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Contents

Environmental turbulence and institutional responses in African public services

Gatian F. Lungu*

The relationship between environmental turbulence and unsatisfactory levels of performance in many African civil service systems has not received adequate scholarly attention. In this article the author discusses the hitherto poorly defined concept of environmental turbulence in public organizations and its negative impact on African civil service systems. Among other things, it is argued that environmental turbulence has largely but, not exclusively, emanated from the political environment, and has had two major types of impact on African civil services: i) considerable impairment, if not outright dislocation, of institutional capacity, and ii) a reactive stance by these systems that has in turn engendered organizational conservatism which has thwarted efforts at positive reform and innovation. Democratizing states in Africa can draw several lessons from this administrative paralysis caused by hyperturbulence, and develop strategies to forestall sliding back into what has now become a continental syndrome.

Introduction

One of the conspicuous features of contemporary African civil service systems is their propensity to adhere to cultures and traditions of the inherited colonial bureaucracy despite concerted efforts at reform on the one hand, and an economically and politically hyperturbulent environment, on the other. Organizational responses to both reform programmes and to the sudden if not cataclysmic events in the economico-political environment have defied conventional logic. The well funded and much publicized reforms-be it

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Africanization, organizational restructuring, decentralization, or human resource development - have not helped transform civil service systems towards developmental, people-oriented and user-friendly institutions that policy makers and other stakeholders have intended them to be. Similarly, the relatively high degree of instability in the economic and political environments would logically have led these systems to a halt or total collapse altogether. This latter development has generally not occurred either. In a few states like the Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire) civil services had completely collapsed after the departure of the colonial power. However, in many African states civil service systems, while rendered ineffective, have actually survived. For the most part, their survival has meant relative insulation from change, elitist in orientation, and have continued to operate on outworn conventions from mother countries. Consequently, they have failed both to serve the needs of rapidly changing societies and to discharge traditional functions of government (Hirschman,1981; Lungu,1995).

This discussion addresses the failure of African civil service systems to adequately transform themselves for tasks and performance in the post-independence era against the backdrop of environmental turbulence. Among other things, it is argued that environmental turbulence has impeded effective reform in the civil services, has impaired their capacity to function effectively, and has engendered self-insulating and change-resistant mechanisms that have made them more grotesquely ridiculous than their colonial predecessors. The relationship between environmental turbulence and institutional ineffectiveness of the civil service raises several questions regarding reform and innovation in relation to public services in emergent democracies like Namibia and South Africa, or indeed in a number of African countries that are now experimenting with donor-sponsored multiparty democracies. Explanations of bureaucratic resistance to change and institutional ineffectiveness may acquire new persuasiveness if they are placed in the broader context of environmental turbulence.

Environmental Turbulence in Perspective

Although available literature makes several allusions to environmental turbulence

(Waldo,1971) the concept has received inadequate attention generally, and in public management in particular. Mosher (1971), for example, refers to turbulence as a set of unexpected changes in the environment that might catch officials in government off-guard and abruptly disrupt policy initiatives. Writing from a generic environmental perspective, Terreberry (1973:180) defines turbulence as "complexity as well as rapidity with regard to change in casual interconnections in the environment." These definitions do little to clarify the concept of environmental turbulence. Both complexity and rapidity of change do not necessarily or always constitute or create elements of environmental turbulence, unless and until these create crises for the organization or system. In this connection, Warwick's (1975:62) approach is more insightful and plausible. He construes turbulence as a form of organizational threat: "the extent to which the environment is a potential source of harm, losses, or other serious forms of deprivation, and the degree of unpredictability in the environment."

Thus, according to Warwick, complexity and rapidity of change in the environment become aspects of turbulence to the extent that they generate organizational instability, threats and uncertainty. This is an important observation because both complexity and rapidity of change do not always trigger these effects on organizational systems. Associating environmental turbulence with dramatic events like rapidity of changes is however, a limited view of the tributary sources of turbulence, especially in the public sector. Cohen and March (1974) observe that non-dramatic and often subtle elements like role ambiguity and goal ambivalence can also contribute to environmental turbulence. Environments may send conflicting messages regarding organizational roles. Relatively high degree of ambiguity and ambivalence may generate an atmosphere of both insecurity and uncertainty which can discourage flexibiltiy and creativity, and buttress the urge for organizational survival and conservation of structures and traditions that may be targeted for reform

The notion of environmental turbulence has been further clarified in the realm of biological sciences. Ayala and Valentine (Gould, 1975) undertook a study of **tradacna,** a tropical reef-dwelling clam that inhabits a highly stable environment. The research design consisted of control and experimental **tradacna:** the control set was left in a relatively stable environment, while the experimental set was

exposed to various experimental interruptions and disturbances - including tourists, birds, and so forth - for a period of ten years. Their findings, reported by Gould (1975), showed that **tradacna** left in the stable environment developed more genetic variations, while those in unstable environmnent did not. The publication of this study coincided with that of Warwick (1975) in public administration which, among other things, showed that civil servants in the American Department of State responded positively to organizational changes and innovations during stable (i.e. non-election) years, and were negative to suggestions of change and innovations during unstable (i.e. presidential election) years. He further observed that during the presidential election years the uncertainty associated with the tenure of political executives (i.e.: those who vacate office with the incumbent president) prompted permanent career civil servants to distance themselves from the former, and insulated themselves from political directives until presidentail elections were over. Echoing the work of Ayala and Valentine, and of Warwick, I have also remarked elsewhere about the environmnental turbulence in connection to reform in the Zambian public service as follows:

> It is a well known natural and social science observation that an organism - whether biological or social - does not venture to to acquire new characteristics in a turbulent environment. Administration as a social process tends to hold on to old conventions with much tenacity in an environment characterized by turbulent events (Lungu, 1981:38).

Environmental Turbulence and African Public Services

Contemporary Africa can be aptly described as a continent plagued by hyperturbulence. In his study of organizational environments in Africa Munene (1991:455) observed that "extreme environmental uncertainty is a defining characteristic and predictability is almost nil." Mutahaba et al. (1993:8-13) identify the following ecological forms of turbulence for African civil service systems: (i) too rapid change in the nature, size, and complexity of tasks; (ii) high rates of population growth and rapid urbanization; (iii) volatile economic performance; (iv) rapid turnover of governments and political systems, and (v) incompatible sociocultural contexts. Changes in the nature, volume and complexity of tasks partly arose from the expecations of political independence,

especially the need to redress past imbalances and the expanded role of the state. Africa's population growth is currently the highest among the five continents, and the rate of urbanization is occurring at unprecedented speed and far outstipping amenities. Civil services in many countries could simply notwithstand the pressure:

> Simultaneous with the increase in population and urbanization was the increase in the demand for education. The cumulative effect of all these developments has been an increased pressure on governments to provide more goods and services, jobs for the growing number of unemployed youth, more schools and health facilities, at the extreme end, to cope with an increasing crime rate (Mutahaba et al., 1993:11-12).

Economic turbulence has equally made its mark and taken a heavy toll. Almost all African economies, with a few exceptions of Botswana, Ivory Coast, Mauritius, Namibia and South Africa, have or are virtually collapsing. National currencies have been devalued hundreds of times against hard currencies like the American dollar. Interest rates change as rapidly and as frequently as devaluations of national currencies. Prices of commodities, if and when they are available in shops, rise sharply almost on a daily basis, thus making it difficult for government and other organizations to budget with certainty. In addition, financial turbulence has scared off international investors, disabled and crippled governments and undermines their capacity to discharge their functions.

Perhaps no single form of turbulence surpasses the rapidity of governments' turnover in Africa. Currently, as this paper is being written, the ruling party in Lesotho is faced with opposition boycot and even a coup **(The Argus,** 21 September, 1998). The civil war in the Congo Democratic Republic is complementing other wars in Angola and civil strife in Somalia. Both Ghana and Nigeria, among the first to gain political independence, have had several military coups. This is not to mention traumatic periods in the Central African Empire under the semi-neurotic Bokassa, and Uganda under the monstrous regime of the iron-fisted Idi Amin. With very few exceptions, military rule has exchanged hands frequently with civilian governments in more than half of African countries. Even in relatively politically stable countries like Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe undesirablely frequent reshuffles of ministers and senior public managers have been witnessed. Moreover, the urge for political patronage in

these countries has led to partisan interferences and patronage in civil service systems. The introductions of one party states and now dominant party systems have also led to strain on civil service systems (Mutahaba, 1989; Lungu et al., 1996). Ethnic rivalries have led to open hostilities and even civil wars in countries like Liberia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda and now the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Even the relatively stable states of Botswana and Zimbabwe have not been spared ethnic rivalries, and often these have spilt over into civil service systems. The African continent has thus excelled in manifesting various forms of turbulence in this last decade of the twentieth century.

The turbulence that emanates from the incompatibility of western bureaucratic civil service systems and the African sociopolitical cultural milieux has been aptly described by Haque as the problem of a contexless public administration:

> The modern administrative framework adopted by Third World nations is hardly compatible with various dimensions of their political context. Foremost, the politico-ideological tradition of western liberal democracy, within which modern bureaucracy has evolved, hardly exists in Third World nations. Such a liberal democratic context, which assumes the neutrality, anonymity and impartiality of the administrative apparatus and its accountability to elected politicians, is either absent or fragile in most Asian, African and Latin American countries (Haque, 1996:319).

Haque continues to argue tha even the economic and sociocultural aspects of African communities are at variance with those of the colonially imported civil service systems. This view is corroborated by the findings of Jones et al. (1996:455-467) among civil servants in Botswana who noted the contextual mismatch between indigenous African and colonially imported management practices. The ambiguities and ambivalence that this contextual mismatch creates for civil servants in enormous, and tends to either produce dysrhymic changes or promote dysfunctional behaviours like nepotism and corruption (Price, 1975) both of which are hardly conducive to positive administrative performance, reform and innovation.

Impact of Environmental Tuburlence

The forms of turbulence discussed above are clearly disruptive, distractive and

incapacitating for civil services. The logical consequence of such impacts would be predictably great impairment of the civil service systems at best or their total collapse at worst. To a large extent many African civil services have been considerably impaired by environmnental turbulence. For example, their failure to maintain the infrastructure left by their colonial predecessors is a clear manifestation of their impairment:

> The sight of dilapidated buildings, perhaps less than a decade old, of poorly maintained roads, of dirty and dented buses, of inoperative and putrid public toilets, of newly built halls with torn seats and cockroaches, and of new airplanes whose seat-belts can no longer be adjusted - is a severe indictment on African development administration, an administration that has actually helped underdevelop the infrastructure that the colonial rulers had built (Lungu, 1995:162).

There are several examples of classic victims of environmental turbulence, and these include collapsed civil services in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Somalia and Uganda (under the Amin regime).

However, by and large African civil service systems have not collapsed. What has happened instead is that environmnental turbulence has pushed many of these systems towards insulation, a typical form of organizational response for survival under this type of pressure. The consequence of such a reactive posture is to entrench conservatism. Many a visitor to African countries cannot fail to be impressed by the striking resemblance between colonial and postcolonial bureaucratic structures and processes, including for that matter building styles. Of course faces, the size and colour of personnel, some functions, and levels of efficiency and effectiveness have drastically changed: but formal appearances, ethos, and values inherited from mother countries have largely survived the turbulence. A recent visit to Francophone African schools of public administration by this author (i.e: Ivory Coast, Mali, Morroco and Senegal) revealed striking similarities, at least in formal structures of curricula to that of the **Ecole Nationale Administratio** (ENA) in France (Lungu,1996). Indeed, Francophone Africa has held to French colonial civil service conventions with amazing degree of tenacity. If pupils in Paris have a mathematics lesson at 11.00 Hours, classes in French West Africa will also hold mathematics lessons at the same hour!

Similarly, in former British colonies, the Whitehall model continues to wield considerable influence long after the mother country has reformed several aspects of its civil service. An American academic, visiting several Anglophone countries in the South-eastern Africa, made the following observation:

> African civil servants in the British tradition still pursue many of their functions as if there had been no changes since the Whitehall tradition was introduced in the nineteenth century. Political neutrality, for example, has remained an official virtue in spite of politicization of the functions of the government; the civil servants' role may have changed in the mother country more than in the former colonies (Montgomery, 1986:2 1).

During the one-party era politicians in Kenya, Tanzania and Zambia were reportedly frustrated by civil servants who generally tended to shun partisan politics even after they had been allowed to be actively involved in party activities (Lungu, 1998). Cabinet secretariats, and titles like 'permanent secretary', 'secretary to the cabinet and head of the civil service' have been maintained despite turbulence in many of these countries. Where changes have been made to these titles (e.g.: Director in Ghana, Director-General in Nigeria and South Africa) civil servants have reacted with deep apprehension. In Nigeria, for example, when the title 'permanent secretary' was changed to 'director-general' in 1988, and the functions turned to those of a deputy minister, and the abolition of the post of secretary to the cabinet and head of the civil service, civil servants' reaction was negatively critical. Fadahunsi reports that many feared that the new arrangement would scare off experienced and qualified staff, and the abolition of the post of head of the civil service was feared to have "undermined the cohesion as well as **esprit de corps** of the service. Some even claim that the service now is an organization without a head" (Fadahunsi, 1991:22). Similar attempts to change the title of 'permanent secretary' by the Zambian government in 1990 was unanimously rejected by the country's Committee of Permanent Secretaries.

More substantive resistance to change by African civil servants, specially in the Anglophone group, has consistently been manifested by the failure of the reform movement to take off the ground. In Ghana, for example, several attempts have been made to decentralize functions of government since the years of the first President Kwame Nkrumah. Assessing progress on this front after 41 years of

attaining political independence, Nkrumah observes that:

> In spite of considerable investment in time and effort, progress on the decentralization front has been unimpressive. Even the Minister of Local Government and Rural Development, the government's chief spokesperson on decentralization reforms, has occassionally admitted, in exasperation, that the decentralization policy was far from being successfully implemented... The reason largely is that the bureaucracy of the civil service, particularly the top management personnel of the civil service, is not in favour of decentralization (Nkrumah, 1998:2-3).

Commenting on Zimbabwe's Public Service Reform Programme introduced in 1991 Chipangura observes that:

> It is now close to seven years since the PSRP was initiated, the problems identified by the Public Service Review Commission are still with us. The general public is still complaining of a lethargic, rude, inefficient and corrupt bureaucracy ... The PSRP seems to be moving at a snail's pace (1998:4).

Stalled reform processes have been reported in Kenya, Tanzania, the Sudan and several other countries, despite decades of reform effort. Undoubtedly, several factors have been responsible for stalled civil service reforms, but at the centre of it has been the impact from a hyperturbulent enviromnent.

Much of the civil service conservatism and resistance even to mild reform proposals has largely been symbolic, since the functioning of many colonially introduced institutions like parliament have been considerably undermined. However, symbolism has a function in organizations generally, and African civil service systems in particular. Bolman and Deal make the following observations with regard to the role of symbolism in organizations:

> The symbolic frame assumes that organizations are full of questions that cannot be answered, problems that cannot be solved, and events that cannot be understood and managed. Where that is the case, humans will create and use symbols to bring meaning out of chaos, clarity out of confusion, and predictability out of mystery. **Myths** and other narrative forms such as **fairy tales** and **stories** provide explanations, reconcile contradictions, and resolve dilemmas ... An organization's culture, moreover, is revealed and communicated most clearly through its symbols (Bolman and Deal, 1991:253-254).

Seen within the context of African civil service systems, symbolism has become a form of legitimizing resistance to reform introduced by unstable governments. Reference to traditions that made for success in the past is the norm, and minimization or even utter rejection of new ideas is one way of throwing away uncertainty. The kinds of turbulence experienced in many African countries have engendered the feeling of normlessness, of temporariness, and has left the impression among civil servants that politicians are not serious with reforms, and pose a danger to the integrity of the service (Wamalwa, 1986). The fact that many African leaders who have been at the centre of turbulent events have been persons of questionable integrity (i.e.: Amin and Bokassa) and lacked sober habits of governance (e.g.: Ghana's Rawlings beating up his Vice-President at a cabinet meeting) has not endeared them to civil servants. A semi-illiterate and buffoonish dictator is not a personage who can impress civil servants with reform rhetoric; neither can a professor who heads a department for two months persuade civil servants on the merits of reform. Under such conditions colonial relics like the Whitehall model with its emphasis on the permanence of the civil service vis-a-vis rapid political turnovers readily becomes a reference point. It is thus not surprising that after almost four decades of independence African civil service systems have remained little more than colonial replicas: elitist, insulated from political changes, unresponsive to public needs and unaccountable even to their brutal political masters and to the public. Instead of responding to the needs of rapidly changing societies, the rapidity of change itself has made them focus on issues of their own survival.

Conclusion

African civil service systems have generally tended to manifest a conservative orientation at a time when they are expected to shed off their colonial trappings and transform themselves into effective instruments of national development. Conventional explanations of this manifest conservatism tends to overemphasize factors like the influence of African indigenous traditions of governance on the behaviour of civil servants to the exclusion of other variables. Alternatively, failure of reform efforts is attributed to the paucity of both financial and human resources, and sometimes to lack of commitment from the political leadership. Such explanations fail to take adequate cognizance of the impact of Africa's

hyperturbulent enviromnent in triggering organizational defensive postures in
civil service systems. The African environment has and continues to be virulently
turbulent, even by modest assessment, as current political turmoil in Lesotho and
the Democratic Republic of the Congo typifies. This has denied civil service
systems the stability upon which they could have drawn sustenance and develop
capacity for reform and innovation. Stability is a prerequisite for successful
reform, and not its antonym, and without it the civil service will continue to
leapfrog from chaos to further chaos.

Countries that are now attempting to democratize their governing systems have
several lessons to learn from the civil service history of the past forty years. First,
administrative reform and innovation, including privatization, cannot be
successfully implemented without a stable political and economic environment.
As political institutions, civil service systems are very sensitive to the political
enviromnent; and unlike business corporations that might regard turbulence in the
market as an opportunity for innovation, civil service institutions tend to atrophy
instead. Second, African civil service systems have been inundated by a plethora
of reforms, most of which have not been given sufficient time to take effect.
Genuine reform effort must be well planned and managed, but not hurried. Third,
given the preponderance of the liberal multiparty democratic model in current
political reforms, relationships between politicians and civil servants must not be
allowed to degenerate further, as they already are in many countries, especially
through the evil of political patronage. This form of turbulence is particularly
incapacitating for civil servants; for while never neutral in the broad sense, civil
servants must be allowed to play their roles as technical functionaries and as
advisers. Conflict and insecurity begin when the relatively narrow roles of civil
servants are confused with broad ones of elected officials. A culture of mutual
trust and complementarity must be allowed to evolve between bureaucrats and
politicians if they are to co-manage government business effectively. Here
experiences of one-party states during most of the 1970s and 1980s are
instructive: when pushed to the corner civil servants do not respond to political
directives: they close their eyes instead!

Fourth and finally, non-political forms of turbulence must also be closely
monitored: economic turbulence in particular tends to accompany and sometimes

even lead to political turbulence. It is inconceivable that a sound civil service system can emerge from a highly beleaguered economy. Additionally, the contextual mismatch between the civil service and its society requires urgent attention. Much of what has been written on this mismatch is exaggerated; African indigenous sociocultural norms have been over-credited with influences that they scarcely exert - like the corporate nature of African kinship encouraging corruption (Price, 1975) - except of course when other turbulent elements in the enviromnent create opportunities for such an impact. It is important that the nature of the mismatch is accurately assessed, and strategies to minimize it applied. African societies have been and still are receptive to human values and experiences from other societies, and there is no earthly reason why, despite turbulence, they should not succeed in reforming their civil service systems.

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