



The New Public Sector Reform Strategy in Ghana: Creating a New Path for a Better Public Service?

Frank L. K. Ohemeng¹ · Augustina Akonnor²

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Abstract

Is administrative reform path dependent or path creation? Some scholars believe that public sector reform is path dependent while others are of the opinion that it is path creation as it is supposed to deviate from an old order to a new one. In this paper, we contribute to this debate by examining a recently developed public sector reform strategy in Ghana, hailed as a new path to address the shortcomings of public organizations. We argue that the strategy is not a new path and may not necessarily bring the kind of changes needed in Ghana.

Keywords Administrative reform · Ghana · Path creation · Path dependency

Introduction

Public sector reforms, defined as a “comprehensive change in... political – administrative orders-arrangements of institutions-rather than to incremental modifications in single institutions” (Olsen, 2017: 9), continue to draw scholarly attention. The vast literature has focused on the impact of the neoliberal reform imperative, such as the new public management and governance, which are more technically driven, than on achieving a good understanding of extant attempts at reforms, and on what can be learned from them (Basheka & Tshombe, 2018; Brinkerhoff & Brinkerhoff, 2015). Hence, “the dominant academic, policy, and practitioner discourses sometimes appear locked in endless loops, repeating variations on the same problem diagnoses and solutions” (Brinkerhoff & Brinkerhoff, 2015). They therefore called for a critical understanding “beyond conventional public sector management approaches

✉ Frank L. K. Ohemeng
frank.ohemeng@concordia.ca

¹ Department of Political Science, Concordia University, 1455 De Maisonneuve Blvd. W., QC H3G 1M8 Montreal, Canada

² Liberal Arts, School of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration, P O BOX AH50, Accra, Ghana

and tools.” But what are the shortcomings of these conventional approaches? In this paper, our objective is to contribute to the search for a theoretical answer to public sector reforms in developing countries by examining a new public sector reform strategy in Ghana.

Since the 1990s Ghana’s attempts to develop an effective democratic developmental state (DDS) – that is, a state that forges broad-based alliances with society, and ensures popular participation in the governance and transformation processes – have met with minimal success (Aye, 2013a) because of bureaucratic weaknesses. A well-functioning public service is critical to creating such a state, as evidenced by Japan, Singapore, South Korea, and Malaysia in Asia, Botswana and Mauritius in Africa, and other emerging markets (Yeung, 2017).

Consequently, since 1993, various governments have initiated and implemented several public sector reforms (PSRs) with a view to producing a developmentally oriented public service (Ohemeng & Anebo, 2012; Ohemeng & Aye, 2016). In early 1994, for example, the National Democratic Congress (NDC) government (1992–2000) implemented a National Institutional Renewal Program, to reform the service (Domfeh, 2004). The New Patriotic Party (NPP) that assumed power in 2001 under John Kufour undertook its own reforms including the development of a charter to enable citizens to measure the performance of these institutions (Ohemeng, 2010). Similarly, the NDC under John Atta Mills developed the ‘New Approach to Public Sector Reform,’ to reform the service (Ohemeng & Aye, 2016). Instituting an effective performance management to oversee and measure the working of the sector was promised. This reform continued under the John Mahama (NDC) administration until the later part of 2015, when it developed the New Public Sector Reforms Strategy (NPSRS) 2017–2027. The aim of the strategy was, again, to reorient public sector agencies to deliver cutting-edge services to citizens, and for the private sector to lead the job creation agenda on a sustainable basis and, also, provide the necessary support to the executive arm of government (Government of Ghana (GoG) (2015)). The reform had become necessary since the performance of the public service continued to be weak or unsatisfactory (World Bank, 2018).

It was against this background that the NPP government that replaced the NDC in 2016 accepted the NPSRS in principle, with the reservation that it be reviewed within the framework of the new private sector-led agenda. The questions that are worth asking are: why has it been so difficult to formulate a public sector reform (PSR) agenda that will restore a public service which at the time of independence was deemed the best in Africa? Is this latest agenda the solution? One needs only to look at how successive governments continue to adhere to the path of reforms undertaken by their predecessors but rather than embark upon a new path in the attempt to change the ethos of the public bureaucracy. These questions merit our attention because it has been well established that PSRs are path dependent, and that their success or failure depends on lessons learned (Groeneveld & Steijn, 2017; Van de Walle & Groeneveld, 2017). Such an approach enables subsequent administrations to build on what has already been established, rather than reinventing the wheel.

The aim of this paper is consequently to examine whether the NPSRS in its present form amounts to path destruction, path creation, or path dependency. We argue

that, unfortunately, the new reform strategy is not a conscious attempt to break the old pattern or path, and that it will not lead to a bureaucracy of the kind that propelled the Asian Tigers into developmental states, and China for economic power (Ang, 2016; Stasavage, 2020). These countries developed new paths to alter their bureaucracies by introducing new strategies such as the merit system, in an otherwise autocratic one. Hence, this new strategy will not enhance the quest to develop a democratic developmental state (Ayee, 2013a, 2013b) in Ghana, because it does not promote the notion of good enough governance and fails to address the issues of overpoliticization, the limited capacity of the service, and current organizational culture (Ayee, 2007; Kumasey et al., 2016).

Rather than yet again follow the route of dependency, reformers need an entirely new one. The current reform strategy does not tackle the fundamental problems, such as bureaucratic insulation from political interference, or address the problems of the principles of merit and the merit system, as well as all sorts of capacity issues that continue to undermine the bureaucracy. Any path that was created can be destroyed, and must be destroyed, to create a new one through what may be described as “creative destruction”, which is the continuous production and process of innovation mechanism by which new institutions replace outdated ones (Schumpeter, 1942). We are not interested in the processes of path creation, or simply, how creative destruction should be undertaken, but rather to assess whether the new agenda has the necessary ingredients to make the bureaucracy efficient and effective, as portrayed by the government.

The paper is organized into five sections. The first reviews the literature on path destruction, path creation, and path dependency. We then discuss the methodology used to obtain information for the paper. The next section will examine the new strategy, and follow with a discussion on whether that strategy will lead to the new path that is so urgently needed in Ghana. The last section then concludes the paper.

Path Destruction

‘Path destruction&’ is not frequently used in the literature, especially when it comes to administrative or PSRs. In many cases, scholars use the idea of ‘creative destruction,’ which is the ‘combinations of existing resources’ (Bekkers & Tummers, 2017), or movement away from an existing institution or institutional arrangement to achieve a desired objective.

In **path destruction** attempts are made to erase traces of the previous path, which will then lead to the creation of a new path. Here, policy actors do not attempt to build on anything from the past, but rather introduce new sets of ideas and instruments to undertake a new venture or overhaul an institution. Thus, the system is not only punctuated; instead, an entirely new system is striven for, without reference to the previous one. Path destruction may be likened to punctuated equilibrium, where an existing system is punctuated with actors seeking new venues to adapt to institutional constraints in a changing environment (Cerna, 2013), and as the means to

radically alter the course of events in a commitment to starting a new path (MacCarthaigh, 2017).

Path destruction can be equated to Peter Hall's (1993) third order change, in which a policy and its instruments are completely transformed. This order signifies a very new process, marked by radical changes in the overarching terms of policy discourse associated with a paradigm shift. It is, therefore, a disjunctive process associated with periodic discontinuities in policy (Hall, 1993: 279). Thus, institutional actors abandon the old institutional structures, and introduce new ones in accord with environmental contingencies. These institutional actors do undertake "creative destruction" (Pfarrer and Smith, 2014), in the sense that such destruction is not about the eradication of the bureaucratic institution, but about altering the structure to make it work better as seen in the Asian Tigers and China, for example (Ang, 2016; Stasavage, 2020).

Path Creation

Path creation (PC) has become an important part of the lexicon in the public policy and management literature (Gaspar, 2011). That importance stems from the idea that new institutions must be created due to societal dynamisms, which make it difficult to follow an established path, as path dependency scholars continue to advocate (Garud & Karnøe, 2001). The idea is thus a challenge to the assumption of path dependency, and offers an alternative for the development and creation of new institutions that then set their own future paths. Scholars of PC emphasize that institutional actors are not constrained by their institutions, but can deviate from the old path to create a new one. In this case, actors who are committed to change maneuver resources and skills to overcome the resistance to pursuing substantial changes over time (Garud & Karnøe, 2001).

In PC "actors mobilize the past not necessarily to repeat or avoid what happened, but, instead, to generate new options" (Garud et al., 2010: 770). Such actors are embedded in the existing structure, and do not have the luxury to "exercise unbounded strategic choice" (Garud & Karnøe, 2001: 2), even though they can change and innovate, not by breaking free from all institutional constraints, but by altering the structures of the institutions themselves (Crouch & Farrell, 2004: 7). Path creation does not understand agencies as being constrained by their past actions, nor is it a rejection of the past. It is constituted by the sociotechnical arrangements that shape temporal dynamics of projects as actors frame issues about the future, coordinate their actions in the present, and make sense of what may have transpired in the past (Garud et al., 2013: 735). Garud et al. (2010) have identified four main characteristics of PC, which are: constructed; emergent and serving as embedded contexts for ongoing action; strategically manipulated by actors; and provisional stabilizations within a broader structural process (765).

Path creation is a highly complex process involving sequences and the accumulation of events over long periods of time. It is about (a) releasing the future potential underlying existing institutions and (b) institutionalizing the released potential. Thus, in PC "entrepreneurs may intentionally deviate from existing artefacts

and relevance structures, fully aware that they may be creating inefficiencies in the present, but also aware that such steps are required to create new futures” (Garud & Karnøe, 2001: 6). When it comes to functional management, PC is concerned with the articulation of new visions and building supportive networks and learning processes through experimenting. Thus, policy experiments and policy innovations could be seen as part of PC efforts (Mäkinen et al., 2015: 488).

Path creation can be distinguished from path dependency on the basis of two ideas: “real-time influence and mindful deviation”, and “the process of mindful deviation” (Gartland, 2005). Mindful deviation is about a situation where “entrepreneurs may intentionally deviate from existing artifacts and relevant structures fully aware that they may be creating inefficiencies in the present, but also aware that such steps are required to create new futures” (Garud & Karnøe, 2001). In addition, PC incorporates the concept of human “agency as a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment)” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).

Simmie (2012) has divided the PC process into five segments: the initial conditions, the PC process, the path establishment process, the main barriers to the path creation, and the landscape outcome of the process. The initial conditions are the existing path dependent trajectories from which the new paths need to deviate. The PC process consists of creating the actual invention or novelty. In the path establishment phase, this invention is turned into an innovation. The barriers to PC can consist of economic, cognitive, institutional, and socio-political factors. Depending on the PC forces and barriers, the landscape change outcome can either be a change or continuation along an existing path.

Path Dependency

Path dependency is one of the critical elements of institutional theory, and it continues to receive significant attention in the literature, especially studies of institutional evolution and change (Thelen, 2003). There is consensus in the literature that path dependency arose with the study by David (1985) and his description of the evolution of letters on the typewriter keyboard. David held that the QWERTY’s dominance could be traced to the agents engaged in production and purchase decisions. He continued that such agents are not “the prisoners of custom, conspiracy, or state control. But while they are, as we now say, perfectly “free to choose,” their behaviour, nevertheless, is held fast in the grip of events long forgotten and shaped by circumstances in which neither they nor their interests figured” (333). The future of every endeavour, according to David, is shaped by historical events, including some long forgotten. Based on this assumption, he wrote that “a *path-dependent* sequence of economic changes is one of which important influences upon the eventual outcome can be exerted by temporally remote events, including happenings dominated by chance elements rather than

systematic forces” (332). History matters if one is to understand change, and if one is to embark upon any successful change in the future. David’s idea has led to the acceptance of this notion, that “history matters,” in the explanation of change, whether it be technological or organizational (Schreyögg et al., 2011).

In path dependence the emphasis is on the influence of institutions on the actors. Thus, path dependence can be considered as equalling institutions that shape actors’ behaviours about and attitudes to future events (Crouch & Farrell, 2004). Djelic and Quack (2007) see it as meaning that “events occurring at an earlier point in time will affect events occurring at a later point in time” (161). To them, “path dependency characterizes historical sequences in which contingent events set institutional patterns with deterministic properties into motion” (161–162).

A number of propositions are inherent in path dependency. First, path dependence events are “locked in by historical events” to particular trajectories (Liebowitz & Margolis, 2014). The idea of lock-in deals with the issue of increasing returns, which is concerned with the outcome of competition among technologies. In lock-in, it is believed that once an event sets off and becomes the dominant force, it becomes the path for subsequent actions. As some scholars have noted, a lock-in does not necessarily mean that the event is superior to other alternatives; rather, it becomes the preferred choice of action. It is based on this notion that the idea of lock-in continues to be criticized by some scholars (Liebowitz & Margolis, 2014).

A second assumption is that of ‘critical juncture’, which is “a period of significant change, which typically occurs in distinct ways in different countries, and which is hypothesized to produce distinct legacies” (Collier & Collier, 1991: 29). A critical juncture is synonymous with a period described as “crisis,” “turning point,” or “unsettled times” (Capoccia, 2016:89). In path dependence, a critical juncture sets in motion trajectories that become difficult, if not impossible, to change.

A third assumption is the self-reinforcing mechanism with positive or negative feedbacks or increasing returns, which is the idea that “initial moves in one direction encourage further movement along the same path” (Thelen, 2003: 101). According to Sydow and Koch (2009), “self-reinforcing dynamics are expected to bring about a preferred action pattern, which then gets deeply embedded in organizational practice and replicated” (694). Thus, self-reinforcement may start from the beginning or the birth of an event, “so that an observer is possibly always path dependent” (Roedenbeck, 2011:34).

The fourth assumption is learning effects. Learning effects refer to increasing efficiency due to process specific experience and skill accumulation. According to Dobusch and Schüßler (2012), learning effects connect the individual and institutional levels through mental models. At the individual level learning is susceptible to path dependence in how new information is ‘selected out,’ or filtered into existing mental maps. At the collective level organizations learn indirectly by observing the successful behaviour of others, and may be encouraged by uncertainty or normative pressures to imitate them. Learning effects “help rational actors anticipate negative consequences in the future and encourage

them to absorb short-term costs and make a change in the present” (Mahoney, 2000: 518).

Methodology

The paper is a qualitative study with the intention to gain an understanding into “regular or problematic experiences and the meaning attached to these experiences of selected individuals” (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007:558), and is part of a larger research on public sector management and reforms in Ghana. Two approaches therefore employed in collecting data: documentary research, which refers to use of “any written material other than a record that was not prepared specifically in response to some requests from the investigator” (Guba & Lincoln, 1981: 228) and elite interview. We examined both the original document developed by the NDC and the current one. In addition, the authors reviewed the President’s State of the Nation Addresses for 2017, 2018, and 2019, other speeches by the president and by the Senior Minister, whose office is responsible for the implementation of the strategy, and newspaper reports by the same, as well as by the Chief Executive Officer of the Public Sector Reform Secretariat.

The second part of the data collection was through elite interview (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002). Here, the focus was on the bureaucratic elites, which is, the “governing class that controls the organisational functioning of the state through a hierarchical structure, procedures, personnel recruitment, and behavioral compliance with the superiority of a legal rational order” (Walsh-Führing, 2018), due to their knowledge of the service and as agents or implementers of reform.

The authors interviewed one member from each of the Public Service Commission (PSC), the Office of the Head of Civil Service (OHCS), and the Office of the Senior Minister. Officials from these institutions are those involved in the reforms. 10 ministries were randomly selected in the hope of interviewing either the chief director or a director. We decided on 10 as a goal so that we might achieve saturation before reaching this number, since we were not asking questions relating to implementation and challenges. Of these, 6 were interviewed. In addition, two of the members of the Committee that reviewed and drafted the framework, as well as a former Chief Director, now an academic at a public university were interviewed. Furthermore, three senior civil servants and another senior academic were informally interviewed at a conference at the Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration. In all, 15 interviews were conducted.

To answer the research question, the authors took the narrative approach as the interview protocol (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). This choice was necessary, since the authors wanted to obtain from interviewees their personal observations, and knowledge about the reform. All the interviews took place at the offices of the interviewees, with each taking approximately an hour.

The New Public Sector Reform Strategy in Perspective

Before we examine the new public sector reform strategy, we will review briefly the historical context of PSRs in Ghana. They are far from new in the Ghanaian socio-political and economic environment; in fact, since Ghana gained independence, PSR has become integral to the country's governance psyche. The desire to leave behind the preoccupations under colonial rule stimulated a new interest in countrywide development as the purpose of the public sector and, under the Nkrumah government, even the creation of new institutions (1957–1966).

The unfortunate result was the enlargement of the sector, with a vast number of such institutions, including state-owned enterprises and civil service organs, that paralleled the traditional civil service. The reorientation to achieving goals simply didn't happen (Ayee, 1991), so much so that by 1966, when the government was overthrown, some of these institutions were not even fit for purpose (Government of Ghana, 1967). It was against this background that the first real post-independence administrative reform in Ghana was undertaken. Almost every government since has tried some reforms, with limited success (Ohemeng & Anebo, 2012; Ohemeng & Ayee, 2016). The NDC government's answer was the NPSRS, which has been adapted by the NPP government.

The NPSRS under the Mahama administration covered a 10-year period. The adaptation by the NPP government took five years. The *raison d'être* given for the reform was that.

Ghana's public sector is faced with a multiplicity of structural, institutional and fiduciary challenges which hinder the efficient and effective delivery of public goods and services. Successive Governments have, therefore, undertaken several initiatives towards the reform of Ghana's Public Sector. The reform initiatives were, however, unable to achieve the desired transformation and improvement in the performance of the public sector (GoG, 2015: 2).

The failed transformation was attributed to myriad problems that the NPSRS was intended to correct (GoG, 2015).

As already noted, the current NPP government accepted these reasons in principle, but went further, claiming that the public sector's performance has deteriorated even further in recent years. It noted that previous attempts at PSRs have yielded only modest results due to weak institutional and human capacity, inadequate resources, lack of accountability, and poor co-ordination. To the government, although the public sector employs many people, citizens continue to complain about insufficient or slow service delivery, even as compensation for public employees eats up much of the government's expenditure. It further noted that the sector is perceived as corrupt, while public servants' poor attitude continues to be the bane of service delivery. Human and institutional capacity at the sectoral level is limited, and service delivery standards are not aligned with emerging global best practices. The result of all these problems is the loss of trust and confidence in the public sector (GoG, 2017: 14).

If the National Co-ordinated Program for Economic and Social Development Policies (2017–2024) are to be realized, then, an enabling environment is crucial. The document sets out six strategy priorities or pillars: a citizens-and private sector-focused public sector; a strengthened public sector regulatory framework; a capable and disciplined work force; modernized and improved work conditions; strengthened local governance structures; and digitized public sector services and systems. These pillars are elaborated on in chapter three of the document (GoG, 2017).

An important aspect of any PSR is implementation. A number of previous reforms, illustrative of problems the present document identifies with suggested recommendations, could not be implemented for one reason or another. Key issues are lack of coordination and of continuity of reform initiatives. Chapter four of the document describes plans to solve them.

The NPSRS in Perspective: Path Destruction, Path Creation, or Path Dependency?

In this section we examine the agenda to see if it is about path destruction, path creation, or path dependency. We do so through the eyes of overpoliticization, insulating the bureaucracy, promoting a genuine merit system: three factors fundamental to a successful bureaucracy in any democratic developmental state, and themes emphasized by our interviewees, and identified by them as reasons the reform “will not change anything.” As already noted, these were the three main principles of the Asian developmental states, the ones that enabled them to emerge from their impoverished condition and become the envy of the world.

As our review of the literature shows, path departure may lead to the deviation, if not destruction of an existing path. This can lead to the development of a critical juncture, which will then lead to the creation or development of a new path, in what we have described as path creation. On the other hand, path dependency shows following the same route, and if necessary, with only a tweak of the existing path. Thus, based on the rhetoric of the government, we expect not a path tweaking, but a completely new path through path destruction in the attempt to review the bureaucracy.

A careful examination of the agenda, however, shows that it is neither path destruction nor path creation, and therefore won't service as the critical juncture to disturb the existing path, which obviously need a change. Thus, the strategy reshapes, as well as follow the same previous path of reforms, although the reform focuses on a selected number of areas designed to focus on responsiveness; quality; and adaptability (World Bank, 2018). In other words, this is a sectoral approach. Yet, this sectoral approach is not different from what was undertaken during the Atta-Mills regime (2009–2013) (Ohemeng & Ayee, 2016). As an interviewee noted, “it is, rather, just a rehash of the old ways”, meaning that despite all the promises and rhetoric of the government, it is, again, a path dependent way of doing things. We have already explained that path destruction is like Peter Hall's third order change, in which both the policy and the instruments are new. In this case we expected the agenda to move beyond the traditional identification of previous problems, and

to look at the core issues affecting the public sector. Moreover, we expected the agenda to include new instruments to change both the structures and functions of the bureaucracy.

It is our view that the new reform initiative is similar to previous reforms, and fails to recognize the need to ‘bureaucratize enough’ the public service (Czarniawaska, 2007). In other words, the foundation of the bureaucracy is very shaky, if not extremely weak, and this new reform strategy does not address that. For any reform to succeed, the country needs to go back to the basics: in this case, to the kind of bureaucratic enterprise set up immediately after independence. The notion of “re-bureaucratizing enough” does not mean returning to the rigidity of the old bureaucracy, a system that was developed in the eighteenth century, and which cannot solve twenty-first century problems. As noted by Czarniawaska (2007), “the previously existing centralistic bureaucracy has been replaced by a newly created centralistic bureaucracy, which operates almost identically, but under the banner of capitalism” (140). This new form of bureaucracy has been described as neo-Weberian, as it combines elements of Weber’s ideal bureaucracy type and “neo” elements (Byrkjeflot et al., 2018; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017).

While the new strategy identifies a capable and disciplined public service as indispensable, it does not, unfortunately, mention how this can be achieved. The Akans of Ghana have a saying that “*if Saturday’s market will be productive, you start seeing signs on Friday evening*”. That is to say, “*coming events cast their shadows before*”. Some interviewees said that the government’s actions in relation to the public service do not speak for any effective attempts at really altering the nature of bureaucracy. They identified the element of overpoliticization as persistent, with, for example, numerous special assistants in various ministries undertaking work that is supposed to be performed by bureaucrats. These special assistants have now become gatekeepers between ministers and bureaucrats. The use of special assistants is not necessarily new (Gyimah-Boadi, 2005), but it became exaggerated under the Kufour regime (2001–2009). Some ministers appoint their own “special assistants” to perform functions rightly discharged by career bureaucrats. There is thus continuity, in terms of policy or path dependence, with what was established under the previous regime of the NPP.

Second, and related to the above point, is that the reform ignores the relationship between politicians and the bureaucracy. One way to address this issue is through ‘bureaucratic insulation,’ which will lead to the creation of an embedded, autonomous bureaucracy that will allow bureaucrats to work effectively (Evans, 1992). Indeed, as discussed by some scholars, good [enough] governance requires good bureaucracy, where civil servants do the day-to-day work, delivering the public goods that government can best provide. Unfortunately, as argued by Huber and Ting (2016), in democracies [*as in the case of Ghana*] politicians are more worried about re-election and the policy consequences of losing. Hence, they lack the incentives to create a good bureaucracy. These politicians, especially incumbents, prefer using patronage-based systems that encourage bureaucrats to work on behalf of electoral and other political goals. Such activities undermine professionalism, and make it more difficult to achieve good governance (Huber & Ting, 2016). How can

this problem be overcome? The answer is in the implementation of the elements associated with neo-Weberian bureaucracy.

Scholars who believe in neo-Weberian bureaucracy accept what Mueller (2015) has described as bureaucratic insulation as a prerequisite if the bureaucracy is to play any meaningful role in national development. Bureaucratic insulation is synonymous with bureaucratic autonomy (Evans, 1992). Schneider (1993) has defined bureaucratic insulation as “the opportunity for (bureaucratic) officials to pursue preferences and formulate policies independently” (331). A caveat, though, is that politicians are supposed to set broad policy objectives for national development. The bureaucracy, with its experts, then adds what may be described as the fine print. In this case, complete bureaucratic autonomy cannot be achieved; neither would such a bureaucracy be healthy for democratic governance. Nevertheless, giving the bureaucracy enough room to do its job is extremely desirable (Evans, 1992). In doing so, bureaucracies are able to present various alternatives to politicians – who, because of their fiduciary powers, are accountable to the electorate. Evans (1995) says that an ‘insulated bureaucracy’ has an embedded, rather than a predatory, autonomy. He explained that a bureaucracy with an embedded autonomy is one that ‘combines Weberian bureaucratic insulation with intense connection to the surrounding social structure,’ and maintains that it is ‘the key to the developmental state’s effectiveness.’ This is what took place in South Korea under the Park regime, and what enabled that country to transition out of impoverishment into a well-developed state (Kim, 2011).

It must be noted that Ghana and South Korea achieved independence at almost the same time; indeed, South Korea was then the far less developed of the two countries (Haruna, 2003). While the South Koreans built a strong bureaucracy with some level of embedded autonomy, and focused on the issue of merit to professionalize it, Ghana went in the opposite direction, with the political elites co-opting the bureaucracy, something that continues to this day. In fact, the politicization of the bureaucracy in Ghana went against what the colonial authorities had established and left for Ghanaians at independence.

Various reforms, especially those initiated since the adoption of the SAP in the earlier 1980s, have consistently failed to rebuild the bureaucracy in terms of its “embedded autonomy,” as interviewees explained. This failure has manifested itself in the appointments and dismissals of chief directors, who serve as the link between ministers and the bureaucracy. The politicization began with the recommendations by the Kaku Kyiamah Committee in 1982, which was set up by the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) government to advise it on how to restructure the bureaucracy (Aye, 1993).

In its final report the Committee called for the civil service to restrict itself to: (a) formulating policies; (b) serving as the administrative support units for political heads; (c) coordinating and monitoring programs and activities within the ministerial sector; and (d) conducting inter-ministerial relationships. It further called for the ‘politicisation of the position of the principal secretary—currently, *Chief Director*,’ because it believed that some of the principal secretaries had the habit of “resisting or blocking the flow of professional advice direct to the political head” (Woode, 1984:46). In making this recommendation, the committee unfortunately “did not

show any rigorous intellectual appreciation of the subject in all its ramifications. It failed to provide concrete evidence that principal secretaries ‘resist and block the flow’ of advice to the political head” (Woode, 1984:46).

The path determined by the implementation of the recommendations has been followed by all other reforms. Unfortunately, as our interviewees lamented, it should have been (but apparently was not) obvious that this politicization has become intrinsic to the performance of the civil service, for example. And still, in spite of this, the new reform does not even begin to address this obstacle. The path of the early 1980s continues to be trod, and will continue to be, sapping the bureaucracy’s performance on a huge scale. It needs to be broken, once and for all, say many interviewees, and a new path established not only for appointments of the most senior bureaucrats, but for how bureaucrats are recruited in general.

One way that would lead to the creation of a new path, is taking this new agenda as a critical juncture and an opportunity for such changes. Regrettably, the good will that the NPP government enjoyed when it assumed power, and that should have enabled them to take the bull by the horns, and lance this systemic bureaucratic boil, has seeped away. In short, the new reform strategy, which should be the turning point, instead perpetuates the enfeebled and enfeebling old system, to the detriment of national development. We therefore need the new strategy, or any reform, to first address this issue.

Third, a critical element in building an efficient and effective bureaucracy is energetic promotion of the merit system, especially in recruitment. The merit system centres on a “pivotal idea” that a civil [*public*] service would use “open, fair, honest, impartial, competitive examination” to find the people “best fitted to discharge the duties of the position” (Johnson and Lewis, 2020: 1). Studies have shown the importance of such a system for a country’s development (Wydle, 2017).

Ghana has had a merit-based system in public service recruitment since colonization, although the colonial bureaucracy was for dominating the people, not for serving them. Second, the early phase of the development of an effective public service until the post-World War Two was dominated by the British at the upper echelons of the bureaucracy (Adu, 1969). In the early 1920s the colonial government decided to pursue Africanization, meant to encourage qualified indigenous people to join the bureaucracy. That policy reached its zenith in the 1940s with the creation of a PSC and the introduction of competitive examination in the recruitment and promotion of indigenous public servants. The idea of a merit-based system was thus firmly instituted in Ghana prior to independence in 1957.

Although the idea of merit-based recruitment has continued, post-independence politicization also continues to result in the over politicization of the bureaucracy, nullifying the meritocratic system. The most prominent way of entering the bureaucracy is the “who you know” system: a damaging patronage system, and “jobs for the boys,” especially at entry level. Competence has been sacrificed for perceived loyalty. It is widely acknowledged that political influences tend to affect the selection of civil servants, leading to the latter dancing to the tune of the former. Public servants do not always appear neutral because they fear to incur the wrath of their political bosses. At the same time, we see a significant number of them engaging in

partisan activities, which goes against the tenets of bureaucratic neutrality (Ayee, 2013b).

Any serious reform must first address this deficiency in the system, as identified by our interviewees. Without recruiting the best and the brightest in the system, public service neutrality will suffer, which will in turn affect the performance of the government. Furthermore, any change in government will result in the termination of appointments perceived as political, as is the case under the current administration. Such a system deprives the bureaucracy of vital expertise and experience. Thus, “the concentration of expertise in the bureaucracy through meritocratic recruitment and the provision of opportunities for long-term career rewards [is] central to the bureaucracy’s effectiveness” (Evans, 1992: 567).

In spite of this, none of the six pillars addresses the notion of changing the system from one of patronage appointments to one that is rigorously merit-based. The path set years ago is still adhered to. The system, as it stands, benefits the government in power to the detriment of the society; it gives important jobs to “veranda boys” (Bob-Milliar, 2014), at the expense of highly educated and qualified individuals.

Conclusion

A new reform agenda has been developed by the current NPP government to attempt to change the outlook of the public service in Ghana. It reviews the public service reform agenda developed by the previous NDC government, and modifies it to suit the political and economic thinking of the current one. A key aspect is the six pillars that the government believes will enable it to achieve reform. The purpose of this present paper was to examine not the implementation but the overall objectives of the reforms, and to ascertain whether the agenda will disturb, if not destroy, the status quo of the public service, and lead to a truly new way of doing things through path creation. At the same time, we wanted to understand whether the reform is really “old wine in a new bottle,” and cleaves to the path that has existed since the early 1980s.

To satisfy our curiosity we examined three areas that we believe any reform agenda should, as a matter of urgency, address. These areas have been identified in the extant literature as comprising the ultimate solution to bureaucratic inertia in developing countries (Evans, 1992). They are the areas that previously penurious Asian countries addressed as they attempted to build their developmental states. Our review of the agenda and our interviews, however, show that in Ghana none of these three areas is being tackled sufficiently to turn around the performance of the bureaucracy. In most cases, the reform agenda can be seen as “putting the cart before the horse” in the sense that the failure to build a bureaucracy that deals with what we have discussed will not yield any meaningful results, especially in enhancing bureaucratic performance and good enough governance in Ghana. The government’s reform attempt, then, can be best described as a half-hearted approach to building Ghana’s bureaucracy. The present system benefits the existing government; as a result, the urge to destroy or disturb the system is not seen as a better alternative route for bureaucratic reforms. If Ghana wants to become like the Asian Tigers,

and be less dependent on international aid, as professed in the government's "Ghana beyond aid agenda", then a strong, efficient, and effective bureaucracy is a *sine qua non*.

Nevertheless, we do not see how this can be achieved with this reform agenda, since it does not address the patronage system, attempts to insulate the bureaucracy, and provides nothing in relation to merit recruitment. Administrative reforms, as noted by Ankomah (1970), "implies more than clichés. It connotes a detailed examination of the system, an identification of the problem, how sporadic is its occurrence, the incubation period and period of duration of the malaise in the service, the degree of communicability, the degree of susceptibility and resistance to treatment and, of course, the method of control, without neglect of the side effects of each prescription" (303). Until these things are done, reform will remain a mirage, and the Holy Grail that it represents will remain no more than a legend. The new reform agenda is new only in name, as it perpetuates the path established by previous non-reforms; it is not a path creating one, which is what is needed.

How then can a meaningful reform be undertaken to change the current bureaucratic ethos? We believe that the best way to revamp the public bureaucracy is to embark upon a "creative destruction" process, where serious endeavour to disturb the existing institutional configuration can be undertaken. In short, public sector reforms, rather than following the path of previous reform initiatives should undertake a path creation process through 'creative destruction', which will lead to the destruction of outdated processes, and which the new reform strategy is not pursuing. What then needs to be done to change the public bureaucracy into an effective institution? How can a new path for changing the Ghanaian bureaucracy be done through creative destruction? What lessons can Ghana learn from the Asian Tigers, as well as China in rebuilding their bureaucracies? These are some of the questions that future research should endeavour to answer.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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Frank L. K. Ohemeng is an Adjunct Professor at the Department of Political Science, Concordia University. He obtained his PhD in Comparative Public Policy and Administration from McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario. His main research interests are in areas of comparative public policy, public management, comparative public administration, human resources management, and development administration and management.

Augustina Akonnor (formerly Adusah-Karikari), PhD, is currently a Senior Lecturer and the Head of Liberal Arts Department, School of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences at the Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration (GIMPA). She is a 2018 Africa Oxford Fellow at the Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford, UK. She was also a Newton International Fellow at the University of Birmingham, UK from 2013 till January 2015.