

Thesis summary: Political authority and the social contract in Mali and Liberia

This thesis explores how political authority is exercised and maintained in two fragile states in West Africa – Mali and Liberia – and how different repertoires of rule shape state-society relations. It challenges the conventional the tax-based fiscal contract approach, which tends to highlight what fragile states lack when measured against its ideal-type contract rather than unpacking the internal dynamics of how authority works in practice. In cases such as Mali and Liberia, this risks reducing state-society relations to deviations from a model of statehood that does not reflect their historical or political realities. To move beyond these limitations, the thesis adopts an expanded notion of the social contract that incorporates both material and symbolic dimensions of authority and enables a closer examination the repertoires through which political authority is established, exercised, and maintained.

The analytical framework draws on social contract theory and Gramscian insights, viewing political authority through the transactional logic of the social contract – one characterised by varying degrees of coercion and consent, shaped by how state actors mobilise material and symbolic resources through everyday practices of governance. These repertoires include revenue mobilisation, administrative reach, and symbolic practices such as public framing. This approach makes it possible to identify a broader variety of contractual forms of authority than those captured by the fiscal contract lens and to analyse how authority is established, exercised, and maintained in fragile contexts.

The thesis is based on two in-depth qualitative case studies of Mali and Liberia. The cases represent contemporary contrasting trajectories of fragility: Mali has experienced deepening crisis, military coups, and a turn toward authoritarian rule amid ongoing conflict since 2012; while Liberia has moved away from civil war and toward electoral democracy, although political and developmental change remain slow and uneven. The findings draw on several rounds of fieldwork between 2022 and 2024, including interviews and focus groups with state and non-state actors, complemented by public survey data, official documents, and secondary sources.

In Mali, this thesis reveals that the military regime's authority rests less on coercion than on a symbolic, narrative-based 'social bond' with key societal groups. Sovereigntist and anti-colonial narratives serve as central symbolic resources that sustain high popular support despite increasing insecurity and weak service delivery. This enables a process of 'decoupling', co-produced by leaders and societal groups, in which perceptions of the national leadership are separated from the realities of poorly functioning local governance. This dynamic suggests that

Mali's state-society relations form a 'multiverse' of parallel experiences of the state, where national pride in the regime coexists with frustrations over local governance.

In Liberia, this thesis unpacks how a lack of political ownership function in contemporary decentralisation reform. It finds that interactions between government and donors create a 'twisted win-win' dynamic that sustains continuous but largely superficial reform: state officials protect established elite privileges while donors accept incremental, "good enough" progress to satisfy internal institutional incentives. The thesis further reveals how decentralisation reflects a broader pattern of 'roundabout politics', where reforms repeatedly reproduce longstanding inequalities and logics of rule. State-society relations are shaped by a 'permissive social contract' in which the state extracts revenue and maintains administrative presence but refrains from fully asserting authority in exchange for limited demands for accountability.

Overall, this thesis contributes to debates on state formation, fragility, and social contract theory by illustrating how different resources and repertoires produce distinct forms and patterns of political authority in fragile contexts. It advances a broader understanding of the social contract that does treat a single ideal-type as the benchmark to which cases like Mali and Liberia automatically become deviations. Instead, it offers a set of analytical tools for future research suited to unpacking how authority is exercised and maintained in fragile states and how varied sets of practices of governance shape state-society relations, both within and beyond West Africa.