Varieties of Patronage: Second-Order Colonial Legacies and Public Expenditure in Independent Morocco

Benjamin Kaplow, PhD

March 15, 2026

bkaplow@umich.edu
707.799.3027

Department of Sociology
University of Michigan–Ann Arbor
Room 3115 LSA Building
500 S. State Street
Ann Arbor, MI 48109

Abstract: Extant political economy research in colonial 'legacies' prioritizes tracing the direct effects of imperial rule, attending little to mediating factors during decolonization and in early postcolonial states. In this paper, I examine what I term 'second-order' effects: outcomes derived from colonial institutions that are fundamentally mediated or transformed by decolonial and postcolonial social processes. Through an examination of postcolonial Morocco, I demonstrate that the pattern of public expenditures was a second-order effect of colonial rule. Expansions in education, healthcare, and infrastructure transformed rural communities and economies, but did so unevenly across the country. Where some rural districts saw investment in heavy infrastructure, others gained clinics, schools, or nothing at all. I argue that variations in colonial institutions led the postcolonial monarchy to utilize different styles of patronage to gain rural support, focusing on elites in areas of significant land consolidation and irrigation infrastructure, and local communities in areas with limited land consolidation and hydraulic systems. Using original longitudinal geospatial data, I use a difference-in-difference model to determine if previous landholding consolidation and infrastructure led to increased investment in irrigation systems in those localities and neighboring areas, including analysis of spillover effects from irrigation system expansion and controls for agricultural and irrigation suitability. Using the same difference-in-difference strategy, I test if the absence of significant agricultural settlement increased investment in community-oriented public goods, comparing school construction, placement of health clinics, electrification, and the expansion of government services. In evaluating how and why local communities received different kinds of public investment, this paper contributes to our understanding of rural inequality, patronage politics, and the institutional foundations of socioeconomic development in Morocco.

The study of how imperial and colonial projects shape the political trajectory of independent states has long been of interest to political and comparative-historical sociologists, and is a perennial topic in the burgeoning field of historical political economy. Focusing largely on the lives and afterlives of colonial institutions, extant research prioritizes tracing the direct effects of imperial rule, attending little to mediating factors during decolonization and in early postcolonial states. In this paper, I examine what I term 'second-order' effects: outcomes derived from colonial institutions that are substantively mediated or transformed by decolonial and postcolonial social processes.

Through an examination of postcolonial Morocco, I demonstrate that the pattern of public expenditures was a second order effect of colonial rule. I ask *why did rural localities in postcolonial Morocco receive varied public investment, both in magnitude and kind*? Rural localities in Morocco experienced significant transformations in the decades following the end of French rule in 1956. Kings Mohammed V and his son Hassan II cemented monarchical rule through a combination of public goods and repression, successfully cultivating support in rural communities. Expansions in education, healthcare, and infrastructure transformed rural communities and economies, but did so unevenly across the country. Where some rural districts saw investment in heavy infrastructure, others gained clinics, schools, or nothing at all. How can we explain such variation? I find that this variation is a 'second-order' colonial legacy. Whereas French institutions generated a set of *potential* outcomes, only Moroccan political processes selected and determined which ones occurred.

Following Moroccan independence, the Moroccan monarchy employed patronage strategies in order to secure support, largely from rural communities. With limited resources, the *Makhzen*[1] relied on targeted measures to cultivate support due to both the limited quantity of valuable natural resources–land and water–and preexisting public and economic infrastructure. In simplified terms, the *Makhzen* could choose between measures intended to benefit

[1]The monarchical institution, including both the royal family and administrators.

elites or those to serve the broad populace.

French rural settlement and its agricultural infrastructure was spatially uneven. Its regions of citrus-rich consolidated landholding serviced by state-of-the-art industrial irrigation systems lay next to otherwise comparable localities, encompassing small plots of dry-cultivated wheat and barley. Through a series of land reforms in the first seventeen years of Moroccan autonomy, valuable French-held lands became the property of Moroccan elites, often with the sometimes hidden and often bare assistance of the *Makhzen.* In these areas, local elites held sway and economic power, owning rich, profitable plantations of export crops and often providing rare opportunities for rural employment in a rapidly urbanizing economy. In such cases, I argue, the state's patronage efforts were targeted toward elite interests. Rural elites often combined economic power–both local through employment and national through providing export crops–with positions of authority in local politics and even tribal communities. Serving their interests with irrigation, crop conditioning centers, and transportation infrastructure incentivized rural notables to support the monarchist cause.

In areas with limited French settlement, there was often less infrastructure, less consolidation of land and water rights, and local communities with relatively more equal economic opportunities. While irrigation and infrastructure would certainly be valuable, they were often among the most expensive forms of public investment and were situated amongst a number of other desired improvements in rural areas. In areas under- or unserved by health care, clinics, pharmacies, and schools were extremely desirable to provide a means for advancement in communities with high rates of illiteracy. Electrification, wells, police stations, and post offices all provided meaningful benefits to communities looking for clean water, modern technological conveniences in the home, security, and communication with their family in the country's urban centers or working abroad in France. I hypothesize that in these milieus, the monarchy was more likely to invest in broadly applicable and cheaper public institutions of these kinds.

Drawing from historical analysis and this model of targeted patronage, I derive three primary hypotheses:

1. Increased French settlement increased postcolonial investment in elite-serving infrastructure in local communities.

2. Decreased French settlement increased postcolonial investment in community-serving infrastructure in local communities.

3. Increases and decreases in elite-serving investment are *inversely* correlated with community-serving investments.

Where the impact of French settlement led to the possibility of these differences in public expenditure, I argue there was no necessary link between colonial institutions and what transpired. Monarchical strategy, calculation, and policy created a 'second-order' legacy, mediating, shaping, and determining what its legacy would be.

To evaluate these hypotheses, I analyze original geospatial datasets constructed from archival materials. The datasets records the density of colonial settlement, land consolidation, and agricultural infrastructure to establish a proxy for the presence of desirable assets for postcolonial elites. Using longitudinal geospatial data on the construction and expansion of irrigation infrastructure, I use a difference-in-difference model to determine if previous landholding consolidation and infrastructure led to increased investment in irrigation systems in those localities and neighboring areas, including analysis of spillover effects from irrigation system expansion and controls for agricultural and irrigation suitability. Using the same difference-in-difference strategy, I test if the absence of significant agricultural settlement increased investment in community-oriented public goods, comparing school construction, placement of health clinics, electrification, and the expansion of government services.

In evaluating how and why local communities received different kinds of public investment, this paper contributes to our understanding of rural inequality, patronage politics, and the institutional founded of varying socioeconomic development in Morocco. Theoretically, I provide evidence for the importance of attending to second-order legacies of colonial rule and increased attention to the capacity of postcolonial state leaders to shape political and economic trajectories, even–or particularly–in contexts with significant impacts from colonial rule.