

ABSTRACT

POWER SHARING IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE: THE ORIGINS AND CONSEQUENCES OF 'UNITY GOVERNMENT' IN AFRICA

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This paper draws on recent literature and a range of empirical examples to explore the rise and implications of power-sharing government in Africa. I argue that unity governments are essentially the product of *untenable deadlock* – a situation in which both sides recognize that the impasse cannot be maintained indefinitely, but in which neither party has the strength to act unilaterally. However, the popularity of unity governments as instruments of conflict resolution in Africa can only be fully understood in relation to two additional factors; the pressure of the international community for a prompt resolution of the dispute, and the legacy of the one-party state. While stressing the fact that many unity governments can be understood using a common framework, the paper draws on the recent experience of Kenya and Zimbabwe to demonstrate the significant variations that exist in the foundation and impact of unity governments on the continent, highlighting the significance of the role of the military, the structure of the economy, and the salience of ethnic identities.

Finally, I argue that there is a need to re-evaluate the current enthusiasm in academic and policy circles for using unity governments to resolve cases of 'democratic deadlock'. In countries such as Iraq, Nepal, and the Central African Republic, the costs of non-cooperation – the resumption of large-scale violence or civil-war – may outweigh the costs of coalition government. But extending the use of unity agreements from situations of civil war to those of protracted electoral crisis ignores an inherent tension between power-sharing and the pursuit of necessary democratic reforms. Most significantly, coalition government may undermine further democratization through three mechanisms which demand further study: the tendency not to punish violations of democratic norms, the barriers created to genuine institutional reform, and the fostering of opportunities for further elite collusion and corruption.