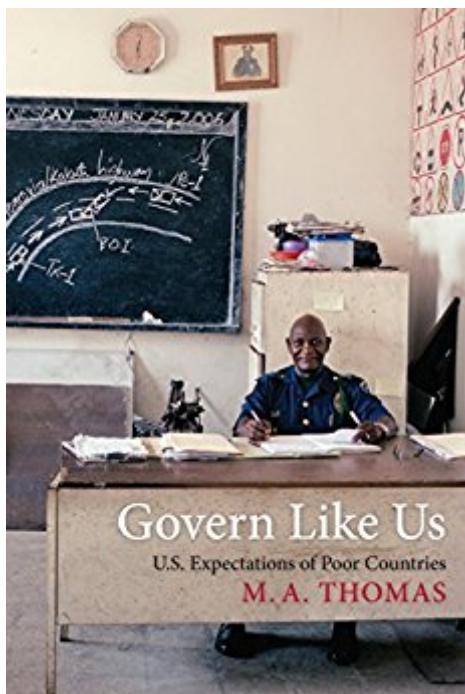


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# Govern Like Us: U.S. Expectations Of Poor Countries



**Govern Like Us**  
U.S. Expectations of Poor Countries  
**M. A. THOMAS**



## Synopsis

In the poorest countries, such as Afghanistan, Haiti, and Mali, the United States has struggled to work with governments whose corruption and lack of capacity are increasingly seen to be the cause of instability and poverty. The development and security communities call for "good governance" to improve the rule of law, democratic accountability, and the delivery of public goods and services. The United States and other rich liberal democracies insist that this is the only legitimate model of governance. Yet poor governments cannot govern according to these ideals and instead are compelled to rely more heavily on older, cheaper strategies of holding power, such as patronage and repression. The unwillingness to admit that poor governments do and must govern differently has cost the United States and others inestimable blood and coin. Informed by years of fieldwork and drawing on practitioner work and academic scholarship in politics, economics, law, and history, this book explains the origins of poor governments in the formation of the modern state system and describes the way they govern. It argues that, surprisingly, the effort to stigmatize and criminalize the governance of the poor is both fruitless and destabilizing. The United States requires a more effective foreign policy to engage poor governments and acknowledge how they govern.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Thomas posits that financially poor governments govern less because they do not have the resources to govern more; necessarily must govern differently because they do not have the resources to govern in accord with our Western ideal; and then concludes that because of their lack of economic resources, poor governments have more important priorities than providing those governed with public goods like health care, infrastructure and the rule of law. I don't think anyone can reasonably disagree with Thomas' first two points, but to me her third point seems more a product of the people in government, than the nature of the government, but it may be impossible to separate the two when dealing with poor countries and governments. Thomas points out how advanced governments have failed to recognize the essential differences and flaws in poor governments and continually waste capital when making aid decisions based on misperception and hope, rather than reality. Thomas also persuasively compares the success of western governments, the product of centuries of the consolidation of power, with the failure of poor governments, set up arbitrarily and quickly through decolonization without much thought to how those poor countries could finance expected governmental activities far from the capital. Some of the Thomas' prescriptions, like the repeal of FCPA, may lead to debate, but her essential thesis, is hey guys lets get real. Poor governments don't function like rich governments, so we should deal with those poor governments with our eyes open and with realistic expectations in the hope for incremental progress. (After all is it realistic to expect the Third world to establish functional governmental machinery in two generations machinery when it took the First world centuries to accomplish that task). The book is an important addition to discussion regarding foreign policy, aid and NGOs. I highly recommend it.

This is an excellent book about the limitations of governance reform as practiced by the contemporary development community, from someone who has both extensive practical experience and theoretical grounding. And it's very readable, to boot.

A solid updating of development strategies that takes corruption and malgovernance as givens but

can be overcome. Many examples, mostly from Africa. Usable in courses on the developing areas.

The central, cold-shower argument of “Govern Like Us” lies on page 130: “There may be better ways for poor governments to govern, but it will not be from the popular legitimacy that comes from democratic elections, the rule of law, and the wide delivery of public goods and services because poor governments cannot afford to provide them.” In the surrounding 207 pages, Melissa Thomas makes some good points that U.S. efforts at nation-building have been frequently ill-conceived, and have often come to naught. (Think: Iraq, Afghanistan, Haiti... In that context, she is right that throwing billions in military and development aid at corrupt, impoverished countries with no absorptive capacity will not help them develop into stable, well-governed states with accountable governments. The fatal flaw in her argument, however, is that despite repeating the above refrain in every chapter, Thomas admits you really can't calculate how much “good governance costs”, and therefore, there is no way to know if a country is ready to move on. After summarily concluding that poor countries cannot afford good governance, and dismissing the ability of intangibles such as “political will” to make a difference, Thomas informs us that the poor really have no choice but either (a) corrupt governments or (b) repressive ones. Don't bother with examples of poor states that rejected these choices and pro-actively put themselves on a path to reform, like post-Soviet success stories Estonia and Georgia—they're not poor enough to count in her sample. (Georgia's annual GDP per capita was just \$1,186 in 2004 when President Saakashvili launched his anti-corruption efforts, which helped quadruple the country's wealth in a decade.) The other glaring hole in “Govern Like Us” is the almost complete absence of any distinction between countries whose governments are poor but trying to improve, and well-endowed states whose leaders are willfully robbing the national wealth and impoverishing its people. Three pages from the end of the book, she finally acknowledges “There is a qualitative difference, for example, between North Korea and Rwanda.” She goes on to note that “A large body of scholarly work has debated the benefits of development-minded authoritarian regimes, such as pre-democracy South Korea...” but then inexplicably cuts off that line of thought and changes topics. Ironically, the huge developmental gulf between North and South Korea demonstrates the falsehood of Thomas' claim that “political will” has nothing to do with good governance or growth, and poor countries cannot afford it. The DPRK and the ROK began at exactly the same starting line in 1945, and barely a generation later the south is a

thriving OECD member, while the north is a starving basket case. This dangerous fallacy seemingly equates nations whose corrupt elites have impoverished their people by pouring national wealth in nuclear weapons and cyber attacks, sending what's left offshore, (i.e. DPRK, Russia, Pakistan) with those like Haiti and Somalia whose poverty results from mismanagement exacerbated by natural disaster, disease and war. Thomas undercuts her own argument again by pointing out (p. 129) that “Patronage and clientalism are not strategies that are reserved for use by poor governments,” citing examples of campaign finance malfeasance in the United States. So...if rich countries can be corrupt, then why can't poor countries be honest? Thomas never actually presents concrete research or evidence that there is a causal linkage between quality of governance and income level. She also steers clear of addressing the one explanation that the rest of her book points at—culture—for the third-rail of social science that it is. Only in the words of another academic, Vivek Sharma, does she note (p. 184) that:

“Simply taking Danish-style administrative organs and transplanting them to Afghanistan cannot work because the people who would actually staff them would be Afghans...” Again, if cultural determinism is the explanation, then why focus on income levels? Many observers (including the reviewer above) make the erroneous argument that: “It took developed countries centuries to get where they are, so we can't expect undeveloped countries to get there in a couple of generations.” This sounds reasonable until we consider that today's poor nations were around centuries ago, too. They didn't just spring out of the ground after World War II. Russia—a country both very wealthy and very corrupt—has 1,000 years of history, and China three times that. Despite the world-historical civilizations of both these nations, they languished in desperate poverty until just the last few decades. However, now that they are wealthier they are no less corrupt (by our definition). Certainly one cannot change a people's culture from the outside in a few generations, if ever. Perhaps geography is destiny (“Guns, Germs, and Steel”) or perhaps institutions are, (“How Nations Fail”) but it is still not clear that poor countries must be either corrupt or oppressive, as Thomas argues. “Govern Like Us” breaks sharply with numerous recent books on corruption (i.e. “Putin's Kleptocracy”, “Thieves of State”, “The Looting Machine”, and “Dirty Entanglements” to name a few) that view corruption not as a stage of development but as a sign that leaders have willfully departed from the path to development in ways that pose a national security threat to their people and their neighbors.

Thomas speaks of "patronage best practices" but it's not clear what these are. She mentions CIA payments to Afghan President Karzai with sacks of cash to feed his corrupt patronage system, but the lesson is unclear: is this an example of how to work within such a system instead of against it? Are sacks of unaccountable cash paving Afghanistan's way to more honest government?

ÃƒÂ¢Ã  ¬Ã  Å“Govern Like UsÃƒÂ¢Ã  ¬Ã  Å• takes article-length cautionary tales of failed nation-building, on which Western governments should reflect soberly, and has spun them out into book length. In the process, Thomas has unfortunately shed no light on what works, and in the process has left (perhaps inadvertently) the dangerous impression that criminally rapacious and oppressive regimes simply can't afford to behave any other way.

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