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**REVOLUTIONARY NATIONALISM AND EARLY STATE-BUILDING:
DIVERGENT PATH OF NKRUMAH AND SOEKARNO**

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Abstract

This article presents a comparative historical analysis of postcolonial state building under the leadership of Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana and Sukarno in Indonesia. It argues that revolutionary nationalism functioned as a double-edged force, enabling mass mobilization and political legitimacy while simultaneously generating institutional fragility in newly independent states. Employing a qualitative historical-comparative methodology and a most similar systems design, the study examines how colonial institutional legacies, bureaucratic capacity, strategies of political legitimacy, civil-military relations, social fragmentation, and Cold War geopolitics shaped divergent state-building trajectories in the two cases. The analysis shows that although both leaders pursued anti-imperialist agendas, state-led development, and mass mobilization, they adopted contrasting political strategies in response to distinct domestic and international constraints. Nkrumah relied on political centralization and a single party system to compensate for weak administrative capacity, whereas Sukarno emphasized ideological integration and symbolic unity through Guided Democracy within a highly pluralistic social context. In both cases, however, these strategies were structurally constrained and ultimately contributed to political instability and regime collapse. The article concludes that postcolonial state-building cannot be explained by leadership charisma alone but must be understood as a product of the interaction between institutional inheritance, societal formation, political authority, and global forces.

Keywords: comparative state-building, political legitimacy, leadership, independent states

Abstrak

Artikel ini menyajikan analisis historis komparatif tentang pembentukan negara pasca-kolonial di bawah kepemimpinan Kwame Nkrumah di Ghana dan Sukarno di Indonesia. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa nasionalisme revolusioner berfungsi sebagai kekuatan bermata dua, memfasilitasi mobilisasi massa dan legitimasi politik yang juga menimbulkan kerentanan institusional di negara-negara yang baru merdeka. Menggunakan metodologi historis-komparatif kualitatif dan desain sistem yang paling mirip, studi ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana warisan institusional kolonial, kapasitas birokrasi, strategi legitimasi politik, hubungan sipil-militer, fragmentasi sosial, dan geopolitik Perang Dingin membentuk jalur pembangunan negara yang berbeda di kedua kasus. Analisis menunjukkan bahwa meskipun kedua pemimpin mengejar agenda anti-imperialis, pembangunan yang dipimpin negara, dan mobilisasi massa, mereka mengadopsi strategi politik yang kontras sebagai respons terhadap batasan domestik dan internasional yang berbeda. Nkrumah mengandalkan sentralisasi politik dan sistem partai tunggal untuk mengatasi kapasitas administratif yang lemah, sedangkan Sukarno menekankan integrasi ideologis dan kesatuan simbolis melalui Demokrasi Terpimpin dalam konteks sosial yang sangat pluralistik. Namun, dalam kedua kasus tersebut, strategi-strategi ini secara struktural dibatasi dan pada akhirnya berkontribusi pada ketidakstabilan politik dan keruntuhan rezim. Artikel ini menyimpulkan bahwa pembangunan negara pasca-kolonial tidak dapat dijelaskan semata-mata oleh karisma kepemimpinan, tetapi harus dipahami sebagai hasil interaksi antara warisan institusional, pembentukan masyarakat, otoritas politik, dan kekuatan global.

Kata Kunci: *pembangunan negara komparatif, legitimasi politik, kepemimpinan, negara-negara merdeka*

INTRODUCTION

National revolution and post-colonial state building were two interwoven processes that shaped the trajectory of nation-state formation in Asia and Africa (Nerenberg, 2021; Letsoin et al., 2022). In the 1950s and 1960s, the wave of decolonization gave rise to revolutionary leaders who occupied strategic positions in determining the form, orientation, and institutional capacity of the newly independent states (Nunoo et al., 2023). Among these figures, there are no more celebrated

ones than Kwame Nkrumah (Ghana) and Sukarno (Indonesia), not least because they did not simply win the struggle for independence but, in fact, transnationally built a state with an ambitious ideological orientation. The two were committed to merging revolutionary nationalism with a state-building agenda, as embodied by mass mobilization, the consolidation of political power, and ambitious modernization efforts (Grilli, 2019; Besman & Sjachro, 2021).

Although both were charismatic anti-colonialists, shaped by fierce national struggles, the trajectory and outcomes of state-building under Nkrumah and Sukarno diverged notably. Nkrumah pioneered what he termed African socialism, an approach to development policy characterized by state-led industrialization and a Pan-Africanist vision. This project confronted structural economic obstacles, domestic political strife, and external interference within the Cold War environment (Katsakioris, 2020). In the interim, President Sukarno popularized the notion of Guided Democracy, which was based on a blend of radical nationalism, populism, and an anti-imperialist geopolitical orientation, articulated in terms of the Jakarta–Beijing–Moscow Axis (Singh, 1967). This ideological vision and the dynamics of domestic politics formed a power structure but also generated friction among the state, society, and the military.

The contrast between the developmental paths of Nkrumah and Sukarno illustrates that revolutionary nationalism does not develop in a singular manner. The outcomes, rather, are highly dependent upon the particular constellation of political figures in place at the time and on the inherent capacity of institutional structures to handle colonial contingency, world-system economic forces, and

the choices disseminated by leaders (Jones, 1964; Mazov, 2025). By comparing these two figures, this article aims to explain the sources of divergence in postcolonial state-building and to understand how revolutionary nationalism can simultaneously function as a mobilizing force and as a source of institutional chaos.

The study is important because comparative research on revolutionary political leaders in Asia and Africa remains rare (Osei-Opare, 2023; Pitono & Fauzi, 2025), as do studies that draw attention to the nexus between anti-colonial ideology and state institution-building in the independence era (Allen et al., 2018; Harned, 2022). In addition, insight into the divergent trajectories of Nkrumah and Sukarno can contribute to academic discussions of state-making, political leadership, and the complexities of nation-state building in the Global South. This article contends that Ghana’s and Indonesia’s divergent paths of state-building in the early post-independence period were largely a result of the interplay between leaders’ visions, the domestic political structures in place at independence, and international pressures emanating from the Cold War environment.

State-Building in the Postcolonial Era

The phenomenon of state-building in the post-colonial period was one of the most crucial episodes in the political history of erstwhile colonies turned sovereign states in Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Sanchez & Myat, 2021). Unlike the low-key emergence of formal states in Europe, which was relatively natural and gradual and underpinned by prolonged economic and technological evolution, postcolonial states inherited administrative systems created to expand empire rather than to develop nations. This legacy rendered the state-building trajectory nonlinear, conflict-ridden, and characterized in many ways by early institutional failure. Consequently, postcolonial state-building can be understood as political reconstruction on shaky, unbalanced, or uncertain ground.

In Europe, states emerged through war, taxation, and the consolidation of bureaucracy. In contrast, postcolonial states were “imported” through colonial structures that often lacked roots in local societies. Charles Tilly argues that European states emerged from a process of competition among rulers that required bureaucratic strengthening. However, in colonial territories, colonial rulers never intended to build strong states; instead, they constructed an effective colonial administrative apparatus for the purposes of colonization. This meant that

postcolonial states inherited modern structures but not substance, and therefore lacked widely accepted social legitimacy. According to the weak state perspective, postcolonial states are fragmented because they fail to regulate social and economic relations within society. Under such circumstances, newly independent state institutions must compete for legitimacy and support with non-state social actors, including ethnic groups, traditional authorities, religious bodies, and patronage networks, whose power at the local level is more apparent. This dynamic produces what Michael G. Migdal has described as the disjunction between strong societies and weak states. In other words, postcolonial states are required to construct administrative capacity and legitimacy simultaneously, whereas these were built gradually and together in Europe.

In addition, a number of authors remind us that there are geographical barriers to monopolistic control, as population densities are too low and communications are inadequate or obsolete. With no dividends from empire to underwrite road systems, deep bureaucracies, or stable tax bases, postcolonial states confronted structural challenges that did not present themselves in the same fashion for European states. Postcolonial state-building for the most part occurred in large, unintegrated territories that offered very little

in terms of pre-independence state preparedness and therefore required political strategies very different from those of states that formed historically in Europe. In addition to these structural considerations, postcolonial state-building was also deeply affected by international ideological and political trends. Decolonization took place in the context of the Cold War, which constrained attempts to create alternative political orders for newly independent states. Postcolonial governments were influenced by global pressures from both Western and Eastern powers, which sought to shape their domestic politics. As a result, postcolonial states often found themselves compelled to follow political blueprints that did not align precisely with domestic social realities, thereby generating tension between international ideological demands and national development agendas.

Therefore, postcolonial state-building can be understood as an ambitious project that simultaneously addressed four key needs: building bureaucracies; gaining political legitimacy in diverse societies; transcending social and political fragmentation; and navigating global geopolitical structures. This complexity renders postcolonial state-building trajectories highly variegated and, for the most part, unstable. Variations in po-

litical strategy, bureaucratic capacity, and domestic power relations determine whether elite groups pursue authoritarian consolidation or pluralistic integration as part of the regime's state-building project.

METHOD

This research employs a qualitative methodology with a historical-comparative research design (Babbie, 2010; Fearn & Hiller, 2015). It focuses on understanding the dynamics of revolutionary nationalism and the process of state-building in early post-independence Ghana and Indonesia (Buonanno et al., 2022; Ponterotto & Park-Taylor, 2021). This approach was chosen because it provides a robust framework for tracing the evolution of political and institutional processes of state-building, while also enabling an analysis of why the trajectory of Kwame Nkrumah diverged from that of Sukarno. In this context, the study adopts a most similar systems design (MSSD) as its comparative method. This model facilitates the comparison of two cases that shared many similarities at the outset, namely postcolonial states led by charismatic revolutionary leaders during the Cold War era, yet ultimately produced divergent political and institutional outcomes (Fauzi & Kusumasari, 2020; Owen et al., 2020). This comparative strategy allows the

study to explain differences in state-building practices pursued by the two leaders during the early independence period.

The research data were drawn from literature and historical documentary sources. Primary materials include political speeches by Sukarno and Kwame Nkrumah, constitutional records, state policy statements, as well as official reports produced by governments and international bodies during the same period. Secondary sources, in turn, consist of books on political history and biographies of known figures, articles published in scholarly journals, and academic works addressing decolonization, state-building, and the political situations in Ghana and Indonesia. In addition, databases such as the Library of Congress, JSTOR, and SCOPUS were consulted to identify relevant documents and studies related to the research. Thematic analysis methods were employed to identify common patterns in the deployment of ideology, political strategy, state–society relations, and exogenous forces in Russian and French politics. The analysis was conducted by constructing a timeline of institutional evolution for each case, which were then compared systematically in order to identify similarities and differences.

In order to ensure data validity, this study applied source triangulation, which involved comparing documents, archival materials, and academic publications originating from different periods and reflecting diverse perspectives (Butler et al., 2021). Cross-verification across sources was conducted to establish the reliability of the information, while the use of theoretical perspectives on state-building, charismatic leadership, and Cold War politics further contributed to strengthening interpretation and ensuring academic rigor and accountability (Iradha & Pamungkas, 2021). Overall, this study seeks to offer greater clarity on the ways in which revolutionary nationalism and domestic political configurations contributed to shaping state development during the early leadership of Kwame Nkrumah and Sukarno.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Kwame Nkrumah and Sukarno were two revolutionary leaders who constructed nationalism as a political project for the creation of postcolonial nations. Both turned away from Western imperialism, emphasized the importance of economic sovereignty, and relied on large-scale mobilization as a primary political tool. Student activists functioned as ideological fellow travelers, sharing many of the political objectives articulated by

the revolutionary leadership. Nkrumah conceived African Socialism not only as a political and economic framework but also as an instrument for regional integration and Pan-African solidarity. This initiative promoted an expansion of Ghana's political orientation beyond national borders. In Sukarno's case, Marhaenism and the subsequent concept of Nasakom were developed as mechanisms for incorporating nationalists, religious groups, and communists within Indonesia. Sukarno was therefore more concerned with domestic unity than with regional solidarity. This distinction represented a key point of difference between the two leaders, as Nkrumah's nationalism was regional and outward-looking, whereas Sukarno's was integrative and domestically focused. This difference, in turn, shaped the distinct state-making strategies adopted by each ruler.

By contrast, colonial institutional legacies largely determined early state capacity in Ghana and Indonesia. Ghana inherited a less complex and more centralized bureaucracy from the British. However, although capable administrators and sufficient revenue to support their work were not entirely absent, at the time of independence in 1957 Ghana still possessed one of the weakest administrative apparatuses in Africa. These constraints led Kwame Nkrumah to conclude

that a development strategy based on strong centralization was necessary, including the establishment of the Convention People's Party as the single party in power. Indonesia, by contrast, inherited a more administratively complex bureaucratic structure from the Dutch East Indies, which also exhibited a higher level of administrative capacity but was marked by significant sociopolitical diversity. Sukarno faced the challenges of ideological pluralism, a recently collapsed federal structure, and tensions surrounding parliamentary representation. In Indonesia, the problem was therefore not limited to bureaucratic capacity alone, although this remained an issue as well. This divergence helps explain why Indonesia's state-building agenda was politically more complex than that of Ghana.

In addition, civil-military relations constitute a significant factor in explaining the divergence of the two leaders' developmental paths. In Ghana, the armed forces were relatively weak during the early post-independence period. However, by 1966, growing military dissatisfaction with the policies of Kwame Nkrumah, combined with economic instability, created greater scope for military involvement in politics and ultimately led to his overthrow. The fragility of civilian control mechanisms and the absence

of institutional coherence further exacerbated political instability in Ghana. In Indonesia, by contrast, the army occupied a strategically significant position from the outset, with strong ties to the revolutionary experience. Sukarno was therefore compelled to accommodate the army faction, which had become increasingly politicized, through the implementation of the Guided Democracy system. In 1965, tensions between the military and the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) reached a critical point, triggering a major political crisis. Although Indonesia remained relatively politically stable during the period from 1959 to 1965, the fragility of its civil-military relations played a decisive role in Sukarno's eventual overthrow. Consequently, civil-military relations are central to explaining why Ghana experienced a relatively swift coup d'état, whereas Indonesia underwent a more prolonged and complex political crisis.

Both men pursued anti-imperialist policies and forged strong ties with the socialist bloc, which enhanced their domestic legitimacy but also led many Western countries to regard them with suspicion. Kwame Nkrumah was widely perceived as excessively pro-Soviet and pro-Chinese, and Ghana was subjected to political destabilization and economic disruption linked to Cold War rivalries. Foreign aid declined, and

Nkrumah's macroeconomic policies proved unable to withstand mounting domestic crises. In Indonesia, Sukarno established close relations with Beijing and Moscow through what became known as the Jakarta–Pyongyang–Beijing axis and pursued a confrontational foreign policy, most notably through the Malaysian Confrontation. These measures heightened external pressure and intensified Indonesia's international isolation. Western responses to the two leaders differed in context but were similar in application, as both involved efforts to undermine internal stability through economic and diplomatic coercion. This contrast demonstrates that Cold War geopolitics functioned not merely as a contextual backdrop but as an active force that weakened both revolutionary state-building projects.

Beyond these factors, some of the most notable contrasts can be found in the character of the political entities each leader constructed. Kwame Nkrumah gradually molded a one party state in order to enable decisive and planned economic development. This concentration of power facilitated short term political efficiency but simultaneously reduced the space for political opposition and accelerated the loss of governmental legitimacy. Sukarno, by contrast, promoted a

model of Guided Democracy that incorporated elements of an ideologically pluralist political system in which diverse forces were combined. This model was not mediated through political parties but was instead centered on the authority of the president himself. While this form of political unification produced a temporary sense of stability, it failed to resolve the intensifying ideological struggles within Indonesian society. This juxtaposition illustrates that the key variation in state building lay in the contrast between Nkrumah's party centered centralization and Sukarno's attempt at political synthesis. This difference helps account for the divergent trajectories of state development in Ghana and Indonesia. It can therefore be concluded that the contrasting state building paths of Nkrumah and Sukarno were not merely a function of differing domestic conditions but rather the product of an interaction between ideological visions, institutional legacies, civil military relations, and external pressures. Whereas Nkrumah's crisis stemmed largely from limited state capacity combined with a highly centralized development strategy, Sukarno's crisis emerged from the complexity of domestic politics and persistent ideological fragmentation. This contrast demonstrates that revolutionary nationalism generated

markedly different trajectories of state building and underscores that political charisma alone was not a sufficient condition for a successful state building process.

DISCUSSIONS

With regard to the construction of bureaucratic capacity, both Sukarno and Kwame Nkrumah inherited colonial institutional legacies that were poorly suited to the demands of national development. However, the institutions they inherited differed substantially. The Dutch left Indonesia a relatively extensive and well-trained bureaucratic apparatus, comparable in some respects to that of Nehruvian India, yet more oriented toward the extraction and management of resources than toward their transfer to the imperial metropole. Sukarno drew upon this institutional inheritance in pursuing state-building projects but encountered persistent difficulties in exercising control over a politically fragmented and geographically dispersed bureaucracy. By contrast, British colonial rule produced a small and highly centralized bureaucratic apparatus in Ghana, one that proved too weak to sustain Nkrumah's ambitious industrialization agenda. In response to this administrative vacuum, Nkrumah opted to concentrate power within the single-party structure of the Convention

People's Party. Paradoxically, this strategy narrowed institutional alternatives and accelerated the erosion of state legitimacy.

Additionally, in their efforts to attain political legitimacy within pluralized social contexts, both leaders relied primarily on the charisma derived from their revolutionary credentials. Sukarno embodied nationalism through a syncretic ideological framework, most notably expressed in Pancasila and Nasakom, which sought to reconcile competing nationalist, Islamic, and communist currents within the framework of Guided Democracy. Sukarno's authority rested largely on his ideological role as a bridge between the various social and political groupings in Indonesia. Kwame Nkrumah, by contrast, grounded political legitimacy in an African identity and in the broader Pan-African project, articulated through the concepts of African Personality and African Socialism. Ghana, however, was relatively more ethnically homogeneous than Indonesia, and Nkrumah therefore did not confront comparable levels of ideological and religious pluralism. Opposition instead emerged primarily from political elites and traditional chiefs, who viewed Nkrumah's project as excessively radical and potentially disruptive to established local power networks.

Beyond this, in their efforts to transcend social and political atomization, Sukarno and Kwame Nkrumah pursued markedly different strategies, largely as a result of variations in their respective societal formations. Indonesia experienced severe fragmentation following independence, characterized by ideological confrontation, regional rebellions, religious polarization, and antagonism between the Partai Komunis Indonesia and the Tentara Nasional Indonesia. In response to this fragmentation, Sukarno made symbolic integration and mass mobilization the cornerstones of his Guided Democracy model, yet he failed to institutionalize effective procedures for managing political conflict. Rather than diminishing, fragmentation intensified and ultimately reached its peak during the crisis of 1965. Ghana, by contrast, was less politically fragmented. Nevertheless, resistance from opposition parties, traditional authorities, and economic elites posed a significant challenge. Nkrumah responded by consolidating political power within a single-party system, a strategy that neither addressed the underlying sources of fragmentation nor reduced opposition and instead contributed to growing alienation from his regime.

These two leaders also had to contend with international geopolitical forces. Both

Sukarno and Kwame Nkrumah rejected Western hegemony and sought to chart a middle path through the Non-Aligned Movement. However, this shared anti-IMF and anti-Western stance rendered them increasingly unacceptable to Western powers. Sukarno gradually moved Indonesia closer to the Eastern Bloc by establishing strong relations with China and the Soviet Union and by adopting a more confrontational foreign policy, most notably through the Konfrontasi against Malaysia. While these initiatives enhanced his international profile, they undermined his domestic standing as economic difficulties intensified and diplomatic pressure mounted. Nkrumah faced a similar dilemma. His alignment with the Sino-Soviet bloc and his commitment to radical Pan-Africanism provoked strong reactions in the West, particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom, which responded by supporting domestic actors opposed to his leadership. This external pressure significantly contributed to political instability in Ghana, especially as economic conditions began to deteriorate.

On balance, an examination of these four sets of state-building strategies demonstrates that, although Sukarno and Kwame Nkrumah were both charismatic revolutionary leaders seeking to construct modern

states, their projects were shaped by differing colonial legacies, degrees of social pluralism, levels of political fragmentation, and geopolitical constraints. Sukarno relied primarily on ideological integration as a means of managing internal pluralism and fragmentation, whereas Nkrumah pursued political centralization in an effort to compensate for weak state capacity. However, both strategies were structurally constrained and ultimately contributed to the collapse of their respective political projects. This contrast highlights that postcolonial state-building is not merely the product of a leader's vision but is fundamentally shaped by the interaction among administrative capacity, political authority, social formation, and global forces.

CONCLUSION

Taken together, the comparative analysis of Ghana and Indonesia demonstrates that revolutionary nationalism was neither a sufficient nor a self-sustaining foundation for postcolonial state building. While it enabled mass mobilization and conferred early political legitimacy, its institutional effects were fundamentally shaped by inherited administrative structures, patterns of social fragmentation, and the constraints imposed by Cold War geopolitics. The trajectories of Kwame Nkrumah and Sukarno illustrate that divergent strategies, political centralization in the

former case and ideological integration in the latter, represented context specific responses to structural challenges rather than freely chosen political projects. In both instances, however, these strategies narrowed institutional adaptability and intensified political vulnerability. The broader implication is that postcolonial state formation cannot be adequately explained through leadership or ideology alone, but must be understood as a contingent process in which political authority, institutional capacity, and global power relations interact to delimit the possibilities of revolutionary governance.

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