

STABILIZATION LESSONS FROM THE BRITISH EMPIRE

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Abstract: This paper reviews the basic principles of British colonialism, not to condone its evils, but to understand how it was able to establish stable political order in so many different parts of the world. Before 1939, foreign interventions were regularly managed by a decentralized team of plenipotentiary agents who specialized in fostering local political development. Since 1945, however, international development assistance has generally worked with and through a recognized national government, implicitly supporting a centralization of power. Basic organizational principles of the British colonial district officers could be effectively applied in an international state-building agency for promoting accountable government in failed states that export violence and suffering.

"He [General David Petraeus] told me that the cooperation I had engineered from the Iraqis had helped him understand how Britain had ruled half the world with a handful of Foreign Office folks and the odd sergeant major. Embarrassed, I told him that it was just about relationships, building trust and listening." Emma Sky (2015).¹

When did foreign political stabilization missions become so difficult?

The frustration of costly state-building efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq has led many observers to conclude that even a superpower with global military supremacy cannot afford missions to establish stable government in foreign countries. But during the era of European colonial expansion in the late 19th century, it did not seem so difficult for colonial agents to establish stable political regimes in distant foreign lands at negligible cost to the domestic taxpayers of their home countries. We may ask whether 19th-century colonizers understood something about how to establish political stability that was forgotten by those who undertook state-building missions in the early 21st century.²

Of course, political goals and the realities of power have changed over the past century, and nobody wants to recreate the old colonial empires. But there are still times when political instability in one country can become a threat to other nations, as when a failed state becomes a

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¹ Emma Sky, *The Unraveling: High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq* (Public Affairs, 2015), p201.

² Rory Stewart has insightfully raised this question in Rory Stewart and Gerald Knaus, *Can Intervention Work?* (Norton, 2012).

base for terrorists or a source of desperate refugees uncontained by international borders. Then international security and stability may depend on some capability for state-building.³

There are basic principles in the development of political order that may apply to any form of government. Thus, regardless of our aversion to colonialism, it could be worthwhile to examine the operational principles that were successfully applied in colonial stabilization, so that we may ask whether some of these principles could also be applicable for democratic state-building today. So this paper reviews some basic principles of British colonialism, not to condone its evils, but to understand how it was able to establish order and support political development.

The phrase "colonial stabilization" is used here to denote the process of establishing a stable colonial regime, although this obviously was not an independent state. However, where the British used a system of indirect rule through indigenous leaders, the political development of a British colonial state could have more in common with that of an independent state than other forms of direct imperial rule.⁴ Also, in the final years of British colonial rule, its agents actually did work toward a goal of building an independent democratic state.⁵

This paper focuses mainly on organizational principles of British colonial administration in Africa, which established political order in almost half of the continent and achieved a half-century of peace in those colonies that did not have settlers. Certainly there were some times when people rose up to resist foreign colonial domination and were repressed by military force, but a network of British agents worked strategically to minimize the need for military force by co-opting leaders and developing political responses to local discontent.⁶ In Africa, the British applied and refined strategies for political stabilization which had been developed during a

³ For broad examinations of the recurrent necessity for state-building interventions and the fundamental dilemmas that they entail, see James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, "Neotrusteeship and the problem of weak states," *International Security* 28(4):5-42 (2004), <https://doi.org/10.1162/0162288041588296>, and David A. Lake, *The Statebuilder's Dilemma: On the Limits of Foreign Intervention* (Cornell U Press, 2016).

⁴ French colonies in sub-Saharan Africa generally had direct rule that replaced indigenous political institutions; see Carl Müller-Crepon (2020), "Continuity or change: (In)direct rule in British and French colonial Africa," *International Organization* 74:707-741, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818320000211>. It would be more difficult to draw lessons for democratic state-building from interventions which did not try to build on indigenous institutions.

⁵ See Anthony Kirk-Greene, *Symbol of Authority* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2006), chapter 10, and discussion below.

⁶ A remarkable minimization of force was achieved. Total British colonial troops in Africa in 1930 numbered only about 12,000, according to David Killingray (1986), "The maintenance of law and order in British Colonial Africa," *African Affairs* 85(340):411-437, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/722968>; see p429. Most of these troops were themselves recruited in the colonies. In Africa around 1939, the total number of British officials serving in the colonial administration, police, military, and judiciary was less than 2500, and they presided over territories inhabited by more than 40 million people, according to A. Kirk-Greene (1980), "The thin white line: the size of British Colonial Service in Africa," *African Affairs* 79(314):25-44, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/721630>; see p39.

century of imperial expansion in India.⁷ Our goal here is to ask what these strategic principles from colonial stabilization might suggest about how democratic state-building missions could be similarly effective at establishing political order, while providing better foundations for subsequent democratic development. The analysis here is guided by basic ideas from agency theory, which can help to identify organizational principles that should be applicable in any era.

The most important lesson that we draw here from the history of British colonial administration is that the management of a political stabilization mission should rely on a decentralized team of agents who can negotiate effectively with local leaders throughout the country. In the British Empire, these local plenipotentiary agents were known as *district officers*.⁸

Theoretical arguments can support the suggestion that recent state-building missions needed a more decentralized focus on local political development, to ensure that the political system should include trusted local leaders in every part of the country.⁹ But it is more convincing to find that, when the British Empire had the world's most successful operation for foreign political stabilization, it actually used such a decentralized approach, which was fundamentally different from standard approaches to development assistance today. While this point may be well known in the literature on colonial history, it has not been widely recognized in the current literature on national security and counterinsurgency operations. So this paper provides a summary of key points from writings of leading experts on the strategy for political stabilization in the British Empire, as well as from some important critics of that strategy.

The plan of this paper is as follows. First, to introduce the role of colonial district officers, we survey their responsibilities and typical career paths, as described in a comprehensive study by Anthony Kirk-Green.¹⁰ Then we consider the basic principles of political stabilization that district officers were expected to apply, according to a 1922 treatise on colonial administration by Frederick Lugard, who was one of the founders of British colonial

⁷ William Malcolm Hailey argued that indirect rule was particularly suitable for African colonies which lacked India's ready supply of indigenous educated personnel for a large competent civil service; see Lord Hailey, "A turning point in colonial rule," *International Affairs* 28(2):177-183 (1952), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2604015>.

⁸ See also David Gilmour, *The Ruling Caste: Imperial Lives in the Victorian Raj* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2005), p90.

⁹ For example, see Jennifer Murtazashvili, "A tired cliché: why we should stop worrying about ungoverned spaces and embrace self-governance," *Journal of International Affairs* 71(2):11-29 (2018), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26552327>; and R. Myerson, "Toward a theory of leadership and state-building," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences U.S.A.* 108(supplement 4):21297-21301 (2011), <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1019397108>.

¹⁰ Anthony Kirk-Greene, *Symbol of Authority: The British District Officer in Africa* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2006).

rule in Malawi, Uganda, and Nigeria.¹¹ Lugard's principles cannot be evaluated without an understanding of how British colonialism contributed to the subsequent problems of African political development, and so we review Mahmood Mamdani's critical observation that the colonial practice of cultivating a despotic form of local authority has been responsible for a long and pernicious legacy.¹² We argue, however, that this practice was not a consequence of the stabilization principles that Lugard expressed, and indeed it may be seen as contrary to one of his basic principles. Specifically, Lugard's principle of Cooperation suggests that district officers should have regularly promoted the formation of broad inclusive councils for local governance, and this policy could be at least as appropriate for democratic state-builders today. We find similar points in a contemporary critique of British colonial administration by Margery Perham, who was a leading historian of colonial Africa and biographer of Lord Lugard.¹³ Perham's prescription for the path to African independence is compared to the strategies for development assistance that were actually applied after World War II, when the old decentralized focus on local political development shifted toward a primary focus on the development program of the new national governments. Finally, in the last two sections, we consider how the district-officer model and Lugard's operational principles might still be applied in international assistance missions that respect national autonomy and promote democratic government.

The focus here is on how colonial district officers established stable and effective government, and the wide literature on colonial economic relationships is beyond the scope of this paper.¹⁴ To the extent that colonial governments supported the exploitation of people and resources in Africa for the benefit of foreign interests, such exploitation increased the difficulty of convincing people to accept colonial rule. But such political effects of economic exploitation might imply that a strategy which achieved political stabilization for colonial regimes could be

¹¹ Frederick Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (1922; 5th ed. 1965; reprinted by Routledge 2005).

¹² Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton U Press, 1996). See also Mahmood Mamdani, "Beyond settler and native as political identities: overcoming the political legacy of colonialism," *Contemporary Studies in Society and History* 43(4):651-664 (2001), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2696665>. Mamdani's critique is particularly valuable in his focus on the legacy of political institutions from colonial rule. As he observes on the first page of his 2001 article: "In the decade that followed African political independence, militant nationalist intellectuals focused on the expropriation of the native as the great crime of colonialism... But no one wrote of how Europe *ruled* Africa." [His italics.]

¹³ Margery Perham, *Native Administration in Nigeria* (Oxford U Press, 1937). See also Margery Perham, *The Colonial Reckoning* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1962).

¹⁴ For example, see Gareth Austin (2015), "The economics of colonialism in Africa," in *The Oxford Handbook of Africa and Economics: Volume I, Context and Concepts*, edited by Célestin Monga and Justin Yifu Lin, 522-535, <http://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199687114.013.4>. For a classic introduction to this topic, see also Walter Rodney (1972), *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Bogle L'Ouverture Publications), chapters 5 and 6.

even more effective for supporting the establishment of sovereign states that are democratically accountable to their people. On the other hand, historical precedents of benevolent promises masking the establishment of exploitative colonial regimes might raise suspicions about the goals of state-building interventions today and so could increase resistance to these interventions.

British colonial district officers in Africa

District officers formed the essential backbone or core of Britain's colonial administration. Kirk-Greene has provided a detailed description of their careers and professional norms, and here we can only sketch an outline of salient points from his book and from Lugard's.¹⁵

The district officer's job was to oversee all political and legal affairs in a district in the British Empire. Districts varied in size, but an average district might have about 50,000 inhabitants, and it had to be small enough that the district officer could visit most of it in a couple of months of touring on foot. Within such a district, the district officer had responsibility for supervising all aspects of local government and law, as the local face of colonial power. While most of this work would be done from an office in the district headquarters, with an indigenous staff of clerks and messengers, the district officer was expected also to spend at least a couple of months every year touring to learn about problems and concerns of the people throughout the district. If there was any disorder or unrest in the district, the district officer could expect to be questioned about whether he had failed to anticipate the problems by inadequate touring.¹⁶

District officers were commonly recruited as recent college graduates or war veterans, and they might be sent out to a colony after a period of basic training that could include introductory courses on colonial accounts, tropical economic products, criminal law, Islamic law, hygiene and sanitation, surveying, ethnology, and languages. A new officer's first assignment would be to serve as an assistant district officer, sharing responsibilities with an experienced supervisor, and the first tour of the district was effectively an immersion course in the regional language. Promotion then depended on passing exams in law, government regulations, and

¹⁵ Anthony Kirk-Greene, *Symbol of Authority* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2006). Frederick Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (5th edition reprint, Routledge 2005). See also Valentin Seidler, "Institutional copying in the 20th century: the role of 14,000 British colonial officers," *Journal of Contextual Economics* 137:93-120 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.3790/schm.137.1-2.93>; and Valentin Seidler, "Copying informal institutions: the role of British colonial officers during the decolonization of British Africa," *Journal of Institutional Economics* 14(2):289-312 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1744137417000443>.

¹⁶ Anthony Kirk-Greene, *Symbol of Authority* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2006), p126-127. See also Frederick Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (5th edition reprint, Routledge 2005), p135.

languages. But Kirk-Green quotes one district officer's testimony that the most important skills that they needed were "unlimited patience, and a real sympathy for the people among whom the young officer will work."¹⁷ Lugard suggested that basic qualities for a good district officer were an aptitude for managerial initiative, within a chain of command, and "an almost passionate conception of fair play, and of protection of the weak."¹⁸ (While these sentiments may seem admirable, we should note that there were no equivalent opportunities for young Africans after college to oversee the local government of a district in England, and this asymmetry was morally indefensible.)

When wide powers over remote communities are concentrated in the hands of one official, however, one cannot rely on good character alone to prevent abuse of power. District officers were supervised by a provincial commissioner or Resident, who was an experienced former district officer, and whose province typically included only three or four districts.¹⁹ A practice of regularly re-assigning district officers to different districts every few years provided another form of monitoring, as local complaints about one officer would be heard by his successor. To maintain continuity, provincial commissioners were expected to stay longer in one province.²⁰

District officers were also typically assigned for at least a couple of years to the Governor's central secretariat in the capital of the country where they were serving. As a result, effective communication between central policy-makers in the capital and those responsible for implementing policy in the districts could be facilitated by personal connections and familiarity. Furthermore, because the district officers on rotation always formed an essential component of the central secretariat, the district officers as a team had substantial responsibility for the direction of policy-making in the colonial capital as well as in remote districts. So political policies in the colony were determined primarily by the team of officers who had local expertise, and the influence of the Colonial Office in London was correspondingly limited.²¹

¹⁷ Anthony Kirk-Greene, *Symbol of Authority* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2006), p43. An alternative view can be found in the last chapter of Chinua Achebe's great novel *Things Fall Apart*, which depicts a district officer who generally understands the main character's tragic situation but seems remarkably lacking in empathy.

¹⁸ Frederick Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (5th edition reprint, Routledge 2005), p132.

¹⁹ Frederick Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (5th edition reprint, Routledge 2005), p131.

²⁰ Frederick Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (5th edition reprint, Routledge 2005), p136.

²¹ Margery Perham, *Native Administration in Nigeria* (Oxford U Press, 1937), p350.

Lugard's principles of colonial administration

In his treatise on colonial administration, Lord Lugard summarized its essential principles in three words: Decentralization, Continuity, and Cooperation.²² It is worth considering in some detail what he meant by each of these principles, as they encapsulate a leading expert's instructions for organizing effective stabilization missions, even if his practice did not always match his ideals.

Lugard's principle of Decentralization refers to the devolution of wide powers and responsibility to the local district officer. Under the policies of indirect rule, which Lugard did much to formulate, British colonial rule allowed local indigenous leaders to exercise authority in their communities. But all decisions of indigenous authorities were subject to review by the local district officer, who represented the British Empire within his district. Foreigners in the district were also subject to legal supervision by the district officer. Notice that this allocation of colonial power can be described as both decentralized and concentrated, as wide discretion and responsibility was delegated to local administrators, but this decentralized power was concentrated in the hands of one district officer in each district. This local concentration of effective power over all relations with the external world helped to maximize the district officer's ability to influence indigenous local leaders with minimal use of external force. Operating locally, but with globally authorized powers, the district officer combined an ability to act forcefully with an intimate understanding of the local political issues that motivated and constrained indigenous community leaders.

But the district officer's influence would be reduced if his ability to offer promises was limited to the extent of his own term in office. Lugard's principle of Continuity addresses this problem. Lugard argued that, in order to maintain continuity of policies under different officers, it was essential for each officer to keep detailed records of important matters, especially of any conversation with indigenous leaders in which some promise was made.²³ Thus, a district officer had to keep a notebook that was a guide to his district, listing village units, tax collection data, and details about local chiefs, including how they are chosen. Other essential documents included the hand-over notes which the district officer was expected to leave for his successor, which described recent issues and undertakings in the district, such as local political events and economic development projects.

In Lugard's system, the higher levels in the administrative hierarchy had principal

²² Frederick Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (5th edition reprint, Routledge 2005), p113.

²³ Frederick Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (5th edition reprint, Routledge 2005), p103.

responsibility for maintaining continuity. The provincial commissioner would review the documents and records from the district officers under his supervision and then would report to the Governor and the central secretariat about current problems in the province and how they were being handled. The Governor in turn had to study the provincial commissioners' reports, formulate general principles for consistently addressing the policy questions raised in these reports, and issue memoranda that would codify these principles for guidance of future decisions. If the Governor had not served previously as a district officer and provincial commissioner himself, then he should work with a Lieutenant Governor who had such experience.²⁴ Thus, the provincial commissioners and the Governor could maintain continuity and integrate the district officers' practical decisions into the long-term policies of the colonial government.

Lugard's principle of Cooperation directs district officers to build an inclusive coalition for supporting local government and its undertakings, by striving to develop trust and common interests with all significant groups that operate in the district. Cooperation should be sought with others in the colonial government, with local merchants, with other Europeans who are active in the district, and above all with indigenous chiefs and local leaders, who must be assured of a share of the benefits of power in the local order.²⁵

Lugard emphasized the vital role of local taxation, for cementing the alliance between the local chiefs and the colonial administration, and for confirming the general acceptance of their local authority in the community. He argued that, when the colonial intervention has increased people's welfare by promoting regional peace and better transportation for their products, people should be willing to pay moderate taxes on the enhanced income-earning potential of their land and other assets. In Lugard's system, residents' tax obligations were assessed by their village headman under the direction of their customary chief, and the district officer would support the headman's collection of these taxes after hearing people's complaints about any perceived inequities or excesses. Tax revenue was then divided in fixed proportions between the headman, the chief, special funds for local public goods, and the colonial administration.²⁶ So the system of taxation was designed to be a partnership between indigenous leaders and colonial officials,

²⁴ Frederick Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (5th edition reprint, Routledge 2005), p125-126. Lugard argued that, when a deputy must act for an absent Governor, a Lieutenant Governor with experience in district administration would be better than a Colonial Secretary with experience in managing the central secretariat.

²⁵ Frederick Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (5th edition reprint, Routledge 2005), p193, 243. For a study of long-term effects of cooperative inclusion of local leadership which Lugard recommended, see Julian Wucherpfennig, Philipp Hunziker, and Lars-Erik Cederman, "Who inherits the state? Colonial rule and postcolonial conflict," *American Journal of Political Science* 60(4):882-898 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12236>.

²⁶ The colonial administration was also supported by taxes on trade collected at the major ports. See Leigh A. Gardner, *Taxing Colonial Africa* (Oxford U Press, 2012).

and people's tax payments implicitly demonstrated their acceptance of this leadership.

The political education and development of indigenous society was considered to be a principal goal of colonial government in Africa. In Lugard's view, the essential primary step in this program of political development was the establishment of such accepted local leadership, capable of taxing its people and managing budgets for public services.²⁷

The problem of local despotism

Lugard's principles guided a colonizing strategy that established a stable political order under colonial rule in many parts of Africa, and these principles also had potential to provide a strong foundation for subsequent political development. But this potential was not realized because, as Mahmood Mamdani has observed, colonial political development in Africa was debased by a general practice of promoting local leadership in a despotic form.²⁸

People in different parts of precolonial Africa had a wide range of political institutions, often with leaders exercising limited powers subject to checks and accountability in their communities. As district officers responded to local political conditions, institutions could develop differently depending on the colonial state's interactions with indigenous elites.²⁹ But colonial authorities generally tended to assume away any separation of legislative, executive, and judicial powers in traditional societies. (Eastern Nigeria was one place where people had no tradition of submitting to a hereditary monarch, and so district officers developed a system of governing councils, but even here Lord Lugard tried to identify individuals who could serve as autocratic local chiefs.³⁰) The common colonial practice was to concentrate "customary" authority in the hands of an all-powerful local chief, who was accountable only to the colonial district officer. Traditional powers of village councils were transferred to a village headman who was appointed by the local chief, so that chiefs controlled both the assessment of people's taxes and the punishment of those who could not pay.

Such a policy of cultivating local despotism cannot be derived from Lugard's three principles. Indeed, we may argue that the practice of concentrating power in the hands of a

²⁷ Frederick Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (5th edition reprint, Routledge 2005), p217-219.

²⁸ Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton U Press, 1996). See also Mahmood Mamdani, "Beyond settler and native as political identities: overcoming the political legacy of colonialism," *Contemporary Studies in Society and History* 43(4):651-664 (2001), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2696665>.

²⁹ See Jutta Bolt and Leigh Gardner, "How Africans shaped British colonial institutions," *Journal of Economic History* 80(4):1189-1223 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022050720000455>

³⁰ See A. E Afigbo, "The warrant chief system in Eastern Nigeria: direct or indirect rule?" *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 3(4):683-700 (1967), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41856908>.

despotic chief was contrary to Lugard's principle of Cooperation, which should have required district officers to ensure that all significant groups in the community had some effective representation in the local power structure. This inclusive principle of Cooperation could have been fulfilled if the district officers' template for customary authority had been based, not on the appointment of a local chief, but on the formation of a broadly representative local council that would choose a chief and hold him accountable. We may surmise, however, that when the goal was to establish and perpetuate colonial domination, a local despot might have seemed a more reliable instrument than a representative council.

While Mamdani found local despotism in the colonial legacy throughout Africa, Abhijit Banerjee and Lakshmi Iyer noted that the British installed such local despots only in part of colonial India.³¹ In some regions of India, British colonial rulers granted privileges of power and taxation to local agents, called zamindars, who then functioned as local lords in their districts. The zamindars' local authority was granted as a permanent property right that could be sold or bequeathed to heirs, and so they became a class of local despots who had a vested interest in maintaining the colonial regime. But these zamindars were installed only in some regions of India, mainly those which came under British rule in its early stages or after the 1857 mutiny. Banerjee and Iyer have compared these zamindar regions to other parts of India, where the British governed without installing a local despot, and their results show that local despotism can have serious long-term economic costs. Decades after India's independence, the regions where the British had governed through local zamindars were still found to be suffering significantly lower agricultural productivity and higher infant mortality than other parts of India.

Perham's inter-war prescription for the path to independence

Examining Nigeria after several decades of colonial rule, Margery Perham described the next steps that she saw as necessary to move toward independence.³² She argued that the program of educating people for local self-government based on their own traditional institutions needed to be applied more boldly, first by increasing the responsibilities and public accountability of indigenous local leaders, and then by encouraging them to federate. She criticized colonial governments for over-regulating instead of allowing indigenous leaders to take real responsibility for serving their communities.

³¹ Abhijit Banerjee and Lakshmi Iyer, "History, institutions, and economic performance: the legacy of colonial land tenure systems in India," *American Economic Review* 95(4):1190-1213 (2005), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4132711>.

³² Margery Perham, *Native Administration in Nigeria* (Oxford U Press, 1937), chapter 21.

Perham deplored the common tendency of colonial governments to give a few indigenous chiefs wide coercive powers over their own people, without any corresponding concern for making these chiefs accountable to their communities. She noted that colonial officials found it useful to act through subordinate African agents whose role in the colonial regime gave them interests separate from the mass of the people. Anticipating Mamdani's critique, Perham warned that it would not be possible for the national government to progress towards democracy while autocracy reigned in local governments. She observed that there were democratic tendencies in most African societies which colonial governments had too often ignored or suppressed. Indeed, Perham considered that one of the best expressions of the ideals of indirect rule could be found in the words of a chief of the Basutos (in Lesotho) when he urged that imperial laws should apply to his country only after they had been submitted to and approved by the council of his people.³³

To take control of large territories with small forces, colonial governments had initially needed to win the cooperation of indigenous leaders who had real popular support. But once the colonial regime was established, it would often be more convenient for the government to allow its allied chiefs to have more power and less accountability in their communities. A district officer could find himself more respected and influential throughout a community when complaining to him provided the only redress that people there had against their chief.

Even if colonial officials had maintained a scrupulously neutral policy toward indigenous political institutions, the positive effects of colonial government in promoting a broad regional peace would tend to reduce the local accountability of indigenous leaders. In precolonial times, although many traditional leaders might not have been chosen by any formal popular election, the regular possibility of a violent challenge to their authority meant that they could not hold positions of power without some broad support from people willing to fight for them. But with peace under colonial rule, when recognition from a colonial officer was all that a chief needed to maintain his privileged position, the imperative for him to maintain a popular base of support would vanish. So there was a serious risk of traditional political institutions losing their ability to provide trustworthy leadership for their communities when their leaders were not subject to some form of broad popular accountability. Thus, a program to support the development of effective self-government based on traditional institutions needed to promote some elements of democratic accountability in those institutions.

³³ See also page 245 in Victor Murray, "Education under indirect rule," *Journal of the Royal African Society* 34(136):227-268 (1935), <http://www.jstor.com/stable/716819>.

So Perham urged the introduction of greater public-service responsibilities and popular accountability for indigenous leaders at the local level, on the scale of the traditional institutions with which the people were familiar. Such political decentralization might seem inefficient to foreign observers who saw economies of scale and regional externalities in the provision of many public goods and services, but it might be necessary until people have had more experience with national politics. As Perham suggested, a weak federation could be an ideal structure for this transitional period, keeping most responsibilities of government in the hands of locally accountable local leaders, but giving people some experience of national politics in the weak federal body.

Perham argued that, when the time for independence comes, it would be easier for a new national government to take effective accountable control of public-service agencies that have developed under indigenous local management than under foreign colonial management. Under the latter alternative, nobody in the new nation would be able to offer a knowledgeable experienced critique of public mismanagement after independence. Although development of public-service agencies under local indigenous authorities might involve some redundancy that could seem inefficient at first, it would ultimately give the nation a larger competitive supply of individuals who know how these public services should be managed.

Perham believed that most government jobs for educated Africans would have to be found in the local native administrations, but she recommended that the central colonial government should also press forward a policy of employing more Africans in responsible positions. But then she urged one surprising exception from this policy, an exception which shows deep insight into the problems of foreign assistance in state-building. Her words are worth quoting directly:

*"There is, however, one branch into which, I believe, Africans should not enter, and that is the Administrative Service. This should aim at being increasingly advisory in its functions. It should be regarded as the temporary scaffolding round the growing structure of native self-government. African energies should be incorporated into the structure: to build them into the scaffolding would be to create a vested interest which would make its demolition at the appropriate time very difficult."*³⁴

The colonial Administrative Service to which she refers here is the corps of district officers, who formed the primary administrative network of the colonial regime. It was not from

³⁴ Margery Perham, *Native Administration in Nigeria* (Oxford U Press, 1937), p361.

any prejudice against indigenous African people that Perham advised against appointing them as district officers. Her advice was based on a recognition that people in England would not want to have their local governments supervised by such centrally-appointed district officers, and that African people could feel similarly. For a district officer to be an effective agent for local political development in a society where he was an outsider, the colonial regime had to delegate a wide array of local powers to the district officer; but the permanent presence of such a powerful official within the political system itself could be problematic for a stable democracy, which depends on a system of checks and balances among public officials. Guidance from district officers should be replaced by accountability to the local population. Thus, Perham argued, the network of district officers should not be integrated into the new independent states of Africa, but instead should vanish like scaffolding when the colonial intervention ended.

By professional norms and organization, the district officers formed a superb instrument for monitoring and responding to local political challenges in every district of a large nation. As such, they could be effective agents for supporting the development of both administrative capacity and public accountability in indigenous institutions of local government. But there is only a fine line between supporting local political development and controlling it. A network of district officers could equally serve as a mechanism for asserting central political control throughout the nation. Kirk-Greene noted that no African government wished to rid itself of these critical field agents.³⁵

Perham's vision was of African nations achieving independence as federal entities, where institutions of local self-government would be derived from familiar forms of traditional leadership, and where national coordination would be provided by a weak federal government with limited powers. Indeed, people in the United States of America chose a political system based on just these principles when Americans became independent of British rule. But a different path was followed in Africa.

The great shift in development assistance after World War II

After World War II, the mission of British colonial government in Africa shifted toward preparation for national independence. Although independence would obviously mean an end to political supervision by British district officers, they continued to serve the cause of political development with vital guidance and advice right up to the day when Independence put them out

³⁵ Anthony Kirk-Greene, *Symbol of Authority* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2006), p221.

of a job.³⁶ In the last years of colonial rule, there finally were efforts to establish elected local councils in some regions, but these councils could not do much good while local chiefs retained absolute authority over people in their communities.³⁷

From the late 1940s, however, the nature of colonial government and the district officers' roles in it were fundamentally changed by an increased focus on developing the central administrative capabilities that a sovereign national government would need. This post-war shift, away from the previous focus on decentralized political development based on local indigenous institutions, should be recognized as a critical change in the strategic direction of international development assistance.

The refocusing of colonial efforts on national political development meant that customary local leaders were not pressed to accept stronger forms of public accountability. As a result, customary forms of local leadership could be seen as lacking accountability to anyone but their district officer, and as such they could be seen as obsolete political institutions that should have little or no role in a modern democratic state. Thus, new foundations were laid instead for a centralized state which would seem remote and foreign to many outside the capital. This centralization was advantageous for educated urban Africans, who would have difficulty competing for leadership in the local politics of rural communities but could rise in the new national politics as leaders of the independence movement.³⁸

Contrary to Perham's advice, native citizens began to be trained to replace foreigners as district officers for the new nations.³⁹ Kirk-Greene noted that, in the transition to independence, new indigenous recruits into the corps of district officers seemed less prone to the old norm of regarding rural assignments with village touring as the best and most important part of their job.⁴⁰ For district officers who were citizens of the new independent nation in which they served, it was natural to feel that service in a remote rural district was less likely to bring

³⁶ Anthony Kirk-Greene, *Symbol of Authority* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2006), chapter 10.

³⁷ Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject* (Princeton U Press, 1996), p105.

³⁸ For an insightful discussion of the history of local government in Nigeria, see Matthew T. Page and Abdul H. Wando "Halting the kleptocratic capture of local government in Nigeria" (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2022) https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Page_Wando_NigeriaCorruption_final.pdf

³⁹ Perham's advice was considered but disregarded by the Foot Commission, which was appointed in 1948 to make recommendations about the recruitment and training of Nigerians for senior positions in the government services. Although the Commission recognized that "the eventual aim must be for Native Authorities and other local government bodies to be developed to a stage where the need for an Administrative Service as we know it will disappear," nonetheless the Commission took the view that "the Administrative Services should continue to be open to Nigerians since the experience which they gain in the Administrative Services will be invaluable to them in whatever form of public service they may subsequently undertake." See Eric Burr, *Localization and Public Service Training* (Oxford Development Records Project, Rhodes House, 1985), p44-46.

⁴⁰ Anthony Kirk-Greene, *Symbol of Authority* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2006), p219-221.

recognition and rewards from powerful national leaders than service in the national capital. (Perhaps district officers from England tended to see less value in their occasional assignments to the colonial capital because, after all, it was not London.) In any case, a national leader who could view effective local leaders as potential rivals for power would probably not want the development of effective local self-government to be a priority for his district officers. He would prefer them to focus on monitoring local political issues and exercising the control over customary chiefs that the independent state inherited from its colonial predecessors.

Mamdani describes two broad responses to the questions of reforming customary chiefdoms after independence, depending on whether a conservative or radical path was chosen by the national leadership.⁴¹ Conservative states generally retained the ethnic chiefs' customary local authority, which tended to increase the importance of ethnic identity in national politics. In states with radical leadership, the chiefs were generally replaced by agents of the ruling national party, but these agents still exercised the kind of unchecked local authority that had been assigned to customary chiefs, so that the system of local despotism just became more centralized.

The effectiveness of the state depends on a functional relationship between local and national politics. When the national government constitutionally devolves powers to autonomous institutions of local self-government, then every part of the country will have local leaders whose share of power gives them an active interest in maintaining the general authority of the state. Furthermore, when responsible leaders of both national and local government are democratically elected, then popularly trusted local leaders who prove their ability to provide good public service in autonomous local government can become strong competitors for higher office, thus strengthening democratic competition at the national level. Successful democracy depends on a competitive supply of political leaders who have good reputations for exercising power responsibly in public service, and autonomously elected local governments can be the best place to develop such competitive democratic leadership. From this perspective, the colonial policy of installing customary chiefs as local despots can be seen as particularly problematic for democratic development in Africa, stifling local democratic traditions instead of cultivating them as the essential foundations for a strong system of national democracy.

In a highly centralized state, however, the national leader can keep all the benefits of state power within his own patronage network and can avoid such locally-proven competition. So national elites may prefer to lead a weak state where all the power is concentrated in their hands

⁴¹ Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject* (Princeton U Press, 1996), p25, 107.

than to lead a strong state where the exercise of national power regularly requires complex negotiations and competition with autonomous local leaders throughout the country. But then the result can be a weak state, where only a small central elite have any real interest in supporting the state, and where large segments of the population may feel alienated politically and unable to invest securely for economic improvement.

A national leader's ability to impose such centralization can be increased by foreign assistance that is directed through the national government, as this assistance provides a source of funding that national elites can enjoy even if they lose effective control over some remote regions of the country. Such flows of international assistance to support the national governments of poor countries began in the late 1940s and have continued to this day.

Indeed, development assistance since 1945 has been guided largely by an assumption that economic and technical experts can promote economic development without political development, and that political development should be based on national leaders accepting democratic forms of public accountability. Where the new national governments seemed weak, the solution would be sought in technical assistance to improve their administrative capacity. So in the 1940s and 50s, even as independence approached, the inflow of Europeans coming to Africa to work on development initiatives outnumbered the old corps of district officers so much that some described it as a second colonial occupation.⁴² After the end of colonial rule in Africa, the old form of developmental intervention by a team of district officers who specialized in supporting local political development was largely forgotten in the global community of development-assistance professionals.

The importance of political autonomy

People can be confident of getting beneficial public goods and services only from a government that is accountable to them. But any foreign intervention, even when its goal is to support positive political development, must inevitably compromise this essential principle of domestic political accountability. Even in Lord Lugard's treatise on colonial political development, his title "The Dual Mandate" was an admission that colonial governments were established to serve international economic interests as well as the interests of the indigenous population.⁴³ The key question is whether, in some circumstances, can a foreign intervention be

⁴² D. A. Low, *Eclipse of Empire* (Cambridge U Press, 1991), chapter 7 with John M. Lonsdale, p173-176. See also Anthony Kirk-Greene, *Symbol of Authority* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2006), p217.

⁴³ Frederick Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (1922; 5th ed. reprint, Routledge 2005), p58.

managed so as to do more good by supporting local political development than the harm that it does by its (hopefully short-term) violation of national political autonomy.

Since the end of colonialism, the Westphalian principle of nonintervention among sovereign states has been appropriately valued as a norm for defending the autonomy of politics in every nation. But this principle of nonintervention has had its own dual motivation. While today we may prefer to interpret it as an international norm for protecting the domestic democratic accountability of national governments, its original motivation (from the Peace of Westphalia in 1648) was more about autocratic rulers agreeing not to undermine each other's domination of their respective subject populations. From this perspective, we should not be surprised to find cases in the world today where the principle of respect for Westphalian sovereignty in international relations has effectively served to strengthen the centralized power of a ruling national elite.

But communities also need some degree of subnational political autonomy, for effective local accountability in the provision of local public goods that are essential for prosperity. We have argued that strong political systems depend on a balanced relationship between local and national politics. When there has been no constitutional protection for autonomously elected institutions of local government, people who do not trust their national leaders may prefer to rely on informal structures of local leadership, which are harder for outsiders to monitor and manipulate. Unfortunately, this informality also makes it harder for foreign assistance to support local political development, unless the assistance is directed by local political officers who are deeply immersed in the communities that they have been sent to help. Without formal institutions of local democracy, it is difficult to identify who is widely respected in a community except by living there and listening to people. So the kind of immersion that was practiced by colonial district officers may be essential for anyone whose mission is to cultivate popularly trusted local leadership, which must be the primary task in any intervention for democratic political development.

The core political problem in democratic state-building is to negotiate a new distribution of power among local and national leaders that can be broadly accepted by people throughout the country. This problem cannot be solved from afar. If a foreign mission is to take a positive role in identifying and supporting an acceptable solution to this problem, then the mission must include a team of field officers who can work with local leadership in every part of the country.

State-building agents for the 21st century?

A global order that is based on mutual respect among sovereign independent nations is better than a global order based on colonial domination of large parts of the world. History has shown that benevolent goals could be claimed as justifications for interventions that became imperial conquests, and so it is appropriate that any such claimed justifications for forceful interventions should be judged critically by the international community.⁴⁴ But global stability requires some mechanism for filling vulnerable gaps in the international system, by fixing failed states and promoting their political development into functioning partners in the global order.⁴⁵ When violence and suffering from a failed state threaten to spread beyond its border into other countries, their citizens have a right to demand some effective response.

However, the frustration of costly state-building missions in recent years has created a widespread belief that nothing can be done to help states that fail, and this sense of helplessness has fed demands to fortify borders against fears of uncontrollable numbers of refugees from failed states. It is to find some remedy for this perceived helplessness that this paper has re-examined the political stabilization strategies of the British Empire, to identify what principles might have been forgotten by would-be state-builders in Afghanistan and Iraq after 2003.

In the recent state-building missions to Iraq and Afghanistan, vast resources were invested in developing the military and administrative capacity of the national government. This strategy, if successful, would have created a powerful centralized state that could implicitly threaten local interests in many parts of the country. But an essential part of the state-building problem was the complex challenge of negotiating a broad inclusive distribution of power that could assure popular local leaders a role in the political system.⁴⁶ The history of British colonial administration has shown us that, to support the development of a political system with deep roots in local politics, the strategic management of a state-building mission should be based on a team of local plenipotentiary district officers.

We have argued that, by their organizational structures and operational principles, the team of British colonial district officers formed a uniquely effective instrument for influencing

⁴⁴ For more discussion of this point, see R. Myerson, "Standards for state-building interventions," in *Economics for the Curious*, edited by Robert Solow and Janice Murray (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pages 174-188, also at <http://home.uchicago.edu/~rmyerson/research/std4sb.pdf>.

⁴⁵ This point has been cogently argued by James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, "Neotrusteeship and the problem of weak states," *International Security* 28(4):5-42 (2004), <https://doi.org/10.1162/0162288041588296>

⁴⁶ See R. Myerson, "Local politics in the theory of democratic state-building" (2022), to appear in *Journal of Democracy*, <https://home.uchicago.edu/~rmyerson/research/demsb.pdf>. See also R. Myerson, "How to prepare for state-building," *Prism* 7(1):3-15 (2017), <https://home.uchicago.edu/rmyerson/research/prepare4sb.pdf>.

local political development in every part of a country. If the legacy of their colonial rule has been harmful for postcolonial development in Africa, it was because they used their influence to promote an autocratic form of local governance, which might have seemed more convenient when the goal was to establish long-term foreign domination. But where colonial interventions regularly promoted local political development by recognizing and supporting the authority of one local leader, the norm for democratic state-building interventions should be to recognize and support the authority of a broadly representative local council or assembly, to which local officials are accountable.

The international community can support constructive responses to the problems of failed states without tolerating interventions for neocolonial domination only if observers throughout the world recognize how democratic state-building should differ from colonial stabilization. The essential differences between colonial stabilization and democratic state-building are that a democratic state-building intervention must be for a strictly limited term, and democratic state-builders must be committed to supporting broadly representative coalitions for local governance. The similarity, however, is that both need an executive team of field officers who can respond effectively to local political challenges in all parts of the country.

A direct comparison between the British Empire's methods of political stabilization and more recent approaches to state-building can be found in the history of Iraq. After World War I, a British invasion led to the establishment of the Kingdom of Iraq, which then governed from 1921 to 1958. Gertrude Bell has reported that in 1920 the British occupation of Iraq had just 5 senior British officers in its central administration, which seems a stark contrast to the central concentration of administrators in Baghdad's Green Zone after the American invasion in 2003. Instead, the British administration in 1920 relied on a decentralized corps of about 70 local political officers who had experience serving as district officers in the British Empire.⁴⁷ Although they came with an invading army, they formed an administrative network that could monitor and respond to local political forces throughout the country.

In contrast, it was not until six months after the 2003 invasion of Iraq that America's Coalition Provisional Authority had a network of local political coordinators in each province and began soliciting weekly political reports from them.⁴⁸ Violent insurgencies took root during

⁴⁷ Gertrude Bell, *Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia* (1920); reprinted by Forgotten Books (London, 2015), p122-125.

⁴⁸ James Dobbins, Seth G. Jones, Benjamin Runkle, and Siddharth Mohandes, *Occupying Iraq: A History of the Coalition Provisional Authority* (RAND, 2009), p27, 259. See also Emma Sky, *The Unraveling: High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq* (Public Affairs, 2015), p7-72.

these months of misdirection. The analysis of this paper suggests that, as a basic principle of strategic planning for any such state-building mission, a team of local stabilization officers should have been ready to go to work in every part of the country from the first week of the occupation, and the mission's political direction should have depended critically on these local field officers' reports and recommendations from the second week onwards.

Although Lugard was writing in 1922 about colonial stabilization, his three basic principles are still applicable for international missions to support the establishment of sovereign democratic states in the 21st century. Such missions might accompany military interventions, or they might be missions that just bring economic assistance, but they can be considered state-building missions if their main goal is to support a country's political development.

Lugard's principle of Decentralization recommends that, when the goal of foreign assistance is political development, broad power over all foreign assistance in each locality should be delegated to a district stabilization officer, who can oversee the allocation of aid to local groups and organizations. Then Lugard's principle of Cooperation stipulates that these district stabilization officers should use their delegated power over foreign assistance to promote the formation of a broad inclusive coalition for local governance, by directing aid to local leaders who cooperate with each other and with the national authorities. Indeed, we have argued that this principle of Cooperation may actually be more fully compatible with democratic state-building than with Lugard's mission of colonial domination.

District stabilization officers could be expected to work full-time in their district for a term of one or two years, but then they should be rotated to other districts, so that a local officer cannot establish independent personal authority anywhere. Then Lugard's principle of Continuity suggests that each district stabilization officer should be supervised by a coordinator who has long-term responsibility for a province or region that contains just a few local districts, and these regional stabilization coordinators should be actively involved in formulating the general strategic direction of the whole state-building mission.

When the goal of an international intervention is to support the development of a sovereign democratic state, the strategic direction of the intervention should depend on regular input from the political leaders who will be competing for power in the new state, both at the local and national levels. Realistic goals for a democratic state-building mission can be determined only in a process of negotiations with the contenders for local and national power in the state. A stabilization assistance team of district officers with experienced regional coordinators can form an effective mechanism for getting strategic input from political leaders

throughout the country. Thus, the district stabilization officers and their regional coordinators should serve as a principal source of advice and guidance for top policy-makers in formulating the state-building mission's overall political goals and strategies. (Of course, the governments of the intervening nations must determine the amount of resources that they are willing to commit to a state-building mission in a country. But if a state-building mission relies on analysts in Washington DC or in an isolated "Green Zone" fortress to formulate its political goals for the country then it must expect to be seen as a threat to the country's independence.)

Unlike the old colonial interventions, a state-building intervention today needs a clear exit strategy. Within a clearly limited number of years, the interveners' goal of supporting political development must give way to the normal principle of international respect for national political independence.

We should acknowledge that colonial stabilization may have been facilitated by its unbounded time horizon, but democratic state-building goals should enable stabilization interventions today to have limited terms. To establish political order against a violent insurgency, a state needs a nationwide network of active supporters, who must be motivated by confidence that the rewards for their loyal service will include long-term protection from the state. The unbounded term of the old colonial interventions meant that these essential promises of long-term protection could be offered by the colonial officers themselves. But in state-building interventions that are committed to withdrawing all foreign forces after a limited term, these essential long-term promises must come from indigenous leaders of the new political system, who must be able to organize reliable protection even in remote communities. Such promises can have credibility when the state-building intervention is supporting a political regime that includes trusted local leaders in communities throughout the country. Thus, a limited term should be feasible for a democratic state-building mission when its local stabilization officers help the new state to develop strong foundations in local politics.

The mission's ultimate exit should be planned as a gradual process. During a period of transition, the portion of foreign assistance that is directed by the team of district stabilization officers could be reduced gradually from 100% down to 0; and other independent aid organizations could be encouraged to fill in wherever needs are identified by the new state's national and local authorities. But even to the end of this exit process, the district stabilization officers' effectiveness might depend on an ability to promise some future assistance in exchange for current cooperation. So after the district stabilization officers have been withdrawn, their regional coordinators might still maintain consular offices for a few more years, during which

they could continue to honor the mission's past promises to local leaders when it is feasible and appropriate to do so. That is, the scaffolding of the intervention could be removed first from the lower district level, where the mission's local political deals were negotiated, but later from the higher regional level that served to maintain continuity in the mission's provision of assistance.

Even within its limited time, such state-building power should be exercised only with strict international restraint. State-building missions should be considered internationally unacceptable unless they are supported by a broad multinational coalition, and these missions are best done multilaterally. One can only speculate about what nation or international organization might take responsibility for maintaining a reserve corps of local stabilization officers, with professional training in local government administration and languages, so that the world can be better prepared for the next state-building emergency. But from the perspective of this paper, it is hard to imagine that a more suitable sponsor than the Commonwealth of Nations, where the legacy of British colonial district officers is still widely remembered.