



## Helpdesk Research Report

# Dominant party systems and development programming

Edward Laws

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### Question

*Review recent literature on dominant party political systems in developing countries, drawing lessons for development programming and the risks and challenges with such systems of political governance. Where available, include information on encouraging core state institutional reforms, enhancing accountability, and dealing with private sector development.*

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## 1. Overview

A dominant party system refers to a category of parties or political organisations that have successively secured election victories and whose defeat is unlikely for the foreseeable future. The term has been applied to a variety of parties and organisations, ranging from the right-wing Guomindang in Taiwan to the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa, and including the Social Democrats in Sweden, the Liberal Democrats in Japan, the Christian Democrats in Italy and the Indian National Congress in India. In dominant party systems, the victory of the opposition party is an improbable event, requiring a level of opposition mobilisation, unity and/or skill beyond what would normally be required for victory in a democratic competition. As such, dominant party systems are often identified as hybrid or semi-authoritarian regimes.

This rapid literature review found few recent studies which look at the concepts or implications of one-party dominance in a development context. Frequently cited examples of existing research are Arian and Barnes (1974), Pempel (1990), Giliomee (1998), Rimanelli (Ed) (1999), Giliomee & Simkins (1999), and Bogaards & Boucek (Eds.) (2010). However, these studies are not based on recent, systematic comparative research and focus mainly on established democracies.

A number of studies describe the risks of dominant party systems in terms of corroding lines of accountability, and these risks are illustrated primarily through narrative case studies. However, this review found there is a lack of applied thinking or rigorous empirical investigation into how donors and the international community can work with dominant party systems to promote more responsive state-society relations, or other forms of development progress. Some recent work on political settlements includes recommendations for how development programming should be adapted to fit with dominant party systems. However, this research is at an early, primarily conceptual stage, and some authors working in the field acknowledge that more in-depth empirical support is required before robust policy prescriptions can be derived from it.

### **Key messages**

- Whilst **dominant parties deploy a range of methods to maintain power**, there is empirical evidence to suggest that the **exploitation of state resources** is of central importance.
- Recent work on political settlements analysis suggests that **working with the grain of dominant systems** is important for making progress on development objectives. This may involve adopting a **piecemeal approach to reform**, rather than trying to initiate sweeping top-down changes.
- Some authors point out that dominant parties are effective in **creating political stability and consolidating democratic institutions**.
- Other studies draw attention to the costs of such systems in terms of **blurring state-party lines, inhibiting the development of effective opposition, accumulating power and disrupting lines of accountability**.
- One-party dominance has been identified as one of the common characteristics of a number of countries in Africa that have experienced **strong economic growth** in recent years.
- There is evidence that the presence of an **autonomous, meritocratic bureaucracy**, alongside **strong corporatist relations**, are important determinants of economic performance in dominant party states.

## 2. Conceptualising political dominance

### The political economy of dominant parties

Dominant party systems are distinguished from other democracies by the monopoly of power held by a single party or political organisation. Given that the dominant party wins its position through democratic elections, this dominance is not typically maintained through force or deceit (de Jager, 2009). Due to the very nature of a democratic system such dominance requires maintenance and strategy. The methods used to ensure dominance may include (Ibid: 7-8):

- Delegitimising the opposition
- Corporatism (agreements/pacts between elites)
- Patronage
- Relying on and emphasising 'kinship' contacts between the citizens and government, for example through continually highlighting a shared past
- Instituting national projects
- Centralising political and economic power
- Controlling the selection of political leadership in the interest of the ruling party
- Manipulating elections and electoral systems
- Preferential party-funding practices
- Holding a monopoly or near-monopoly of the public policy agenda
- Uniting against a real or perceived enemy.

### *Dominant parties and public resources*

Using a cross-national analysis of election outcomes, Greene (2010) argues that dominant parties persist or fail based primarily on their ability to politicise public resources, which they achieve through political control of the public bureaucracy. When incumbents can access and use public resources for partisan purposes, they can outspend competitors and render the election result a foregone conclusion. Resource advantages mean that authoritarian dominant parties typically do not need to rely on fraud, violence or other forms of repression to maintain their rule. They can persist as competitive authoritarian regimes that give space to opposition forces, rather than as fully closed authoritarian regimes. Conversely, dominant party rule is threatened when the incumbent's access to public resources declines and opposition parties have a greater opportunity to compete for votes. Greene (2010) argues that the demise of dominant parties is therefore not due primarily to social or institutional changes, socioeconomic modernisation, globalisation, or the diffusion of democratic norms, but rather a lack of access to the resources needed to remain in power.

## **Dominant political settlements**

Political settlements analysis (PSA) is concerned with understanding the formal and informal power relationships between elites, and between elites and their respective groups of followers, that help to shape political and economic processes. One of the major implications of PSA is that successful development programming involves adaptation to formal and informal political processes, practices and power balances, and their associated path-dependencies (Kelsall 2016). PSA has generated a number of typologies and theories that hypothetically link different types of political settlement to differences in development outcomes. This has allowed further hypotheses about the kinds of policies that are likely to work best in the context of different settlements.

### ***The ESID framework***

There are a number of approaches to PSA. A recent influential framework has been developed by researchers at the Effective States and Inclusive Development (ESID) Research Centre, including Brian Levy, Michael Walton, and Tim Kelsall. ESID research categorises political settlements along two main axes: (i) the degree of competition in the political system. In dominant settlements, it is very difficult to remove the leader or ruling party from power, while in competitive settlements, this is much easier; and (ii) the degree to which personalised norms or impersonal rules govern institutions.

Levy (2015) distinguishes between various types of dominant and competitive political settlements and argues that development programming strategies should be aligned to fit them. Along the dominant trajectory, the effectiveness of reform efforts depends on the extent to which political leaders are developmentally-oriented and the extent to which the leadership has an unequivocal hold on power. Where these are present, Levy suggests that opportunities for ambitious public management reforms are good. In their absence, efforts to improve public management are unlikely to succeed. Dominant leaders or leadership groups have a great deal of discretion over the performance of the public bureaucracy. In consequence, where the leadership is inclined towards predation, public sector performance is likely to be poor. However, on occasion, dominant political leaders can emerge with a strong developmental orientation. In these circumstances, the potential may be high for unexpectedly strong bureaucratic performance (Levy, 2012: 8, 2014).

One of the key issues for political settlements theory is to explain how some settlements become more inclusive, stable and/or developmental over time (Levy & Walton, 2013; Levy, 2014; North et al., 2009). According to the ESID framework, this rarely happens by means of sweeping, top-down efforts to reform political systems and administrations. These approaches, which go against the grain of existing arrangements, are likely to result in resistance or collapse. Rather, development progress in dominant settlements is more likely to come through a piecemeal, step-by-step approach to bureaucratic reform. Technocratic initiatives, together with improved external stakeholder involvement, are more effective in these contexts. In competitive settlements, progress is more likely to arise when coalitions of stakeholders provide support for 'islands' of administrative effectiveness (Levy & Walton, 2013).

### ***Applying political settlements analysis***

The ESID political settlements typology, or a variant of it, has been used by a range of authors to analyse different country contexts and development problems:

- Golooba-Mutebi (2013) looks at the political coalitions that have ruled Rwanda in the post-independence period and their impact on political stability. The historic episodes of violence are

attributed to the failure of elites to create sufficiently inclusive political settlements. The system of proportional representation and the constitutional requirement that dominant parties share power with smaller parties are two aspects of the inclusive truce reached after the genocide and civil war, which has helped to maintain peace and stability.

- Hickey et al. (2015) explore how the politics of oil extraction is unfolding in Uganda, focusing on the nature of contracts and agreements drawn up between the government and oil companies. They use PSA to analyse the likely developmental capacity and commitment of Uganda to govern oil in the national interest in the near future. They argue that the country's recent shift from a largely developmental coalition to a 'weak dominant' party political settlement has undermined its capacity and commitment to delivering development, particularly in terms of the increasingly short-term pressures being exerted on the ruling coalition and the capacity of bureaucratic agencies to perform their roles effectively.
- Kelsall et al. (2016) apply PSA to debates on universal health coverage (UHC) in developing countries. They use the dominant/competitive distinction as a starting point for explaining the varying levels of political commitment to UHC in different contexts, focusing on Vietnam, Kyrgyzstan, Myanmar, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Indonesia and Bangladesh. These case studies provide broad support for the idea that UHC progress is typically stronger in dominant political settlements, and some support for the idea that UHC progress is optimal when policy strategies are designed to fit political settlement type in a given country.

## Advantages and risks of dominant party systems

Political analysts have argued for both positive and negative implications of dominant party systems.

**Political stability and democratic consolidation:** Pempel (1990) points out that a dominant party can facilitate stability by entrenching democratic institutions, marginalising political extremes, fusing ethnic differences and creating a forum for compromise. Arian and Barnes (1974: 593) argue that a dominant party can provide a more stabilising platform for democratic politics than a collection of fragmented parties with roughly equal political leverage. They suggest that a dominant party can provide a foundation for a durable liberal democracy if it combines its rule with political competition and the protection of civil liberties.

However, the supporting examples that Arian and Barnes (1974) and Pempel (1990) cite are drawn predominantly from industrialised countries. Advanced industrial countries tend to have certain features which provide safeguards against dominant parties abusing their positions of strength. In comparison, the context within developing countries – which often involves long histories with authoritarianism, severe socio-economic inequalities, endemic corruption, clientelism and patronage, and tensions around ethnic and social identity - can lead to a volatile system which is more vulnerable to the dangers of unhindered power accumulation (de Jager, 2009: 46).

There are four principal risks with the one party dominant system, which largely relate to the methods used to consolidate and maintain dominance.

**The blurring of state-party lines** can result from state centralisation and the ruling party's access to state resources to maintain patron-client linkages. With the continuation of the same party in power, a process of politicisation typically occurs as state officials and institutions adopt the ideological and political priorities of the ruling party. As a corollary, there is a risk that, given the lack of viable alternative parties,

dissatisfaction amongst the general public with the ruling party's policies and actions may be translated into dissatisfaction with democratic institutions themselves, thereby jeopardising the future of those institutions (Ibid: 56).

Dominant parties often **inhibit the development of a strong opposition** to consolidate their power. If a dominant party controls the electoral arena and the outcomes of elections, the opposition has little hope of influencing policy-making or offering benefits to their members. Weak and ineffective opposition often characterises dominant party systems, especially where the dominant or party feels no obligation to take the opposition's agenda into account (Ibid).

**Accumulation of power:** If a dominant party accumulates sufficient power, to the extent that it can ignore the interests of its citizens without fearing reprisal at the ballot box, it may degenerate into a corrupt, authoritarian and illiberal democracy. There are usually other constraints on the power of dominant parties, such as civil society organisations, opposition parties, and internal factions within the ruling party. However, in countries with weaker democratic institutions and civil society organisations, dominant parties can close down these alternative sites of power "using control of the state to keep ... existing supporters content and ... opponents disorganised" (Simkins 1999: 50).

**Lack of accountability:** Although dominant party systems may initially have a uniting, stabilising effect, this dominance is often achieved at the expense of genuine democratic competition. The tendency of uncompetitive systems becoming unaccountable systems is well-documented in the literature. Two relevant case studies, on the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) in Mexico and the ANC in South Africa, are set out below. However, this review found a lack of applied thinking on how international actors or other stakeholders can work to improve government responsiveness in dominant party systems.

### ***Accountability and institutional transformation in a dominant party system - Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), Mexico***

The PRI in Mexico held power from 1929 to 2000. According to de Jager (2009), the party consolidated and maintained its dominance through distorting the roles played by political society and civil society. The initial basis of the PRI's hegemonic control and the impotence of civil society emerged during the early presidency of Cárdenas (1934-40). Through the implementation of socialist policies, Cárdenas placed the state, which was controlled by the ruling party, at the centre of economics and politics. He then drew potential competing social forces, including labour movements, into close relationships of corporatism with the state. Incorporating interest groups at an early stage ensured that the party created a broad support base whilst neutralising potential sources of opposition. Rather than aggregating and representing the interests of the general public, civil society in Mexico's dominant party system limited the extent of citizen's demands on the government, mobilised support for the ruling party, legitimated the regime in the eyes of the United States, and distributed jobs and rewards within client-patron networks (Ibid: 152).

The PRI used elections and electoral reforms less for the purposes of democratisation than for ensuring its domestic and international legitimacy, and for combating opposition parties. Its overwhelming control resulted in an ineffective opposition, especially within the legislature. The opposition was largely dependent on the PRI for its existence, as public finance and electoral laws determined whether or not they could compete in elections. As a result, instead of the opposition fulfilling the functions of interest aggregation, voter mobilisation and keeping the ruling party accountable, it performed a stabilising, system-legitimising and system-maintenance function (Ibid: 151-152). So long as the PRI had virtually

complete control over the economic and political arenas it could control civil and political society. Mexico's hierarchical, authoritarian structures of governance discouraged autonomous political participation, depressed citizen efficacy and buttressed the foundations of authoritarianism, which would endure for several decades (Ibid).

The PRI gradually lost support to its rivals on both the left and the right. Its electoral base declined as a result of urbanisation, an inability to handle economic and social crises, electoral reforms, neoliberal economic reforms, the mounting strength of the opposition and civil society, external pressures, and an increasing generational distance from the post-revolutionary regime. By 2000, the electorate had stable alternative party options to the PRI. In July 2000, Vicente Fox won the presidential election, which represented a historic turning point in Mexico's party system (Ibid: 186).

### ***Local accountability in a dominant party system - the African National Congress (ANC), South Africa***

Wegner (2016) investigates accountability in South Africa's dominant party system, studying how the ANC reacts to electoral incentives at the local level. Since the first democratic local elections in 2000, the ANC has governed the overwhelming majority of South African municipalities. However, there are large differences in the margins of victory by which the ANC won local elections. Comparing the party's degree of responsiveness to voters in municipalities where the ANC is dominant in elections, to those where it is not, Wegner (2016) looks at how the ANC has reacted to electoral incentives. Responsiveness to voters is assessed by studying whether high-quality politicians remain and low-quality politicians are removed from office. If voter signals and electoral performance affect re-nomination, it would mean that the ANC shows a degree of responsiveness to voters in spite of its electoral dominance. If those factors are unrelated to re-nomination, it would imply that other considerations, such as party loyalty or closeness to the leaders, matter more for ANC candidate nominations.

The results show a mixed picture. The strongest and most consistent finding is that the ANC does differentiate between places where it has electoral hegemony and places where it does not. In competitive places (i.e. municipalities with low margins of victory), re-nomination for higher status councillor positions is strongly and positively associated with all performance indicators. In uncompetitive municipalities, only service delivery is positively associated with re-nomination, whereas voter signals and financial management have no impact. The effect of service delivery in competitive municipalities is much larger than in uncompetitive municipalities.

According to Wegner (2016), these findings have two implications for the study of dominant parties:

- Accountability was not altogether absent in uncompetitive municipalities; the fact that responsiveness to voters' concerns exists for highly salient issues suggests that even dominant parties might exhibit some responsiveness when the stakes are high. Rather than assume that a lack of accountability in dominant party systems is a given, future research should focus more on party-voter relations at different levels of government.
- In terms of the debate on dominant parties at the national level, the findings suggest that accountability increases as the margins of victory decrease, and that a dominant party threatened with the loss of power might well react by putting up a bigger electoral fight rather than bend the rules (Ibid).

### 3. Dominant party systems and economic performance

#### Developmental patrimonialism

In a comparative study of seven middle African countries (Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda), Booth (2012: 25) finds that economic performance was strong in periods where there was a political regime that had a system to centralise the management of economic rents and orientate rent generation to the long term. Under such regimes, defined by Booth and others at the African Power and Politics Programme (APPP) as 'developmental patrimonialism', the ruling elite has the disposition and capacity to use rents productively to enlarge the national economic pie, rather than to capture the largest amount from it in the short term. Booth finds that all successful cases of growth in the seven countries above had the following common features with respect to the dominant ideology and the political regime:

- a single or dominant party system;
- a strong, visionary leader (often an independence or war-time hero);
- a competent and confident economic technocracy;
- a strategy to include, at least partially, the most important political groups in some of the benefits of growth; and
- a sound policy framework, meaning a broadly pro-capitalist, pro-rural bias.

Other APPP research suggests that a developmental patrimonial regime has never emerged in Africa from an election under conditions of peaceful multi-party competition. It has only arisen under one or a combination of two particular sets of conditions (Booth 2012: 48):

- Where the popularity and personal dominance of a wartime or national liberation leader has enabled that leader to impose their vision upon the political and military elite as a whole, and to sustain the associated discipline for an extended period;
- Where the elite in power has been galvanised into a degree of self-discipline, regulated by a dominant political party structure or other means, as a result of a major threat to its survival, usually involving large-scale internal violence or warfare (e.g. Rwanda under Paul Kagame and Ethiopia under the late Meles Zenawi).

However, some studies suggest that the type of political regime - whether it is a dominant party or multi-party system - is less important in explaining the emergence of effective state-business relations than the ideology of key political actors and whether there is a shared vision of the importance of growth-oriented policies among rival political parties (Leftwich 2009). Other literature has emphasised the importance of both types of factors in the emergence of developmental regimes in Asia (Doner et al., 2005; Weiss & Hobson, 1995). In most of the Asian cases, it took both a major national shock or threat and a dominant leadership to overcome the obstacles that elite fragmentation and collective action problems would otherwise have put in the way of rent centralisation and the implementation of a long-term vision (Booth 2012: 48).



## Bureaucratic coherence and cohesion

Evidence from four cases (Mexico, Japan, Kenya and India) examined in a thesis by Gorud (2011) suggests that the presence of an autonomous, meritocratic bureaucracy is an important determinant of economic performance in dominant party states.

- The PRI in Mexico took pains to craft autonomous bureaucratic structures which assumed a key role in the country's rapid economic growth between 1940 and 1960. Whilst the PRI used a significant portion of its bureaucratic appointments for patronage, many policies of the so-called "Mexican Miracle" were engineered in the 1960s by Antonio Ortiz Mena, the Finance Minister, and Rodrigo Gómez at the Central Bank. The regime allowed these elites to construct meritocratic financial institutions which operated autonomously from the other ministries, and formulated and implemented policy (Gorud 2011: 85).
- During the course of its post-WW2 growth period, the Japanese state crafted an elite bureaucracy headlined by the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI), which was insulated from political pressure through both meritocratic promotions and a high turnover rate for top-level bureaucrats. MITI oversaw the strategy of industrial promotion and state investment which led to one of the most impressive growth performances in history. As bureaucrats were independent of political interference, Japanese policymakers could adhere strictly to a national development plan whilst resisting populist policies or short-term concessions (Ibid).
- In comparison, the bureaucratic experience in Kenya between independence in 1964 and its evolution to a one party state in 1982 illustrates the corrosive influence in a dominant party state of an overly politicised bureaucracy. President Kenyatta appointed many loyal local elites and citizens from his own ethnic group to positions in the bureaucracy and provincial administration. While this strategy helped the party in political terms, these appointees abused their positions of influence and engaged in corruption and extortion (Ibid).
- During an accelerated period of growth in India in the 1980s and 1990s, the bureaucracy avoided politicisation but suffered from a lack of coherence within its administrative ranks. As was the case in Kenya, local administrators had the authority to address popular grievances and deliver services but demonstrated little deference to state policymakers over issues of economic regulation. India lacked a significant link between the central planning authorities and the local bureaucrats who would implement policy across the country. The division of authority to regional and local institutions hindered the central government's ability to implement the interventionist policies advocated by its planning commissions (Ibid: 86).

## Dominant parties and the private sector

Gorud (2011) argues that strong corporatist relations are a significant determinant of economic success for dominant party regimes:

- In Japan and Mexico, regular meetings between industrial conglomerates and policymakers cultivated a pattern of information-sharing that facilitated protectionism and industrial promotion initiatives. The participation of lead private sector actors in policy formulation within the corporatist regimes of Mexico and Japan provided a check on the regime's power and ensured patrimonial interests did not fully co-opt public policy.

- In Kenya, by comparison, many of the most prominent industrial players were excluded from politics due to their foreign ownership. As a result, even though the regime attempted to protect and nurture domestic industries, politicians and other elites had freer reign to co-opt state policy and exploited their positions for personal economic interests (Ibid: 87).
- In India, the rhetoric and actions of the country's post-independence leaders through the 1970s focused on social welfare, poverty eradication, and other populist measures. While the institutionalised corporatist relations observed in Japan and Mexico were not present, a shift in state-business relations preceded India's economic takeoff. In the 1980s the policymaking commissions were composed of top-level bureaucrats who were amenable to the private sector. These councils proposed many of the reforms advocated by leading business groups at the time, and reflected a public-private consensus on a new policy direction. While formal relationships between policymakers and business leaders allowed Japan and Mexico to pursue aggressive state-initiated development plans, India's economic success hinged on the removal of complex regulations and licensing systems. Both models of economic growth in dominant party states required the participation of business leaders in the policymaking arena and co-operation between bureaucrats and the private sector.

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## Expert contributors

Kenneth Greene, Associate Professor, Department of Government, The University of Texas at Austin

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