

The Presidency Is Not the Problem: Toward an Executive Dependency Theory of the Ghanaian State

Why constitutional reform alone cannot produce institutional resilience.

by **Richard DABLAH**

IN BRIEF

- Executive dominance in Ghana has outlasted every election and every constitutional review because it is a symptom of institutional weakness, not its cause.
- Power migrates toward the presidency through four identifiable mechanisms: institutional gravity, administrative vacuum, vertical escalation, and institutional atrophy.
- Constitutional reform redistributes legal authority but leaves operational capacity untouched, so executive concentration regenerates in new forms.
- The reform question should shift from “How do we reduce presidential power?” to “How do we strengthen every other institution until presidential intervention becomes exceptional?”

For more than three decades, Ghana has returned to the same constitutional question: Does the President wield too much power? The debate was recently rekindled by reported comments from an outgoing foreign diplomat, who said that Ghana's current constitutional review process should curtail the presidency's extensive powers. The argument is neither new nor without merit. Since the promulgation of the 1992 Constitution, scholars, politicians, civil society organizations, and constitutional review commissions have repeatedly identified executive dominance as one of the Republic's principal democratic challenges.

Yet after every election, every constitutional review, and every promise of institutional reform, the presidency appears stronger than before. Why?

Conventional constitutional scholarship offers a straightforward answer: powerful constitutions create powerful presidents. Reduce constitutional powers, and democratic equilibrium will follow. This explanation is increasingly insufficient. It explains legal authority but not political reality. A different explanation is required.

I propose what may be called Executive Dependency Theory. Its central proposition is simple but profound:

The concentration of executive power is not the primary cause of weak states. It is the consequence of institutional dependency.

Strong presidents do not necessarily create weak institutions. Weak institutions create strong presidents. This reversal changes everything.

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The presidency should not be seen as the source of excessive centralization but as the destination to which governance migrates when institutions progressively lose competence, legitimacy, and autonomy. Power, like water, follows the path of least resistance.

Whenever Parliament struggles to exercise oversight, citizens increasingly turn to the President. Whenever local governments lack fiscal autonomy, communities demand presidential intervention. Whenever regulators hesitate to act independently, difficult decisions migrate upward. Whenever ministries avoid politically costly choices, the Cabinet absorbs the burden. Eventually, every unresolved problem reaches one office. The presidency becomes the Republic's final administrative destination.

This phenomenon is not unique to Ghana. It can be observed across much of the postcolonial world. The mistake has been to interpret executive dominance as the disease rather than the symptom. The real pathology lies elsewhere, within what might be called the institutional ecology of the state.

Most constitutional theory treats government as a hierarchy. Power flows through formal legal authority, from constitutions to institutions. Reality is more complex. Modern states resemble ecosystems far more than machines.

Healthy ecosystems distribute intelligence. Forests have no central tree directing every ecological process. Coral reefs have no single organism coordinating all interactions. Human immune systems have no single cell responsible for defeating every infection. Their resilience emerges from thousands of autonomous yet interconnected actors capable of solving local problems without waiting for instructions from the top.

Healthy democracies operate in precisely the same way. Municipalities solve municipal problems. Universities govern universities. Professional bodies regulate their professions. Independent regulators oversee markets. Courts adjudicate disputes. Parliaments oversee the executive. The presidency provides strategic direction rather than operational management.

When these institutions function effectively, the executive governs without becoming indispensable. When they weaken, governance begins to migrate. This migration follows identifiable patterns.

The first is Institutional Gravity. Authority naturally gravitates toward the institution with the greatest remaining decision-making capacity. As districts lose competence, ministries inherit responsibilities. As ministries become overwhelmed, the presidency assumes functions that should never have reached the Head of State. Power is therefore not merely allocated by constitutions. It is drawn to institutional competence.

The second mechanism is Administrative Vacuum. Governance never tolerates a space. When bureaucracies cease making decisions, politicians inevitably fill the void. Every

administrative failure attracts political intervention. The executive expands because bureaucracy contracts.

The third mechanism is Vertical Escalation. Problems continue to escalate upward until they reach an institution capable of resolving them. Floods become presidential matters. Waste management becomes presidential. Hospital procurement becomes presidential. Market redevelopment becomes presidential. School infrastructure becomes presidential. Local disputes become presidential. Agriculture becomes presidential. Even football administration periodically becomes presidential. No constitution explicitly intended such concentration. Institutional failure produced it.

Over time, this leads to Institutional Atrophy. Unused institutions gradually lose capability. Decision-making is like a muscle. What is not exercised eventually weakens. When municipalities repeatedly wait for ministerial approval, they lose confidence in their ability to act independently. When ministries constantly defer to the presidency, bureaucratic initiative declines. When Parliament becomes reactive rather than supervisory, legislative authority slowly erodes. The Republic begins to forget how to govern itself.

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Citizens observe these failures and adjust accordingly. Instead of demanding better municipal governance, they petition the President. Instead of trusting independent regulators, they await presidential directives. Instead of expecting institutions to function autonomously, society increasingly believes that every national problem requires presidential intervention. This is Institutional Dependency.

Dependency eventually becomes cultural. The presidency becomes the nation's principal complaints office. Every successful presidential intervention resolves an immediate crisis while unintentionally reinforcing the long-term expectation that only the presidency can resolve future crises.

A vicious cycle emerges. Weak institutions produce greater executive intervention. Executive intervention reduces institutional autonomy. Reduced autonomy weakens institutional competence. Weak competence increases public dependence on the executive. The cycle repeats.

Constitutional reform rarely disrupts this process because it typically addresses legal authority rather than institutional capability. Constitutions distribute formal power, while institutions generate operational power. Operational power almost always prevails.

This explains one of Africa's enduring constitutional paradoxes. Many countries repeatedly amend their constitutions even as executive dominance persists. The legal architecture changes, but the institutional ecology remains untouched. Executive concentration simply reappears in new constitutional forms.

The question, therefore, should not be whether the presidency has excessive authority. The deeper question is why so many institutions have surrendered the authority they were created to exercise.

The solution is equally different. Most constitutional reform begins with the question: How do we reduce presidential power? Executive Dependency Theory asks a different question: How do we strengthen every other institution so that presidential intervention becomes exceptional rather than routine? This distinction is fundamental.

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The objective is not subtraction but multiplication. Multiplication of competent municipalities. Multiplication of autonomous regulators. Multiplication of independent professional bodies. Multiplication of financially capable local governments. Multiplication of institutions trusted by citizens.

The measure of constitutional maturity is therefore not the number of powers removed from the presidency. It is the number of public problems solved without presidential involvement.

A resilient state is one in which metropolitan authorities manage floods before they escalate into national emergencies. Hospitals are run by professional administrators rather than by executive directives. Universities govern themselves. Independent agencies regulate without political approval. District assemblies have sufficient authority and resources to govern their communities. The presidency should remain strategically important but operationally unnecessary.

This is not an argument for weakening executive leadership. It is an argument for strengthening the Republic itself. Indeed, the strongest presidency is not one that governs everything. It is one that governs least, because the nation's institutions govern effectively.

The constitutional debate, therefore, has been asking the wrong question for thirty years. Ghana's challenge is not primarily one of presidential excess. It is one of institutional dependence. Executive dominance is the visible consequence of a deeper structural condition. Unless constitutional reform is accompanied by the deliberate reconstruction of institutional competence, legitimacy, and autonomy at every level of the state, executive concentration will regenerate itself regardless of the constitutional text.

The presidency is not the disease. It is the Republic's diagnostic instrument. Its expanding authority measures the shrinking capacity of every institution beneath it. That is the true constitutional challenge facing Ghana and, indeed, much of the postcolonial world.

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The future of democratic governance will depend not on how successfully nations restrain presidents, but on how courageously they rebuild the institutional ecosystems that make strong presidents increasingly unnecessary.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard Dablah is an independent governance researcher, environmental policy analyst, and public affairs commentator. His work examines constitutional governance, political economy, institutional resilience, and environmental governance, with a particular focus on Ghana and the Global South. He is the author of the emerging Executive Dependency Theory, which explores how constitutional design, institutional incentives, and administrative behavior interact to shape executive power. His broader research spans urban governance, decentralization, waste governance, and state capacity.

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The companion paper to this Critical Perspective, which is the author's extended treatment of the argument, is here: [Executive Dependency Theory: The Extended Argument](#)