

## Local Politics and Democratic State-Building<sup>1</sup>

Disastrous misdirection of several interventions for democratic state-building suggest a need to reconsider how we think about the foundations of democracy.

(The last President of Afghanistan was considered an expert on fixing failed states!)

*...A vital relationship of local & national politics has been underappreciated.*

National reconstruction never begins from Hobbesian anarchy (*all vs. all*).

People cannot live without cooperation from neighbors in local groups.

Local leadership matters even more when the state is weak or has failed.<sup>2</sup>

Hobbesian error led to a ***centralized theory of democratic state-building***, a belief that, after establishing basic security, the main tasks would be

(1) hold elections to ratify constitution and select national leader,

(2) help gov't develop effective forces & agencies under this elected leadership.

*Why would such elected national leaders still meet widespread resistance?*

Fragile states lack proven mechanisms for holding national leaders accountable.

So many people may distrust a new national leadership which can threaten the local institutions on which they have relied.

*Among constitutional divisions of power, the national/local division comes first; executive/legislative/judicial divisions presume an accepted national elite.*

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<sup>1</sup> *Journal of Democracy* 33(4):62-73 (2022), <<https://home.uchicago.edu/~rmyerson/research/demsb.pdf>> .

These slides: < [https://home.uchicago.edu/~rmyerson/research/demsb\\_notes.pdf](https://home.uchicago.edu/~rmyerson/research/demsb_notes.pdf) > .

<sup>2</sup> Jennifer Murtazashvili, "A Tired Cliché" [ungoverned spaces], *Journal of International Affairs* (2018).

*A failed state is not a blank slate; local politics persists when national politics fails.  
A state-building intervention that promises to respect people's right to choose their  
leaders should not ignore the local leadership on which they have relied.*

Ask: what powers & responsibilities do people want local institutions to retain?

Successful democracies depend on a balance between local & national politics.<sup>3</sup>

- Locally accountable officials will be more attentive to local concerns;  
centrally appointed officials may care more about national political interests.<sup>4</sup>
- People are more willing to fight for the defense of a national state when  
their community leaders have a positive role in the state.<sup>5</sup>
- Good local leaders can show their qualifications to compete for higher offices,  
making national politics more competitive.<sup>6</sup>

But national leaders may prefer to centralize power and avoid such competition.

So we get a *decentralized theory of democratic state-building*:

- (1) national political reconstruction must recognize & reassure many local groups,
- (2) empowering locally accountable leaders makes state stronger & more accountable.

*Ratifying the US Constitution in 1787 required respect of provincial authority.*

*The French Revolution suppressed provincial authorities and resulted in tyranny.*

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<sup>3</sup> *OECD Regions and Cities at a Glance 2018*, p114-115, <[https://doi.org/10.1787/reg\\_cit\\_glance-2018-en](https://doi.org/10.1787/reg_cit_glance-2018-en)> .

<sup>4</sup> R. Myerson, "Local agency costs of political centralization," *Theoretical Economics* (2021).

<sup>5</sup> T. Brik & J. Murtazashvili, "The Source of Ukraine's Resilience," *Foreign Affairs* (28 June 2022).

<sup>6</sup> R. Myerson, "Federalism and incentives for success of democracy," *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* (2006).

***Negotiations to establish a broadly acceptable national/local distribution of power are an essential pillar of democratic state-building.***

State-builders should be talking regularly with local leaders, not just national leaders.

When an international intervention's goal is to promote political development, it needs ***local stabilization officers*** who can monitor & respond to local political concerns. Local stabilization officers should have authority over local direction of foreign aid, to reward local groups who cooperate in the new political system.

The strategy and goals of a state-building mission should be informed and guided by a stabilization-assistance team that is so engaged with national and local leaders. But foreign assistance rarely achieves such decentralized political engagement, and so it generally becomes a force for centralization of power under national authorities.

Local political conditionality is difficult for outsiders to observe.

When the goal is to build a state that is accountable to its people, not to the donor gov't, local stabilization officers may need exemptions from normal donor-gov't controls.

## *An historical model for the organization of a stabilization assistance team*<sup>7</sup>

When the British Empire had the most successful operation for foreign political stabilization, they actually used a decentralized approach.<sup>8</sup>

Colonial *district officers* were [in our terms] local stabilization officers.

(Colonial imperialism is not democratic state-building, but sensitivity to local political concerns can help to stabilize any political regime.)

The 3 principles of Frederick Lugard's 1922 *Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa*:

- (1) **Decentralization** of power of all aid to local stabilization officers;
- (2) **Cooperation** in forming inclusive coalitions for local government = LS officers' goal;
- (3) **Continuity** from provincial coordinators supervising local officers & guiding policy.

Local stabilization officers (in field for 1-2 years) & provincial coordinators (assigned longer) formed a team for monitoring & responding to local political issues.

Flat 3-level hierarchy facilitated communication of local issues to top policymakers.

But colonial district officers tended to promote despotic power of one local chief, where *Cooperation* should have meant promoting a broadly inclusive local council.

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<sup>7</sup> See note 16 in the paper, and "Stabilization lessons from the British Empire," *Texas National Security Review* (2023), <<http://home.uchicago.edu/~rmyerson/research/sblessons.pdf>> .

<sup>8</sup> Dan Honig observes that the UK's DFID still regularly gives broad authority over local aid projects to advisors who are embedded in their target region for an extended period. See "The power of letting go," *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (Winter 2019) <[https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the\\_power\\_of\\_letting\\_go](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_power_of_letting_go)> .

## *A US agency with decentralized political engagement in South Vietnam 1962-1964*

In 1962, Rufus Phillips created USAID's Office of Rural Affairs for distributing aid to support counterinsurgency in South Vietnam.<sup>9</sup>

In each province, a field officer distributed aid to encourage cooperation among local officials of the national government and locally elected community councils.

These provincial officers were supervised by four regional coordinators.

Who could better understand the challenges of establishing the government's authority: stabilization officers working with local leaders throughout the country, or military advisors supporting the army's fight against insurgents?

US policy-makers should have relied on the Office's director and coordinators for input in planning the US's strategy for state-building in South Vietnam.

*Sept 1963: In Washington, Phillips was warned not to speak without permission even on topics where he was best-informed in the room.*

The head of a stabilization-assistance team needs status to speak to top policy-makers!

O.R.A. was disbanded in 1964. Many in USAID disapproved of delegating aid authority to junior field officers who focused on local concerns of remote communities.

But the costly misdirection of US state-building in Afghanistan & Iraq might have been avoided if, from the start of these interventions, US policy-makers had relied on a team of local stabilization officers with decentralized political engagement.

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<sup>9</sup> Rufus Phillips III, *Why Vietnam Matters* (2008). See also his *Stabilizing Fragile States* (2022).