

Coalition government in Africa promotes inclusion but hurts accountability

Presidents in Benin, Malawi and Kenya have frequently had to construct legislative coalitions in order to secure a parliamentary majority. The need to form multi-party alliances has increased the costs of governing, forcing presidents to share cabinet positions and development funds with leaders from other parties. A research project at the University of Oxford has interviewed over 300 legislators to explore the consequences of coalitional politics for governmental efficacy and democratic consolidation. The findings of the project demonstrate coalition politics is a double-edged sword, promoting political inclusion and decisive government at the expense of exacerbating corruption.



Key findings

- MPs in Benin, Kenya and Malawi agree that coalition government has facilitated the inclusion of diverse social interests into the government, boosting political stability.
- But MPs also agree that coalition government has a dark side, as legislative alliance formation exacerbates corruption and marginalizes legislative opposition.
- Perceptions of the overall relationship between coalition government on democracy are mixed: positive in more democratic Benin but negative in Kenya and Malawi.

Policy conclusion

The high number of rival political parties – in part due to the divisive impact of ethno-regional cleavages – means that coalition government is here to stay in much of Africa. Forming cross-party alliances requires presidents to share greater power and resources than would otherwise be the case. However, it has also encouraged presidents to use a range of diverse strategies to manage their alliance, including the “exchange of favours”. In turn, this process has tended to increase parliamentary corruption and undermine legislative scrutiny. Taken together, these developments have weakened the formal structures of political parties, posing a serious challenge to the consolidation of African democracy.

Policy context

Contrary to much existing analysis, presidents in Benin, Kenya and Malawi regularly have formed coalitions in order to secure a legislative majority. In many cases, presidential parties actually have a relatively narrow social base, and are unable to control parliament. This has led to the emergence of surprising marriages of convenience, such as the Jubilee Alliance in Kenya, which brings together two leaders – President Uhuru Kenyatta and Deputy President William Ruto – accused of inciting post-election violence against each other's communities by the International Criminal Court. Such coalitions are typically sustained through the sharing of ministerial positions. However, the weak rule of law in many African countries means that such deals are often also cemented through the "exchange of favours" and other informal practices.

Overview of the project

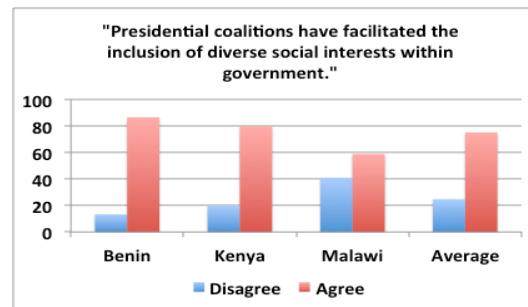
Researchers from the University of Oxford have conducted the first cross-regional study of coalitional presidentialism. With the assistance of research consultants based in nine countries across three regions – Brazil, Chile, Ecuador (Latin America); Benin, Kenya, Malawi (Africa); Armenia, Russia, Ukraine (Former Soviet Union) – they surveyed and interviewed over 300 MPs in government and opposition on their experience of coalitional rule. The results presented here are drawn from 110 interviews with MPs in Africa.

Project findings

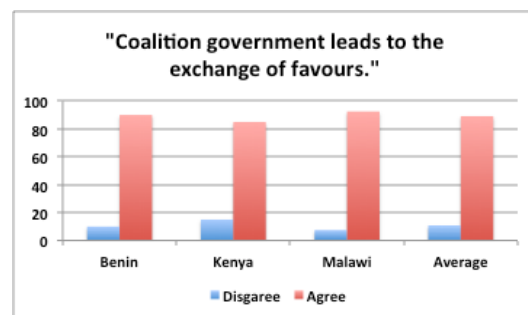
The trade-off between broad and decisive government and clean and accountable politics is epitomised by the cases of Benin, Kenya and Malawi. Over 80% of MPs in Benin and Kenya believe that coalition government fosters the inclusion of diverse interests, and a majority of MPs in Malawi agree. A clear majority of MPs in Benin and Malawi also agree that coalition government has led to more decisive policy making (Kenyan MPs are split 50-50 on this question).

But legislators also recognize the many drawbacks of coalition government. An overwhelming majority of MPs agree that coalition government has contributed to a form of politics based on the exchange of favours, in which the executive mobilizes legislative support through informal deals that include – but are not limited to – the promise

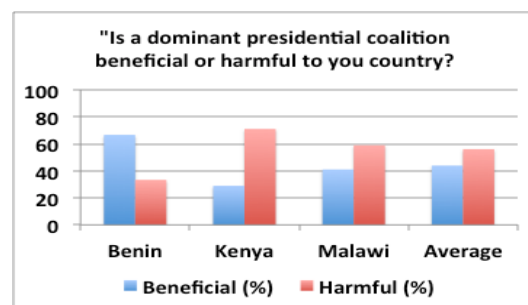
of personal benefits such as cash transfers and lucrative appointments.



As a result, legislators in all three countries are sceptical about the overall impact of coalitions. Over 80% of MPs in each case believe that they have marginalized the opposition and undermined legislative scrutiny.



Partly for this reason, a strong majority of respondents in Kenya (71%) and Malawi (59%) feel that dominant presidential coalitions are harmful to their countries. Only in more democratic Benin, where legislators report less frequent abuse of the exchange of favours, do MPs see coalition government as beneficial (73%).



For more detailed information

For further information on the project, including references to other publications, see: www.area-studies.ox.ac.uk/presidentialism

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