

Soldiers, Shovels, and the State: Militaries and State-Building in Post-Colonial Senegal

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Armies often take on domestic roles that extend far beyond the parameters of security provision. These can include economic ventures, carrying out service delivery, natural resource management and a variety of civic action and economic development schemes. This project draws attention specifically to military use of economic development and seeks to understand how these missions—which often portray the army as benign protectors of the nation—influence public opinion. What impact does military involvement in economic development have on public opinion towards security forces, the use of force, and military influence in politics? I will address this question through a survey with embedded experiments in Senegal, with a representative sample of 1,500 adults. The survey builds on an in-depth case study of how the Senegalese Armed Forces have employed economic development schemes to ensure funding within constrained national budgets, to socialize and integrate a regionally and ethnically diverse institution, to build state capacity, and to stake military and state claims over natural resources in peripheral areas. These goals are not unique to Senegal, as similar dynamics have been seen in Mexico, Madagascar, and the United States, among many other countries.

In this project, I hypothesize that citizens respond to military involvement in economic development schemes by improving their views of both the regime and of security forces (including military and police). However, citizens who have been exposed to military-led projects will also be more likely to tolerate military involvement in domestic politics. I will also examine how these policies effect public opinion in different communities, including regions where there has been conflict, and among ethnic or linguistic minorities. The findings will likely suggest that when militaries are deployed on seemingly benign missions and are portrayed as paternalistic guardians of the nation, they are then positioned to manipulate public opinion towards both the regime and the security forces. These findings have ramifications for civilian oversight of the military. If these programs make some citizens more tolerant of military incursion into domestic politics, then even routine economic development schemes can serve to weaken civilian oversight, not only by allowing the military to take on new ventures, but also by limiting public willingness to push back on military incursion in domestic politics.