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Regime Types and Power Equations in Political Systems: A Study of Presidentialization of Power in Democracies

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Abstract

The shift or movement of power towards the executive arm of government, concentrated in the person that is at the helms of affairs is gaining wide acceptability day by day. The point of interest is that, in spite of the fact that this phenomenon appears to be promoted by the constitutional arrangement of the presidential system of government; it is obtainable in every regime type. The paper argues that presidentialization of regimes can be understood as the changes or development of (i) increasing leadership power resources and autonomy within the party, (ii) the political executive and (ii) increasingly leadership-centred electoral processes. It points out that these changes or development affect (1) essential areas or part of democratic government that speedup the presidentialization of regimes and has reveals itself in the area, namely (i) the executive arm of government (ii) the political party and (iii) the electoral process, it concludes that the internalization of politics, the growth of the state, the eorion of cleavage, the changing structure of mass communication, amongst other factors account for the presidentialization of regimes in political system.

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Introduction

Attention has been drawn to the concentration of power around the person and office of the president in most, if not all democracies across the globe in spite of existing constitutional arrangements of these regimes. Careful examination of almost all modern governments irrespective of regime type portrays executive dominance, the personification of this dominance lies or centres on the personalization of power by a single leader, who is the head of the executive arm of government. This is what is regarded here as presidentialization of power. Owing to its formal constitutional features, it is the belief that such a phenomenon could easily be obtainable or achieved in the presidential system of government. In contrary, Farrell (1971: x) contends that in almost all political systems, executive dominance and the personification of this domination in a single leader is a central fact of political life. In that vein, Foley (1993), (2000) observes that in the United Kingdom long-standing concerns about prime ministerial power have occasionally produced assertions of presidential rule. Draper (1999), Hencke (2000) and Watt (2000) assert that that view became almost a common place with the advent of Tony Blair's premiership. As Farrell (1971) rightly observes, that presidentialization is almost in all political systems; Traynor (1999), Lutjen and Walter (2000) report that it was obtainable in Germany under Gerhard Schroder. According to Fabbrini (1994) Italy experienced it under Bontino Craxi; while Calise (2000) notes that it was also practiced by Silvio Berlusconi.

This paper aims at buttressing and authenticating the dominance of the executive arm of government showcased in the personalization of power by a single leader who is the head of that arm of government. The introduction presented a succinct, but lucid background, while the clarification of concepts took care of the explanation of key terms in the paper. Regime types or systems of government and their respective features were brought into the fore to show their peculiarities and distinction. The way and manner presidentialization of power occurs in political systems irrespective of regime types and the factors that facilitate it are the crux of the paper. It is founded-off with a conclusion.

Clarification of Concepts

Attempts are made to explain the following terms to aid understanding:

i. Political system

This is the super-structure of the state that comprises of all governmental structures in their political aspects. Therefore, Easton (1965) explains that it is a sub system of the social system which deals with authoritative allocation of values to the society. Wiseman (1966:98) added that it involves political structures, political roles performed by actors or agents, patterns of interactions between actors, whether individuals or collectivities, and a political process. In that vein, Chikendu (2002:149) concludes that the political system includes not only governmental system such, a-legislative, courts, the executive systems but all structures in their political aspects.

ii. Regime type

It simply means the method or system of government that is obtainable in a political system. It could either be presidentialism, parliamentarism or semi-presidentialism..

iii. Power

It is the ability to get others to do what one wants even if they do not want to. In other words, it is the ability to swerve others to one's side despite opposition. Weber (1980-28) notes that it is the ability to achieve a desired outcome, even against resistance.

iv. Power equation

It refers to the pattern of configuration of political power in a political system. The nature of the concentration of power gives rise to the regime type or system of government that is practiced in a given political system; this could be presidential, parliamentary or semi-presidential. Furthermore, the power equation could favour concentration of power around the party that is in power or around the person that is at the helm in the executive arm of the government irrespective of the regime type, this is what is regarded here as the presidentialization of power.

v. Presidentialization

It is a process by which regimes are becoming more presidential in their actual practice without, in most cases, changing their formal structure, that is, their regime-type. Presidentialization is strongly concerned with a shift from a party-based to a 'presidentialized' mode of operation. It is amplified by factors other than those flowing directly from the formal constitutional structure.

REGIME TYPES AND THEIR FEATURES**Presidentialism or presidential System**

Presidential regimes have popularly elected heads of government. In other words, for a political system to merit the presidential label in a formal sense, the president must be the true head of government. According to Lijphart (1992:3) the most common (if not only) way in which such status can be conferred in a democracy is for the president to be popularly elected, either directly by the people or via an electoral college which closely reflects the popular preferences of the electorate. Ideally, such a popular mandate is an essential precondition of a president's democratic legitimacy and, therefore, of his or her personal authority to govern. Under presidentialism, only the president is mandated to govern by the people, and therefore, only he or she is politically accountable. This does not mean, of course, that the executive literally comprises a single individual; s/he appoints members of his cabinet as in the case of Nigeria, the United States, etc, who take charge of policy in different government departments, but they are not individually responsible to the electorate or to the legislature, given the separation of powers which operates. The members of the cabinet are rather individually responsible to the president, who reserves the power and authorities to hire and fire though the former with the approval of the legislature.

Features

- i. The president is accountable only to the electorate which furnished his or her mandate to govern.
- ii. The president is not politically responsible to the legislature,
- iii. There is separation of powers, which ensures that the executive is neither accountable to the legislature nor removable by it.

- iv. He/she has a fixed term of office,
- v. The president is subject to impeachment by the legislature for reasons of gross impropriety or misconduct,
- vi. Presidential regimes are characterized by uni-personal executive responsibility. This implies that the president has a personal democratic mandate: he carries responsibility for the entire administration.

Parliamentarism or Parliamentary System

Under parliamentarism, the political executive emerges from the legislature whose confidence it must enjoy. The executive as a whole emerges from the legislature and it is responsible to the latter. Thus, the executive in a parliamentary regime is formally accountable to the legislature; this represents one element of a single chain of delegation and accountability extending from voters to bureaucracy. This fusion of powers does not necessarily mean that the executive must actually retain the positive support of a parliamentary majority, but it does at least have to avoid a situation in which a majority forms against it on a vote of no-confidence. In reality, however, we know that parliamentary party discipline may be so developed that the executive enjoys a high degree of de facto control over the legislature. The inherent logic of the parliamentary regime compels parties of government and opposition to maintain high discipline in order to either support the government or present themselves as a credible alternative. In the parliamentary system, Party systems may provide strong countervailing incentives: in the absence of alternative majorities, parties of government may not be penalized, even if they bring down their own government. However, as the examples show, systems that continue to function against the logic of parliamentarism run into great difficulties.

Features

- i. Parliamentary regimes are characterized by collective executive responsibility.
- ii. The collective character of the government represents an essential characteristic of parliamentarism

Semi-Presidentialism or Semi-Presidential System

Semi-presidentialism have popularly elected heads of state who are politically not responsible to the legislature and have a degree of real executive power; however, as Duverger (1980), Linz (1994: 48), Sartori (1994: 131) and Elgie (1999: 13) note the power must also in some way be shared with a separate prime minister, the latter being formally the head of a government which emerges from the legislature and is responsible to it. Thus, a semi-presidential regime mixes core elements of presidentialism and parliamentarism. Its actual working mode is directly dependent upon presence or absence of party political congruence between the president and the parliamentary majority. Therefore, Sartori (1994: 153) describes semi-presidential regimes are 'double-engine systems' characterized by diarchic executives. In periods of unified government, semi-presidential regimes resemble an extreme form of parliamentarism in that the prime minister tends to be the lieutenant of the president who ultimately controls all executive powers and dominates parliament through a prime minister in charge of the parliamentary part of government. In times of divided government, however, semi-presidential regimes revert to a unique mix of parliamentary and presidential elements of government and the president is reduced to that portion of executive powers which is vested directly in his or her office and hence not subject to parliamentary accountability. In effect, the chief executive office is split between a president and a prime minister.

Features

The most important feature of semi-presidentialism is that it is a regime type in its own right as Pasquino (1997: 129) rightly observes; it does not imply alternate between phases of parliamentary and presidential government, as has been suggested by Lijphart(1992:8),(1997:127).

The parliamentary, presidential, and semi-presidential regimes are distinguished according to formal legal-constitutional criteria. The boundaries between these three categories of regime are distinct in the sense that they are not part of a flexible continuum along which countries might gradually shift, though, with the introduction of a little more or a little less parliamentarism or presidentialism as the case may be; for this reason, semi-presidentialism - though physically located between parliamentarism and presidentialism, is not simply to be understood as a vague halfway point between the two, but rather as a distinct regime-type in its own right. Although not all presidential regimes are identical, they must nevertheless share a common set of core legal-constitutional features in order to qualify for the designation, and the same goes for parliamentary and semi-presidential regimes respectively.

Presidentialization of Power

As deduced from our conceptual clarification, presidentialization entails the movement of power from the party to the president. In other words, it involves a change in the existing power equation of political system where concentration of power moves from the party (group) to the president (individual). The most important characteristics of presidentialization is that it does not respect boundaries, it cuts across all regime types be it presidentialism, parliamentarism or semi-presidentialism.

In principle, all regime-types can move (to varying degrees) between party-based and presidentialized forms of government. How closely they approach either of the opposing poles of this continuum is determined by a wide range of underlying structural factors (such as changes in the social structure and the media system) and contingent factors (such as the personality of leaders). This movement is, of course, highly constrained by the formal configuration of political institutions. In other words, different regime-settings provide institutions and actors with different power resources, thus constraining correspondingly the potential space for movement.

Location on this continuum does not depend on formal legal constitutional provisions, but rather on structural and contingent political characteristics which determine the degree of personal visibility, autonomy, and power resources which national political leaders have. By structural we mean enduring changes below the level of legal-constitutional changes such as changes in party rules or in the fabric of society, whereas contingent changes depend on the characteristics of particular political actors or specific political contexts.

More precisely, the location on the continuum is determined by the shift of political power resources and autonomy to the benefit of individual leaders and a concomitant loss of power and autonomy of collective actors like cabinets and political parties.

In other words, leaders who enjoy greater autonomy have a larger sphere of action in which they are protected from outside interference. To this extent they can effectively ignore other actors. Their overall power is, then, the combination of the scope of this protected area and their ability to use all their power

resources to overcome potential resistance by others outside this protected area. Increased power can thus be the result of two processes:

1. A growth of the zones of autonomous control, which means that, effectively, power does not need to be exerted over others as long as desired outcomes are exclusively within such an autonomous zone.
2. A growing capacity to overcome resistance by others.

Presidentialism or presidential system has three (3) core features namely: a popularly elected executive, the separation of executive and legislative power, and uni-personal executive responsibility that constitute the necessary and sufficient formal conditions that boost and enhance presidentialization of regime types. In other words, presidential systems offer far more executive power resources to the leader of the executive while, at the same time, giving him or her considerable autonomy vis-a-vis the political parties in parliament (and vice versa). According to Katz (1986: 42) while party-based government (i.e. party-based government) means governing through parties, presidentialized government implies governing past parties. Sequel to these, the inherent functional logic of presidential regimes has three (3) effects that prime the presidentialization of regimes. They are:

- (i) leadership power resources
- (ii) leadership autonomy and
- (iii) personalization of the electoral process.

1. Leadership power resources: The logic of presidentialism provides the head. Of government with superior executive power resources. This emanates directly from the fact that he or she is not responsible to parliament, is usually directly legitimated and has the power to form a cabinet without significant interference from other institutions. In a nutshell, as regards the executive branch of the government, the head of the executive can govern without much outside interference.

2. Leadership autonomy: This is also a direct result of the separation of powers. While in office, the head of the executive is well protected against pressure from his own party. This works both ways; however, parties in parliament are not constrained either to support the government or to present themselves as a viable opposition. Hence, while the head of the executive enjoys considerable autonomy vis-a-vis his own party, his power to lead depends directly on his electoral appeal. In other words, leadership autonomy may make for enhanced power to lead, but it is contingent upon electoral success. It is not based on organizational control of the party. In a nutshell, leadership autonomy may find expression in two different zones of action: the party organization itself, and (for governing parties) the political executive of the state.

3. Personalization of the electoral process: This follows directly from the natural focus on the highest elective office and implies that all aspects of the electoral process are decisively moulded by the personalities of the leading candidates.

It follows from the above that the de facto presidentialization of regimes can be understood as the changes or development of (i) increasing leadership power resources and autonomy within the party, (ii) the political executive and (iii) increasingly leadership-centred electoral processes. Three (3) essential areas or parts of democratic government are mainly affected by these development or changes that speed up

the presidentialization of regimes and presidentialization has reveals itself in the areas, namely: (i) the executive arm of government (ii) the political party and (iii) the electoral process.

The Executive Arm of Government

The growth of zones of autonomous control may result directly from giving the chief executive or party leader more formal powers, be it the power of appointment or the power to decide unilaterally about policy. However, the growth of zones of autonomy can also be a result of the increasing recourse to a personal mandate by the leader. In this case, elements of electoral presidentialization, particularly the use of plebiscitary appeals, lead to a highly contingent growth of autonomy in that it is directly dependent upon the continued ability of the leader to substantiate the validity of his personal mandate. In other words, autonomy depends upon his continued ability to appeal successfully to relevant constituencies (be they party rank-and-file or the electorate at large). In short, in an electoralist era, parties may let their leaders 'have their ways' as long as they can deliver the electoral rewards.

Exerting power outside zones of autonomous control requires resources to overcome potential resistance. Those may be the usual power resources, including formal powers, staff, and funding, but they may increasingly be connected to the capacity to set agendas and define the alternatives at stake. Increasing control over communication flows is central to this since it furnishes political leaders with enhanced potential to influence the perception of others (whether decision-makers or the public at large) as to the range of viable choices. In fact, growing involvement in international negotiation systems (either on party or government levels) tends to make this power to define the alternatives almost irresistible, because multi-lateral international agreements can rarely be re-negotiated following domestic dissent. It follows from the preceding discussion that increased leadership power flows from the combined effect of growing autonomy and enhanced power resources. While much of this is related to structural changes such as increasing international interconnectedness, a considerable portion of it will be contingent upon the specific political context, most notably the personal appeal of a leader.

The Political Party

The second arena in which the presidentialization of power could reveal itself is the political party itself; this would involve a shift in intra-party power to the benefit of the leader. Were this to be the case, we would expect to find evidence of growing leadership autonomy from the dominant coalitions of power within the party. This might occur in a number of ways, including structural changes like the introduction of direct leadership elections by the party rank-and-file. As a result, party activists and factional leaders cease to be the decisive power base of party leaders; rather, claims to leadership rest on personalized mandates. This is likely to be accompanied by a shift towards plebiscitary modes of communication and mobilization which are contingent upon individual leaders' public appeal and communication skills.

Increasingly, leaders seek to bypass sub-leaders and activist strata of the party and communicate directly with members (or even voters) in respect of programmatic or strategic questions. Probably most relevant in this regard is the shift towards candidate-centred electioneering, since it is essentially the leader rather than the party who competes for a popular mandate; not surprisingly, therefore, the leader may expect to be accorded considerable autonomy by the party in devising his or her own policy programme.

The tendency towards personalized leadership is likely to lead to a concentration of power resources in the leader's office. However, the logic of presidentialization suggests that the bulk of these resources will not be directed towards controlling the party machinery. Instead, they will be used for enhancing the leader's personal standing through coordinated planning and public relations activities.

The effects of presidentialization on the mode of interaction between the chief executive and political parties in a formally presidential system would follow the same logic as in a presidentializing parliamentary system. To the extent that the growth of executive power and the effects of electoral presidentialization have elevated the president to a paramount political figure he or she will begin to govern increasingly past the parties in the legislature. In other words, presidents will increasingly use the power of their popular mandate and the weight of their executive power to 'have their ways' in parliament without directly attempting to control or lead parties.

The Electoral Process

This brings us to the third arena of presidentialization, which concerns electoral processes. Again, it involves a shift from party-based control to domination by leaders. This may be revealed in a number of closely interrelated ways. First, through a growing emphasis on leadership appeals in election campaigning. Crewe and King (1994), Mughan (1993) and Semetko (1996) observe that, it seems increasingly common to encounter references to the 'personalized', 'presidential', or 'candidate-centred' campaigns of certain leaders in democratic societies. Although such developments may well be partly contingent on the personalities and leadership styles of particular leaders, they are becoming too widespread and enduring in parliamentary regimes to be explained entirely in these terms. Second, and relatedly, we may expect such campaigning to be reflected by the media so that media coverage of politics focuses more on leaders. Third, we might reasonably expect such developments to resonate within the electorate: thus, evidence of the presidentialization of electoral processes could also be constituted by the growing significance of leader effects in voting behaviour. (Bean and Mughan (1989), Kaase (1994) and King (2002) note that it may be difficult to establish evidence of a systematic growth of leadership effects since they are highly dependent on contingencies such as leaders' personalities and the changing political context of elections. For instance, the politics of a nation may alternate between polarized and consensual phases and it is reasonable to expect that leader effects would play a stronger role in the absence of highly contentious issues.

That said, even a small leadership effect could make all the difference on Election Day. This and the widespread perception of growing leadership effects may be sufficient to convince parties and their campaign planners that it is necessary to personalize campaigns. In other words, even if leadership effects are minimal, the parties may respond to their perceived relevance by consciously personalizing their campaigns.

Overall, then, it should be clear from the foregoing discussion that the 'presidentialization of democratic regimes' entails a shift away from party-based democracy in terms of one, two, or all three of the dimensions that we have identified. To be sure, the rate and extent of movement along the respective areas of presidentialization may vary within (as well as between) countries. These variations reflect the impact of the different forces driving the processes of change within each of the areas. However, these processes are logically connected, which means we are unlikely to find shifts in one area accompanied by complete stasis (or even counter-movement) in others.

Factors promoting Presidentialization of Power in Regime Types

Besides the contingent factors related to the political context and the personality of leaders, the following structural factors are most important for explaining shifts towards a more presidentialized mode of governance in modern democracies:

A. Internationalization of politics

It is now almost trite to observe that many of the most challenging political problems facing governments can only be dealt with via international cooperation. This is implicit in the frequently deployed concept of globalization, and examples can easily be found in policy contexts as diverse as the policing of ethnic conflict (as in the former Yugoslavia), the fight against international terrorism, the battle against environmental pollution, the establishment of effective and just asylum and immigration policies, and the control of global financial markets and patterns of transnational investment.

Where such issues are dealt with via inter-governmental negotiation, this shifts power to the heads of governments and some of their key advisers or governmental colleagues. Increasingly, parliaments and even cabinets can only ratify the decisions which have been taken elsewhere. In particular, it would seem likely that the process of European integration means that a substantial part of domestic politics is now decided like international politics, which is a traditional domain of leaders and senior members of governments (as opposed to cabinets, parliaments, and parties).

B. Growth of the state

The growth of the state has been a long-term process which has undoubtedly led to greater bureaucratic complexity and organizational specialization.

Peters, Rhodes and Wright (2000: 8) describe this in terms of the twin processes of institutional differentiation ('increasing the organizational types through which government works') and institutional pluralization ('increasing numbers of the same type of organization'). The growing complexity and competence of the state has generated a variety of responses, some of which would seem to be relevant to the phenomenon of presidentialization, including:

1. The centralization of power as the core executive seeks to coordinate the 'institutional fragments' of the state.
2. The undermining of collective cabinet responsibility, as the trend towards 'sectorized' policy-making brings more bilateral contacts between relevant ministers and the head of the core executive. Paradoxically, these processes may well go hand in hand with other initiatives designed to restructure the state by appearing to divest the executive of power, for instance, through privatizing or hiving-off responsibilities to agencies. Thus, strategies conducive to the presidentialization of politics may be compatible with the sort of 'hollowing-out' strategies which governments have sometimes pursued in order to overcome problems of 'ungovernability'. Where this happens; the core executive attempts to reduce the scope of its direct responsibility for government, while enhancing its coordinating power in the domain which it continues to regard as strategically critical.

Whatever the precise approach; Peters et al (2000:7) note that, there is general agreement that over the last thirty to forty years there has been a steady movement towards the reinforcement of the political core executive in most advanced industrial countries and, that within the core executive, there has been an increasing centralization of authority around the person of the chief executive - president, prime minister, or both.

C. The changing structure of mass communication

According to Van Deth (1995: 59) another major societal change which may be equally important in accounting for the phenomenon of presidentialization is the growing role of electronic media since the early 1960s, which has fundamentally altered the nature of mass communication in modern democracies.

D. The widespread privatization of Television has further amplified these changes.

By its very nature, Bowler and Farrell (1992), Farrell and Webb (2000) explain that television tends to focus on personality rather than programme in order to reduce the complexity of political issues, and politicians frequently respond by concentrating on symbolism rather than substance and detail in order to cater for the media's inherent needs. To be sure, it works both ways: to a degree the media require and force politicians to adapt to their logic and their format. Much of this so-called mediatization of modern politics, however, may be the result of conscious choice by politicians to exploit the visual media's potential for simplification and symbolism for their own ends. Thus, governmental leaders may use the potential of modern media communications techniques to bypass other executive actors in setting political agendas.

E. The erosion of traditional social cleavage politics

Bell (1960), Kirchheimer (1966) and Lipset (1964) point out that since the 'end of ideology' debates of the early 1960s, and the associated interpretations of party transformation in the West, many observers have contended that traditional links between mass parties and their bases of social group support have eroded. Large cross-national study of the organizational linkages between parties and the masses has found that even though traditional parties have striven to maintain their organizational connections to their core constituencies, these linkages have been weakened both in substance and in terms of their overall scope (not least as a result of the growth of new parties). According to Mair and Biezen (2001) this has been particularly pronounced for linkage through party membership.

The weakening social anchorage of a party entails the increasing pluralization of its social base and carries with it a concomitant loss of social group ideology; the presentation of a coherent and integrated programmatic package to the key constituency has been the key to success in traditional cleavage politics. Yet the clear-cut orderliness of political competition based on the conflict of social group ideologies (be they class-linked, ethnic, or denominational) seems to be disappearing in modern democracies; not only have electorates become socially and ideologically more heterogeneous, but party programmes have followed suit. As a consequence, where social group identities no longer dictate voter loyalties and sharp ideological conflicts fail to provide unambiguous cues, factors such as the personal qualities of actual or prospective heads of governments may become relatively more important for the conduct of election campaigns.

Simply put: if voters become 'available' as a result of loosening social ties and clear programmatic alternatives are increasingly lacking, party politicians may take refuge in a growing leadership-centredness of politics.

Conclusion

From the preceding discussion, we drew attention to the fact that presidentialization could: (i) influence voters to focus on leaders' personal qualities in making their electoral choices, (ii) be exploited by party leaders in order to bypass colleagues in setting political agendas and (iii) provide a crucial power resource for chief executives to dominate their governments and govern increasingly past their parties. From our analysis, a large number of modern democracies provide ample evidence of the extent of structurally induced presidentialization, for instance, some of the most conspicuous examples have been driven by exceptional personalities like Tony Blair, Gerhard Schroder, Bettino Craxi and Silvio Berlusconi. Yet, there is strong evidence of an underlying structural component in all our cases, which means that we are not simply finding unsystematic fluctuation between presidentialized and party-based politics depending on contingent factors. Rather, a substantial part of these changes have resulted from long-term - and to that extent 'structural' - development which are unlikely to be reversed in the foreseeable future.

From the foregoing account, it should be clear that the internationalization of politics and the growth of the state have most immediate impact on executive presidentialization since they affect government and decision-making. The erosion of cleavage politics, however, is quite clearly a precondition of electoral presidentialization since it produces a shift in the factors influencing voter choice. The causal impact of the changing structure of mass communication is more evenly spread. Indeed, we would argue that it affects all areas of presidentialization.

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