

# INTRODUCTION TO **POLITICAL SCIENCE**

A Reading Text on  
**Politics and Governance**

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## Chapter 10

### SYSTEMS OF GOVERNMENT

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#### **Introduction**

The composition of the Executive is not the only factor necessitating changes in systems. Changes in the nature and scope of the legislature also dictate changes in systems of government.

Conceptually speaking, the system of government as a form or method of administration in a political milieu, could be classified into Presidential, Parliamentary and Hybrid Systems depending on the constitutional conditionality of a state. Comparatively, there is no absolute similarity or convergence among political systems of the countries in the World, and it is also permissible for a country to shift from one system of government to another depending on which best suits the prevailing situation. This was the case of Nigeria that experimented with parliamentarism, a system patterned after the order of British Westminster as a form of colonial heritage where Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe held sway as the ceremonial president and Sir. Tafawa Balewa was the head of government. Also, the constitution drafting committee constituted by the military government recommended a presidential system for the country copied from the United States of America which ushered in the second republic in 1979, where absolute power of administration and control was vested in the office of the President.

This chapter is however keen to provide a simple yet detailed explanation to freshmen and women students in Political Science and other social science classes in higher institutions the basic knowledge of Systems of government, a component part of Introduction to Political Science. This is in most cases, an obvious requirement for first-year compulsory students as well as those in the advance levels. This chapter is therefore succinctly framed to assist students in the understanding of this topic.

#### **Presidential System of Government**

Cheibub (2007) noted that the thrust of presidential democracies stems from the constitutional demarcation between the executive and legislative arm of government. The government headed by the President does not need any legislative support in order to exist. Furthermore, presidential system of government or single executive is that in which the president is the head of state and head of government operates and performs his/her functions independent of the legislature clearly defined by the constitution, with a fixed tenure. In other words, the discharge of responsibilities of



structure makes it possible for the several states to cooperate in matters of common concern and also retain their separate identities.

Confederations are very rare in today's world. The Confederate State of America (1861-1865) is one example in the past. A possible modern example is the European Union (EU), which is an assembly of 28 nations, mostly in Europe. Through its institutions, the EU has established free trade among its members, launched a common currency (euro), and coordinates the foreign trade and defense policies of its members. Recently, the United Kingdom voted to exit from the EU for more independence, a situation which is often referred to as 'Brexit'. (Ibeano & Kuna, 2016)

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head of state and head of government is performed by one person. In such a system, the chief executive is not merely the titular or ceremonial head, but he is the real executive and dispenses all the powers granted to him by the law governing the state (Asirvatham & Misra, 2012). Presidential system of government can also be explicated through the doctrine of separation of power, a principle that empowers the three organs of government i.e the Legislature, the Executive and the Judiciary. Each of them acts autonomously and within its own jurisdiction. As a matter of fact, the principle of separation of powers remains the basics of presidential system, which ensures that the legislature can hold the executive accountable.

The United States of America, as the originator remains a prime example of a pure presidential system of government, with the US president being the head of state and head of government at the same time. Other examples are Nigeria between 1979-1983, and 1999 till date. Most of the Latin American States according to Mbah (2007), are imitators of American presidentialism and other notable states globally such as France, Mexico, etc practice this system of government. The crux of presidential system is its emphasis on the personality and ability of an individual, the President.

The chief features of the presidential system of government are:

1. The president is not dependent on the legislature or responsible to it.
2. He is directly elected by people who have the power to vote and not by the legislature.
3. There is complete separation of powers between the executive, legislature and judiciary.
4. The president is constitutionally empowered to appoint ministers and other heads of parastatals and they are all responsible to, he also has the power to disengage them, a case in point is the administration of President Goodluck Jonathan.
5. The president cannot dissolve the legislature, also the legislature cannot remove the president, except the president commits impeachable offence.

#### Merits of Presidential System of Government

1. There is stability in government and continuity in policies because the president is elected for a fixed term and can be re-elected for a second term in office. President Muhammadu Buhari started his first term on May 29<sup>th</sup>, 2015 and he began his second term on May 29<sup>th</sup>, 2019.
2. It enhances promptness in decision making being that a single person is allocated with all powers, this will largely help a country in times of emergencies.
3. Legislatures are likely to be less dominated by party spirit.
4. The presidential system is beneficial to a multi-ethnic state such as Nigeria with diverse interests.

5. The checks and balances system limit abysmal use of power which is a vital indicator of a democratic government.

#### Demerits of Presidential System of Government

1. The enormous powers constitutionally conferred on the president can make the person occupying such office to become despotic and autocratic. This lends credence to the toga of "power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely". A typical example was the deployment of military personnel by the government of President Muhammadu Buhari to stop the #ENDSARS protest in October 2020.
2. The lack of sufficient knowledge on parliamentary duties by the executive can lead to delay in ratification of appointments, approvals and even constant deadlock between the legislature and the executive. A case in point was the protracted delay in the confirmation of the appointment of then EFCC Acting Chairman Ibrahim Magu by the leadership of the 8<sup>th</sup> senate.
3. The president may renege on his/her election campaign promises bearing in mind that he has a fixed term in office, and he can complete it provided he has not violated the laws of the land (Mbah, 2007).
4. The presidential system is not flexible and not easily adaptable to prevailing situations.
5. The existence of multiple committees serving oversight functions in the legislature, results to delay, confusion and avoidable conflicts between the executive and legislature.

#### The Parliamentary System of Government

Giannetti & Benoit (2009) in one of their influential study aptly submits that parliamentary system of government is one which the prime minister and his/her cabinet are accountable to any majority of the members of parliament and can be removed from office by the latter. In other words, it is a system of government in which the prime minister and his/her executive (cabinet) is constitutionally answerable to the legislature for all activities in government. Also, parliamentarism is that system of government in which the president is a ceremonial head of state, but the main power i.e executive power of government is in the hands of the prime minister with a group of ministers forming the cabinet, as was the case with Nigeria during the first republic. In the same vein, Gberevbie (2012) observed that parliamentarism is a system of government that is made up of nominal head of state, and prime minister holding the executive power of the state, and the head of the cabinet. Parliamentary system of government is common globally, but the British parliament is the mother of all parliaments.

#### Features of Parliamentary System of Government

1. There is a nominal head of state. As the name implies he/she performs ceremonial functions with restricted influence within the political space, this



could be hereditary or elected. The head of state in a parliamentary system holds the nomenclature of president as in Nigeria's first republic, Germany, India or Monarch as in Japan and United Kingdom, among others.

2. The real executive function is performed by the prime minister and his cabinet. they guide and control the administration of the state. For instance, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa led Nigeria delegation to United Nations as the 99<sup>th</sup> member state in 1960.
3. Principle of collective responsibility is one of the chief features of parliamentarism. In the spirit of the principle all government decisions are collectively taken by all ministers. "All the ministers swim or sink together". For example, a working and capable minister may resign for the wrong of others if they lose the confidence of the legislature.
4. There is confidentiality in government information because one party forms the entire cabinet. This allows for secrecy of proceedings which is a principle of parliamentary system.
5. The prime minister or head of government has the power to dissolve the parliament and order a new election.

#### The Merits of Parliamentary System of Government

1. It allows harmonious working relationship between the legislature and the executive; this is a feat that is uncommon in the presidential system of government where there could be frequent cases of deadlock in government deliberations. The existence of unity of purpose between the cabinet and the legislature will guarantee speedy delivery of governmental programs and policies.
2. The opposition is readily available to checkmate and point out the flaws of the government in power and subsequently serving as alternate government.
3. Parliamentarism limits to a large extent, the arbitrary use of power. The incidence of dictatorship is out of place because it could attract a vote of no confidence from the parliament, hence it restrain autocratic tendencies in government.
4. Sensitization of executive in legislative duty. The system offers the executive opportunity to participate in legislation because of the infusion of function between both, it enables executive to take initiative in law making business.
5. Parliamentary system is less expensive to operate compared to presidential system. The member of parliament forming the cabinet would to a large extent reduced the cost of administration and governance.

#### Demerits of Parliamentary System

1. *Frequent and unexpected changes:* A prime minister can change at any time, with or without elections. According to Cheibub (1998) in his study of 291 parliamentary democracies, it was found that 163 prime ministers left office

without election, a recent instance was formal British Prime minister, Theresa May who took over from David Cameron in 2016 without election. The problem associated with this is that it has the potential of disenfranchising electorates to have a direct say in the election of their leader.

2. *The parliamentary system flagrantly violates the doctrine of separation of power:* The essence of this doctrine was to prevent arbitrary use of power by the ruler, it finds its application in the principle of checks and balances among the triple arms of government which is not so under the cabinet system.
3. Scholars are of the view that the system is distractive in the instance of ministers performing both executive and legislative functions at the same time, at the end of the one arm might suffer.
4. Executive arm of government is known for policy implementation, but the workability of cabinet system makes the executive to depend on legislatures and becoming parliament addendum, thereby making governance moribund.
5. Opposition parties too frequently oppose every move by the ruling party just for the sake of opposition thereby constituting a clog in the wheel of governance.

#### Hybrid System

The hybrid system of government is one that has the dual characteristic of presidentialism and parliamentarism. It is also important to state that there are some regimes that contains some elements of one and some elements of the other and are thereby hybrids, it's instructive to mention also that this aspect of political system is a road that is less traveled by scholars of comparative politics. Hence, there is still nothing like a scholarly consensus on how to offer definition to the hybrid system. The system is gradually gaining currency and acceptability among democratic countries of the World, against the back sit it occupied in the 40's when a handful countries i.e. Austria, Finland, and Iceland practiced it (Lario, 2017). Under this system there can be two competing actors within the executive, the president and the prime minister, compare to presidential and parliamentary where only one actor exist in each case. Direct election provides the system with a double legitimacy which must be combined and co-exist in its powers, a hybrid of a popularly elected and powerful presidency with a prime minister heading a cabinet subject to assembly confidence is the practice under this system.

Shugart (2005) identified three major characteristics of hybrid system as one, a president who is popularly elected by the electorate, this appears like the presidentialism with a fixed tenure and constitutional power to act without the confidence of the legislature, although this differs across regimes. Secondly, the president that has considerable legal authority in that the person occupying the office of the president is constitutionally empowered to deploy considerable authority within the political system. The third characterization aptly incorporates the



fundamental principle of the parliamentary system of the existence of a prime minister and cabinet, subject to the confidence of the assembly majority. However, I argue that to gain sense of the meaning of hybrid system, we must draw a parallel between the basic features of presidential and parliamentary system of government.

The hybrid system also has its pros and cons just like two other dominant political system, i.e presidential and parliamentary. For instance, the hybrid system in the view of Elgie (2011) enhances detailed and intelligent decision making in that member of both sides share decision making function with a clear stakeholder's mentality with much support for democracy. On a second note, the system accentuate flexibility in administration with potential that could lead to a 'rebalancing' of the executive diarchy. It permits swinging of power between both, leading to a 'flexible' dual authority structure.

For critics of hybrid, the dual nature of the executive can trigger difficulties of executive administration that could weaken the performance of democracy or even affect its relevance, propels instability in the system. Decision making process could be affected also because of various politicking and intrigues within the executive (Elgie, 2011). The foregoing may largely lead to differences in policies as a result of horse trading between the president and the prime minister. Another notable pitfall of the hybrid system is the major issue of line of control especially on the part of the military, the question posed by the opponents of this system is who would exercise control over the military, is it the president or the prime minister? Furthermore, cohabitation is another challenge of the hybrid system. Instances whereby different political parties produces the president and the prime minister especially where the president party is not adequately represented in the cabinet.

### Conclusion

As mentioned in the opening chapter of this study, the three dominant political systems are presidential, parliamentary and the hybrid system. and without doubt, Nigeria have experimented since independence in 1960 with two out i.e, parliamentarism and presidentialism. The nature party system was ethnicized in Nigeria first republic led to premature end of the parliamentary thereby paving the way for the military's first shot at national governance. It was argued that political parties assumed regional identities and ideology which needlessly aggravated tension and suspicion within the system and the troubled Western region coupled with the weak ceremonial president. The shift from Westminster system to American presidentialism in 1979 which is the practice till date is indicative that the later has endured more than the former and preferred in the country, in that it allows for more participation at national level. For instance, the legislature has a combined membership of 469, while the executive is comprised of the president with 37 ministers, the separation of the arms of government in terms of duties and functions as noted before made this possible. The foregoing invariably would have

rightly captured the heterogenous nature of Nigeria society and serve as legal antidote to stabilize the polity.

Of the three, Nigeria is yet to test the workability of the hybrid system, a system that allows for "dual executive" heads. Findings have revealed that it may not offer a promising alternative to parliamentarism and presidentialism in Nigeria because of the ethnic rivalry and competition among groups that constituted the country.

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