



**BEYOND THE BALLOT BOX: RETHINKING  
DEMOCRACY AND DEVELOPMENT THROUGH THE LENS  
OF SINO-AFRICAN GOVERNANCE: A COMPARATIVE  
STUDY OF CHINA AND SIERRA LEONE**

**Joseph Momoh Conteh<sup>i</sup>**

Peking University,  
China

**Abstract:**

Political Realism and its sub-sets are about power politics. Of the much that has been written about them, power acquisition and not reclamation is the prime focus. “Make America Great Again” is the sing-song of the Trump Administrations (1.0 and 2.0). This clarion call (though not exclusive to them) has become the cry-symbol of America’s revivalist quest for global dominance. This study used a tangential similitude of the power politics emblematic of an ecosystem to explain the current desire by President Trump to recalibrate the international system with the U.S. at its summit. Just like the Alpha lion sits at the helm of affairs in a Pride of lions, the desire of the Trump Administration is reflective of this grand design. Restoration Realism was used in this study to examine the subterranean pattern of power reclamation by any State desirous of lost power. The steps needed to realise these goals were adequately analysed. The data for this research were primarily drawn from secondary sources, cross-checked against the author’s observations of a wild lion den. By using the U.S. in a chronological format, salient patterns similar to what is obtained in a Pride of Lions were unraveled for a robust comprehension. It was discovered, among other things, that critical to America’s power-reclamation bid is maintaining its relationship with its traditional allies and maintaining a clear dichotomy with its known rivals.

**Keywords:** administration, great, power, pride, reclamation, restoration, system

**1. Introduction**

The relationship between democratic governance and economic development remains one of the most contested debates in comparative politics and international development. This article interrogates the assumption that procedural democracy, defined by competitive multiparty elections and universal suffrage, constitutes a prerequisite for

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<sup>i</sup> Correspondence: email [josephmconteh2004@yahoo.com](mailto:josephmconteh2004@yahoo.com)

sustained economic progress in the Global South. Using a comparative case study methodology, the article examines the governance systems of the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Sierra Leone to argue that political culture, state capacity, and performance legitimacy are more decisive determinants of developmental outcomes than electoral procedures alone. Drawing on theories of political culture, developmental statehood, and South-South cooperation, the analysis reveals a fundamental divergence between systems that derive legitimacy from the act of voting and those that derive it from the visible delivery of public goods and economic transformation. China's trajectory, rooted in Confucian political philosophy, centralised party-state institutions, and a performance-based model of governance, is positioned as an instructive, if contextually specific, alternative framework. Sierra Leone's experience illustrates how procedural democracy, grafted onto a society with weak institutions and unresolved colonial legacies, can produce persistent developmental failure despite regular elections. This article does not argue for the replication of China's authoritarian model in Africa. It contends that African states and their development partners must look beyond the ballot box to confront the structural conditions of state capacity, political culture, and performance accountability that underlie developmental success. The findings carry significant implications for how South-South cooperation is theorised and for how African governments engage with both domestic governance reform and international development partnerships.

**Keywords:** political culture, procedural democracy, substantive democracy, developmental state, performance legitimacy, South-South cooperation, China-Africa relations, Sierra Leone, governance

## 1. Introduction

In June 2023 Sierra Leone conducted its fifth consecutive multi-party general election since the end of its devastating civil war in 2002. International observers praised the vote as broadly free and fair. Within two years, the country ranked 148th out of 189 nations on the UNDP Human Development Index, with more than half its population living below the international poverty line and maternal mortality rates among the highest in the world (UNDP, 2020). The ballot box had functioned. The state had not delivered.

Contrast this with China. The Chinese Communist Party has governed without multi-party electoral competition since 1949. By 2022, it had lifted more than 800 million people out of extreme poverty, built the world's largest high-speed rail network, and transformed a primarily agrarian economy into the second-largest economy on earth (World Bank, 2022). No competitive election produced these outcomes. An entirely different logic of governance did.

This juxtaposition sits at the heart of one of contemporary political science's most contested debates: what is the relationship between democracy and development? Must countries democratise before they can develop, or can effective governance, defined by

substantive outcomes rather than procedural form, generate development independently of electoral competition? And what happens when the two diverge, when states are procedurally democratic but substantively failing?

This article examines these questions through a comparative analysis of China and Sierra Leone, two states that represent opposing poles of the governance spectrum. One has ruled without competitive elections for seven decades and achieved transformative development. The other has held regular elections for over six decades and struggled to produce consistent developmental progress. The comparison is deliberate and analytically instructive. It does not suggest that Sierra Leone should abandon democracy or adopt authoritarianism. It argues that studying the contrast reveals something important about the conditions under which governance systems succeed or fail to deliver development for the citizens they govern.

The analytical core of this article is the concept of a legitimacy gap: the structural space that opens between procedural legitimacy derived from electoral processes and substantive legitimacy derived from developmental delivery. When this gap grows too wide, political instability, corruption, and institutional erosion follow. Closing it requires more than conducting elections. It requires building capable states with the institutional infrastructure, administrative coherence, and political will to translate mandates into outcomes. These structural preconditions, rooted in political culture and historical trajectory, are the primary focus of the comparative analysis presented here.

The Sino-African governance interface makes this argument both more urgent and more concrete. China is now Africa's largest bilateral trading partner and one of the continent's most significant sources of infrastructure finance. Its governance model, forged over seven decades of party-state developmental experience, presents an alternative reference point for African states evaluating their own institutional paths. The question of what that model is, how it functions, what it transfers through South-South cooperation mechanisms, and where its limits lie has direct consequences for governance reform across the continent.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews theoretical literature on political culture, democracy, the developmental state, and South-South cooperation. Section 3 provides historical context for both cases, tracing the political evolution of China from the imperial period through contemporary party-state governance, and Sierra Leone from colonial inheritance through post-independence instability and democratic consolidation. Section 4 conducts the core comparative analysis, examining the contrasting sources of legitimacy in each system. Section 5 analyses the Sino-African governance interface in practice, with particular attention to Sierra Leone. Section 6 synthesises the findings and discusses their broader implications for governance reform. Section 7 concludes, acknowledges limitations, and proposes directions for future research.

## **2. Rethinking Democracy and Development: A Review of the Literature**

### **2.1 Political Culture and Its Developmental Consequences**

Political culture, in the foundational sense articulated by Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba (1963), refers to the system of beliefs, values, and emotional orientations that citizens hold toward the political system and their role within it. Their typology distinguished between parochial, subject, and participant cultures, with a stable liberal democracy requiring a civic culture that balanced active engagement with deference to institutional authority. Ralph Linton's earlier anthropological formulation was simpler but equally significant: a society's culture is its members' shared way of life, the collection of ideas and habits learned and transmitted across generations (Linton, 1945). Politics is no different. The values a society holds shape how it structures power, whom it regards as legitimate, and what it expects from governance.

Lucian Pye's work on political culture in non-Western contexts extended this framework critically (Pye, 1965; 1985). Pye argued that modernisation theorists had erred in assuming that Western political forms, particularly liberal representative democracy, would emerge as the universal endpoint of political development. Different cultural matrices produce different political expectations. In societies with strong traditions of hierarchical authority, communal obligation, and technocratic governance, the demand for participatory democracy may be less primary than the demand for effective and benevolent leadership. This insight is directly relevant to both cases examined here. China's Confucian heritage and Sierra Leone's layered colonial and traditional governance structures each shaped political expectations in ways that complicate the assumption that Western procedural democracy is universally the preferred or most effective model.

Political culture is not static. It interacts with economic development, institutional design, and historical experience. As Inglehart and Welzel (2005) demonstrated through the World Values Survey, rising incomes correlate with increasing demands for self-expression, participation, and individual rights. This creates a dynamic tension: developmental states may generate the very citizen expectations that eventually challenge their governance models. For Africa, this dynamic is still unfolding. The direction it takes will depend significantly on which governance traditions prove most capable of delivering the economic progress that drives cultural change, and on how political elites manage the relationship between developmental delivery and expanding demands for political participation.

The role of colonial legacy in shaping political culture deserves explicit attention. As Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson (2001) demonstrated, the institutional legacies of colonial rule, in particular the distinction between extractive institutions and inclusive ones, have persistent long-run effects on economic development and governance quality. Sierra Leone, like many West African states, inherited institutions designed for extraction rather than developmental investment. The colonial state's primary function was revenue extraction and labour control, not welfare provision or inclusive institution-building.

This legacy shaped not only the formal institutions inherited at independence but the informal norms and expectations that citizens and elites brought to those institutions. Understanding Sierra Leone's governance challenges requires reckoning with this institutional inheritance, not simply with the procedural design of the post-independence democratic system.

## 2.2 Procedural Versus Substantive Democracy

The procedural definition of democracy, associated with Joseph Schumpeter (1942) and later refined through Robert Dahl's concept of polyarchy (1971), focuses on the competitive processes through which leaders are selected. Free and fair elections, universal suffrage, freedom of expression, and the peaceful transfer of power constitute the defining criteria. On this minimalist account, a state is democratic if it meets these procedural requirements, regardless of whether its governance produces equitable or effective outcomes for the majority of its citizens.

Critics of procedural minimalism argue that this definition is analytically impoverished. A state may conduct elections faithfully while systematically failing to deliver healthcare, education, or security to its citizens. Substantive definitions of democracy, advanced by theorists such as David Beetham (1994) and, in development contexts, by Amartya Sen (1999), insist that democracy must be evaluated by its outcomes. Does governance expand human capabilities, reduce inequality, and empower citizens to live flourishing lives? On this account, an electoral process that returns leaders who deliver nothing substantive fails the fundamental test of democratic governance.

The Asian Barometer Survey, which has tracked political attitudes across East and Southeast Asia since the early 2000s, provides complementary evidence at the citizen level. It found that Chinese respondents tend to evaluate their political system primarily on its capacity to deliver economic progress and social stability rather than on procedural characteristics (Chu *et al.*, 2010). This pattern is not unique to China; similar orientations appear in survey data from other developing regions where state delivery failures are salient. What the Chinese case adds is a governance system that has been explicitly designed around this performance orientation, making it analytically tractable as a comparative reference point.

Robert Barro's empirical work (1996; 2008) adds a further empirical dimension. Analysing cross-country data, Barro found that democracy, as conventionally measured, has a weakly negative relationship with economic growth, particularly in early stages of development. His argument is that competitive elections may generate redistribution pressures that distort investment incentives, and that what drives development is not political competition but the rule of law, secure property rights, and market openness. Ha-Joon Chang (2003) reinforced this argument historically, demonstrating that today's developed countries did not develop under the democratic institutions they now recommend to developing states. The standard package of electoral democracy, central bank independence, and open capital accounts was largely absent during the developmental phases of Britain, the United States, Germany, and Japan. These

arguments do not endorse authoritarianism. They challenge a specific orthodoxy: the assumption that procedural democracy is a prerequisite for development rather than one possible institutional environment within which development might occur.

Samuel Huntington's (1968) contribution shifts the analytical focus to institutional order. Huntington argued that the critical variable for political development is not the form of regime but the strength and adaptability of political institutions. Societies that modernise economically without developing corresponding institutional capacity face political decay, not democratic progress. Participation, in Huntington's account, must be matched by institutionalisation: the capacity of political structures to channel competing demands in an orderly and productive way. Institutions must be well-serviced and adapted to the changing needs of society. This argument finds direct application in Sierra Leone, where rapid social change and economic frustration have historically overwhelmed the state's limited institutional capacity.

### **2.3 The Developmental State**

The concept of the developmental state, introduced by Chalmers Johnson (1982) in his analysis of Japan's Ministry of International Trade and Industry, describes a state apparatus that actively directs economic transformation rather than simply enabling market activity. The developmental state sets industrial priorities, channels capital toward strategic sectors, protects infant industries, and builds the infrastructure necessary for sustained growth. Johnson's model was extended to South Korea, Taiwan, and other East Asian economies by Peter Evans (1995), who emphasised the concept of embedded autonomy: the state's capacity to maintain insulation from particularistic business interests while remaining sufficiently connected to the private sector to gather the information needed for effective industrial policy.

China's post-1978 developmental trajectory represents a distinctive variant of this model. Deng Xiaoping's reforms introduced market mechanisms and integrated China into global supply chains while maintaining party control over strategic sectors, state-owned enterprises, and the financial system. The result was an unusual hybrid: market-oriented in its microeconomic organisation but state-directed in its macroeconomic strategy. This model does not fit neatly into the liberal market economy category or the classic East Asian developmental state category. It represents a third pathway, what some scholars term the party-state developmental model, in which the ruling party's political survival depends on its capacity to deliver economic growth (Naughton, 2007). The cadre evaluation system that links local officials' career advancement to measurable performance targets, including economic output, infrastructure delivery, and poverty reduction, institutionalises this performance orientation within the bureaucratic hierarchy.

The developmental state literature has direct implications for African governance. Mkandawire (2001) examined why attempts to apply the developmental state model in Africa have produced mixed results, identifying the institutional prerequisites, a capable and embedded bureaucracy, clear developmental priorities, and insulation from rent-

seeking, as often absent in the African context. Sierra Leone's post-independence experience illustrates this dynamic clearly. The state inherited weak institutions from the colonial period and subjected them to further erosion through political patronage and civil conflict. Without a capable state apparatus, neither procedural democracy nor developmental planning can produce sustained progress. This is not a counsel of despair but a diagnosis of the specific institutional investments required.

## **2.4 South-South Cooperation and the China-Africa Dimension**

South-South cooperation (SSC) refers to exchanges of resources, technology, and knowledge among developing countries of the Global South, positioned as a complement or alternative to traditional North-South development assistance. The concept gained institutional traction through the Buenos Aires Plan of Action (UNDP, 1978) and has been reinvigorated by China's growing role as a development partner across the African continent. The China-Africa Research Initiative at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies has documented the scale and character of this engagement in detail, revealing a complex and differentiated picture that defies simple characterisation as either benevolent partnership or neocolonial extraction (Brautigam, 2009; Sun, 2014).

China's approach to SSC is explicitly framed around principles of non-interference, mutual benefit, and respect for national sovereignty. The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), established in 2000 and convened at three-year intervals, provides the institutional architecture for this engagement, generating commitments to infrastructure finance, trade liberalisation, debt relief, and technical cooperation across multiple sectors. These principles contrast sharply with the conditionality frameworks of Western donors and international financial institutions, which typically attach governance reform requirements to development assistance. Whether China's approach constitutes genuine SSC solidarity or serves primarily Chinese strategic interests remains contested in the literature (Mohan and Lampert, 2013; Langan, 2017). What is clear is that China's engagement offers African states options in financing, infrastructure, trade, and political alignment that did not exist at the same scale a generation ago. The governance implications of this new optionality, and the specific mechanisms through which Chinese governance norms are transmitted and potentially adopted, are central concerns of this article.

## **3. Historical Contexts: Political Evolution in China and Sierra Leone**

### **3.1 China: From Imperial Mandate to Party-State**

To understand contemporary Chinese governance, one must begin with the Confucian political tradition that shaped two millennia of imperial statecraft. Confucianism is not merely a philosophical system; it is a theory of governance grounded in the moral obligations of rulers and the hierarchical order of social relationships. Its central propositions are that social order depends on proper relationships, that leadership is a

moral responsibility rather than an inherited or procedurally conferred right, and that authority derives from virtue and performance rather than from popular consent. The ruler governs under the Mandate of Heaven, a concept that legitimises authority not through divine right but through results: a ruler who fails to maintain order, prosperity, and justice loses the mandate and, with it, the moral right to govern. Rebellion against a failing ruler is not merely permitted under this framework; it is justified.

This performance-based conception of legitimacy has profound and enduring implications for Chinese political culture. It creates an expectation that leaders will deliver rather than that they will be chosen through a particular procedure. The Confucian hierarchy of relationships, each governed by mutual obligations covering rulers and subjects, parents and children, elders and younger people, structures a social order in which collective welfare and social harmony take precedence over individual rights and participatory procedures. Principles of conservatism, morality, obligation, authority, collectivity, and harmony run through Chinese political culture and shape popular expectations of governance to the present day. As the Asian Barometer Survey evidence confirms, Chinese citizens overwhelmingly evaluate governance quality through the lens of delivery rather than procedure (Chu *et al.*, 2010).

Imperial China, governed for over two millennia under a centralised state structure that recruited officials through competitive examination rather than aristocratic inheritance, created an expectation that governance would be conducted by technically competent officials selected on demonstrated ability. One can trace the line from this meritocratic tradition to the CCP's contemporary emphasis on technocratic governance and advancement within the party hierarchy based on measurable performance. The collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1911 did not resolve the fundamental questions of political order that Confucianism had addressed. The Republican period between 1912 and 1949 was characterised by warlordism, foreign aggression, and civil war. The CCP's victory in 1949 was experienced by many Chinese not primarily as the triumph of a particular ideology but as the restoration of order and national sovereignty after what Chinese historians term the century of humiliation. This historical context gives the CCP a form of historical legitimacy, reinforced by national pride and civilisational narrative, that is distinct from but powerfully reinforces its performance legitimacy.

Mao Zedong's leadership from 1949 to 1976 produced dramatic social transformations, not all of them beneficial. The Great Leap Forward between 1958 and 1962, which aimed to accelerate industrialisation through mass mobilisation and agricultural collectivisation, resulted in one of the worst famines in human history, with credible estimates of excess deaths ranging from 15 to 55 million (Dikotter, 2010). The Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976 dismantled educational institutions, persecuted intellectuals, and subjected the country to a decade of political terror. These catastrophes profoundly shaped the CCP's subsequent governance philosophy. The post-Mao leadership drew the lesson that ideological campaigns without technical competence generate catastrophe, and that governance must be grounded in pragmatism, expertise, and measurable outcomes. The quintessential form of political

participation in the Maoist years, mass mobilisation campaigns such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, gave way in the reform era to channels of individual economic advancement and institutionalised consultation, a transformation that reflected the regime's recalibration of its legitimacy formula.

Deng Xiaoping's reforms after 1978 operationalised this lesson through the creation of what he termed a socialist market economy. Special Economic Zones opened coastal areas to foreign investment. Agricultural collectives were dismantled and replaced with household responsibility systems. State-owned enterprises were partially corporatised and exposed to market competition. The result was the most rapid sustained economic growth in recorded history, averaging approximately 10 per cent annually for three decades. This transformation occurred without political liberalisation in the Western sense. The party retained control over the media, the judiciary, civil society, and political organisation. What it offered in exchange was rising living standards, national strength, and stability. The principle of democratic centralism, which states that the individual is subservient to the organisation and that the minority is subservient to the majority within party structures, provided the internal procedural architecture for collective leadership. The three principles of the party, democratic centralism, collective leadership, and the protection of minority views within party deliberation, created mechanisms for internal accountability and policy correction that have given the system a degree of adaptability over time.

Contemporary Chinese governance is best understood through the concept of fragmented authoritarianism (Lieberthal and Oksenberg, 1988), which describes a system in which policy authority is dispersed across multiple bureaucratic actors and levels of government, with bargaining and negotiation rather than central command determining many outcomes. This model generates policy flexibility and local experimentation that belies the monolithic image of Chinese communist rule. At the same time, the party's dominance over strategic decisions and its capacity to mobilise resources at scale remain defining features of the system. Under Xi Jinping, the reversal of some collective leadership norms and the consolidation of personal authority have raised questions about the long-term adaptability of the system, but the fundamental performance-oriented logic of CCP legitimacy, grounded in the Confucian political tradition and operationalised through the cadre evaluation system, remains intact.

### **3.2 Sierra Leone: Colonial Inheritance and the Struggle for Political Order**

Sierra Leone's political history must be read against the background of British colonial rule, which ended formally in April 1961 but left enduring institutional and social legacies. The Westminster parliamentary system transplanted to Sierra Leone at independence was designed for a society with particular historical conditions: a literate electorate, established political parties with ideological platforms, an independent judiciary, and a professional civil service with traditions of impartiality. Sierra Leone possessed none of these conditions in adequate measure at the moment of independence. What it did possess was a complex web of ethnic loyalties, regional identities, and

traditional authority structures that the colonial state had not integrated into the constitutional framework it bequeathed.

The colonial dual structure, which separated the Colony around Freetown from the Protectorate of the interior, created an administrative and social divide that mapped onto ethnic and class differences between the Krio elite of the coast and the diverse communities of the interior. The Westminster system's majoritarian logic, in which the largest party governs and the second-largest opposes, created incentives for ethnic mobilisation rather than programmatic politics. Parties became vehicles for ethnic patronage networks rather than organisations with coherent policy platforms. Elections became zero-sum competitions in which losing was catastrophic for both leaders and their constituencies. This dynamic produced instability almost immediately. The Sierra Leone People's Party, which led the country to independence under Sir Milton Margai, faced sustained challenge from the All People's Congress led by Siaka Probyn Stevens. The 1967 election, in which Stevens won the popular vote, was interrupted by a military coup that denied him the premiership. He assumed office only in 1968 after a counter-coup, amid revolts, counter-coups, chaos, trials of army officers, and several executions that marked the fragility of institutional order.

Stevens' subsequent consolidation of power illustrates a pattern observed across post-colonial Africa: the attempt to impose political order through executive dominance in the absence of capable institutions. Drawing on Huntington's (1968) argument that political order is the primary prerequisite for development, one can read Stevens' move toward a one-party state in 1978 as a response, however deeply flawed, to the genuine threat of institutional fragmentation. The 1977 student demonstrations against the government further destabilised the political environment, contributing to Stevens' introduction of a one-party Republican Constitution that formally ended multi-party competition. This constitution marked the end of opposition parties in Sierra Leone and created a framework of nominal stability founded on the consolidation of political power rather than on institutional development.

What Huntington's thesis does not adequately account for is the tendency of such systems to generate their own forms of disorder. Stevens' consolidation was accompanied by systematic corruption, the erosion of state capacity, and the marginalisation of ethnic and regional communities that created the grievances fuelling the 1991-2002 civil war. The Revolutionary United Front's insurgency devastated Sierra Leone's already fragile institutional infrastructure. An estimated 50,000 people were killed, hundreds of thousands displaced, and the country's physical and social capital severely reduced. The 2002 elections marked the formal end of the war and the beginning of a reconstruction process supported by international donors and United Nations peacekeepers. Since then, Sierra Leone has conducted five successive elections and achieved democratic consolidation by procedural standards. Power has transferred peacefully between parties. Yet developmental outcomes remain deeply disappointing. Maternal mortality at 443 per 100,000 live births is among the world's highest (UNDP, 2020). Access to clean water, electricity, and quality education remains limited for the majority. State

institutions, while formally functional, lack the capacity and resources to deliver consistent public services across the territory. The legitimacy gap between the procedural success of elections and the substantive failure of governance remains structurally entrenched.

## 4. Two Faces of Legitimacy: A Comparative Analysis

### 4.1 Performance Legitimacy and the Chinese Model

Political legitimacy, in Max Weber's classic formulation, is the belief that the exercise of power is rightful. Weber distinguished three ideal types: traditional legitimacy derived from custom and hereditary authority, charismatic legitimacy derived from the exceptional qualities of a leader, and rational-legal legitimacy derived from rules and procedures. Contemporary Chinese governance draws on elements of all three but is most distinctively characterised by a fourth type that the theoretical literature has variously termed performance legitimacy or output legitimacy: the right to rule derived from the demonstrated capacity to deliver results that citizens value.

The CCP's claim to governance rests substantially on this performance record. The party frequently cites its elimination of extreme poverty, its infrastructure achievements, its management of natural disasters, and its navigation of global economic crises as evidence of its fitness to lead. Opinion surveys conducted by Harvard Kennedy School's Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation consistently found high levels of citizen satisfaction with central government performance in China, with approval ratings rising from 86.1 per cent in 2003 to 93.1 per cent in 2016 (Cunningham *et al.*, 2020). These findings must be interpreted cautiously given restrictions on free expression and the absence of genuine political competition, but they suggest that performance legitimacy is genuinely operative as a source of regime support, not merely a post-hoc rationalisation. The Confucian Mandate of Heaven provides the deepest cultural foundation for this model. The mandate is conditionally granted and can be withdrawn from rulers who fail to govern well. The CCP has consciously mobilised this framework, presenting itself as the heir to China's long tradition of effective governance and positioning its developmental achievements as evidence of the mandate's renewal after the humiliations of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Xi Jinping's China Dream discourse makes this connection explicit: the restoration of national greatness is both the party's mission and the source of its legitimacy. This historical-normative legitimacy, rooted in civilisational narrative, reinforces the performance legitimacy derived from measurable developmental achievements.

Internal to the party, procedural mechanisms exist that are operationally significant even if they are not democratic in the Western sense. Democratic centralism creates a form of procedural legitimacy within the ruling elite. Collective leadership norms constrain individual authority and require consensus-building before decisions are finalised. Meritocratic recruitment and promotion through the civil service and party hierarchy create incentives for competence and performance that are absent in systems

where proximity to electoral majorities determines career advancement. The principle protecting minority views within party structures allows for policy discussion and correction before decisions are publicly announced, functioning as a form of quality control on governance decisions. These internal procedures do not substitute for the accountability mechanisms of competitive democracy, but they do create a system with its own internal logic and coherence that cannot be dismissed as pure arbitrary rule.

#### **4.2 The Legitimacy Gap in Sierra Leone**

Sierra Leone's democratic system derives its legitimacy primarily from the electoral process. The constitution guarantees universal suffrage, multi-party competition, and the peaceful transfer of power. These guarantees have been honoured consistently since 2002. The system is procedurally legitimate by the standards of liberal democratic theory, as confirmed by repeated endorsements from international election observer missions.

Yet procedural legitimacy, untethered from performance legitimacy, generates a distinctive form of political pathology. When citizens vote and leaders fail to deliver, the gap between the promise of democracy and its reality breeds cynicism, patronage politics, and institutional erosion. Barro's (1996) empirical finding that democracy has a weakly negative relationship with growth in early developmental stages is visible in Sierra Leone's experience: growth has occurred since 2002, but it has not translated proportionately into improvements in human development outcomes, partly because institutional weaknesses prevent effective public spending even when revenues are available.

The specific dynamics of Sierra Leone's legitimacy gap are worth examining in detail. First, electoral competition is structured by patronage rather than policy. Parties offer jobs, cash transfers, and constituency-specific projects to their ethnic bases rather than coherent programmatic platforms. This creates strong incentives for corruption: officials must recover the costs of electoral campaigns and reward their supporters once in office. State resources are systematically diverted from developmental uses to political maintenance. The law does not effectively serve low-income citizens who must seek redress through money or social connections rather than through formal legal channels. This structural exclusion of the majority from the benefits of formal legal institutions corrodes confidence in the state's capacity to deliver justice.

Second, civil society, which should in theory provide accountability between elections, remains susceptible to co-optation. The appointment of civil society activists to well-paid positions in parastatals and government agencies removes critical voices from the public sphere and incorporates them into the patronage network. This dynamic is not unique to Sierra Leone, but it illustrates a systemic feature of political systems in which the state controls most formal employment and income opportunities and can use access to these opportunities as an instrument of social control.

Third, the rule of law remains structurally weak. Both Barro and Chang identify secure property rights and the rule of law as more important than democratic procedures for development. In Sierra Leone, access to justice is expensive in both direct costs and

social capital requirements. Low-income citizens cannot easily enforce contracts, secure property rights, or obtain redress through formal legal channels without money or connections. This undermines the investment environment and perpetuates the exclusion of the majority from economic opportunity. The country adopted a Western style of democracy when institutions were not properly strengthened to absorb the pressures that come with high demand for social amenities from citizens.

### 4.3 Comparative Architecture of Legitimacy

The contrast between China and Sierra Leone on the question of legitimacy is not simply the contrast between authoritarianism and democracy. It is the contrast between two fundamentally different theories of what governance is for and how political authority is earned, maintained, and lost. China's system operates under a performance contract between state and society: the party governs so long as it delivers on its developmental obligations. Sierra Leone operates under a procedural contract: governments govern so long as they win elections through recognised procedures. The first contract creates strong institutional incentives for developmental performance; the second creates strong incentives for electoral success, which in conditions of weak institutions, high inequality, and patronage-dominated politics does not necessarily require developmental performance.

The following table synthesises the contrasting legitimacy architectures of the two systems, bringing together the analytical threads developed in the preceding discussion.

**Table 1:** Comparative Legitimacy Architecture — China and Sierra Leone

Dimension	China (PRC)	Sierra Leone
Primary legitimacy source	Performance delivery; historical mandate	Electoral procedure (popular vote)
Philosophical foundation	Confucian meritocracy; Mandate of Heaven	Liberal democratic theory; individual rights
Role of elections	Internal party consultative processes	Multi-party competitive elections
Citizen-state relationship	Trust-based; service-delivery oriented	Rights-based; participation oriented
Development outcome priority	Economic growth and stability	Procedural fairness and political inclusion
Key vulnerability	Accountability deficit; restricted civil liberties	Performance gap; weak state capacity
Institutional basis	CCP structures; meritocratic technocracy	Westminster-derived parliament; judiciary

**Source:** Author's synthesis based on comparative analysis of secondary sources.

The table makes visible what the narrative analysis elaborates: the two systems are not simply more or less democratic versions of the same model. They operate according to fundamentally different foundational logics. China's system asks whether governance is delivering. Sierra Leone's asks whether governance was chosen through the right procedure. Both questions matter. The developmental challenge is to find governance

architectures that answer both adequately, and it is toward this synthesis that the article's concluding argument is directed.

## **5. The Sino-African Governance Interface in Practice**

### **5.1 Infrastructure as Performance Demonstration**

China's engagement with Africa operates through multiple channels, but its most visible and politically significant instrument is infrastructure finance. The China Development Bank, China Exim Bank, and a range of Chinese state-owned enterprises have financed roads, railways, ports, energy plants, and telecommunications networks across the continent. The Nairobi Expressway, completed in 2022 at a cost of approximately USD 668 million, is a paradigmatic example. Built by the China Road and Bridge Corporation and financed by China Exim Bank under a Build-Operate-Transfer arrangement, it reduced commute times significantly along one of Nairobi's most congested corridors and stands as a tangible demonstration of what state-directed, focused resource mobilisation can achieve within a defined timeframe.

The developmental significance of this example extends beyond its economic impact. It functions as a concrete demonstration of the performance principle. African governments, observing Chinese-financed projects delivered on clear timelines and with visible results, draw comparisons with the slower, more conditional, and often more contentious processes associated with Western donor funding. Whether or not Chinese project execution is consistently superior to alternatives, the perception of effectiveness shapes political learning among African elites and citizens alike. It reinforces the argument that the primary criterion for governance evaluation should be delivery of results rather than adherence to particular procedural norms.

In Sierra Leone, Chinese-financed infrastructure includes the construction of the State House, rehabilitation of sections of the Freetown-Lunsar highway, and various hospital and school buildings. These projects are visible to citizens and directly associated with the bilateral partnership between the two governments. Their political effect is to demonstrate that external relationships calibrated to delivery rather than governance conditionality can produce tangible results, even as questions about debt sustainability and long-term fiscal impact remain. China's financial support has created a different kind of development relationship than the traditional donor-recipient model, one in which sovereignty is nominally preserved and governance conditionality is formally absent. This arrangement has clear political appeal for host governments, though its long-term developmental implications depend heavily on how the proceeds of such financing are managed domestically.

### **5.2 Elite Socialisation and Policy Learning**

Beyond physical infrastructure, China exercises governance influence through extensive training and socialisation programmes for African political and administrative elites. The Chinese Communist Party's International Department, the China International

Development Cooperation Agency, and the China Executive Leadership Academy Pudong, among other institutions, run training courses for African politicians, civil servants, party officials, and technocrats covering subjects including public administration, economic planning, poverty reduction, rural development, and anti-corruption enforcement. Thousands of African officials have participated in these programmes annually in recent years, creating a substantial cohort of African administrators who have been exposed to Chinese governance philosophy and practice at first hand.

The content of these training programmes is not ideologically neutral. They present China's developmental experience as a reference model and introduce participants to the specific instruments through which the Chinese state has directed economic transformation: five-year planning frameworks, special economic zones, industrial policy tools, targeted poverty alleviation programmes, and performance-based cadre evaluation systems. The governance norms being transmitted include principles of sovereignty, non-interference, state-led development, and the primacy of economic stability over political liberalisation, norms congruent with Chinese governance philosophy and potentially attractive to African governments navigating difficult developmental challenges without adequate resources.

Several African countries have adopted elements of Chinese-style planning frameworks and policy instruments. Ethiopia, under successive governments, pursued a development strategy explicitly modelled on the East Asian developmental state, directing investment toward priority sectors, building industrial parks with Chinese technical assistance, and maintaining growth targets at the centre of governance evaluation. Rwanda's governance model, characterised by strong executive direction, ambitious medium-term planning targets, and performance-based accountability within the public service, draws on similar developmental state principles. Zambia, Nigeria, and Egypt have established special economic zones with Chinese technical assistance. Whether these instruments can be effectively transposed into African institutional contexts, and what governance preconditions are needed for them to function as intended, are empirical questions that require longitudinal study beyond the scope of this article.

### **5.3 The Strategic Context of Chinese Engagement**

China's engagement with Africa must be situated within its broader strategic context. The Belt and Road Initiative, launched in 2013 and expanded to include the majority of African countries through memoranda of understanding, provides an overarching framework for Chinese infrastructure finance and trade facilitation. Within this framework, individual projects serve multiple Chinese interests: expanding market access for Chinese companies and commodities, securing resource supply chains, building geopolitical relationships in international forums, and demonstrating the viability of the Chinese development model as an alternative to Western-prescribed pathways.

This strategic context does not invalidate the developmental benefits that Chinese engagement can generate for African partners. Infrastructure gaps in Africa are enormous, estimated at USD 100 billion annually (African Development Bank, 2018), and Chinese finance has filled gaps that Western donors and multilateral institutions have left open. Roads, airports, ports, and energy plants have real developmental value regardless of the geopolitical motivations that produced them. The relevant question for African policymakers is not whether to engage with China, but on what terms, with what conditions on domestic procurement and skills transfer, and with what assessment of long-term fiscal sustainability.

For Sierra Leone, a small, resource-dependent economy with limited fiscal space, these questions are particularly acute. Chinese construction loans are typically structured at commercial or near-commercial interest rates with sovereign guarantees from the host government. Without careful fiscal management and strong domestic revenue mobilisation, such arrangements can crowd out social spending and create debt servicing obligations that constrain future governments. Brautigam and Gallagher (2014) demonstrate that commodity-backed financing arrangements, in which resource revenues are pledged as collateral for Chinese loans, carry particular risks for countries with volatile commodity export revenues. Sierra Leone's diamond and mineral exports create this vulnerability. Managing the Chinese partnership strategically, in ways that build domestic institutional capacity rather than simply importing physical infrastructure, is the governance challenge that Sierra Leone's policymakers face in their engagement with South-South cooperation.

#### **5.4 Critical Assessment: Opportunity, Risk, and Agency**

A balanced analytical account of Chinese engagement in Africa must resist both celebratory and dismissive framings. China's approach offers genuine opportunities: infrastructure finance without governance conditionality, policy models oriented toward state capacity and economic transformation, and a rhetoric of South-South solidarity that resonates with African experiences of Northern prescriptivism. African governments operating under tight fiscal constraints and facing urgent infrastructure deficits have rational reasons to engage actively with Chinese partnership.

At the same time, the risks are real and must be taken seriously. Debt sustainability concerns are legitimate in contexts where loan terms are not fully transparent and commodity revenues are volatile. The reinforcement of executive authority through centralised planning models may strengthen governance capacity in narrow senses while weakening accountability mechanisms over time. The employment content of Chinese-financed projects has varied significantly, with some projects importing Chinese labour rather than generating local skills and income, reducing the broader developmental multiplier effects.

Mohan and Lampert (2013) rightly insist on African agency in these relationships. African governments, civil societies, and communities are not passive recipients of Chinese engagement but active negotiators of its terms and effects. The outcomes of Sino-

African cooperation reflect the choices of African actors at least as much as the strategies of Chinese ones. Building the domestic institutional capacity to negotiate these partnerships effectively, to maximise developmental benefits and minimise risks, is precisely the governance challenge that the legitimacy gap analysis points toward. Without capable institutions, even the most favourable external partnerships cannot generate sustained developmental progress.

## **6. Beyond the Ballot Box: Synthesis and Implications**

### **6.1 The Insufficiency of Procedural Metrics**

The comparative analysis presented above supports a central argument: the ballot box is a necessary but insufficient institution for achieving developmental governance. Electoral procedures create a mechanism for leadership selection and, in principle, for accountability. But they do not automatically produce the state capacity, institutional coherence, or policy consistency required to translate political mandates into developmental outcomes. The developmental state literature has made this argument for decades. What the Sino-African governance interface adds is a contemporaneous and geographically proximate reference point that African citizens and policymakers can observe directly.

African citizens are not comparing their systems to an abstract ideal of Weberian bureaucracy. They are comparing them to Chinese-financed expressways, airports, and hospitals that they can see and use. The comparison is uncomfortable for advocates of procedural democracy because it raises an obvious question: if electoral democracy is the superior governance system, why does it so frequently fail to deliver the results that matter most to citizens? The answer is not that democracy is wrong. It is that procedural democracy without substantive institutional capacity is a governance framework with a structural liability. It creates expectations of delivery that it cannot consistently fulfil, and the gap between expectation and reality generates the corruption, cynicism, and instability that make developmental progress even harder to achieve.

### **6.2 State Capacity as the Primary Variable**

What the comparison between China and Sierra Leone suggests most clearly is that state capacity, the ability of governmental institutions to formulate and implement policy, deliver services, collect revenue, and maintain order across the territory, is the primary explanatory variable in understanding developmental outcomes. China's party-state possesses this capacity in abundance and has invested systematically in maintaining and expanding it. Sierra Leone's democratic state lacks it and has not yet found the political formula for building it sustainably.

State capacity is not determined by any particular political system. It is a product of institutional investment, political will, administrative culture, and historical trajectory. Some democracies, including South Korea and Botswana, have built high-capacity developmental states. Some authoritarian regimes have maintained corrupt, extractive,

low-capacity states despite their insulation from electoral pressures. The governance form alone does not determine the outcome. What matters is whether the ruling elite has both the incentive and the capacity to build and sustain capable institutions, and whether the political system provides the stability and accountability needed to do so over the long planning horizons that development requires.

China's model demonstrates that performance-based legitimacy, when operationalised through effective institutions, can generate and sustain state capacity over time. Leaders who derive their authority from delivery have strong incentives to invest in the bureaucratic, technical, and infrastructure capacity necessary to deliver. Leaders who derive their authority primarily from electoral mobilisation have strong incentives to invest in patronage networks that deliver political loyalty rather than public goods. Sierra Leone has held the elections but has not yet built the institutions that would make electoral accountability an effective driver of developmental performance.

### **6.3 The Governance Reform Agenda: What African States Can Learn**

The analysis developed in this article does not produce a simple policy prescription. It does, however, identify a set of governance reform priorities that follow logically from the diagnosis of the legitimacy gap. The first priority is the depoliticisation and professionalisation of the civil service. In Sierra Leone, as in many post-colonial African states, the civil service has been progressively hollowed out by political appointments, patronage pressures, and the flight of qualified personnel to better-compensated positions in international organisations and the private sector. Building a civil service that can formulate policy, implement programmes, and maintain institutional continuity across changes of government requires sustained investment in salaries, training, and the legal and cultural protection of meritocratic norms. This is not a glamorous reform, but it is foundational to everything else.

The second priority is fiscal transparency and domestic revenue mobilisation. Performance legitimacy requires that the state has the resources to deliver, and that the use of those resources is visible to citizens. Sierra Leone's tax revenue as a share of GDP remains among the lowest in West Africa, reflecting both a narrow formal economy and significant tax evasion by well-connected businesses. Expanding the tax base, enforcing compliance fairly, and making public spending transparent through accessible fiscal reporting are essential steps toward building the performance contract between the state and society. The Chinese model is instructive here not as a political template but as a demonstration that ambitious developmental targets can be pursued and met when backed by adequate fiscal resources and administrative capacity.

The third priority is long-term planning that transcends electoral cycles. One of the structural disadvantages of procedural democracy in low-capacity states is the tendency toward short-term decision-making driven by electoral time horizons. Infrastructure projects, agricultural transformation, and educational investment all require planning horizons of ten to twenty years, well beyond the five-year electoral cycle. Institutionalising long-term development planning, as China has done through

successive five-year plans and longer-term development visions, allows governments to make and sustain developmental commitments that voters and investors can hold them accountable for over time. Several African governments, including Rwanda and Ghana, have adopted medium-term development frameworks that provide this longer planning horizon within democratic governance structures. Sierra Leone's various development plans have not yet achieved the institutional consistency needed to drive sustained transformation.

#### **6.4 Bridging Procedural and Performance Legitimacy**

The most important implication of this analysis for Sierra Leone and similar states is that the legitimacy gap must be closed from both sides simultaneously. Strengthening procedural legitimacy through cleaner elections, stronger electoral management bodies, and better civil society oversight is necessary but not sufficient. Equally necessary is building performance legitimacy by delivering tangible improvements in citizens' lives: better roads, functioning hospitals, quality schools, reliable electricity, and economic opportunities that do not depend on political connections.

This requires a strategic reorientation of governance philosophy. Rather than treating development as a by-product of political competition, governments must treat it as the primary mandate, the criterion by which their right to govern will ultimately be judged by citizens. This is, in essence, the substantive democracy argument: democratic governance should be evaluated not only by how leaders are chosen but by what they do with power once they hold it. The Chinese understanding that leaders, whether elected or not, should deliver, and that trust and performance matter more than procedure, is not a rejection of democratic values. It is an insistence that governance must be assessed by its consequences for citizens' lives.

For Sierra Leone specifically, closing the legitimacy gap requires a set of interconnected institutional reforms. Building a meritocratic civil service, insulated from patronage pressures and evaluated on performance targets, is foundational. Developing planning capacity that extends beyond electoral cycles allows states to pursue agricultural, industrial, and social policies over time horizons long enough to generate visible results. Constructing accountability mechanisms that go beyond the five-year electoral cycle to hold public institutions accountable for specific service delivery outcomes reinforces the performance contract between the state and society. And cultivating a political culture of performance accountability among citizens, who must demand not only the right to vote but the return of tangible public goods on their political participation, shifts the political economy away from patronage and toward programme delivery.

South-South cooperation with China can support this reorientation if managed strategically. The infrastructure financing, technical training, and planning frameworks that China offers are tools whose developmental impact depends on the domestic governance context in which they are applied. Sierra Leone needs to engage with Chinese partnership on terms that reinforce rather than substitute for its own institutional

development: prioritising projects with strong domestic employment and skills transfer content, insisting on transparency in financing terms, and using Chinese planning frameworks as reference points for building indigenous planning capacity rather than importing external governance models wholesale.

## 7. Conclusion

This article has argued that the relationship between democracy and development cannot be adequately understood through procedural metrics alone. The comparison between China and Sierra Leone reveals that the capacity of a governance system to deliver substantive developmental outcomes depends not primarily on the procedure by which leaders are selected but on the institutional architecture, political culture, and state capacity through which they govern. These foundational conditions, shaped by historical trajectory and cultural inheritance, determine whether governance can translate political mandates into the tangible improvements in citizens' lives that constitute development in its fullest sense.

China's performance-based legitimacy model, rooted in Confucian political philosophy and operationalised through the party-state's developmental apparatus, has produced transformative gains in poverty reduction and economic transformation over seven decades. The cadre evaluation system, the meritocratic recruitment of technocratic elites, the long-term planning framework, and the historical legitimacy derived from the restoration of national sovereignty after the century of humiliation provide mutually reinforcing pillars of governance coherence. Sierra Leone's procedural democracy, inherited from colonial administration and insufficiently supported by capable institutions, has failed to close the gap between electoral legitimacy and developmental delivery over six decades of independence. The resulting legitimacy gap, the persistent disconnect between procedural success and substantive failure, has fuelled political instability, patronage politics, and citizen disillusionment with governance institutions. The Sino-African governance interface adds an important contemporary dimension to this analysis. China's engagement with Africa, through infrastructure finance, elite socialisation, and South-South cooperation frameworks, offers resources and reference points that African states can draw on in building developmental governance capacity. The specific governance norms transmitted through Chinese training programmes, the demonstration effects of Chinese-financed infrastructure delivery, and the policy instruments, including special economic zones and five-year planning frameworks, that African governments have adopted from the Chinese experience represent concrete channels of governance learning. The terms of this engagement, however, must be determined by African developmental priorities and managed through capable domestic institutions if the benefits are to outweigh the risks of new financial and political dependencies.

The core analytical contribution of this article is the concept of the legitimacy gap: the structural space between procedural legitimacy derived from elections and

performance legitimacy derived from developmental delivery. When this gap is wide, political instability, corruption, and citizen disengagement follow. Closing it requires simultaneous attention to both dimensions of legitimacy: elections that are free, fair, and meaningful, and governance that is capable, accountable, and oriented toward substantive outcomes. The ballot box is one institution among many, and its effectiveness depends on the broader political culture and state capacity within which it operates.

Several limitations shape this analysis. The comparison of two highly distinct cases, a continental-scale authoritarian developmental state and a small West African post-conflict democracy, is analytically suggestive rather than systematically conclusive. The causal mechanisms through which Chinese engagement influences African governance outcomes remain underspecified and require empirical investigation through detailed fieldwork and careful process tracing. This analysis has not directly addressed the experiences and voices of Sierra Leonean citizens, a gap that future research must fill through in-depth survey work and qualitative inquiry to gauge citizen perceptions of governance legitimacy and the developmental impact of Sino-African cooperation in their communities.

Future research should pursue several specific directions. Comparative studies of Chinese-financed and traditionally donor-funded infrastructure projects across multiple African countries, examining their respective developmental impacts, employment generation, skills transfer, and institutional effects, would provide important empirical grounding for the analytical claims advanced here. Studies of the specific governance content of Chinese training programmes and their reception and uptake among African officials would illuminate the mechanisms of elite socialisation and policy learning. Longitudinal analyses of countries that have adopted elements of Chinese-style planning frameworks would test whether the developmental state model can generate performance legitimacy within democratic governance structures over time, and under what institutional and political conditions such transfers prove productive rather than merely cosmetic.

There is also scope for more granular research at the sub-national level in Sierra Leone. District and chiefdom-level variation in governance quality, service delivery outcomes, and citizen trust may reveal important insights about how political culture and institutional capacity interact within a single national system. Communities with stronger traditional governance institutions, where chiefs maintain legitimacy through service delivery rather than coercion, may exhibit patterns of political trust and civic engagement that offer lessons for national institutional design. Similarly, the growing use of mobile technology platforms for government service delivery, tax payment, and citizen feedback in Sierra Leone and other African states represents an emerging field of governance innovation that merits systematic study. These micro-level dynamics do not displace the macro-level comparative analysis developed in this article, but they add texture and nuance to the governance reform agenda that the legitimacy gap framework points toward.

Beyond the ballot box lies the harder, less visible work of governance: building capable institutions, maintaining fiscal discipline, investing in human capital, and sustaining the political will to deliver for the many rather than the few. That work is what development requires. Democracy provides the legitimating framework and the accountability mechanisms within which that work should be judged. But the judgment must ultimately be substantive. Citizens of Sierra Leone and across the African continent assess their governments not only by whether they were allowed to vote but by whether the vote produced anything worth voting for. Achieving the governance quality that makes those elections meaningful, beyond the ballot box, is the defining challenge of the twenty-first century for states across the Global South.

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### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest. No financial support, employment, consultancy, stock ownership, honoraria, or paid expert testimony was received from any organization with a financial interest in this work. All funding sources are disclosed in the acknowledgments. The research was conducted independently, and no commercial, financial, or personal relationships influenced the findings or the integrity of this manuscript.

### **About the Author(s)**

Joseph Momoh Conteh is a PhD candidate in Theoretical Economics, with a focus on National Development, at the Institute of South-South Cooperation and Development (ISSCAD), Peking University, Beijing, China (<https://www.isscad.pku.edu.cn/>). His research covers Trade, Information and Communication Technology, Administration, Policy Development, and Finance. Through his doctoral work, he aims to generate practical insights that advance economic theory and inform development policy across the global South.

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