

Enhancing Administrative Autonomy within the Ministry of National Education in Madagascar by Reducing Political Influence

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the extent of administrative autonomy within the Ministry of National Education in Madagascar and to analyze how political influence shapes administrative practices, decision-making processes, and education governance outcomes. The study adopts a qualitative design based on semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Data were collected from 20 purposively selected key informants, including senior ministry officials, mid-level administrators, school inspectors, policy advisors, members of the National Assembly, and education experts. Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns related to administrative autonomy, political influence, and governance constraints. The findings reveal that political interference significantly limits administrative autonomy, particularly in personnel management, budgeting, and policy implementation. Weak legal safeguards and ambiguous institutional roles intensify administrative dependence on political actors. Professional capacity and informal depoliticization strategies partially mitigate political pressure but remain insufficient to ensure sustained institutional autonomy. This study contributes original empirical evidence on ministerial-level administrative autonomy in a low-income, politically fragile context. By focusing on the central education administration in Madagascar, it addresses a gap in education governance literature that has largely emphasized school-level or higher education autonomy.

Keywords: Administration, autonomy, politics, MEN, Madagascar.

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INTRODUCTION

Administrative autonomy within ministries of education is widely recognized as a critical condition for effective governance, policy continuity, and service delivery in national education systems (Kapelela, 2025). In many developing countries, education ministries operate within highly politicized environments where administrative decisions are frequently shaped by short-term political interests rather than long-term institutional objectives (Eric et al, 2025). Madagascar represents a salient case in this regard, as the Ministry of National Education continues to face persistent challenges related to political interference, institutional fragility, and limited bureaucratic independence (Ratna et al., 2025). These constraints have direct implications for policy implementation, educational quality, and public trust in state institutions.

The Ministry of National Education in Madagascar plays a central role in shaping national human capital development, managing public schools, allocating resources, and implementing reforms across primary and secondary education (Bien-Aimé et al., 2025). Administrative autonomy within this ministry refers to the capacity of professional administrators to make decisions concerning planning, budgeting, personnel management, and policy execution based on legal mandates and technical expertise rather than partisan or political pressure (Skoog & Svensson, 2023). Studies on bureaucratic autonomy emphasize that politically insulated administrative structures are better positioned to ensure policy stability, accountability, and performance efficiency (Yesilkagit & van Thiel, 2008). In contexts where political influence permeates

administrative decision-making, ministries often experience frequent leadership changes, disrupted reform agendas, and weakened institutional memory.

Madagascar's education sector has historically been shaped by structural dependency, governance instability, and limited administrative capacity. Empirical evidence demonstrates that higher education and broader education systems in Madagascar suffer from ineffective governance arrangements, weak coordination mechanisms, and insufficient administrative-level institutional authority (Emynorane et al., 2025a). Political interference has contributed to inconsistent policy priorities, delayed reforms, and inefficiencies in resource utilization. These challenges are not isolated to Madagascar but reflect broader patterns observed across Sub-Saharan Africa, where education governance reforms often struggle to reconcile decentralization objectives with political realities (Matete, 2022).

Administrative autonomy is closely linked to the concept of depoliticization, which refers to the deliberate reduction of direct political control over administrative and technical decisions (Eric et al., 2025). Governance scholars argue that depoliticization does not imply the removal of democratic accountability but rather the establishment of clear boundaries between political leadership and professional administration (Flinders & Wood, 2014). In education systems, depoliticization has been promoted as a strategy to enhance managerial efficiency, protect professional norms, and ensure evidence-based policymaking (Ozga, 2025). Experiences from the United Kingdom and Australia indicate that increased administrative and school-level autonomy can positively influence performance outcomes and leadership satisfaction when accompanied by accountability mechanisms (Horwood et al., 2022).

Within the Malagasy context, political influence over education administration manifests through frequent ministerial turnover, politically motivated appointments, and discretionary budget reallocations. Media and governance studies reveal that public fund capture and elite influence remain persistent governance issues in Madagascar, undermining transparency and institutional credibility (Francken et al., 2009). These dynamics limit the capacity of administrative actors within the Ministry of National Education to operate independently and to sustain long-term reform initiatives. The absence of stable administrative autonomy weakens policy coherence and reduces the effectiveness of decentralization reforms aimed at empowering local education authorities (Emynorane et al., 2025b).

Previous studies on administrative autonomy in education have largely focused on school-level governance and higher education institutions. Comparative studies demonstrate that financial and managerial autonomy can enhance institutional performance when governance structures are clearly defined and protected from excessive political intervention (Chynybaev et al., 2025; Waluyo, 2018). In higher education systems across Africa, autonomy reforms have produced mixed outcomes, often constrained by political control, regulatory ambiguity, and limited administrative capacity (Mohammed, 2024). Evidence from Ethiopia and Indonesia illustrates that autonomy without adequate safeguards can expose institutions to new forms of political and bureaucratic pressure rather than reducing them.

At the subnational level, analytical frameworks for measuring administrative autonomy highlight dimensions such as fiscal discretion, personnel authority, and policy implementation independence (Aoki & Schroeder, 2014). These dimensions provide valuable tools for assessing how autonomy operates within complex governance systems. Studies from Tanzania suggest that decentralization reforms often redistribute authority without fully transferring decision-making power, resulting in hybrid governance arrangements where political actors retain significant influence over administrative processes (Matete, 2022; Kapelela, 2025). Such findings are highly relevant to Madagascar, where decentralization policies coexist with centralized political control.

The role of education and training in strengthening administrative autonomy has also been emphasized in public administration literature. Study indicates that civil servants equipped with strong policy analysis skills, professional ethics, and institutional knowledge are better able to resist undue political pressure and contribute to effective governance (Angaw et al., 2023). In the education sector, professionalization frameworks have been proposed to align administrative practices with quality assurance, policy coherence, and institutional accountability (Akıncıoğlu, 2025). These approaches

underscore the importance of administrative capacity-building as a complementary strategy to structural reforms.

Political influence in education governance is not always overt and often operates through subtle mechanisms such as agenda setting, performance indicators, and reform narratives. Studies on depoliticization strategies reveal that administrative actors frequently adopt technical or managerial language to neutralize political conflict while maintaining operational control (Skoog & Svensson, 2023). In education reforms, particularly in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education, depoliticization has been used to frame policy decisions as technical necessities rather than political choices (Sharma & Hudson, 2022). These dynamics highlight the complexity of reducing political influence without obscuring accountability.

Critical scholarship on education in Africa further cautions that autonomy reforms may reproduce existing power asymmetries if they fail to address broader socio-political contexts. Autoethnographic and critical analyses emphasize that governance reforms often prioritize efficiency over democratic engagement and critical consciousness (Njoya, 2025). In Madagascar, where historical inequalities and governance challenges persist, enhancing administrative autonomy requires careful consideration of social legitimacy, institutional trust, and participatory mechanisms.

Despite the growing body of literature on education governance, several gaps remain. Limited empirical attention has been devoted to administrative autonomy at the ministerial level, particularly in low-income and fragile states. Existing studies predominantly focus on schools, universities, or subnational authorities, leaving central education ministries underexplored. Studies on Madagascar have extensively documented governance weaknesses and policy challenges in higher education and public administration, but have not systematically examined how political influence constrains administrative autonomy within the Ministry of National Education (Emynorane et al., 2025a). This gap restricts the development of context-sensitive policy recommendations.

Another limitation in previous studies lies in the tendency to treat political influence as a uniform phenomenon. Political interference varies in form, intensity, and institutional location, requiring nuanced analysis that distinguishes between legitimate political oversight and detrimental politicization. Comparative insights from Europe and Africa suggest that autonomy-enhancing reforms must be tailored to specific governance traditions and administrative cultures (Gobby & Niesche, 2019; Fan et al., 2020). Applying these insights to Madagascar necessitates an in-depth examination of institutional arrangements, legal frameworks, and administrative practices.

Methodological limitations also characterize existing literature. Many studies rely on cross-national quantitative indicators that may overlook informal governance practices and context-specific dynamics. Qualitative and mixed-method approaches are better suited to capturing the lived experiences of administrators and the everyday realities of political influence. The present study responds to this limitation by adopting a contextually grounded perspective that integrates governance theory with empirical insights from Madagascar's education administration.

By focusing on enhancing administrative autonomy within the Ministry of National Education by reducing political influence, this study addresses a critical yet underexplored dimension of education governance in Madagascar. The analysis builds upon established theories of bureaucratic autonomy, depoliticization, and education governance while situating them within the Malagasy institutional context. This approach contributes to both scholarly debates and policy discussions on how education ministries in developing countries can strengthen administrative effectiveness, institutional resilience, and policy continuity.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative design to explore administrative autonomy within the Ministry of National Education in Madagascar and to examine how political influence shapes administrative practices and decision-making processes. This design is appropriate because administrative autonomy and political

influence are complex, context-dependent phenomena that cannot be adequately examined with quantitative indicators alone. The study emphasizes in-depth inquiry into institutional dynamics, informal governance practices, and the perceptions of actors directly involved in education administration. By focusing on meaning, experience, and interpretation, the study captures how administrative actors understand autonomy, respond to political pressures, and implement policies within constrained institutional environments. This approach is consistent with governance and public administration studies that highlight the importance of context-sensitive and interpretive analysis when examining bureaucratic behavior and institutional reform in developing-country settings.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. A total of 20 key informants were purposively selected based on their direct involvement in educational governance and administrative decision-making. Informants included senior officials of the Ministry of National Education, mid-level administrators, school inspectors, policy advisors, members of the National Assembly, and education experts with experience in public administration and education reform. This selection ensured a diversity of perspectives across hierarchical levels, institutional roles, and political-administrative positions. Documentary sources, including policy texts, legal frameworks, reform strategies, and official reports, were examined to complement interview data and enhance triangulation. The profiles of the informants are presented in Table 1, which summarizes their institutional affiliations and relevance to the study. Data analysis followed a thematic approach, involving systematic coding and categorization of interview transcripts and documents. Initial coding identified recurring patterns related to administrative autonomy, political influence, and institutional constraints, followed by analytical coding to establish relationships among themes. This iterative process strengthened analytical rigor and supported the development of empirically grounded insights into administrative autonomy within the Malagasy education system.

Table 1. Profile of Research Informants

| Informant Category | Institutional Affiliation | Number of Informants | Relevance to the Study |
|---------------------------|--|-----------------------------|---|
| Senior Officials | Ministry of National Education (Central Level) | 4 | Strategic decision-making, policy direction, political-administrative interface |
| Mid-level Administrators | Ministry Directorates and Departments | 5 | Policy implementation, administrative coordination, and managerial autonomy |
| School Inspectors | Regional and District Education Offices | 4 | Decentralized administration, supervision, and local political influence |
| Policy Advisors | Government or Independent Advisory Bodies | 3 | Reform design, governance expertise, depoliticization strategies |
| Members of Parliament | Parliamentary deputy representative | 2 | Legislative oversight, political influence on education policy and administration |
| Education Experts | Academia and Civil Society | 2 | Independent perspectives on governance and institutional reform |

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Political Interference in Administrative Decision-Making

Findings from the study indicate that political interference remains a defining feature of administrative decision-making within the Ministry of National Education in Madagascar. Interviewed administrators consistently described political involvement in areas such as senior appointments, budget allocation, and policy prioritization. These interventions were reported to occur both formally, through ministerial directives, and informally, through political networks linked to elected officials. Such practices constrain administrators' ability to act in accordance with professional standards and institutional mandates.

The presence of National Assembly members among the informants revealed that legislative oversight often extends beyond accountability to direct influence over administrative affairs. Parliamentary deputies reported frequent engagement with ministry officials regarding school construction projects, staffing decisions, and regional resource distribution. Administrators perceived these interactions as politically motivated, particularly during electoral cycles, which introduced pressures to align administrative actions with constituency interests rather than national education priorities.

These findings align with broader scholarship on bureaucratic autonomy, which emphasizes that excessive political influence undermines administrative neutrality and institutional effectiveness (Yesilkagit & van Thiel, 2008). Similar dynamics have been observed in education systems where politicisation weakens policy coherence and disrupts long-term reform trajectories (Fan et al., 2020). In the Malagasy case, political interference appears to function as a structural constraint rather than an episodic challenge, reinforcing patterns of administrative dependency.

Constraints on Administrative Autonomy at the Ministerial Level

The study reveals that both formal institutional arrangements and informal governance practices limit administrative autonomy within the Ministry of National Education. Administrators reported restricted authority over personnel management, financial planning, and program implementation. Key decisions often require political approval, even when technical assessments suggest alternative courses of action. This situation reduces the scope for managerial discretion and delays administrative processes.

Mid-level administrators highlighted the lack of clear legal protections for administrative independence. Although decentralization and reform policies formally promote autonomy, implementation mechanisms remain weak. Authority is frequently centralized at the political level, creating ambiguity over roles and responsibilities (Bien-Aimé et al., 2025). This finding resonates with studies demonstrating that decentralization reforms often redistribute administrative tasks without transferring genuine decision-making power (Aoki & Schroeder, 2014; Matete, 2022).

From a governance perspective, limited ministerial autonomy undermines institutional resilience and policy continuity. Research on education governance in Africa suggests that autonomy without legal clarity and enforcement mechanisms exposes administrators to political vulnerability rather than empowerment (Kapelela, 2025). The Malagasy experience illustrates how partial autonomy reforms can inadvertently reinforce political dominance when institutional safeguards are absent.

Administrative Professionalism and Capacity as Moderating Factors

Despite structural constraints, the study finds that administrative professionalism and individual capacity serve as moderating factors in the management of political influence. Senior officials with strong technical expertise and institutional experience demonstrated greater ability to negotiate political demands and preserve procedural integrity. Training in public administration and policy analysis was frequently cited as a critical factor enabling administrators to justify decisions using legal and technical arguments.

Education experts and policy advisors emphasized that professional norms serve as informal buffers against politicisation. Administrators who adhere to standardized procedures and documentation practices are better positioned to resist arbitrary political directives. This observation is consistent with evidence

showing that public administration education enhances civil servants' policy capacities and professional judgment (Angaw et al., 2023).

The findings support arguments that professionalisation frameworks can strengthen administrative autonomy by aligning individual competencies with institutional objectives (Akıncioğlu, 2025). In the Malagasy context, professional capacity does not eliminate political influence, but it mitigates its most disruptive effects. Investment in continuous training and merit-based recruitment emerges as a practical strategy for enhancing autonomy within existing political constraints.

Depoliticization Strategies and Governance Practices

The study identifies several informal depoliticization strategies employed by administrators to manage political pressure. These strategies include framing decisions in technical language, relying on procedural rules, and delaying implementation until political attention shifts. Administrators described these practices as necessary coping mechanisms rather than formal governance reforms.

Such findings correspond with the literature on depoliticization, which conceptualizes it as an administrative strategy to distance operational decisions from political contestation (Flinders & Wood, 2014). Administrative actors often use managerial and technical rationales to legitimize decisions and reduce political scrutiny (Skoog & Svensson, 2023). In education governance, these strategies are commonly observed in reform implementation processes (Ozga, 2025).

At the same time, the reliance on informal depoliticization raises concerns regarding transparency and accountability. Governance scholars caution that depoliticization can obscure power relations and limit democratic oversight if not institutionally regulated (Sharma & Hudson, 2022). The Malagasy case demonstrates that depoliticization functions as a survival mechanism within politicized systems rather than a comprehensive governance solution.

Implications for Education Governance and Institutional Reform

The combined results highlight significant implications for education governance in Madagascar. Limited administrative autonomy, persistent political influence, and reliance on informal coping strategies collectively weaken institutional effectiveness. Administrators reported difficulties in sustaining reform initiatives due to frequent leadership changes and shifting political priorities, which disrupt long-term planning.

Comparative evidence from other developing contexts indicates that autonomy reforms yield positive outcomes only when accompanied by accountability mechanisms and institutional clarity (Waluyo, 2018; Chynyaev et al., 2025). In Madagascar, the absence of stable administrative autonomy contributes to governance fragmentation and undermines the capacity to implement policies. This situation mirrors challenges identified in higher education governance, where institutional effectiveness is constrained by political and structural dependencies (Emynorane et al., 2025b).

Critical perspectives further suggest that governance reforms must account for broader socio-political contexts to avoid reinforcing existing power asymmetries (Njoya, 2025). Enhancing administrative autonomy within the Ministry of National Education requires not only technical reforms but also political commitment to institutional integrity. The study's findings underscore the need for balanced governance arrangements that protect administrative professionalism while maintaining democratic accountability.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that administrative autonomy within the Ministry of National Education in Madagascar remains constrained by persistent political influence, limited institutional safeguards, and ambiguous governance arrangements. Administrative decision-making is frequently shaped by political considerations, thereby weakening policy coherence, disrupting reform continuity, and restricting the professional discretion of administrators. Although individual capacity and professionalism partially

mitigate these pressures, structural limitations continue to undermine institutional effectiveness. To enhance administrative autonomy, practical measures are required at both institutional and policy levels. Clear legal frameworks should be established to define the boundaries between political oversight and administrative authority, particularly in areas of personnel management and budget execution. Merit-based recruitment, continuous professional training, and standardized administrative procedures can strengthen bureaucratic professionalism and reduce vulnerability to political interference. Strengthening accountability mechanisms, including transparent reporting and legislative oversight focused on performance rather than intervention, would further support balanced governance. Future studies should examine administrative autonomy through comparative or longitudinal approaches to assess reform outcomes over time and across sectors. Additional research focusing on subnational education administrations and the role of informal political networks would deepen understanding of governance dynamics in Madagascar and similar contexts.

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