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Building Institutions That Survive

*A Political Architecture Approach to Governance Reform
in Canada and West Africa*

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Key Concepts

Political Architecture	The structural arrangement of authority, legitimacy, and institutional sediment in a given governance context - the conditions any reform must engage with, not design around.
Institutional Sediment	The accumulated residue of past institutional choices - formal rules, informal practices, and historical legacies - that constrains the design space available to reformers.
Authority Distribution	The formal and informal allocation of decision-making power across actors, levels, and institutions - including contested and overlapping jurisdictions.
Competing Legitimacies	The coexistence of multiple, sometimes conflicting, grounds for governance authority - statutory, customary, electoral, and historical - each drawing on different sources of public acceptance.
Institutional Form vs. Function	The distinction between an institution's formal properties (its mandate, structure,

	and legal standing) and its operational function (what it actually produces in practice). The design-function gap - not failure per se - is the paper's central object of analysis.
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Abstract

Across Canada and West Africa, governance reform programmes informed by credible expertise and genuine political commitment have repeatedly produced institutions that are coherent in design but fragile in sustained operation. This paper argues that this pattern has a structural explanation: reform processes that engage with institutional form while bypassing the political architecture within which institutions must operate. Political Architecture refers to the structural arrangement of authority distribution, competing legitimacies, and accumulated institutional or historical sediment that determines what any given design can realistically achieve - and what it will encounter when deployed.

We are not making a general underperformance claim. The cases examined here - Canadian intergovernmental emergency management and Ghana's hybrid formal-traditional governance structures - include genuine institutional achievements. Canada's federal system has demonstrated real adaptive capacity across decades. Ghana's democratic consolidation since 1992 is among the most significant governance achievements in West Africa. Our argument is precise: even in these contexts of genuine institutional capacity, specific reform domains persistently exhibit a gap between institutional design and operational function that is attributable not to failures of will or implementation but to a structural mismatch between reform design and political architecture.

We introduce Political Architecture as both an analytical framework and a practical diagnostic tool, built on three pillars - authority mapping, legitimacy auditing, and sediment analysis - and argue that durable institutions cannot be designed without first understanding the political architecture they are entering.

Keywords: *political architecture, institutional design, historical institutionalism, governance reform, design-function gap, Canadian federalism, postcolonial institutions, West Africa, state capacity, legitimacy, institutional layering*

I. Introduction: The Governance Reform Paradox

The paradox at the centre of this paper is well documented but insufficiently theorised: across widely different contexts, governance institutions are often designed by credible experts, funded by committed governments and development partners, and launched with genuine political support governance institutions designed by credible experts, financed by committed governments and development partners serious governments and donors, and launched with genuine political commitment have repeatedly produced institutions that function on paper

and fail in sustained practice. In Canada, federal-provincial coordination mechanisms designed to manage overlapping jurisdictions produce structurally predictable breakdowns decade after decade in specific, identifiable domains. In West Africa, governance reform programmes informed by international best practice generate well-formatted institutional blueprints that dissolve within one or two electoral cycles.

Political Architecture is the terrain; Political Architecture Assessment is the survey; the Political Architecture Brief is the map that tells reform designers what the terrain can carry.

A. A Note on the Central Claim

The claim requires precise formulation, because two legitimate objections must be addressed before it is developed.

The first is the inappropriate benchmark objection: governance reform ambitions are frequently set above what designers actually expect to achieve, for entirely rational political reasons. Ambitious language secures coalition support, satisfies donor reporting requirements, and signals commitment to constituencies who need reassurance. If the stated targets were understood by all parties as aspirational rather than operational, measuring outcomes against them is not a meaningful test of reform efficacy. This objection has genuine force against the cruder versions of the governance failure literature. It does not defeat our claim. It does not apply to our claim, which is not about outcomes relative to stated targets but about the gap between institutional form and institutional function: the failure of institutions to do, in sustained practice, the governance work they were designed to do, irrespective of whether that work was articulated in ambitious or modest terms.

The second is the counterfactual objection: without knowing what governance outcomes would have obtained absent the reform, any assessment of underperformance is methodologically incomplete. An institution that achieved forty percent of its design intent in a deteriorating environment may represent significant genuine progress. This objection is also legitimate, and we concede it for the class of cases it describes. It does not, however, neutralise the structural argument. Our claim is not that governance reforms have made things worse, or that governance reform is futile. It is that a specific class of institutional failures - in which institutions are formally constituted and operationally hollow - is structurally explicable, and that the structural explanation points toward a prior analytical discipline that existing reform approaches do not supply.

Both objections, properly considered, sharpen rather than undermine the paper's contribution: they direct attention toward the form-function distinction, which is the paper's actual object of analysis.

B. The Central Argument

We introduce Political Architecture as both an analytical framework and a diagnostic tool. Political Architecture holds that the form-function gap in governance reform is systematically produced by reform processes that engage with institutional design while bypassing three structural realities:

- The distribution and contestation of authority across formal and informal actors - which determines whether designed institutions can make binding decisions stick;
- The coexistence of competing sources of legitimacy - which determines whether institutions will be accepted, used, and sustained by the publics they govern;
- The accumulated weight of historical or institutional sediment - prior rules, practices, and historical decisions - which defines and constrains the design space and shapes how new institutions will actually behave.

Reform that works with the grain of these structural realities is more likely to produce institutions that endure. Reform that designs around them produces institutions with formal validity and operational fragility - the governance reform paradox in structural form.

C. A Note on Cases and Genuine Achievements

The two cases examined in this paper - Canadian intergovernmental governance and Ghanaian governance - were selected because they present Political Architecture's challenges in analytically distinct forms. They were not selected because they represent governance failure. Both exhibit genuine institutional achievements that any serious account must acknowledge.

Canada's federal system has demonstrated significant adaptive capacity across its history. The architecture of intergovernmental fiscal relations - the Canada Health Transfer, equalization, and associated transfer mechanisms - has maintained a functioning national social architecture across decades of political change. The Social Union Framework Agreement represented a genuine innovation in intergovernmental coordination. These are real institutional achievements, and the Political Architecture framework is not offered as a critique of Canadian federalism in the round.

Ghana's democratic consolidation since 1992 - multiple peaceful transfers of power, a functioning Electoral Commission, a reasonably independent judiciary, and consistent civil society engagement - is among the most significant governance achievements in West Africa and in the postcolonial world more broadly. It is not an afterthought to Ghana's governance story; it is a central feature of it. Our argument is not about democratic consolidation.

Our argument is about a more specific class of institutional challenge: the persistent gap, in both contexts, between what formal governance institutions are designed to do and what they sustainably produce in practice, in specific and identifiable reform domains. The coexistence of genuine success and structural design-function gaps in the same governance environment is precisely what requires explanation, and what the Political Architecture framework provides.

D. Scope, Method, and Structure

This paper develops the Political Architecture framework through comparative case analysis. Canada represents a mature federal democracy whose sophisticated institutional architecture nonetheless produces recurrent, structurally predictable coordination failures in specific domains - most clearly in emergency management, First Nations governance reform, and executive-legislative relations. Ghana represents a postcolonial hybrid state where formal institutional design coexists with deeply embedded traditional authority structures that compete with statutory governance for popular legitimacy and operational reach - most clearly in local governance, land administration, and decentralisation.

The differences between these cases illuminate the framework's general applicability. Both cases are selected as instances of a phenomenon - the form-function gap - not as a representative sample of all governance contexts. Section II reviews and critiques dominant frameworks for understanding governance failure. Section III develops the Political Architecture framework. Sections IV and V present the Canadian and West African cases. Section VI draws comparative conclusions. Section VII proposes the practical diagnostic instrument. Section VIII concludes.

II. The Problem: Why Governance Reform Fails

This section reviews the dominant explanatory frameworks for governance failure - technical-design models, capacity-deficit approaches, and historical institutionalism - and identifies their shared blind spots. The goal is to establish what the Political Architecture framework adds to existing analysis.

A. The Technical-Design Fallacy

The dominant tradition in governance reform frames institutional failure as a design or implementation problem. On this view, the gap between governance intent and governance outcome follows from poorly structured mandates, inadequate legal frameworks, or insufficient implementation capacity. The remedy is better design. This tradition has produced powerful tools - New Public Management, Results-Based Management, Whole-of-Government approaches - that generate real improvements in bounded administrative contexts.

But as Grindle (2004) argued in her foundational critique, 'best practice' governance templates consistently produce this form-function gap in politically complex environments because they assume a baseline of institutional stability and political alignment that does not exist in most contexts where they are deployed. The technical turn in governance reform has produced better-designed institutions that still fail to function as designed - because it lacks a theory of how political architecture shapes what any design can accomplish. Andrews (2013) frames this as 'isomorphic mimicry': the adoption of institutional forms that signal compliance with reform requirements without producing the functional change those forms are intended to generate. Isomorphic mimicry is not a failure of design; it is a predictable structural response to design that ignores political architecture.

B. The Capacity-Deficit Framework and Its Limits

Fukuyama (2004) distinguished state scope from state strength, arguing that the critical variable in governance performance is not what states do but how well they do it. This insight reoriented attention toward building administrative capacity -

civil service reform, public financial management, meritocratic recruitment. The capacity framework is an important corrective to purely design-focused approaches, but it shares a structural blind spot: it treats capacity as a neutral technical resource rather than as a politically constituted condition.

In postcolonial contexts, capacity is not simply absent - it has been historically shaped, selectively deployed, and politically circumscribed in ways that make capacity-building programmes ineffective unless they engage with the political architecture that produced the capacity deficit in the first place (Ohemeng, 2025; van de Walle, 2001). Capacity built on institutional foundations that misalign with the authority and legitimacy structures of the context will reproduce the form-function gap in a new register.

C. Historical Institutionalism: A Partial Correction

Historical institutionalism (HI) - associated with Pierson (2004), Mahoney and Thelen (2010), and Streeck and Thelen (2005) - identifies the mechanisms through which institutional structures constrain political actors over time: path dependence, increasing returns, and the gradual processes of layering, conversion, displacement, and drift. This framework is essential to the Political Architecture approach, and we build directly on it.

But HI, developed primarily through analysis of advanced industrial democracies, is most finely tuned to contexts of institutional density rather than institutional hybridity. Applying HI to postcolonial states - where formal institutions coexist with customary authority, colonial legacies compete with democratic aspirations, and state capacity is contested rather than assumed - requires significant contextual adaptation. Political Architecture provides that adaptation by extending the sediment concept to incorporate colonial institutional transplantation and competing legitimacy structures that HI's Western canon does not fully theorise.

D. Legitimacy: The Missing Variable

Running through all three dominant frameworks is a common gap: insufficient attention to legitimacy as a structural force. Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) - whose work received the 2024 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences - focus on extractive versus inclusive institutions but largely bracket the question of whether citizens accept those institutions as valid. This is a significant analytical limitation in hybrid governance environments. Arif (2023) demonstrates that legitimacy operates as an independent variable: institutions perceived as illegitimate face structural headwinds regardless of their technical quality. In contexts where statutory authority, traditional leadership, electoral mandates, and technocratic expertise simultaneously claim governance space, legitimacy is not supplementary to institutional analysis, but foundational.

E. The Nearest Neighbours: Political Economy Analysis and Adaptive Approaches

The closest antecedents to the Political Architecture framework are not the technical-design or capacity traditions but the family of politically informed approaches built on their critique: Political Economy Analysis (PEA), the 'Thinking and Working Politically' (TWP) agenda, and Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA) (Andrews, Pritchett, & Woolcock, 2017). Each takes seriously the

proposition that governance reform fails for political rather than technical reasons. A framework claiming to add analytical value must therefore be distinguished from them directly.

PEA comes nearest to what we propose, and has been institutionalised in donor practice for two decades: DFID's Drivers of Change approach (DFID, 2004; Warrener, 2004) and its subsequent analytical refinement (Leftwich, 2006, 2009), followed by the World Bank's problem-driven governance and political economy framework (Fritz, Kaiser, & Levy, 2009), are its most developed expressions (Whaites, 2023, traces the lineage). But PEA as practised has three structural limitations. First, it is typically commissioned as a contextual study that sits alongside reform design rather than as a discipline that constrains it: the analysis is produced, read, and shelved while the design proceeds from the template - a decoupling the Bank's own review of its PEA experience acknowledges (Fritz, Levy, & Ort, 2014). Second, its analytical categories - interests, incentives, rents, elite bargains - are actor-centred rather than structural: they explain who will resist a reform, not what the institutional environment will do to it. Third, PEA has no settled treatment of plural legitimacy or of institutional sedimentation - the two variables this paper argues are decisive in hybrid governance contexts.

TWP and PDIA share a different limitation. TWP is a set of operating principles - political awareness, flexibility, local ownership - without a specified analytical product: it tells reformers how to behave, not what must be known before design begins. PDIA supplies a genuine method, discovering constraints through problem-driven iteration. It is powerful precisely where the design space is unknown - but iteration is a costly way to learn what a prior structural analysis could have established, and a problem-driven entry point can bypass the authority and legitimacy questions that determine whether solutions, once found, will stick.

The Political Architecture framework differs on each dimension. It is a prior, structured diagnostic with a defined deliverable - the political architecture brief - produced before design and binding on it; its categories are structural rather than actor-centred; and it treats competing legitimacies and institutional sediment as first-order variables rather than background context. It is a complement rather than a rival: the brief gives PEA's insights a design-facing form, gives TWP's principles analytical content, and tells PDIA where iteration is worth its cost.

Summary:

- PEA** → explains political context.
- TWP** → guides political behaviour during implementation.
- PDIA** → learns through iteration.
- PAA** → comes before design and translates authority, legitimacy, and sediment into design constraints.

III. Theoretical Framework: Political Architecture

The Political Architecture framework builds on historical institutionalism but extends it to account for legitimacy and postcolonial hybridity. It holds that governance reform must engage three structural pillars - authority distribution,

competing legitimacies, and institutional sediment - as preconditions for any institutional design that aims to endure.

A. Pillar One: Authority Distribution

Political architecture begins with a mapping of how authority is actually distributed - not how formal mandates are assigned, but how decision-making power is held, exercised, contested, and legitimated in practice. In complex governance environments, authority is rarely coterminous with formal mandate. It is distributed across levels of government, across formal and informal actors, and across statutory and customary spheres in ways that formal organisational charts do not capture.

Authority mapping asks: Who actually makes binding decisions? Who must be consulted, accommodated, or neutralised for decisions to stick? Where is authority contested, overlapping, or ambiguous? Where do formal and informal authority structures conflict? The answers define the real governance architecture - and the real constraints on what reform can achieve.

B. Pillar Two: Competing Legitimacies

Governance institutions require legitimacy to function. But in complex governance environments, legitimacy is not singular - it is plural, contested, and sourced from multiple and sometimes incompatible bases: constitutional authority, traditional and customary standing, electoral mandate, technocratic expertise, historical precedent, and community recognition. When reform creates institutions that draw on one source of legitimacy while ignoring or displacing others, it generates structural resistance that technical capacity cannot overcome.

Legitimacy analysis asks: On what basis do existing institutions claim authority? Which governance actors are accepted as legitimate by which publics? Where are there legitimacy vacuums that informal or traditional actors are filling? Arif's (2023) distinction between the legitimacy of government (procedural) and the legitimacy of governance (output-based) is directly operational here: an institution can hold formal procedural legitimacy while lacking the output legitimacy that sustains public compliance and cooperation.

C. Pillar Three: Institutional Sediment

Following Mahoney and Thelen (2010), we argue that governance contexts accumulate institutional sediment - layers of prior rules, practices, norms, and expectations that shape what new institutions can achieve. Sediment is not simply historical background; it is an active structural force. New institutions are layered on top of, converted from, or in contest with prior arrangements whose logic continues to shape behaviour even after those arrangements are formally replaced.

Sediment analysis asks: What prior institutional choices constrain the current design space? Which historical legacies remain structurally active? How have prior reform attempts layered new logics over existing ones, and what tensions have they introduced? Crucially, sediment analysis is not only diagnostic of constraint - it also identifies institutional inheritances that are assets to be leveraged rather than obstacles to be designed around.

D. What Political Architecture Adds

The Political Architecture framework is not a replacement for existing governance reform tools. It is a prior analytical layer that tells you what those tools will encounter when deployed. Technical-design models tell you how to build a new institution. Capacity frameworks tell you what resources are needed. Political Architecture tells you whether and why a given design will function in a specific context - and what needs to be true about authority, legitimacy, and institutional history for any design to have a realistic chance of enduring.

The framework does not predict failure. It identifies the structural conditions under which the form-function gap is likely to emerge, and thereby creates the analytical foundation for designs that are more likely to close it.

IV. Canada: Intergovernmental Complexity and Institutional Strain

Canada provides a distinctive case study in political architecture: a mature democracy with sophisticated formal institutions, a written constitution, and a long tradition of public administration reform - and yet one that produces recurrent, structurally predictable coordination failures at the federal-provincial interface in specific domains.

A. The Architecture of Canadian Federalism

Canada's constitutional framework does not simply divide powers: it creates overlapping, contested, and co-dependent jurisdictional spaces that must be navigated through intergovernmental negotiation rather than hierarchical direction. The system's architecture has demonstrated genuine adaptive capacity - its fiscal federalism machinery has maintained a functioning national social architecture across decades of political change, and mechanisms like the Social Union Framework Agreement and the Council of the Federation have produced real intergovernmental coordination.

What the system has not resolved, and what makes it a productive Political Architecture case, is the structural dependence on informal conventions, personal relationships, and incumbent political will for coordination functions that have no constitutional anchor. As the Forum of Federations documents, Canadian intergovernmental coordination is not grounded in constitutional structures but in protocols and practices developed through experience. This produces governance architecture that is highly sensitive to political transitions and leadership change - and that is structurally vulnerable in exactly the high-stress, time-compressed scenarios where coordination is most critical.

B. Emergency Management as a Stress Test

Emergency management offers a domain-specific case study in what happens when this architecture encounters stress. Jurisdiction is effectively divided: the federal government holds primary responsibility for national coordination, but provinces and municipalities hold operational authority for most actual response. This division is constitutionally grounded and not inherently problematic - it is the coordination mechanism between divided responsibilities that is structurally underdeveloped.

The 2023 wildfire season - more than 18 million hectares burned, nearly triple the previous annual record - exposed these structural vulnerabilities at scale. Public Safety Canada's own 2024 strategy acknowledges persistent gaps in federal-provincial-municipal communication and logistics coordination as ongoing systemic problems, not isolated failures. The abortive Senate reform processes and the Kelowna Accord are additional instances of the same structural pattern: well-designed institutions whose operational function was compromised by the authority and legitimacy structures they were embedded in.

A Political Architecture analysis frames each of these not as an implementation gap but as a predictable output of an authority structure that separates constitutional responsibility from operational capacity without adequately resolving the coordination architecture between them.

C. Institutional Sediment in the Canadian Context

Canadian federalism carries significant institutional sediment: the BNA Act of 1867, the patriated Constitution of 1982, the Meech Lake and Charlottetown processes, and the accumulated body of federal-provincial-territorial agreements. Each reform attempt has layered new institutional logics over existing ones without resolving the underlying authority ambiguities. The 2026 Policy Options analysis adds a further sediment layer specific to the federal executive: extreme PMO centralisation, the marginalisation of ministers, and the dominance of political staff over public service advice - an accumulated institutional layering of executive power consolidation whose roots predate any current government and which no administrative reform can resolve without engaging its constitutional and cultural foundations.

D. Lessons from the Canadian Case

The Canadian case illustrates Political Architecture's authority distribution and institutional sediment pillars most clearly. Authority in Canadian intergovernmental relations is structurally ambiguous by constitutional design, producing recurrent coordination failures in specific high-stress domains. Institutional sediment constrains the reform space available to even well-resourced governments. Reform that does not engage with these structural realities will not produce durable coordination improvement - not because the reforms are poorly designed in technical terms, but because they are designed without a theory of the political architecture they are entering.

V. West Africa (Ghana): Postcolonial Layering and Legitimacy Conflict

A. A Note on Ghana's Democratic Achievement

Ghana's democratic consolidation since 1992 is among the most significant governance achievements in West Africa. Multiple peaceful transfers of power between competing parties, a functioning and credible Electoral Commission, a reasonably independent judiciary, and sustained civil society engagement - these represent institutional achievements that cannot be dismissed as surface-level compliance. Afrobarometer data consistently shows relatively high levels of public support for democratic institutions in Ghana compared to regional peers.

This achievement matters analytically, not merely as a caveat. It demonstrates that the form-function gap is not a general condition of Ghanaian governance - it is domain-specific. Ghana can produce durable, legitimacy-grounded institutions when the political architecture conditions support them. The question the Political Architecture framework addresses is why the same environment produces such divergent outcomes across reform domains.

B. The Colonial Legacy as Foundational Sediment

Mamdani's (1996) analysis of the bifurcated postcolonial state remains foundational: colonial governance created an urban sphere governed by civil law and a rural sphere governed through traditional authorities whose customary power was simultaneously recognised, instrumentalised, and distorted by the colonial state. Post-independence governance has been building on — and contesting — this sediment ever since. As van de Walle (2001) demonstrated, structural adjustment and governance reform from the 1980s onward failed in significant part because they treated this institutional sediment as irrelevant background rather than as the primary material reformers were working with.

Ohemeng (2022, 2025) extends this analysis to contemporary Ghana, showing how post-colonial path dependence in public administration continues to shape capacity deficits through over-reliance on external expertise, persistence of colonial administrative forms, and a structural gap between formal institutional capacity and the informal governance practices that actually produce outcomes. Critically, Ohemeng frames this not as a failure of Ghanaian governance but as a predictable structural output of colonial institutional transplantation - a sediment problem, not a capacity problem.

C. Chieftaincy, State, and Competing Legitimacy

Ghana offers an unusually rich case study in competing legitimacies because it has both one of the most institutionally robust traditional governance systems in Africa and one of the continent's most stable democratic systems - and the relationship between these two forms of governance authority remains structurally unresolved in specific domains.

The chieftaincy institution - with its hierarchies of chiefs, elders, and councils of traditional advisers, among them the *akyee* (spokespersons), whose roles run through chieftaincies throughout Ghana - is formally recognised and accorded autonomy in Ghana's 1992 Constitution. Traditional authorities manage land, adjudicate disputes, mobilise communities, and perform governance functions the formal state cannot replicate in many areas. Adjei and Asante (2022) document how traditional authorities have adapted into neo-traditional roles - as development brokers, electoral stakeholders, and custodians of local governance legitimacy - that intersect with and sometimes override the formal local government system.

The result is a governance architecture of competing legitimacies operating simultaneously in the same space. The Local Government Act assigns formal authority to District Assemblies; the Constitution protects traditional authority; communities navigate between both, allocating compliance and cooperation according to context-specific legitimacy assessments that formal reform design rarely maps. This produces institutions that are formally constituted and

operationally partial - the form-function gap in its most structurally transparent form.

D. Decentralisation: A Domain-Specific Case

Ghana's decentralisation programme provides the paper's clearest West African case of the design-function gap. Initiated in the late 1980s and constitutionally enshrined in 1992, the programme was ambitious in design: genuine fiscal devolution, local democratic accountability through District Assemblies, and transferred service delivery responsibility. After three decades, District Assemblies have less revenue autonomy, weaker staffing, and lower capacity than the design envisioned. This is not a narrative of failure in any simple sense - local governance exists, elections are held, some services are delivered. It is a narrative of persistent structural gaps between institutional design and institutional function that sediment analysis explains: the formal devolution architecture was layered over a pre-existing pattern of central resource control, traditional authority in local governance, and informal fiscal practices that the formal design did not engage.

E. Lessons from the West African Case

The West African case illustrates Political Architecture's competing legitimacies and institutional sediment pillars most clearly, in a context where these structural forces are more heterogeneous and less formally visible than in Canada. Competing legitimacies - between statutory and traditional authority, between externally designed reform frameworks and locally anchored institutional logics - are not residual problems to be managed away. They are structural features of the governance environment that any durable reform must explicitly engage. The contrast between Ghana's democratic success and its local governance design-function gap is the strongest empirical case for the Political Architecture framework's domain-specific rather than systemic framing.

VI. Comparative Analysis: Patterns, Divergences, and Shared Architecture

The Canadian and West African cases differ dramatically in historical context, institutional density, state capacity levels, and reform challenges. What they share is theoretically significant: both demonstrate, in specific reform domains, the form-function gap that the Political Architecture framework explains.

A. Shared Structural Patterns

Authority fragmentation without coordination architecture. Both systems distribute authority across multiple actors and levels in ways that produce coordination gaps requiring constant negotiation - negotiation that is structurally precarious because it depends on informal conventions rather than institutional certainty.

Legitimacy mismatches. Both systems produce reform outputs whose formal (statutory) legitimacy is not matched by substantive (output and community) legitimacy. The result is institutions that are legally valid and politically fragile.

Sediment-blind design. Both have generated reform programmes that treat existing institutional arrangements as the problem to be solved rather than the context to be understood - producing layering of new logics over existing ones without resolving the tensions between them.

Short-termism in institutional design. Both cases show the consequences of designing institutions for electoral cycles rather than governance horizons. Durability requires explicit design for political transition, not optimisation for current incumbents.

B. Context-Specific Variations

Canada's institutional sediment is primarily constitutional and administrative - thick, formally visible, embedded in legislation and administrative culture. The primary political architecture challenges are coordination architecture and sediment engagement within a system that has genuine functional capacity. West Africa's sediment is thicker, less visible, and more heterogeneous - produced by the compounding of pre-colonial structures, colonial transplantation, post-independence state-building, and externally-driven reform. The primary challenges there are legitimacy architecture and sediment resolution - building formal institutions that either draw on the legitimacy of traditional governance or develop alternative legitimacy bases capable of generating genuine public acceptance.

C. What Durable Institutions Share

Across both cases, the institutions that endure share structural characteristics: they are designed for the governance environment they actually operate in; they align formal authority with substantive legitimacy; they engage institutional sediment as a resource to be worked with rather than an obstacle to be overcome; and they build coordination mechanisms that sustain themselves through political transitions rather than depending on the goodwill of current incumbents. These are not coincidental features - they are the predictable outputs of reform processes that engage with political architecture.

VII. Toward a Political Architecture Diagnostic

This section translates the framework into a practical diagnostic instrument for policy advisers, government officials, and development partners. The tool is structured as a sequenced three-lens analysis to be conducted at the beginning of any significant governance reform engagement.

A. Lens One: Authority Mapping

Maps the actual distribution of authority, distinguishing between formal mandate and effective power. Key questions:

- Who holds formal authority over the governance domain? Who holds effective authority? Where do these diverge?
- What actors — formal and informal — must be aligned, consulted, or accommodated for decisions in this domain to be implemented?
- Where is authority contested, overlapping, or ambiguous? What mechanisms currently manage those contests?

- What happens when the formal authority structure fails to produce coordination? What informal mechanisms fill the gap — and on what legitimacy basis do they operate?

B. Lens Two: Legitimacy Auditing

Examines the sources and distribution of governance legitimacy. Key questions:

- On what bases do current governance institutions claim authority? How deeply are those bases accepted by relevant publics?
- Where are there competing legitimacy claims — customary, electoral, technocratic, historical — operating in the same governance space?
- What actors command legitimacy that formal institutions lack? Can that legitimacy be engaged, incorporated, or complemented rather than displaced?
- What reforms have previously failed due to legitimacy deficits? What explains those deficits — was it procedural illegitimacy, output illegitimacy, or both?

C. Lens Three: Sediment Analysis

Examines the institutional history of the governance context. Key questions:

- What prior institutional choices — constitutional, administrative, cultural — continue to shape current governance behaviour?
- Which historical legacies are assets that can be leveraged? Which are constraints that must be explicitly addressed?
- How have prior reform attempts modified, layered, or converted existing institutional logics? What tensions remain unresolved?
- What does the institutional history reveal about which governance arrangements have proven durable in this context, and why?

D. The Political Architecture Brief

The three-lens diagnostic produces a political architecture brief: an analytical document that tells reform designers what the real governance environment looks like, what constraints they are operating within, and what strategic opportunities the existing architecture provides. It changes the driving question from 'what is the ideal institutional model?' to 'what institutional design, given this particular authority distribution, legitimacy landscape, and sediment profile, has the best realistic chance of producing durable governance improvement?'

The brief is not a barrier to reform design. It is the analytical foundation on which reform design that actually holds can be built.

E. The Diagnostic in Action: Canadian Emergency Management

The value of the diagnostic is best shown in application. The following worked example applies the three lenses to the emergency management case developed in Section IV. A parallel application to Ghana's decentralisation programme (Section V) is presented in Annex A.

Lens One - Authority Mapping. Formal authority: provinces hold operational responsibility for emergency response within their borders; municipalities act as first responders as creatures of the provinces; the federal government coordinates national response under the Emergency Management Act (2007) and holds surge

assets, including the Canadian Armed Forces. **Effective authority:** no order of government can compel another to coordinate; cross-jurisdictional action runs through negotiated Requests for Assistance and federal-provincial-territorial tables. **Divergence:** federal responsibility without operational reach; provincial authority without fiscal depth in catastrophic events; municipal capacity without standing in the intergovernmental machinery.

Lens Two - Legitimacy Auditing. All three orders of government hold electoral legitimacy - which in a crisis makes their claims competing rather than complementary: credit and blame politics rewards visible unilateral action and penalises pre-committed coordination. Publics assign output legitimacy to whoever visibly delivers, regardless of formal responsibility. Indigenous governments hold a recognised but under-institutionalised legitimacy claim in this domain, despite First Nations communities being disproportionately exposed - a structural gap, not an oversight.

Lens Three - Sediment Analysis. The active layers: an 1867 division of powers that predates modern emergency management entirely; a century of executive federalism that settled coordination into convention, memorandum, and personal relationships rather than institutional structure; a sedimented default of ad hoc Requests for Assistance with the Canadian Armed Forces as permanent surge capacity; and a growing stack of after-action reviews - most recently following the 2023 wildfire season — recommending substantially the same fixes. Repetition of identical recommendations across decades is itself diagnostic: the failure is structural, not informational.

What a political architecture brief would have told designers. Coordination in this domain depends on incumbent goodwill and is therefore structurally vulnerable in exactly the time-compressed, high-stress events where it matters most. Predictable outcome: recurring breakdowns at communication and logistics interfaces during major events - which is what Public Safety Canada's own 2024 strategy acknowledges. Design implications: a standing interjurisdictional coordination body with pre-committed authorities and automatic funding triggers, insulated from political transitions; a formalised role for Indigenous governments; and evaluation of any new mechanism against the transition test - does it survive a change of government in Ottawa and two provincial capitals simultaneously?

VIII. Conclusion: Implications for Policy and Practice

Governance reform is not primarily a technical problem. It is a political architecture problem: a challenge of understanding and engaging the structural conditions — authority, legitimacy, and institutional sediment — that determine what any given institutional design can achieve in a specific context. The Political Architecture framework offers a prior analytical discipline that makes existing reform tools significantly more likely to produce durable functional outcomes.

A. Implications for Policy

Governance reform diagnostics should begin with political architecture analysis — authority mapping, legitimacy auditing, and sediment analysis — before moving to institutional benchmarking against best-practice models.

Reform design should be explicitly context-specific, driven by the political architecture brief rather than derived from transferable templates. The template is a starting point, not a design.

Intergovernmental coordination mechanisms should be designed for durability through political transitions, not optimised for the current government's priorities. Durability requires institutional certainty, not convention.

Development partners and international financial institutions should require political architecture analysis as a precondition for governance reform programme design, as a condition of their own due diligence.

B. Implications for Practice

Policy advisers in complex governance environments need analytical tools that go beyond mandate mapping to include authority mapping, legitimacy auditing, and sediment analysis — and need to apply these tools before not after the design phase.

In hybrid governance contexts — particularly across West Africa — advisers must develop the capacity to work constructively with traditional and customary authority structures rather than designing around them. Traditional authority is not a gap in governance; it is governance.

Public sector reform programmes should explicitly address the informal institutional logics that will determine whether formal reforms take hold, treating these logics as design parameters rather than implementation obstacles.

C. Directions for Future Research

Future research should develop and test the political architecture diagnostic instrument across a wider range of governance contexts; refine the analytical categories through engagement with non-Western governance theory; and explore the relationship between political architecture and institutional durability across longer time horizons. A companion paper applying the framework to Indigenous governance in Canada and Northern territorial governance is in preparation.

Annex A. The Three Lenses Applied: Ghana's Decentralisation Programme

This annex applies the three-lens diagnostic to the decentralisation case developed in Section V, as a companion to the Canadian worked example in Section VII.E.

Lens One - Authority Mapping. **Formal authority:** the Local Governance Act (Act 936) and the 1992 Constitution assign District Assemblies responsibility for local development, service delivery, and local revenue. **Effective authority:** District Chief Executives are presidentially appointed, roughly a third of Assembly members are appointed, staffing runs through the centralised Local Government Service, and the District Assemblies Common Fund keeps the fiscal lifeline in central hands. Meanwhile, the majority of land is held under customary tenure, so most development decisions with a land dimension cannot stick without traditional authorities. **Divergence:** the actors with the mandate (Assemblies) are not the

actors whose agreement makes decisions bind (the Presidency, the Common Fund administrator, the chiefs).

Lens Two - Legitimacy Auditing. Assemblies hold statutory and electoral legitimacy, but district elections are non-partisan and chronically low-turnout, and output legitimacy is weak where services visibly fail. Chiefs hold customary and historical legitimacy with deep, durable community acceptance - and have converted it into neo-traditional roles as development brokers and land custodians. In practice, communities route land and dispute matters to chiefs and documentation to Assemblies - a context-specific division the formal design never mapped. The legitimacy vacuum in peri-urban land governance is being filled informally.

Lens Three - Sediment Analysis. Five active layers: pre-colonial chieftaincy governance; colonial indirect rule, which made chiefs the local administrative tier and converted their accountability downward into accountability upward; post-independence centralisation, which stripped chiefs' formal powers but not their standing; the PNDC-era decentralisation of 1988; and the 1992 Constitution, which enshrines both elected local government and chieftaincy autonomy while barring chiefs from partisan politics. The 1988–1992 devolution architecture was layered over central fiscal control and customary land authority without resolving either.

What a political architecture brief would have told designers. The design assumed authority would follow mandate; the map shows it does not. Predictable outcome: formal Assemblies with hollow revenue autonomy and blocked land-adjacent functions - which is what three decades produced. Design implications: sequence fiscal devolution together with reform of District Chief Executive appointment rather than ahead of it; create a formal chief - Assembly interface for land administration that draws on customary legitimacy rather than designing around it; and treat the Common Fund's central control as the binding constraint it is, not an implementation detail.

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All sources are formatted in APA 7th edition. Grey literature is identified by source type in brackets. An annotated version of this reference list is available as a companion resource on the Akyeame Statecraft website.

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