

## GOVERNING LAGOS: UNLOCKING THE POLITICS OF REFORM

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In fifteen years, Lagos has gone from being a symbol of urban disorder to a widely cited example of effective African governance. The Lagos State government has succeeded in multiplying its tax revenues and using these resources to restore basic infrastructure and expand public services and law enforcement. Extensive field research indicates that reform commitment in Lagos was driven by electoral pressures as well as elite ambitions to construct an orderly and prosperous megacity.

### Findings

- Some reform initiatives, such as overhauls of the tax and waste collection systems, served both political and megacity goals. In these cases, steady progress was achieved through a combination of increased bureaucratic resources, managerial reforms, public outreach, and cooperation with organized social groups.
- Other reform efforts, such as those aimed at regulating buses and containing extortion by youth gangs—known in Lagos as “area boys”—entailed more difficult political challenges. They sought to advance public service and megacity goals but threatened crucial political constituencies. In these cases, governance progress was more partial and relied on creative compromises between state officials and affected social actors.

### Findings

**Political competition can create strong reform incentives while simultaneously complicating long-term institutional change.** Nigeria’s return to elected civilian rule in 1999 was a critical driver of reform in Lagos. But intense competition also forced leaders to focus on short-term political solutions. The Lagos government’s most significant institutional advances came during periods of relative political stability and continuity.

**Technocratic ambitions can and often must be balanced with patronage demands.** Governance transformation in Lagos was driven by a technocratic vision of a modern megacity but relied on creative policy proposals that also served multiple political interests.

**Increased resources and management changes can substantially improve bureaucratic performance.** Lagos leaders built effective implementing agencies in key sectors through the creation of special technocratic enclaves as well as managerial strategies aimed at rewarding good performance and promoting a sense of professional mission.

**Good government performance can increase public trust of and buy-in for reforms.** In the tax sector, for instance, the Lagos government successfully promoted the idea of a social contract between taxpaying citizens and a state providing infrastructure and services.

**Well-organized social actors can be both veto players and critical reform allies.** Lagos politicians have strong political relationships with informal-sector associations. These ties have greatly enabled some reform efforts, such as extending taxation to informal workers, but have complicated other initiatives, including bus regulation.

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