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QUESTIONS & ANSWERS ON PARTY DEVELOPMENT

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POLITICAL PARTY COALITION BUILDING

WHAT ARE POLITICAL PARTY COALITIONS?

Political party coalitions are temporary alliances between political parties to serve their joint interests.

WHAT DIFFERENT KINDS OF COALITIONS EXIST?

There are roughly four different kinds of coalitions:

1) **Pre-electoral alliances** (also known as election pacts). These are formed in situations where no single party can win elections alone;

2) **Legislative coalitions**. These are formed to cooperate to pass legislation in Parliament;

3) **Coalition governments**. Coalition governments make it possible to form governments in situations where no on party can form the government alone; and

4) **Governments of National Unity**, where parties form agreements to govern together in situations of crisis or dramatic political change.

WHY DO POLITICAL PARTIES ENTER INTO COALITIONS?

Political parties enter into coalitions if the coalition advances their interests. Political parties usually enter into coalitions either to win elections or to form a government after elections.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF ENTERING INTO COALITIONS?

Coalitions allow for a broader group of parties to take part in governance, leading to a more representative democracy. The negotiation between different parties in a coalition creates debate and discussion on a range of policy options. It also allows for the representation of a broader range of societal groups along religious, ethnic, regional, class, or other dimensions.

In times of transition to democracy, or major political shifts, coalitions provide a mechanism by which political decision making can be more consensual and include a broader number of different political interests. Therefore, coalition building can be extremely valuable during political transitions as a means to ensure that a wide range of political voices are accommodated in the negotiations surrounding transitions.

WHAT FACTORS DETERMINE WHETHER A COALITION IS IN THE INTEREST OF A PARTY?

A number of different factors can determine whether a coalition is in the interest of a party:

Is the Electoral System Favorable to Coalition Formation?

1) Is a majority required to win the presidential election or a parliamentary election? Requirements to garner a majority of votes to win an election provide an incentive in multi-party systems for pre-election coalition formation, especially in situations where no candidate is likely to win an outright majority.

2) Is the system a first-past-the-post system or a proportional representation system? There are more limited incentives to form a pre-election coalition before an election in a PR system since all parties will be guaranteed a certain number of seats based on votes received, as opposed to a winner-takes-all system, where votes do not translate into seats. However, the PR system provides a strong incentive to build governing coalitions.

3) To what extent does the legal framework allow parties to work together in coalitions without losing their identity? What are the rules governing shifting allegiances between parties? Some electoral systems provide more flexibility for coalitions to operate.

Are the Potential Coalition Partners Compatible?

4) Do the potential coalition partners share a similar ideology or philosophy of governing? In cases where parties have irreconcilable differences on these fronts, their ability to govern as coalition partners after election will be extremely limited.

5) Are the parties established on firm enough ground that they will not risk being dissolved or losing their identity by joining the coalition? In cases where the foundations of parties are fragile, entering into a coalition can weaken their support even further as their supporters transfer their allegiance to the coalition or to the dominant parties in the coalition.

<u>Does the Coalition Add Value to the Party?</u>

6) Do the potential coalition partners increase the party's chance of winning? What strengths and advantages do the potential coalition partners add to the party? Some potential coalition partners that draw on the same bases of support may not help the party's chances of winning. Likewise, some potential coalition partners may have too limited support to be useful.

7) Will the coalition provide enough benefit to outweigh the potential disadvantages, such as loss of autonomy, association with the negative aspects of the coalition partners, and potential loss of party identity and party message? In some cases parties entering into coalitions with parties with which they have historically had poor relations, the negative image of the potential coalition partner may cause them to lose as much support as they gain. Likewise, loss of autonomy and identity can result from a coalition including parties with dramatically different ideologies, principles and values.

WHAT MAKES A COALITION SUCCEED OR FAIL?

Coalitions depend on a number of factors for their success. All coalitions should consider the following to be successful:

1) Define clear goals for the coalition from the outset. For example, does the coalition want to field a joint presidential candidate? Or will the coalition only cooperate in terms of joint parliamentary candidates? Lack of agreement on clear goals regarding such questions in the early stages can often damage the coalition irreparably.

2) Delineate which topics of discussion are off limits due to their likelihood of causing friction within the coalition. For instance, if there are irreconcilable differences between the coalition parties on federalism, federalism should not be an item on the discussion agenda for the coalition. Instead, coalition partners should agree to disagree.

3) Enter the coalition with a willingness to make certain compromises. In cases where joint parliamentary candidates are to be fielded, for example, each coalition partner will have to sacrifice some seats to the preferred candidates of other parties. Lack of commitment to such compromises will promote the rapid dissolution of the coalition.

4) Identify how each party can receive a fair share of the benefits of the coalition. If some parties to the coalition feel that the other parties are receiving unfair benefits, their incentives to remain in the coalition will be limited. For example, if the coalition is providing resources for campaigns of its candidates, there should be a formula so that all parties' candidates receive their fair share of financial support to their campaigns.

5) Negotiate to reach agreement on what concessions to make so that each party can get what it wants. In cases where there are multiple strong candidates for a parliamentary seat from parties to the coalition, for example, parties can negotiate to agree on which candidate should stand and what preferential treatment for other seats will be given to those parties who agree to have their candidates defer.

6) Make decisions in a transparent way. A clear and transparent way of making decisions within the coalition is a benefit. This will build trust between coalition partners and also ensure that all parties have a clear and coherent understanding of the coalition's direction. For example, if there are discussions on how to allocate leadership roles in government, such discussions is best done transparently and with an agreed upon procedure to prevent dissatisfied coalition members from opting out of the coalition.

7) Deliver results. A winning coalition or a coalition that runs government effectively will retain its existing coalition partners and also attract new coalition partners. Coalitions that fail to increase their support during elections generally fall apart. Similarly, coalitions in government that fail to achieve their proposed mandate often dissolve.

8) Resolve disputes between coalition partners proactively. Making an effort to resolve disputes between coalition partners in a timely fashion and by a mutually acceptable mechanism will prevent simmering disputes from undermining the overall goals of the coalition. If two party leaders have a dispute over the coalition's electoral strategy, for example, referring the two party leaders to a dispute reconciliation committee that is constituted fairly and led by an impartial chairperson can help mitigate conflict.

9) Ensure consistent, clear and appropriate communication. Even with the best efforts at communication, political rumours and intrigue can make holding together a coalition difficult due to their impact on trust. Communicating regularly with coalition partners helps them remain focused on goals and objectives. It also builds trust and transparency within the coalition. Finally, it helps dispel rumours that might otherwise weaken the coalition.

10) Establish a coherent organisational structure and governance procedure for the coalition. To work effectively, coalitions will benefit from having different forms of meetings, including meetings of top party leadership, hammering out details of coalition agreements, and how the coalition works.   Decision-making processes may be outlined in a written document, whether through an MOU or through formal legal documents. Lack of a binding document can lead to uncertainty in coalition arrangements or attempts by powerful coalition partners to use the coalition to advance their own interests (Global Partners Governance 2014).

CASE STUDIES

Coalition building is particularly challenging in situations where political parties are largely based on ethnicity or religion. In Kenya, for example, ethnic patterns of party mobilization and coalition building, combined with weakly institutionalized political parties, created the ingredients for election-linked ethnic violence. In the 2002 Kenyan elections, where coalitions were broad-based and contained prominent leaders from all the major ethnic groups, post-election violence was minimal. In 2007, however, when the coalitions placed the major ethnic groups in direct opposition, a contentious election led to a massive outbreak of violence between winners and losers. One lesson from the Kenyan experience is that parties should attempt to build pan-ethnic coalitions wherever possible. Another lesson is that, in cases where ethnic-based electoral coalitions may result in violence, safeguards should be put in place to minimize outbreaks of such violence. Such safeguards might include electoral rules requiring parties to achieve a certain percentage of the vote across all regions of the country; security arrangements that provide a firm buffer against ethnic vigilantes; transparent electoral processes that build confidence in the validity of the results; and commitments by the media to follow a code of conduct that includes encouraging peaceful participation and tolerance (Kadima and Owuor 2014).

In India, coalition building has helped to "enhance the pluralistic aspect of electoral politics" by bringing together political parties with disparate ideologies and ethnic/religious/caste affiliations. Although coalition building has diluted party ideological positions by forcing parties with drastically different ideological perspectives to work together, the impact has been to force parties to adopt a more moderate agenda, as in the case of the Bharatiya Janata Party in India. At the same time, coalition building has increased the representative function of politics in India, with its politics increasingly "reflect the regional diversity and social complexity of the country." A key factor in alliance and coalition building in India is the "effective distribution of responsibility between central and state governments," which allows for power-sharing in a representative way (McMillan 2014).

SOURCES, WEBPAGES, AND LINKS

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McMillan, Alistair (2014), "The Causes of Political Party Alliances and Coalitions and their Effects on National Cohesion in India." In the Journal of African Elections: Understanding the Causes and Consequences of Political Party Alliances and Coalitions in Africa. Volume 13, Number 1, June 2014, pp. 181-206.

Journal of African Elections edition on Coalition Building:
http://www.content.eisa.org.za/pdf/jae13.1.pdf

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DIPD read on coalition building: http://dipd.dk/wp-content/uploads/DIPD_COALITION_BUILDING_READER.pdf