

GOVERNMENTS AND BUREAUCRACIES

A state's central political executive is called its government whose job it is to preside over the country. During its tenure, the government not just puts into effect laws passed by the legislature, it also influences what laws come into being in the first place and exercises general command over the country. The two fundamental principles of democratic government are that the government should link with the electoral process and should function within constitutional restraints.

How are government decisions made?

Presidentialism

In this form, the president is directly elected by the electorate for a set amount of time. The president is both head of government and of state and not answerable to the legislature politically. Members of the government are presidential appointments generally with the legislature's consent. The president is effectively the sovereign and no collective decision-making regime exists.

Parliamentarism

The head of government and the head of state are separate offices. The latter is able to dissolve parliament usually under proposal from the head of government. The head of government, typically elected by parliament, is politically liable along with the cabinet to the parliament and can be ousted from office via a vote of no confidence within parliament.

Parliamentary systems present a wider range of modes of decision making such as cabinet government, prime ministerial government, and ministerial government. Cabinet governments are ones in which the cabinet discusses and rules upon matters of concern. Prime ministerial governments resemble presidential ones in that decision-making is monocratic, the difference being that a president has a constitutional right to such decision-making. In ministerial or fragmented governments, individual cabinet ministers are tasked with different domains exclusive to them. Coalition governments, because of differences in party makeup, result in more complicated modes of decision-making. Parliamentary government creates more of a collegial relationship between the prime minister and other cabinet members than presidential government. Cabinet members in a parliamentary system are not mere appointees, instead the prime minister is merely a first among equals who has to justify and agree decisions with other cabinet members.

Semi-presidentialism

In this form of government, the directly elected president forms a cabinet that is politically responsible to parliament. In Sri Lanka, decision-making has tended to mirror the archetypal presidential system rather than the parliamentary system.

Government Autonomy: The Party Dimension

Since government is linked to the electoral process through political parties, a key concern is the extent to which these parties can influence and control the behaviour of their members in government. The values and policies of the party come to bear upon the government and questions arise as to the autonomy of governments to override party concerns.

Political parties exercise power over their affiliates in government by means of party programmes, the recruitment of party leaders into government office, and permanent supervision and control of the government. Party programmes specify clear objectives and the means to achieve those objectives. For instance, ministers will have clear aims that will be monitored by the party for success. Despite such oversight by parties, empirical studies predominantly demonstrate that they have only finite control over government.

The Political Capacity of Government

The potential of a government to accomplish goals depends on the political environment of that government's term. The government's support base on the ground in society and in political institutions contribute to the conduciveness of the political environment for governments fulfilling their potential.

In presidential systems, a unified government, in which the executive and legislative chambers are all held by one party, presents greater capacity for getting the work of governing done. However, as discussed above, decision making may be focused on the individual president rather than debate within the cabinet. A divided government, in which different parties control the different branches, entails that the president use strategies such as decrees, vetoes, legislative initiatives, and patronage to sway members of the legislature, or settle with legislative parties. If these strategies do not work, there may be a gridlock.

In parliamentary systems, single-party majority governments, in which there is no line of division along party lines, normally have the capacity to accomplish the most politically as decisions made will be uncontentious. In addition, decisions made within cabinet are likely to have been discussed and debated privately in advance.

Bureaucratic Capacities

The capacity of a government to execute its decisions is also contingent on the will and capability of bureaucrats within the structures and processes of the public administration. Classic bureaucracy strives to render the civil service a neutral instrument of government, but in reality, bureaucracies are made of individual human beings with private interests and agency. The enactment of individual political preferences by bureaucrats can lead to loss of departmental agency. Furthermore, career concerns of bureaucrats can lead to further bureaucratic growth.

One way governments counter the bureaucratic dilemma is through a spoils system in which the winning party has free rein over appointing a large section of the bureaucracy after elections. Another is through New Public Management (NPM) systems whereby a profit motive is made the strategy for survival, key positions are open to and competed for by outsiders for a fixed term of office, and accountability is dependent on the bureaucrat achieving agency targets rather than merely following protocol. Over-politicisation of the public service often heightens public discontent and most modern constitutions aim for a depoliticised administration. In addition, politicisation also runs its own risks of bloated inefficiency because appointments are made on political allegiance rather than merit.

Adapted from Wolfgang C. Müller, 'Legislatures' in Daniele Caramani (ed), *Comparative Politics* (OUP 2020)

Further Reading

Jack Hayward and Vincent Wright, *Governing from the Centre: Core Executive Coordination in France* (OUP 2002)

B Guy Peters, Roderick AW Rhodes and Vincent Wright, *Administering the Summit: Administration of the Core Executive in Developed Countries* (Palgrave Macmillan 2000)

Bo Rothstein, *The Quality of Government: Corruption, Social Trust, and Inequality in International Perspective* (University of Chicago Press 2011)

Namika Raby, *Kachcheri Bureaucracy in Sri Lanka: The Culture and Politics of Accessibility* (Syracuse University Publishers 1985)

Ramesh Ramasamy, 'Governance and administration in Sri Lanka: trends, tensions, and prospects' (2020) 23 *Public Administration and Policy: An Asia-Pacific Journal* 187