

Robert I. Rotberg

*on improving  
nation-state  
governance*

Good governance is essential if citizens of nation-states or subordinate political jurisdictions are to maximize their inalienable rights as subjects, taxpayers, or mere residents of the polities to which they owe, or are compelled to pay, allegiance. From their greatest need, freedom from attack (security), to mundane but real needs, such as well-maintained roads and the availability of potable water, citizens look to their suzerains – their modern nation-states, provinces, municipalities, and so on – for high-quality performance. Where that high-quality performance – good governance – is delivered, citizens can go about their personal business and pursuits with en-

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hanced expectations of success, opportunity, and satisfaction. Where bad governance prevails, however, citizens suffer increasingly severe consequences – death, injury, intensified morbidity, diminished personal accomplishments, lowered expectations of achievement, hunger, and sometimes starvation.

Numerous studies have asserted strong linkages between good governance and economic growth – at least at the national level. Good governance, they suggest, provides a platform without which sustained economic growth is extremely difficult. The data from several studies also show that economic growth in nation-states contributes to the possibility of good governance. There are sound reasons why both conclusions should, a priori, be correct. But those conclusions depend on what we mean by good versus bad governance, and what governance includes within its definition.

Better governance inhibits conflict, while poor government is conducive to intrastate tensions and civil wars. Indeed, new analyses of nation-state failure attribute it to governance errors that diminish a national government’s legitimacy, reduce perceptions of its fairness, encourage out-groups to mobilize, and lead ultimately to internal war. It stands to reason that better governed nation-states would undergo fewer civil wars.

This proposition – that better governance, especially in the tension-filled developing world, reduces the frequency and intensity of conflict – reinforces the prior one: economic growth is more likely where there is good governance. War and turmoil and instability obviously inhibit growth – as in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia, and the Sudan – and special cases such as Colombia and Sri Lanka still demonstrate that conflict and insecurity can lower

growth even without vitiating economic performance entirely.

For at least the reasons already advanced, most of us prefer good governance. It is in our self-interest. Conditions of good governance allow us to maximize our returns on personal initiative and entrepreneurship. It is difficult to conceive of anyone, anywhere, who does not seek fuller educational opportunities, paved rather than potholed roads, more rather than less security, and so on. The wages of poor governance, on the other hand, are high, paying off in immiseration, hunger, and death.

Good governance does not occur by chance. It must be nourished explicitly and consciously. The intervention of human agency is therefore critical. There is no good governance absent intentional, positive leadership. Conversely, where nation-states are badly led, the delivery of the essentials of governance falters, neglect becomes common, and the decay of the nation-state becomes obvious, especially to its stakeholders. Idi Amin in Uganda, Siaka Stevens in Sierra Leone, and Mobutu Sese Seko in Congo/Zaire are all African examples of how narcissistic, avaricious, and incompetent leaders create extreme situations of lamentable governance, with deleterious consequences. President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe has followed a similar trajectory in misgoverning his once strong nation-state.

We should no longer describe governance differences anecdotally. Traditional culture is important, but that variable is not useful in distinguishing the causes of good governance from bad governance. Governance is rather a bundle of deliverables that citizens expect, crave, or demand. These deliverables actually differ across continents only at the margin, with altered priorities and prefer-

ence weightings. Public-opinion surveys in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Europe show a compelling uniformity in favor of governance as a quality composed of a number of quantities (political goods) that citizens want from their governments. Thus, the specification of what governance is flows from the bottom up, not the top down. Fundamentally, this analysis depends upon a universal articulation of the requests that citizens now make, and for decades and centuries have made, of their rulers.

Eight categories of political goods comprise governance and separate the good performers from the poor performers. None is as important as the supply of security, especially human security. Individuals alone, almost exclusively in unique circumstances, can sometimes arrange their own security. And groups of individuals can band together to purchase goods or services that provide more or less substantial measures of security. Traditionally, and usually, however, individuals and groups cannot effectively substitute privately procured measures of security for the full panoply of publicly provided security.

The security good includes Max Weber's monopoly of violence. If a nation-state does not hold that monopoly it cannot provide full security. Likewise, only a secure state projects power beyond the borders of the nation's capital. If nonstate actors are violent, security exists only minimally for citizens. High levels of crime also demonstrate that a nation-state, no matter how well-off, is performing poorly in terms of human security. Citizens always look to their states for security of person.

Only when reasonable provisions for security exist within a country – especially in a fragile, newly reconstructed nation-state in the developing world – can governments deliver other desirable

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political goods. After security, rule of law is primary. Effective, meaningful modern states provide predictable, recognizable, systematized methods of adjudicating disputes and regulating both the norms and the prevailing mores of a host society. The essentials of this political good are usually embodied in codes and procedures that together comprise an enforceable body of law, security of property and contract, an independent and efficacious judicial system, and a set of norms that represent the values contained in the local version of a legal system. This is a description not of a Western or non-Western form of law, but of a systematic method of arbitrating disputes without resort to violence – a political good universally desired.

A third key political good enables citizens to participate freely, openly, and fully in the political process. This good of political rights encompasses these essential freedoms: the right to compete for office; respect and support for – and the existence of – national and regional political institutions; tolerance of dissent and difference; and fundamental civil liberties and human rights. Freedom of expression and freedom of association are intrinsic to, and embodied in, this political good. This third political good differentiates stable states that deliver few political rights from states that offer more of other goods, such as economic opportunity.

The fourth essential political good is economic opportunity, which provides a platform for the exercise of entrepreneurial initiative and the maximization of an individual's quest for prosperity and higher living standards. Delivering this political good requires supplying high orders of macroeconomic openness and fiscal prudence. Included in this political good is a money and banking system, usually presided over by a central

bank and lubricated by a nationally created currency, and an institutional context conducive to monetary stability.

Among the other basic political goods that states typically supply are health care; schools and educational instruction; the physical arteries of commerce (i.e., roads, railways, harbors, and airports); communications networks; and a framework conducive to the empowerment of civil society. The first two of these political goods are obvious; in the developing world, citizens have traditionally looked to their governments to supply nearly all medical care and most forms of educational opportunity and advancement.

Literacy levels and school persistence rates can demonstrate how well or how poorly a country, compared to its peers, is meeting or exceeding its people's needs in these areas. More generally, putting numbers to all these criteria can tell us whether, within a region or across regions, a country is providing higher or lower levels of political goods than its neighbors. Is Ruritania more or less secure than its neighbors? Does Ruritania have more or less rule of law? Is it politically free? Are its citizens receiving more or less instruction and medical services? Are Ruritania's economic attainments fully reflected in its listed GDP per capita, its GDP growth rates, its governmental deficits, or its inflation rates? Is its civil society empowered? Those are among the key questions; only by answering them as objectively as possible are we able to answer the overall question: is Ruritania better or more poorly governed than its neighbors?

Measuring governmental performance requires measuring outcomes, and not inputs. We must employ proxies that inform us about a government's delivery of political goods, and not about its budgetary provisions. We want to know pri-

marily not what a government's good intentions may have been, but what it actually accomplished with those appropriated funds. If a country is corrupt, those funds may indeed have been siphoned away from service delivery into individual pockets, so the mere fact that a nation-state appropriates or expends more for health or education than its neighbors do may mean little. Results count.

By measuring such outcomes – the delivery of political goods, country by country – we can create a report card on governance, enabling us to establish a ranking system of nation-states. Doing so will encourage poorly performing nation-states to reform and to provide more and better political goods to their citizens. A ranking system will shame some states into striving to do better. It will also embolden and assist the efforts of civil society organizations in such countries, strengthening the reformist hands of parliamentary critics of poorly governed nation-states.

Such a ranking system will bring governance, and the importance of good governance in the affairs of nations, to the front of policy queues. It would, in other words, bring 'governance' out of the closet. Transparency International (TI) did just that for 'corruption' in the 1990s. The new emphasis in the World Bank and the Millennium Challenge Account on governance per se, and on the delivery of political goods and political institutions, should have the same effect for governance.

Most of all, a sophisticated, transparent ranking system would enable us to create a report card on governance to diagnose the conditions of a particular country. Doing so would strengthen the activities of NGOs. If a nation-state were ranked below its neighbors, we could say why. If security or rule of law scores

were weak, and dragging down a country's score, we could diagnose those weaknesses and undertake improvements – to the benefit of citizens. We could establish benchmarks. Countries, particularly those in the developing world, would have incentives to improve their rankings and, thus, their performance on matters of concern to citizens. Nation-states would naturally compete with their peers, leading to competition for better governance, just as the TI report card on perceptions of corruption has led to greater awareness of the dangers of corruption and, conceivably, to reduced levels of corruption in many societies.

This new focus on governance through the optic of performance, the effective delivery of political goods, deserves its own international NGO to perform the necessary objective scoring and ranking, using refined and calibrated criteria. Without the creation of such an annual scorecard showing relative strengthening or weakening of good governance, the governments of the developing world will continue to be unsure diagnostically about how they can best serve their citizens. Jawboning by Washington, London, and Brussels will have less effect, donor conditionalities notwithstanding, than the publishing of an annual record of nation-state governance achievement. Through such a novel mechanism, there is a reasonable chance of improving the manner in which many weak and well-meaning governments deliver critical political goods to their citizens.\*

\* For more detailed discussions of these issues, see Robert I. Rotberg, "Strengthening Governance," *Washington Quarterly* 38 (2004): 71–81; and Robert I. Rotberg and Deborah L. West, *The Good Governance Problem* (Cambridge, Mass: World Peace Foundation, 2004).