselly61966@gmail.com

This is an open access article under the [CC BY-NC](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) license



The SGIM posits that: Formal Institutions ↔ Informal Networks
→ Administrative Outcomes

Where:

- Formal institutions define official procedures.
- Informal networks influence access, decisions, and enforcement.
- Outcomes reflect the dominance or balance between the two systems.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative multiple-case study approach.

4.2 Case Selection

Three the Liberian public administration domains were selected:

1. Civil service recruitment processes
 2. Public procurement decision-making
 3. Scholarship allocation governance executive Sources
- Policy documents (2006–2023)
 - Public service regulations
 - Audit reports
 - Media investigations
 - Semi-structured interviews with 25 senior and mid-level public officials

4.4 Data Analysis

Thematic coding was applied using pattern-matching techniques aligned with the SGIM framework.

5. Liberian Case Studies

Case Study 1: Civil Service Recruitment

Despite formal Civil Service Agency guidelines requiring competitive recruitment, interview data reveal that:

- Political endorsements frequently override merit-based rankings.
- Temporary appointments often become permanent without competitive processes.
- Informal influence determines candidate shortlisting.

This reflects competing institutional authority between formal HR systems and elite networks.

Case Study 2: Public Procurement in Infrastructure Projects

Audit findings between 2015–2025 show deviations from procurement regulations in infrastructure contracts. Interview respondents indicated:

- Informal directives from political leadership.
- Pre-selection of contractors before formal bidding processes.
- Elite bargaining to maintain coalition stability.

This demonstrates how shadow governance shapes fiscal decision-making.

Case Study 3: Scholarship Governance and State Legitimacy

Scholarship allocation processes illustrate how public administration intersects with political capital.

Findings indicate:

- Regional balancing pressures influence beneficiary selection.
- Political recommendations accompany formal applications.
- Monitoring mechanisms for return-service compliance remain weak.

Scholarship governance thus becomes both a developmental tool and a political resource.

6. Findings

The study identifies four core characteristics of shadow governance in Liberia:

1. Elite Protection Networks
2. Loyalty-Based Administrative Advancement
3. Informal Conflict Resolution Mechanisms
4. Parallel Accountability Channels

Key Empirical Insight

Shadow governance does not eliminate formal institutions—it reconfigures their operational logic.

Formal reforms fail when they assume institutional neutrality in politically negotiated environments.

7. Proposed Reform Model: Integrated Institutional Alignment Framework (IIAF)

The IIAF recommends:

1. Digitization of recruitment and procurement systems to reduce discretionary interference.
2. Transparent publication of selection metrics.
3. Independent oversight bodies with prosecutorial autonomy.
4. Political incentive alignment—linking elite stability to institutional compliance.
5. Formal recognition of informal actors in consultative policy dialogue.

Rather than eliminating informal networks, reform must strategically align them with formal governance objectives.

8. Implications for Public Administration Theory

This research contributes to:

- Expanding post-conflict governance literature.
- Integrating informal institutional analysis into African public administration studies.
- Challenging purely technocratic reform models.

Liberia illustrates that institutional reform must lengthen age political settlement realities.

9. Conclusion

Shadow governance remains a critical but understudied dimension of Liberia's public administration system. Sustainable reform requires acknowledging informal influence structures rather than assuming their disappearance through policy reform alone.

Future research should employ mixed-method quantitative validation of the SGIM framework and comparative analysis with other West African fragile states.

References

1. Bratton, M., & van de Walle, N. (1997). *Democratic experiments in Africa*. Cambridge University Press.
2. Helmke, G., & Levitsky, S. (2004). Informal institutions and comparative politics. *Perspectives on Politics, 2(4)*, 725–740.
3. North, D. C. (1990). *Institutions, institutional change and economic performance*. Cambridge University Press.
4. Republic of Liberia Civil Service Agency. (2006–2023). *Public service regulations*.
5. General Audit General Commission, Liberia. (2015–2022). *Annual audit reports*.