

Institutional sources of cooperation, competition and conflict in developing countries: the cases of civil service administration in PNG and Afghanistan

Nematullah Bizhan and William Maley

Abstract

Institutions are central to political life, yet institutional dysfunctionality remains endemic in many developing countries. In postcolonial settings, institutions inherited through decolonisation have often proved inappropriate to new states, either because of mismatches between institutional form and long-standing authority patterns or because these legacy institutions created incentives for destructive behaviours. These problems are not confined to the postcolonial space, but have also appeared in contexts of multilateral state-building and institutional design. This paper examines how institutional design can incentivise cooperation, competition, or conflict by analysing cases of civil service administration in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021 and in Papua New Guinea after independence in 1975. It argues that a neutral, politically impartial civil service is itself a political objective, but that institutional design has not been able to overcome broader social and political incentives fostering patronage and networking. Careful reflection is therefore required before new arrangements are put in place.

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Nematullah Bizhan and William Maley

Nematullah Bizhan is Senior Lecturer in Public Policy at the Development Policy Centre, The Australian National University.

William Maley is Emeritus Professor of Diplomacy at The Australian National University.

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1 Introduction

Institutions are central to a great deal of political life (Macintyre, 2003), but an endemic problem in developing countries has been that of institutional dysfunctionality. In postcolonial environments, institutions left behind by former colonial powers as part of a process of decolonisation have often proved to be singularly inappropriate to new states, either because of serious mismatches between institutional form and long-standing authority patterns within wider postcolonial societies, or because such 'legacy institutions' have created incentives for destructive behaviours that the architects of those institutions failed to anticipate. These problems, however, are not limited to the postcolonial space, and have also surfaced recently in countries where multilateral involvement to address issues of state disruption or fragility has involved processes of institutional design. In this paper, we examine how institutional design can incentivise cooperation, competition, or conflict. In doing so, we explore civil service administration in Papua New Guinea after it obtained its independence in 1975, and in Afghanistan between the overthrow of the Taliban regime in 2001 and the return of the Taliban in 2021 following the abandonment of Afghanistan's republican regime by the United States (Miller, 2025). What emerges from these cases is that the achievement of a neutral, politically impartial civil service is itself a political objective, but more broadly that different institutional contexts can foster cooperation, competition, or conflict to different degrees, and that very careful reflection is required before new arrangements are put in place, with a view to ensuring that destructive tendencies are not inadvertently encouraged. We begin by discussing the wider theoretical context of institutional development and design; move on to discuss challenges of cooperation, competition, and conflict; and conclude with a detailed discussion of the experiences in Afghanistan and Papua New Guinea. It emerges that in each of these cases, institutional design with respect to bureaucratic administration has not been able to overcome challenges arising from broader social and political incentives fostering patronage and networking.

1.1 Context

In a very broad sense, the discussion of institutions sits within a wider framework of political theory, but here, two very different strands of thinking have historically suggested differing approaches to the roles that institutions may play in shaping politics and political life. One strand can be traced back to Plato's *Republic*, and specifically to the so-called 'allegory of the cave'. Plato linked the development of the good society to the amplification of the virtues of the uniquely gifted (Cornford, 1970: 227-231). A very different strand is associated with Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws*. Montesquieu was notably distrustful of political power, and saw virtues in dividing the exercise of power between different agencies (Montesquieu, 1989: 157). Each approach has been notably influential, with the former implicitly underpinning the exercise of power in theocratic, authoritarian or sultanistic systems (Ullmann, 1975; Perlmutter, 1981; Chehabi & Linz, 1998; Linz, 2000) and the latter much more associated with ideas of constitutionalism (Vile, 1967).

Just as these strands of political thinking are venerable, so too are writings that draw attention to the importance of institutional frameworks, although the *vocabulary* of 'institutions' does not always appear prominently. In 1725, the Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico in his *New Science* devoted considerable attention to the institutions of family and marriage (Bergin & Fisch, 1984: 62). Around the same time, the Dutch-born English writer Bernard Mandeville, in *The Fable of the Bees: or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits*, examined how 'vices' could work to society's good if appropriately channelled: 'So Vice is beneficial found, When it's by Justice lopt and bound' (Mandeville, 1988, Vol.1: 37). Adam Smith in 1776 in *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* elaborated on Mandeville's point, noting that 'It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own self interest' (Smith, 1873: pp. 6-7), but exploring in detail how self-interest could be constrained to benefit the public. In the 19th century, the focus on institutions became sharper still, with scholars such as Jeremy Bentham in his unfinished *Constitutional Code* outlining in great detail what particular

institutions and structures of government and administration might be required (Hume, 1981). This reflected not just intellectual interest on Bentham's part, but also the growing challenge of developing appropriate structures of government as the modern state took shape. Historical sociology suggests that this was a ragged rather than a linear process (Poggi, 1978; van Creveld, 1999; Gill, 2016), and it was of course also one that played out differently in different parts of the world, with many territories in Africa, Asia and South America being subject to colonial domination by European powers.

What, then, are institutions? Many definitions have been put forward. Elinor Ostrom, a Nobel Prize-winning student of institutions, has argued that 'institutions are the prescriptions that humans use to organise all forms of repetitive and structured interactions including those within families, neighbourhoods, markets, firms, sports leagues, churches, private associations, and governments at all scales' (Ostrom, 2005: 3). They are constituted, according to Nicholas Rowe, 'by agents following *rules of action* and believing others to follow *rules of action*' (Rowe, 1989: 23). Implicit in these definitions is that institutions can emerge in a number of different ways. It is possible for institutions to result from a process of formal institutional design, and Goodin has identified revisability, robustness, sensitivity to motivational complexity, and variability as desirable features of an institution constructed in such a fashion (Goodin, 1996: 39-43). However, institutions can also develop through a process of evolution (Pettit, 2023: 27-41), and reach a point of self-sustaining equilibrium (Weingast, 1997). It is the ability of institutions thus to develop that helps explain why apocalyptic scenarios about the overuse of shared resources (Hardin, 1968) have not always come to pass: on the contrary, empirical studies have shown that informal institutions and orders, underpinned by practical knowledge, can develop that effectively ameliorate some of the effects of rampant self-interest (see Ostrom, 1990; Scott, 1998; also Hayek, 1982). Institutions have much in common with formal organisations, the contours of which are typically shaped by rules, roles, relations, and resources. What is particularly important to note, however, is that all four of these tend to lie on continua between formality and

informality. 'Organograms' of the kind beloved to certain forms of manager may give only a poor picture of how an organisation or institution actually functions: to obtain a fuller understanding, it may be important to map the web-like relationships, or networks, that link people to each other both inside and beyond the organisation (Grewal, 2008; Slaughter, 2017). It is also the case that institutions may be very difficult to reform by processes of *diktat*, since norms may have developed that prompt people within institutions to continue to act in accordance with a role-based logic of appropriateness rather than logical consequences (March & Olsen, 1991; Brennan, Eriksson, Goodin & Southwood, 2013: 158-161).

Given the scope of such definitions, it is not surprising that institutions come in many different forms. Analysts have explored the complexities of social institutions, economic institutions, political institutions, legal institutions, and administrative institutions. Social institutions include the family, and, in the public sphere, property (Ryan, 1986; Sened, 1997; Pipes, 1999); economic institutions include markets and mechanisms of trade and exchange (Lindblom, 1980); political institutions shape the exercise of power by those who seek to lead, and come in many different forms, something appreciated since the days of Aristotle (Sabine, 1951: 17-128); legal institutions include courts and tribunals charged with adjudication and the enforcement of laws; and administrative institutions include bureaucracies and regulatory agencies (Weber, 1978; Ayres & Braithwaite, 1992). The world of institutions is very large indeed.

1.2 Institutions and cooperation

While the roots of individual behaviour are complex (Taylor, 1964; Hirschman, 1977; Brennan & Pettit, 2004; Bowles, 2016), institutions can create incentives for different kinds of behaviour, and in some situations serve effectively to foster cooperation. Indeed, in the case of some institutions, their emergence is a direct consequence of cooperative patterns of behaviour, which then proceed to foster further cooperation. The classic mechanism by which this comes about is the development of a *convention*, with the behaviour associated with that convention then becoming *internalised* in such a

way as to give rise to a reproduction of that behaviour in the future as a normatively-expected activity. A convention in the strict sense is an equilibrium solution to a coordination problem (Lewis, 1969: 42), and it is a so-called 'Nash equilibrium', in the sense that the regularity of behaviour associated with it is one from which no actor has an interest in departing. Evolved rules of the road often have such a character: it does not particularly matter whether cars are configured to drive on the left-hand side of the road or the right, but it is hugely important that all drivers operate within a shared understanding of what is required. Here, the interest of motorists in avoiding a crash has the effect of sustaining a regularity of behaviour. But with the passage of time, such conventions can be consolidated into social norms, as behaviours come to be seen and accepted as *the* way to behave, often reinforced by meta-norms ordaining sanctions for those who decline to enforce norms (Opp, 1982; Axelrod, 1986). In this situation, cooperation becomes self-sustaining and self-replicating.

Institutions could also be consciously designed to foster cooperative rather than conflictual forms of behaviour. In the context of democratic political organisation, several approaches are notable. One is the avoidance of structures that encourage 'winner takes all' politics. In particular, much has been written about the dangers that can be associated with presidential systems in which symbolic and executive leadership is combined in the one office (Linz, 1990). While some have challenged the view that presidential systems contribute to political breakdown more than do parliamentary ones (Cheibub, 2007), there are some very striking examples, such as Afghanistan in recent times (Jamal & Maley, 2023), that show how presidential systems can go terribly wrong. Another approach is to use institutions to foster deliberative decision-making in which open and discursive dialogue, rather than simply the rule of the majority, is central to the making of policy (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Goodin, 2003). More broadly, cooperation can – at least to some degree – be fostered by establishing a meaningful framework of law within the society which is not simply an extension of the power of a ruling elite. This is typically captured in references to the political principle of the rule of law, well captured in the formulation of the late Joseph Raz: '(1) All laws

should be prospective, open, and clear (2) Laws should be relatively stable (3) The making of particular laws (particular legal orders) should be guided by open, stable, clear, and general rules (4) The independence of the judiciary must be guaranteed (5) The principles of natural justice must be observed (6) The courts should have review powers over the implementation of the other principles (7) The courts should be easily accessible (8) The discretion of the crime-preventing agencies should not be allowed to pervert the law' (Raz, 1979: 214-218). The rule of law is important as an underpinning for cooperation because it can reduce uncertainty about what the potential costs of cooperation might prove to be. The same is true of neutral and politically impartial state agencies and bureaucratic administration.

Within the sphere of institutional design, the scope for fostering cooperation has proved to be quite extensive. One of the most popular measures to encourage cooperation has been the devolution of authority to the local community level, on the basis that proximity to people's everyday concerns can foster deliberative participation. This was highlighted in the 19th century by John Stuart Mill who warned that 'It is but a small portion of the public business of a country which can be well done, or safely attempted, by the central authorities' (Mill, 1910: 346). This warning can apply just as potently to developing countries: as one study has put it about Afghanistan, 'Customary governance remains an important option for many Afghans despite decades of war and violence. Most villagers believed that customary governance was *more* responsive after decades of conflict because villages had more autonomy' (Murtazashvili & Murtazashvili, 2019: 199; see also Murtazashvili & Murtazashvili, 2021: 102-108). Cooperation can also be fostered through the choice of electoral systems. It has long been appreciated that different electoral laws can have different political consequences (Rae, 1967; Reilly, 2001; Norris, 2004; Lee and Paine, 2024), and while elections almost always create winners and losers, with potentially combustible results (Snyder, 2000), some systems tend to be less divisive than others. For example, there is evidence that the system of preferential voting (also known as the alternative vote) where voters rank candidates in order of preference, and the votes of less popular candidates can potentially be

distributed to those who are more popular in order to ensure that the final victor has an absolute majority, might in certain circumstances work against parties that limit their appeal to just one bloc within an electorate, and encourage cross-ethnic cooperation (Reilly, 2002: 712-713). Finally, confidence in administrative institutions can nurture a more cooperative approach to political life. If the instrumentalities of the state are seen as simply tools to be deployed by political winners against political losers, then the scene is set for turmoil, with incoming rulers seeking to purge state officials and replace them with loyal supporters. This is a key reason why the Weberian concept professional bureaucracy has so long been valued, although interestingly, the roots of such bureaucracy are much deeper, being found not only in imperial China (Kamenka, 1989: 22-39) but also in 19th century Britain (Parris, 1969), where the 1854 Northcote-Trevelyan Report played a substantial role of the professionalisation of public administration.

1.3 Institutions and competition

One of the great lessons of recent centuries has been that competition, properly organised, can be a remarkable source of dynamism, innovation, and legitimacy within societies. When individuals or groups strive to do their best in order to achieve their desired outcomes, and profit from doing so, they send signals to others about what kinds of behaviour might be to their advantage. For this reason, institutions that foster competition *of the right kind* can be very important in political and economic life. Furthermore, competition in ideas through the free articulation of testable hypotheses has been a central source of the growth of scientific knowledge (Popper, 1959; Popper, 1968), although from Socrates through to Galileo through to our own times, free thought and free speech have attracted plenty of enemies (Dabhoiwala, 2025).

In political life, the value of competition has been manifested in one of the simplest conceptions of democracy, namely a system whose institutions allow ordinary people periodically to change their rulers without bloodshed. This straightforward idea, associated with scholars such as Karl Popper and Joseph Schumpeter (Popper, 1966,

Vol. II: 151; Schumpeter, 1976: 269) provides a very useful criterion for distinguishing democratic from autocratic systems, while not denying that there can be other problems associated with systems of 'delegative democracy' in which rulers have no need to pay any attention to the wishes of the people *between* elections (O'Donnell, 1995: 59). If electoral choice is the mechanism for change of government, however, it is vital that such elections be free and fair, and the key institutional requirements in this respect have been identified by Elklit and Svensson. 'Freedom', they write, 'entails the right and the opportunity to choose one thing over another'. This implies an opportunity for voters to make a genuinely free choice. Essential freedoms (for both voters and candidates) include freedom of movement, assembly, association, and speech, as well as universal adult franchise and freedom from intimidation. 'Fairness', they go on to say, means impartiality, and 'involves both *regularity* (the unbiased application of rules) and *reasonableness* (the not-too-unequal distribution of relevant resources among competitors)'. Criteria for fairness include independent electoral authorities, impartial voter education, fair media access, secure polling stations and ballot boxes, and appropriate, transparent, and reviewable scrutiny procedures' (Elklit & Svensson, 1997: 35).

If institutions are important in structuring positive political competition, they are equally important in the structuring of economic competition – although until recently, a great deal of modern economic theory, much of it focussed on mathematical rigour (in contrast to older works of political economy) has had surprisingly little to say directly about institutions (Kasper, Streit & Boettke, 2012). Of critical importance are markets based on exchangeable private property rights. Thinking about markets has a long history (Herzog, 2013), and the value of markets as engines of economic dynamism has been well-established (Baumol, 2002), as the expansion of the US economy after the 1861-1865 Civil War, and the expansion of China following the reforms of Deng Xiaoping from the late 1970s made clear (Zakaria, 1998: 45-46; Vogel, 2011: 423-476). A point made with great force over many years by the economist F.A. Hayek is that real-world competition, even if not the 'perfect competition' of formal theory, is a discovery

procedure, and that markets are mechanisms for the processing of vast volumes of information, reformulated almost on a daily basis and reflected in pricing and output decisions, that state bureaucracies can never hope to match in practice (Hayek, 1949: 77-106; Hayek, 1978: 179-190). But for markets to function, there must be a framework of laws, rules, and norms that gives meaning and effect to property rights, and distinguishes fruitful competition (based on the price and/or quality of a good or service) from destructive competition of the kind that one associates with organised criminal activity and turf wars between gangs.

In some spheres this has long been recognised, and one source of economic dynamism for the United States was an early recognition that monopolies undermined the benefits of competition and ultimately compromised the entrepreneurial spirit. As early as the 18th century, Adam Smith had highlighted this problem, writing that 'People of the same trade seldom meet together, even for merriment and diversion, but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the public, or in some contrivance to raise prices' (Smith, 1873: 54). In the *Sherman Antitrust Act* of 1890, the US Congress provided that 'Every contract, combination in the form of trust or otherwise, or conspiracy, in restraint of trade or commerce among the several States, or with foreign nations, is declared to be illegal', and this ultimately led to the breaking-up from 1911 of John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil Company. Many other states have sought to implement similar bodies of trade practices legislation, but their effectiveness will depend on the robustness of the rule of law in a particular state. If corruption or nepotism offer protection from a political elite to economic adventurers, then the benefits of competition are at grave risk of being lost. One countervailing factor here can be global trends in favour of competition, such as the rules of the World Trade Organisation that are designed to free up *global* trade, rather than simply provide for the kind of *preferential* trade that is frequently embodied in bilateral 'free trade agreements' (see Bhagwati & Panagariya, 1996; Bhagwati, 2008).

1.4 Institutions and conflict

The dividing line between competition and conflict is a fine one, and inevitably there can be a grey area between the two as a result. 'A conflict', Nicholson has written, 'exists when two people wish to carry out acts which are mutually inconsistent' (Nicholson, 1970: 2). Along similar lines, a recent overview defines conflict as 'the existence of incompatible positions', and sees it as 'normal, ubiquitous, and unavoidable' (Bercovitch, Kremenyuk & Zartman, 2009: 10). In many circumstances, however, whether driven by passions or interests (Hirschman, 1977), conflict is also extremely destructive, especially where it takes a violent turn. For this reason, it is rather important that institutions not provide gratuitous incentives for conflict to occur. Such incentives can arise in two ways. One relates to the very design of an institution, which may prove to have unfortunate consequences, whether intended or unintended. Another relates to the functioning of an institution. Even a well-designed institution can either incentivise conflict, or fail to constrain conflict, if it begins to function otherwise than intended. For example, bureaucracies designed to function in an impartial and law-governed fashion may fuel conflict if they begin to function instead as political tools of the government of the day, or as positional goods used by political leaders to reward their followers with employment and access to state revenues. Norms associated with particular institutions – for example, norms of solidarity – may militate against any tendency to self-correction: not all norms are positive in their effects, and as Shepsle has put it, 'the general welfare is sometimes served by violating rules in order to save an institution from itself' (Shepsle, 2017: 140).

Institutions can incentivise conflict in a number of different ways. At the highest level of generality, the development of a constellation of institutions that add up to a strong state – in terms of both scope and strength (Fukuyama, 2004) – can create a stake over which political actors can struggle for control. This problem can readily emerge when trust between political actors is low (Maley, 2003) and the risks to one's fortunes might seem very high if control of the instrumentalities of the state were to fall into the hands of anyone else. When the state is weak, few players may bother to strive to control it; if

the state is strong, it may be different story. This is especially likely to be a problem if the state has control over significant 'rentier' income (Mahdavy, 1970; Richter and Steiner, 2008) – one manifestation of which is the so-called 'resource curse'. Unless it is carefully managed, rentier income can undermine relations of accountability between the state and the citizenry, distort and corrode the operation of government agencies, and fuel corruption on a significant scale.

Beyond this, specific institutions can shape the propensity for conflict in different ways, of which the following are simply illustrations. *Constitutions* may prove grossly dysfunctional. This was spectacularly the case with the presidential system in Sri Lanka in 2022, when President Gotabaya Rajapaksa was forced to flee the country in the face of mass popular protests against policies that had resulted in shortages of food, fuels, and electricity (Mashal & Schmall, 2022). The presidential system – in contrast to parliamentary systems where votes of no confidence can change a government – left little scope for resolving the crisis in any other way. *Electoral systems* can also have perverse effects. The poorly-regarded 'Single Non-Transferable Vote' (SNTV) system (Bowler, Farrell & Pettitt, 2005) used in Afghanistan's lower-house legislative elections from 2005 created what was in effect a chamber of independents, and invited the use of ethnicity as a mobilising tool for creating cohesive blocks on the floor of the Parliament, as well as encouraging brokerage on the part of elected legislators, a practice that had proved destructive in Afghanistan in the 1960s (Weinbaum, 1977). An independent *judiciary* that loses its independence can leave the rule of law in disarray, as occurred with the forced departure of the Chief Justice of Nauru in 2014 (Williams, 2014; Saul, 2014). And a degeneration in the calibre and functioning of *bureaucratic and administrative* institutions can have profound implications for the integrity of public life. For example, in Australia at the Commonwealth level, the idea of a government department having a 'Permanent Head' serving across the life of potentially multiple administrations of different political complexion has been replaced by a model in which 'Departmental Secretaries' have fixed-term contracts (Podger, 2007; Podger 2009). The potential implications for the giving of fearless advice are obviously considerable, and

there have even been suspicions that officials have turned a blind eye to illegality – for example in the so-called ‘Robodebt’ scandal (Royal Commission, 2023; Maley, 2024: 133-137; Hannah & Botterill, 2025) – in order to keep ministers and their staffs happy. Government departments, of course, exist to give effect to government policy; but if governments begin to use them not to give effect to public policy, but simply as mechanisms for rewarding followers and hanging onto power, then there is a problem.

2 Afghanistan

Afghanistan provides a sad – even tragic – recent example of a state in which a serious attempt to put efficient and apolitical bureaucratic mechanisms in place was thwarted by the character of the wider political system, the result being a progressive decline in the standing of the government that made it vulnerable to the eventual collapse that came in August 2021 (Jamal & Maley, 2023). This was in part because those who dominated the design of new institutions after the US intervention in 2001 were committed to the idea of a strong, centralised state even though decades of war had resulted in social fragmentation and low levels of anonymous trust that would drive fierce competition for control of either the state in its entirety, *or particular bureaucratic agencies within the state*. This had major implications for the practical outcome of the institutional design project during the life of Republican Afghanistan (2001-2021).

2.1 Institutional design

While Afghanistan has had a long history of state formation (Ibrahimi & Maley, 2020: 8-46; Bizhan, 2018), in its modern history greater weight should be given to the last two decades of the 19th century, where attempts by Amir Abdul Rahman Khan to build a highly centralised state, during what proved to be a reign of terror, had a lasting impact on the characteristic of administration (Ghubar, 2009). Despite the terror, this model of institutional design became a benchmark for many of his successors who were in search of obedient subjects. Abdul Rahman Khan, who had lived in exile before ruling from

1880-1901, was inspired by the Russian Tsarist state-building project, a model he followed after coming to power. He subsequently consolidated his power with support from the British Empire. Some records claim that during his two decades of rule, about 100,000 people were executed, and many thousands more were killed. As a despotic leader, he brutally repressed about 40 rebellions against his reign (Ghubar, 2009; Kakar, 1979; Ibrahimi, 2017: 53-86). Institutional design in this period had lasting implications for Afghanistan. First, though weak on many dimensions, the state remained autocratic and ruled by a despotic leader. To prevent challenges from the periphery to the centre, any form of institutional cooperation, whether civilian or military, between provinces was hindered by the careful design of institutions. This arrangement was made even though villages and districts in Afghanistan were poorly connected to major urban centres, and local markets were also isolated from national and regional markets. In case of revolts or other major problems in provinces, military and civilian assistance had to be provided from Kabul. Second, institutions lacked minimum checks and balances. Abdul Rahman Khan exercised absolute power. This state of power dynamics prevented the emergence of more accountable institutions and discouraged cooperation within and across public institutions and non-state actors.

Two decades later, Abdul Rahman Khan's grandson, King Amanullah Khan (1919-1929), initiated programs that gave rise to the first rule-based civil service governed by the *Nizamnama-ye Tashkilat-e Asasi-ye Afghanistan* (Law on the Basic Administrative Structure of Afghanistan) (Ghubar, 2009). Yet despite significant political changes and institutional reforms, institutions retained some of the characteristics that Abdul Rahman Khan had pioneered, such as a highly centralised state ruled by one person (Murtazashvili, 2022), and the overthrow of Amanullah in a 1929 revolt (Poullada, 1973) left later rulers with little appetite for attempting radical change (Bizhan, 2018: 55-57). This remained the case until 1978, when a communist coup became the trigger for decades of disruption (Maley, 2021). Not until the Bonn Conference of 2001, following the overthrow of the radical Taliban by the US, did institutional design issues resurface in a serious fashion.

The two decades of conflict following the 1978 military coup by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan witnessed a Soviet invasion (1979-1989), civil war among *Mujahideen* (resistance) groups (1992-1996), and theocratic rule by the Pakistan-backed Taliban (1996-2001), which cumulatively caused enormous human and economic costs. Government departments had been seriously weakened and politicised, or disintegrated entirely, and many essential public services had been disrupted partly or in full (Rubin, 2002). After the removal of the Taliban regime by the US-led military in alliance with Afghan resistance forces, the Bonn Conference in December 2001 brought together representatives of different Afghan factions (excluding the Taliban), mostly those with military leverage, to agree on a post-Taliban political order. While the agreement envisioned a transition to a democratic political order, it did not offer any clear pathway to the re-establishment of government institutions. The Bonn Agreement simply envisaged that an independent civil service commission would promote meritocracy and maintain the integrity of public administration; later, its mandate was expanded. It is an open question whether this provision in the Agreement reflected a genuine commitment on the part of the Afghan and international participants at the Bonn Conference to produce a new and better set of bureaucratic and administrative structures, or whether it was simply a form of window dressing, meaning quite different things to different people, and driven by the acute time pressures under which the participants were operating. The Transitional Administration of Afghanistan Decree 25 on 10 June 2003 defined the duties and responsibilities of the Commission, including managing reforms in public administration; identifying, selecting, and proposing the appointment of high-level civil servants, and reviewing and approving civil service institutions' requests on recruitment (Transitional Government of Afghanistan, 25 June 2003). The rebuilding of the existing government institutions and creating new ones emerged as an inevitable priority only after 2001.

However, an informal agreement among the participants at the Bonn meeting by and large set the agenda for allocating ministerial and senior public positions. The key ruling actors, including politicians and strongmen, saw government departments as tools by

which to reward political and network affiliates and accommodate adversaries to avoid conflict. As such, it was imperative to create as many senior positions as possible to accommodate many different powerful political and military actors and extend political influence. This approach led to overlap, duplications, and rivalries among various actors who occupied and led different institutions. This approach to institutional design aimed to prioritise short-term stability. From the early days of the Transitional Administration, the focus was on ensuring stability by incorporating various interest groups and political rivals into different government departments. However, this approach eventually weakened institutional capacity and cooperation within and across institutions in the long term (Bizhan, 2018). Amid the fact that because of conflict and crises, there was a growing demand for more effective institutions, the Bonn *de facto* approach to institutional arrangement made the job of the newly-established Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission (IARCSC) less relevant in improving meritocracy and the performance of government departments. In particular, key public positions that could yield power and wealth were mainly allocated based on political and patronage considerations (Sharan, 2022). This in turn affected the ability of the Commission to foster cooperation or competition rather than conflict.

2.2 Institutional incentives for competition, cooperation, and conflict

Three mechanisms created key incentives and significantly shaped institutional dynamics in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021: institutional overlap and centralisation; neopatrimonialism; and institutional reforms. Before delving into these mechanisms, it is worth noting an anecdote that illustrates the inner workings of institutional dynamics in Afghanistan. During the rule of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (1978–1992), commonly known as the communist regime, a well-known story about the then Minister of Interior circulated. When asked by a journalist to describe a typical day at work, he responded: 'Upon arriving at the office each morning, my initial task is dismantling all the conspiracies my adversaries have orchestrated against me. This consumes roughly 50% of my day. Subsequently, I spend another 25% of my time devising counterplots against those same enemies. The remaining quarter of

my day is then dedicated to my official duties'. Although possibly exaggerated, this anecdote may encapsulate the institutional incentives for competition, cooperation, and conflict in Afghan governance.

2.3 Institutional overlap and centralisation

Between December 2001 and August 2021, Afghanistan experienced a series of transitions, including an 'Interim Administration' for six months, a 'Transitional Administration' for 18 months, and three elected governments, each serving for five years, except for the last one, which collapsed after 17 months with the return of the Taliban to power. Post-2001 state building inadvertently replicated some of the conditions that drove instability in past governments. Beginning with the violent reign of Abdul Rahman Khan, the rulers in Afghanistan repeatedly used central government authority to impose a new vision on society with little input from citizens (Murtazashvili, 2022: 42). This happened once again after 2001. The Bonn Agreement, officially known as the 'Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-Establishment of Permanent Government Institutions', was signed on 5 December 2001 in Bonn, Germany. It was a roadmap for establishing a new, interim government in Afghanistan. While to some extent it achieved success in charting a pathway for the political future of the country and a settlement among different groups and functions (excluding the Taliban), as far as the functions and effectiveness of government administration are concerned, it did not pay the necessary attention. Since the key actors, including politicians and strongmen, envisioned government departments as a means to reward political and network affiliates and to accommodate adversaries to avoid conflict, it was imperative to create as many departments and ministries as possible so as to accommodate and appease many powerful political and military actors and extend political influence. As per anecdotes among civil servants in Kabul, departments were not designed to serve the public but to accommodate strong actors (*zormandan*) or potential adversaries. The result of such a process was the emergence of overlaps, duplications, and rivalry among different actors who occupied and led different institutions. This approach to institutional design was driven by a

desire to favour short-term stability. From the first days of the Transitional Administration, stability was given precedence by accommodating different interest groups or political rivals in different government departments. However, this approach weakened institutional capacity and cooperation within and across institutions in the long term (Bizhan, 2018). It also resulted in the emergence of overlaps among different government departments.

The immediate result became evident in the first two years after the Bonn meeting, when four national entities with overlapping mandates dealt with development and reconstruction: Finance, Planning, Reconstruction and an Afghanistan Assistance Coordination Authority (Bizhan, 2023: 30). Later, the Ministries of Planning and Reconstruction were merged into a single ministry called Economy, and the AACA was merged with the Finance Ministry's Directorate of Budget. However, the precedents established by the Bonn process eventually dominated Afghanistan's civil service and senior appointments. Later, in 2015, an internal assessment by the Afghan government found that the role of state institutions overlapped in 21 areas, including financial audit, procurement, licensing and managing investments (Government of Afghanistan, n.d).

Additionally, with donor support, the government leadership prioritised centralising resource collection, distribution, and planning (Bizhan, 2026: 87-89). This strategy aimed to extend the central government's influence into provinces while simultaneously weakening the power of provincial strongmen and military commanders, who had reemerged as dominant players in provinces (Mukhopadhyay, 2009). Given the historically weak control of the state over provinces – where various warlords and military leaders had dominated different regions during the conflict after 1978 – this approach was intended to consolidate the central government's authority and improve accountability. For instance, in terms of public financial management, the system became significantly more centralised post-2001 than its predecessor. Under the new framework, all revenues were required to be deposited into a single treasury account, with funds redistributed based on the approved national budget in Kabul. By contrast, in the past, provinces used locally generated revenue to fund provincial expenditures

within the limit of their approved provincial budgets (Bizhan, 2018: 104-132). Despite this, amid weak institutional capacity, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and red tape, donors established parallel systems to deliver aid (Bizhan, 2018). Similarly, strong provincial governors often bypassed central government regulations and policies, consolidating their own power. In some cases, these governors, in comparison to their counterparts, were able to enhance security and facilitate development projects (Murtazashvili, 2022; Mukhopadhyay, 2014).

2.4 Neopatrimonialism

The institutional redesign during the Bonn meeting had lasting implications for competition, cooperation and conflict among various actors and institutions in the subsequent years. It exposed state institutions to neopatrimonial arrangements (Maley, 2013; Bizhan, 2018; Maley, 2018; Mehran, 2018) as a result of a trade-off between short-term stability and long-term development. Neopatrimonialism, much discussed in the context of postcolonial African states, is marked by an entanglement of formal administrative structures with informal patronage networks, sometimes underpinned by norms of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960). In its pure form, two notable analysts, Bratton and Van de Valle (1994: 458), have characterised it as follows:

In neopatrimonial regimes, the chief executive retains authority through personal patronage, rather than through ideology or law. As with classic patrimonialism, the right to rule is ascribed to a person rather than an office. In contemporary neopatrimonialism, relationships of loyalty and dependence pervade a formal political and administrative system and leaders occupy bureaucratic office less to perform public service than to acquire personal wealth and status. The distinction between private and public interests is purposely blurred. The essence of neopatrimonialism is the award by public officials of personal favors, both within the state (notably public sector jobs) and in society (for instance, licenses, contracts, and projects). In return for material rewards,

clients mobilize political support and refer all decisions upward as a mark of deference to patrons.

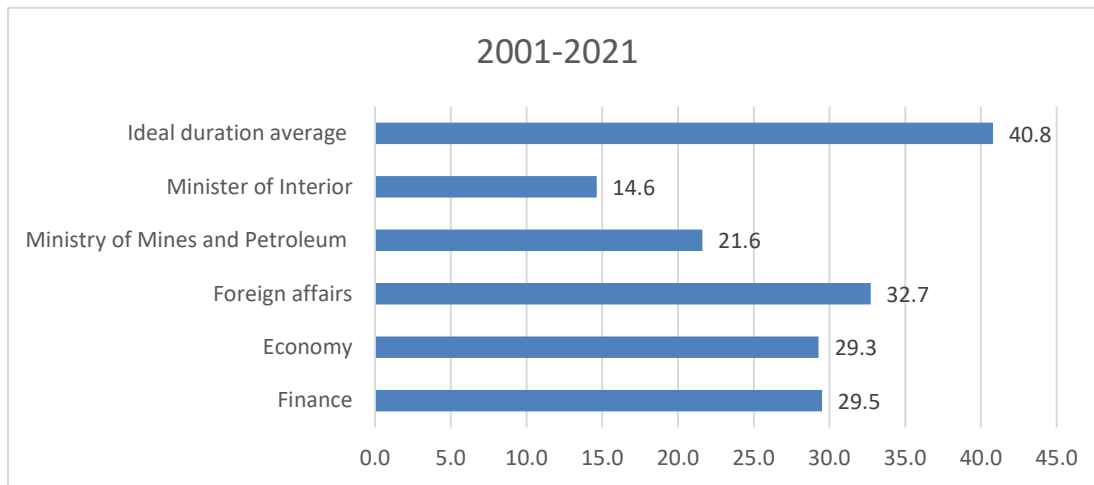
Of course, within the broad category of neopatrimonialism, variations are to be found, and Bach has drawn a distinction between 'regulated' and 'predatory' forms of neopatrimonialism: in the former, 'patrimonial practices tend to be regulated and capped' (2011: 277), whereas in the latter they can reach extraordinary heights.

The diverse nature of the political context in Afghanistan after 2001 meant that cabinets often included ministers from various political factions to ensure a broad base of support and legitimacy. While such an approach was plausible to improve stability in the short term, it also set the stage for harmful competition or conflict, and lack of cooperation among different departments due to differing agendas and priorities without minimal checks and balances. This process created a pattern after 2001 where institutions were often treated as a tool to reward loyal political and network or ethnic affiliates in return for political support or transactional exchanges. This process resulted in framing public office not as a locus of public trust but instead as a positional good (Maley, 2018: 1001). There was little secret about this process. James F. Dobbins, who represented the US at the 2001 Bonn meeting, later wrote in his memoirs that one ministry was arbitrarily divided into two to have enough rewards for various Afghan participants at the meeting (Dobbins, 2008). At the provincial level, public administration was more vulnerable to political considerations; in particular, many former military commanders or members of strong patronage networks were assigned as governors by President Hamid Karzai, with disappointing results, although some of them, by relying on their informal networks and leverage, contributed to improved security and eventually development investment (Mukhopadhyay, 2014). This situation made the role of the newly established IARCSC less effective in improving merit-based appointments and the effectiveness of government departments. Despite some improvements in reforming the government departments and improving meritocracy, key positions that could yield power and wealth were often allocated based on political and patronage considerations (Sharan, 2022).

Neopatrimonialism had implications not only for the effectiveness but also for the stability of public institutions. Between 2001 and 2021, the stability of ministries, as measured by the duration each minister held their position, varied significantly across key institutions but, on average, remained low. Low institutional stability was due to the high turnover of ministers, particularly in institutions with greater societal roles and potential for illegal income. So institutional design legacies created various incentives for competition, cooperation and conflict at the same time, depending on whether senior appointments were made based on merit, whether ministers led various institutions with the same party membership or network or loyalty to the President or other actors, and whether a change in leadership of a ministry would result in changing most of the senior officials in that ministry.

In five key ministries with important economic roles – Finance, Economy, Foreign Affairs, Mines and Petroleum, and Interior – the overall average tenure of ministers across these ministries between 2001 and 2021 was 25.5 months, below the expected average of 40 months for each minister during this period (see Figure 1). The average ideal duration is calculated based on the tenure of various government arrangements after 2001. It is worth noting that except for the Ministries of Defence and Interior and the National Directorate of Security, 23 ministries out of 26 and 30 independent agencies were governed by the civil service rules and regulations (Hashimi and Lauth, 2016).

Figure 1: Average leadership turnover in select ministries, 2001-2021



Source: Authors' analysis.

Among these institutions, the Ministry of Interior experienced the highest turnover in its leadership, reflecting the complex nature of its functions. Conversely, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs remained relatively stable, indicating a relatively more stable work environment. The Ministry of Finance experienced a moderate level of turnover in its leadership. However, a closer analysis of institutional dynamics can offer a better understanding of how relatively low institutional stability may have contributed to prolonging state weakness and the eventual collapse of the regime in Afghanistan in August 2021. For instance, the substantial reshuffling of senior roles, such as directors, within the ministries under new leadership highlights how ministerial positions and senior appointments were deeply politicised and subject to change with each new ministerial leadership.

These alterations, while often defended as necessary reforms, could result in the appointment of individuals with less education and experience to important senior public positions. The patterns of change observed in certain ministries reflected this trend. The Ministry of Interior underwent significant shifts in its senior positions. Even the Finance Ministry, which was relatively meritocratic and governed by civil service constraints, experienced, on average, changes in over 50 per cent of its senior positions

under each minister from 2009 to 2021, with roles related to revenue and customs being particularly susceptible to such fluctuations (Ministry of Finance, 2021).

2.5 Institutional reforms

After 2001, a series of reforms were also adapted to modernise and rebuild the government departments and update the laws and policies. The outcome, however, was mixed. In some areas, it resulted in the emergence of islands of efficiency, with young and well-trained Afghans taking the lead, in ways which were visible across a number of departments such as the Ministry of Finance, Rural Rehabilitation and Development, and Health. Moreover, efforts were undertaken by the IARCSC to promote merit-based appointments. These initiatives attracted a generation of young, well-educated Afghans, previously marginalised by influential networks and political parties functioning as patronage systems. However, the IARCSC was also criticised for its lack of leadership, and senior appointments largely remained under the influence of prominent political figures. The inclusion and integration of educated young individuals laid the foundation for developing a more professional and meritocratic public administration. Additionally, women's inclusion in the public sector was actively encouraged. A quota was established to ensure that at least 30 per cent of civil service positions were held by women by 2013 (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2007: 138).

One of the most encouraging features of post-2001 developments was that part of the public administration reform opened doors for this new generation of young Afghans with diverse skills and educational backgrounds. This shift, to some extent, enhanced public administration's professionalism, inclusivity, and impartiality. Despite criticisms of its flaws and shortcomings, the IARCSC played a vital role in this process. Various donors, including the World Bank, supported civil service reform, including improving legal and policy frameworks, training, and the recruitment process. Conditions tied to donor aid or technical assistance also pressured the government to implement these reforms (Bizhan, 2018). Moreover, the reform measures included increasing wages for more experienced and senior public servants, providing salary top-ups through a super-

scale program, recruiting Afghan expatriates through a bilateral entry civil service program, and hiring experts who would receive competitive salaries. These schemes led to the emergence of a dual public sector, yielded mixed results, and were often applied selectively and misused (Haque, 2025).

Although the civil service reform process was gradual and frequently disrupted by political interference (IARCSC, 2018), it improved the performance of certain government departments. Additionally, a new, albeit small, cadre of civil servants was empowered, actively engaging in development, planning, and infrastructure projects across the country. These individuals also fostered cooperation among themselves and were open to collaborating with other actors across different ministries. Furthermore, the process generally encouraged positive competition as incentives were offered through enhanced wages and recruitment strategies. Opportunities for overseas scholarships and admission to private universities increased the pool of qualified candidates for civil service positions, helping to improve administrative capacity. However, these individuals often remained limited to implementation roles, with little influence over national decisions.

On the other hand, the post-2001 political conditions and incentives fostered complex webs of cooperation and competition among government ministers, heavily influenced by affiliations with particular leaders or networks. This dynamic was deeply rooted in the country's historical political arrangements and the legacy of its past, where the government often resembled a marketplace dominated by conflicting interest groups. Such an environment typically facilitated cooperation only within small circles of like-minded individuals who shared common political goals or patronage networks rather than across the broader government spectrum. This selective cooperation among certain groups, while potentially advancing the specific agendas of those networks, led to challenging and often strained relationships with ministers from rival factions at the national level. This scenario would often result in harmful competition, where members of one network might expose the patronage and poor performance of other groups but

overlook similar misconduct within their own ranks. This dynamic undermined institutional integrity and hampered effective governance and reform implementation.

Leverage and control became important aspects of the behaviour of actors within public institutions. This pattern became even more organised following the formation of a National Unity Government, with Ashraf Ghani as President and Abdullah Abdullah in the new office of Chief Executive (2014-2019). The former would appoint 13 ministers while the latter 12 ministers in the Cabinet. The relationship between ministers from Ghani's team and Abdullah's team was not cooperative or based on mutual trust. Ghani attempted by and large to maintain control over institutions, while Abdullah would attempt to maintain leverage in the government and policy process. This arrangement, a compromise in the face of electoral irregularities and fraud (Maley & Maley, 2016), weakened state institutions and created a sense of uncertainty and ambiguity among the senior leadership in ministries (International Crisis Group, 2016). This situation, in a time of high demand for improved delivery of services and a deteriorating security situation, further weakened government performance.

In this context, cooperation among the like-minded ministers and those appointed by the same network or leader was more likely. Two problems, however, arose. First, such types of cooperation among different actors involved working on advancing the leverage and political goals of those to whom they were loyal; such players had difficult working relationships with those who were loyal to or appointed by opposing networks. This was mainly the result of political arrangements in post-2001 and of the legacy of past, as the state became a marketplace in which conflicting interest groups could compete. As such, cooperation was limited to a small group of actors with common interest, but such cooperation was not extended to other ministers whose appointments were influenced by different actors. This situation in turn triggered negative competition across various networks and their actors. Second, as noted above, the members of the same network would expose patronage and poor performance of the other groups or networks members but would mainly remain complacent about their own network affiliates' misconduct. These types of dynamic among key actors across

institutions fostered interpersonal distrust, and weakened institutions, trust in government, and implementation of reforms. It could be argued that dysfunctional institutions triggered lack of cooperation inside and across institutions, and even conflict, and also lack of cooperation and positive competition perpetuated institutional dysfunctionality. This process cannot, however, be overgeneralised as some of the government departments post-2001, also became islands of efficiency and relatively performed better (Bizhan, 2023).

3 Papua New Guinea (PNG)

3.1 Institutional design

PNG, which became independent in 1975 after decades under Australian administration, inherited its public institutions from its colonial past (Goldring, 1978), which were later reshaped through a series of post-independence reforms. These institutions, in turn, have been affected by PNG's traditions, such as *wantokism* and big man politics. This institutional design and transformation process has had lasting effects on cooperation, competition, and conflict within and across the public sector through institutional incentives and mechanisms. In this section, we first examine the origins of public institutions in PNG before exploring how factors such as centralisation and overlapping mandates, patronage and clientelism, and ongoing reforms, have affected cooperation, competition, and conflict within and across the government departments.

Modern state institutions in PNG are quite young. During the 1950s and the 1960s, the PNG state system was imposed on thousands of ethnic and social groups throughout the country (May, 2004). While it inherited its state structures from this colonial past, it has experienced both continuity and change since achieving independence. The country has a unitary state with a parliamentary democracy modelled on the Westminster system, with a unicameral system, and a three-tier system of government — national, provincial and local (May, 2004). Unlike Afghanistan, which has suffered a series of violent conflicts and regime changes over the past five decades, PNG has not experienced such extensive turmoil or regime change, except for the 1988-1998 conflict in Bougainville (Regan, 1998), together with ongoing low-level tribal warfare, which did not severely disrupt the state (Bizhan & Gorea, 2022). The civil service in PNG was initially organised according to the Australian model, with the Public Services Commission playing a central role in managing the civil service. This role has gone through a series of changes in the last five decades that have both weakened and strengthened its role (Bizhan & Howes, 2025). As noted in the interim report of the Special Parliamentary Committee on

Public Sector Reform and Service Delivery, the public sector in PNG comprises approximately 1,419 to 1,496 organisations and includes more than 120,000 employees across the public service, state-owned enterprises, and internal security forces (Special Parliamentary Committee on Public Sector Reform and Service Delivery, 2022).

Just before independence in 1975, Michael Somare, Papua New Guinea's first Prime Minister, expressed concerns about the public service system inherited from the Colonial Administration, stating that it was 'unsuitable for a self-governing and eventually independent Papua New Guinea' (Somare, 1974: 4). He described it as an alien apparatus designed for alien purposes. Somare emphasised decentralisation, for two main reasons: to appease Bougainvillians seeking independence and to promote unity in PNG's culturally diverse and young country (Howes, Sause & Ugyel, 2022: 61). In response to these concerns, the government established the ToRobert Committee in 1979, named after its chair, Sir Henry ToRobert, to evaluate the country's administrative system. The Committee's report found that PNG's public administration was not effectively responding to national plans and objectives (Turner & Kavanamur, 2009: 12). It recommended greater delegation of responsibilities to government departments. In 1983, a World Bank report also endorsed administrative decentralisation, noting that the strong centralisation of PNG's public management system was one of its most fundamental challenges.

Although the negotiations with Bougainville's leaders broke down just before independence, they resumed after independence. In its second interim report, the Constitution Planning Committee (CPC) argued that decentralisation of decision-making should be political and not merely bureaucratic. It recommended that certain powers should be bestowed by law on provincial governments (CPC, 1973: 3-4). The *Organic Law on Provincial Government* (OLPG) was introduced into Parliament in 1976 and enacted in April 1977. The primary aim of the OLPG was to establish provincial governments with elected assemblies, premiers, and ministers, granting them substantial authority to formulate and execute policies tailored to their specific needs rather than operating under directives from the national government (Howes, Sause &

Ugyel, 2022: 62). By 1979, all nineteen provinces had been granted charters under the Organic Law on Provincial Government, although it took another two years for them to establish elected provincial assemblies (May, 1999: 127). This institutional design and reform stage involved tensions among various institutions and actors. At the initial stage, the CPC and government had divergent views about the form and degree of decentralisation. While the CPC emphasised both administrative and political decentralisation, the government emphasised the former. The CPC's final report was presented in 1974, including detailed recommendations about the establishment of a provincial government. However, this report was accompanied by a white paper from the Government, challenging the CPC's recommendations on the basis that the types of decentralisation proposed by the CPC could result, among others, in a undue concentration of power at the provincial centre; the type of near federal system proposed would create many legal and administrative problems (May, 1999: 126). However, OLPG mainly opted for the form of decentralisation that the CPC recommended.

Over time, however, the provincial government system attracted increasing criticism from politicians and bureaucrats for poor performance, mismanagement and problems of corruption. Several premiers and a large number of provincial ministers were charged with various forms of financial mismanagement. By 1994, all except 5 of the 19 provincial governments had been suspended, some more than once (May, 1999: 133). Furthermore, the decline of provincial governments was taking place along with a decline in national government performance, including weak development outcomes, and there was strong opposition and even threat of secession (in the New Guinea Islands) to the reform of provincial governments by some premiers. The national government responded with threats to suspend local government. However, later Prime Minister Wingti moderated his stand and created a bipartisan parliamentary selection committee on provincial government, which presented an initial report in March 1993. The report recommended that the provincial government be replaced by a system of

decentralisation that would include provincial authorities, with more limited powers than the provincial government, and strengthened local structures.

In March 1994, a bill for an *Organic Law on Provincial Authorities and Local-Level Government* was presented to and passed by the Parliament (May, 1999: 135-6). Prime Minister Sir Julius Chan celebrated this change by saying, 'History was made yesterday'; Papua New Guinea 'had been freed from the burden of a provincial government system that had handicapped the country for the best part of twenty years' (May, 1999: 138). Accordingly, the elected provincial assemblies were replaced by assemblies made up of National MPs representing the province, the president of local-level government and appointed community and sector representatives. The regional (provincial) member of the Parliament would automatically become governor. While the elected assemblies had significant autonomy, the provincial government, after the 1995 reforms, became more subordinated to the national government. Three key drivers of this change included the inefficiency of provincial governments, tensions between national and provincial leaders, and a desire to re-centralise control, especially by allowing national MPs automatically to become members and the regional MP to become provincial governors. Although the performance of provincial governments was a concern, the national government also faced challenges in fulfilling its responsibilities. From the early stages of decentralisation, the national government displayed scepticism towards a form of decentralisation that included political and administrative decentralisation. This process suggests that beyond just the performance of provincial governments, a political desire by the national government to maintain control played a significant role in the reforms of 1994.

3.2 Institutional incentives for competition, cooperation, and conflict

3.2.1 Institutional overlaps

PNG has three levels of government: national, provincial, and local. Currently there are 22 provinces. At the national level PNG had 27 ministries until 2010, a quarter of the 111 Member of the Parliament as per section 144 of the PNG Constitution. However, the Constitution was amended in 2010, increasing the cap on ministries to 32. In 2023, Prime Minister Marape announced that the government would create six new portfolios because of the growing population and parliament. All ministers except the prime minister are appointed by the Head of State based on the prime minister's recommendations. The prime minister decides the ministers' titles, portfolios, and responsibilities. While PNG's state went through political and administrative decentralisation post-independence, institutional overlaps also emerged leading to confusion between department and different levels of government. In the absence of reliable information on the exact number of employees and the total number of public sector organisations, there has been persistent confusion over the roles and responsibilities across different levels of government since independence. Under various decentralisation initiatives, the transfer of staff and functions to a large extent has remained unclear. With the introduction of the 1977 OLPG, many functions were transferred to provincial governments without sufficient financial resources and skilled labour to support them (Duncan & Banga, 2018). While the later adoption of the 1995 *Organic Law on Provincial Authorities and Local-Level Government* in fact was supposed to give more power to local governments, it had the opposite effect, by giving more control to national MPs (Standish, 2007: 149), reversing the earlier reforms in political decentralisation. A lack of a balance between responsibilities of the local level government and the availability of funding has been a noticeable problem. For instance, while all non-national roads were the responsibility of the local governments, low funding levels, poorly skilled labour and confusion over the role of each government resulted in poor road conditions (Duncan & Banga, 2018: 498). In addition, the CEO of the District Development Authority (DDA), which replaced the Joint District Planning

and Budgeting Priorities Committee in 2014, is required to report to multiple agencies, such as the DDA Board and the District Administrator. Some other civil servants have also other superiors to whom they must report. Police and nurses, for instance, report directly to the province under a standalone arrangement (Duncan & Banga, 2018: 503).

In addition, at the national level, overlaps and duplications have remained an ongoing issue. For instance, duplications and overlaps are evident in anti-corruption agencies. At least seven institutional frameworks – the Judiciary, Sweep Task Force, National Anti-Corruption Alliance, Anti-Corruption Commission, Ombudsman Commission, Financial Intelligence Unit, and the Office of Auditor General – by and large have the same mandate in the fight against corruption. These institutions often have overlapping responsibilities but suffer from weak enforcement due to lack of coordination and political interference. Amid the poor implementation of existing laws and considerable resource gaps, confusion over the overlapping responsibilities of anti-corruption and law enforcement agencies has contributed to ineffective anti-corruption efforts (Wickberg, 2013). Another area of institutional overlap is agriculture. Six independent authorities and ministries are assigned to address agricultural issues, leading to redundancies and duplication of efforts. An observer mentioned to one of the authors that he is frequently invited to multiple meetings with a similar agenda, for instance how to improve coffee production in PNG. The policy process is also hindered by a lack of consultation and coordination. A review of the 2005-2010 Medium-Term Development Strategy highlighted insufficient consultation and coordination between central agencies, other departments, implementing agencies, and the national and sub-national governments (Saneto & May, 2010). Institutional overlaps and confusion over roles and responsibilities may cause delays and undermine the performance of the public sector at various levels of government. This situation, along with the persistence of ongoing institutional instability, has created incentives that have encouraged destructive behaviour and undermined cooperation.

3.3 Patronage and clientelism, decentralisation

In the post-independence era, institutional transformation experienced three distinctive challenges. The first was that of localisation, making public administration more responsive to society. Prior to independence, national institutions were designed to govern PNG from Canberra. While localisation was important for the promotion of national sovereignty, it also presented a significant challenge. A large number of skilled employees in the public sector, most of them Australian, left the public sector and were replaced by individuals lacking adequate experience and training (Turner, 1991). This change weakened the capacity of the public sector, at least in the short term. Second, the process of reforms also exposed the administration to challenges arising from traditions embedded in PNG communities, such as *wantokism* and the politics of big men, both of which significantly shaped public administration in PNG (Fukuyama, 2007; Ugyel, 2021). *Wantokism* is rooted in PNG's cultural fabric, and leads to 'patterns of relationships and networks that link people in families and regional localities ... it is also a reference to provincial, national and sub-regional identities' (Nanau, 2011: 32). While it fosters social cohesion and functions as an informal social safety net, it also has complex implications for public administration. It encourages appointments and promotions based on considerations such as kinship, tribe or region, undermining meritocracy and bureaucratic neutrality (Payani, 2000). The politics of 'big man' not only encourages redistribution to concerned communities and tribes but, as an observer of the PNG politics with more than three decades of experience stated to one of the authors, it often leads to holding up things and delays. Third, public administration in PNG has been politicised at different levels, but more so at the executive level. While the PNG Constitution enshrines neutrality, anonymity, and impartiality, and guarantees civil service independence, these principles are often disregarded, particularly at the executive level (PNG Constitution, n.d.; Bizhan & Howes, 2025). Cabinet decisions on appointments frequently prioritise ethnic, regional, and political ties over merit, leading politicians to install allies in senior positions (Payani, 2000). This process has fostered a culture where bureaucrats develop political loyalties to secure promotions or

protection, with many resigning to contest elections with political party backing. When new governments take office – either after elections or votes of no confidence – widespread reshuffling, demotions, and dismissals of bureaucrats occur on political grounds.

PNG's suffering from ongoing political instability has triggered a sense of insecurity at the executive level, especially among those holding 'acting' positions. Often, the number could be significant. For instance, in the mid-1980s, 40 per cent of public servants were in acting positions, and many had been acting for more than one year. A similar challenge has also been noticed recently. In 2023, *Post Courier* reported that 40 key government institutions in PNG, including regulatory authorities, government departments, provincial administrations, and state-owned enterprises, have been overseen by public servants and senior managers in long-term acting roles since 2020, with some appointments dating back as far as 2018 (PCADMINPNG, 2023).

Understanding administration in PNG requires recognising its deep entanglement with politics, where patronage and clientelism play a significant role. Scholars and researchers have long recognised that patronage and clientelism had a prominent role in PNG with significant implications for development and government performance (May, 2004; Fukuyama, 2007; Payani, 2000; Walton, 2017) and crippling effects on public administration reform (Bizhan & Howes, 2025). Patronage and clientelism also trigger negative competition and hinder cooperation across and within public institutions, as different actors with various interests and loyalties may engage in activities to undermine their rivals and strengthen their own positions. Two implications of patronage and clientelism could be that in the first case, politicians' priorities are driven by local priorities and redistribution of resources to their local constituencies rather than national priorities or policies, and by a desire to make appointments favouring political supporters or ethnic and tribal affiliates in key public position. With weak institutions, short-term alliances and shifts in political support have led to political instability, contributing to a high level of instability in government, as measured by the tenure of ministers in office. Clientelism is especially evident during

elections in PNG, where most voters prioritise candidates who offer personalised or localised benefits, and most politicians prioritise delivering to their supporters at the expense of national governance (Wood, 2018).

Since independence, PNG has experienced persistent political instability. Since independence, no prime minister has been able to complete a second term in office, and prior to 2002, none was able to serve a full five-year term in office. Control of government remains crucial to the dispensing of patronage. As a result, since independence in 1975, PNG has seen high levels of government instability, with parliament members often swapping sides. Political instability has also had implications for the stability of public institutions, as measured by the duration of a minister in office under each government. By looking at the ministerial durations of 15 governments in PNG from 1972 to 2017, Ivarature found that while ministerial stability varied considerably between governments, they remained short with low ministerial stability. The average ministerial duration per portfolio for all governments, out of an expected 60 month terms, was 12.3 months. Each minister typically holds a given portfolio for about one-fifth of the full term. However, nine governments were above this average, including the three governments that served a full term in office (Ivarature, 2022). Upon examining various ministries that play important roles in policy, planning and resource distribution (treasury, national planning and monitoring, foreign affairs, mining, forestry, justice), we find that the average length of ministerial tenure drops to just 9.45 months during the same period. The low stability within ministries has significantly impacted civil service and executive-level appointments and performance. Amid bureaucratic politicisation, patronage practices, and the influence of *wantokism*, this instability has weakened the performance and effectiveness of the public sector.

3.4 Institutional reforms

Since gaining independence, PNG has implemented various public sector reforms to improve government performance and the responsiveness of the public sector. These reforms, as noted above, included decentralisation, structural adjustment programs,

and the adoption of New Public Management (NPM) principles (May, 2009).

International development institutions such as the World Bank and aid agencies such as the former Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) – now part of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) – have actively supported these reform initiatives. Some international development institutions have also promoted reforms, although not always consistently, in the role of institutions; notable examples are the World Bank's and the Asian Development Bank's support of different civil service reforms. The former supported the 1986 reforms aiming to make the civil service more flexible, which marginalised the role of the Public Services Commission in civil service and senior appointments. By contrast, the latter supported the 2003 reforms that strengthened the Public Services Commission's role in senior appointments. Successive PNG governments supported both at different times. Marginalisation of the Public Service Commission allowed the National Executive Committee to have a greater say in senior appointments from 1986 to 2003 and again from 2013 to 2019 (Bizhan & Howes, 2025).

In 1984, the governments established the District Services Improvement Program (DSIP) funds to improve service delivery at the district level by providing direct funding to the MPs for use in development projects within their electorates. This electoral discretionary fund grew from a modest amount for each open MP in the first years to K10 million in 2013, and Prime Minister Marape promised to increase it to K20 million in 2025, depending on the availability of funding. The DSIP comprises a significant portion of development expenditure (15 per cent in 2020) (Laveil, 2021). Under the *District Development Authority Act 2014*, each district has a District Development Authority (DDA) board. The DDA is responsible for service delivery, infrastructure, grant disbursement, planning, and budget-priority functions, and the board may direct the chief executive officer in carrying out these responsibilities. In terms of composition, the open MP serves as chairperson of the board, the heads of local-level governments are members, and the MP may appoint up to three additional members. The chair also holds

both a deliberative vote and, in the event of a tie, a casting vote (DDA Act, 2014). This gives the MP a dominant position over the DSIP linked decisions.

In addition to the DSIP and PSIP funds, District and Provincial Infrastructure Program funds are also available to districts and provinces. In 2023, a combined total of K2.4 billion was allocated to these three funds (Kabuni, 2023). However, despite the original intention to improve services, these funds, particularly the DSIP, have become a mechanism for institutionalising political patronage. MPs often use DSIP and PSIP funds to build and maintain political support within their constituencies by selectively distributing resources to loyal supporters while neglecting or punishing opponents. Rather than functioning as a neutral development tool, DSIP funding is frequently leveraged as a political asset, enabling MPs to 'buy' allegiance and secure re-election. Furthermore, the central government can manipulate the disbursement of DSIP funds – delaying or denying access to certain MPs – to reward political allies and marginalise dissenters (Kabuni, 2023, 2018). A lack of accountability in the use of the funds is pervasive. In 2022, officials reported that 40 per cent of the MPs did not adequately account for funds (Kabuni, 2023).

Arguably, PNG has not suffered from a lack of reform programs but rather from persistent challenges in their implementation. This weak implementation can be attributed to individuals' ability to undermine reforms and a lack of institutional capacity. As a result, reform efforts frequently rely on specific individuals' will and capabilities rather than being embedded within robust systems. Consequently, the outcomes of many reform initiatives have fallen short of expectations. Studies of public sector reform in PNG have described these efforts as 'cyclical', with limited impact on improving overall government performance (Sause and Aloï, 2003; Turner and Kavanamur, 2009). While weak state institutions have created unfavourable conditions for sustained reform, a more critical factor has been the dominance of clientelist politics, which continues to erode institutional effectiveness and hinder meaningful reform implementation (Bizhan & Howes, 2025; May, 2004).

4 Conclusion

The lessons that flow from these two cases are rather gloomy. While the establishment of independent civil service commissions might appear an obvious step to take in pursuit of a good governance agenda, making such commissions work in the way that their architects intended may prove to be a much more challenging task. A key reason is that they are never ‘freestanding’ bodies. On the contrary, they are invariably nested in historical and cultural contexts, giving rise to path dependence; and amidst other institutions, informal as well as formal (Rafi, 2022; Rahimi, 2023), with their own *modus operandi* that may militate against giving effect to the Weberian notion of independent professional bureaucracy.

In the Afghanistan case, the attempt to establish a modern bureaucratic system was overshadowed by a history of attempts to build a strong, centralised state. While the Hobbesian argument for such a state might seem to make sense when one is speaking of an established power to hold all others in awe, the story is rather different if one is trying to rebuild state structures following an episode of state failure or fragmentation. When this has occurred, as was the case in Afghanistan, an attempt to rebuild a strong state when levels of distrust between political actors are high is likely to fuel intense conflict which will then overwhelm the attempt to have an apolitical and professional civil service. In the Afghan case, this was aggravated by the Bonn Conference’s treatment of future administrative agencies as positional goods to be distributed as rewards to political actors participating in the conference process. At Bonn, there was no serious discussion of what the future scope and strength of the Afghan state should ideally be; instead, a model was developed providing for up to 28 departments in the Interim Administration, irrespective of whether such a bloated structure was desirable or even sustainable. Furthermore, in both the Afghanistan and PNG cases, there were cultural complexities at play as well. In Afghanistan, years of state disruption led ordinary people more and more to put their trust in social networks as sources of protection; for different reasons, something similar happened in PNG, where the slow penetration of the state into more remote areas saw strong social ties of kinship and

reciprocity continue to shape behaviour. In neither case did an infant civil service commission have the power, or the political support, that would have been required to overcome the burden of these historical and cultural factors. Cooperation and competition too often fell victim to more powerful incentives to engage in conflict.

Patronage and clientelism were not, however, products simply of history. In the Afghan case, the structure of the new state put in place from 2001 led almost inexorably to neopatrimonialism which saw governmental institutions intertwined with networks connected to powerful individuals. In the short run, this kept some powerholders happy, but had serious ramifications for the legitimacy and capacity of the state in the long-run: those outside the charmed circle of patronage saw little reason to fight to save it. While islands of professionalism indeed surfaced, this was the exception rather than the rule. Similarly in PNG, the supply of funds directly to MPs for distribution runs the risk of making professional and apolitical bureaucrats an obstacle to the achievement of MPs' political objectives.

None of this is to suggest that apolitical, professional bureaucracy is not highly desirable. One only has to witness current efforts to dismantle the professional agencies of the state in the USA to appreciate the value of what can be built up over time (Muirhead & Rosenblum, 2024). But competent bureaucracy can work to the detriment of powerful interests, and may have to overcome many challenges before it can find a safe place in a wider constellation of institutions. Attention to the different incentives that particular institutions can create is a good starting point in confronting those challenges.

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