

Are Electoral Coalitions Harmful to African Democracy?

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Democratic consolidation in Africa is widely believed to be hampered by two distinct challenges. First, incumbents rarely lose at the ballot box because they retain distinct advantages in terms of campaign resources and media attention. Secondly, opposition parties often lack distinct policy messages that help distinguish them from their competitors and that galvanize voters.

To address the first challenge, opposition parties in a host of African countries, including Nigeria, Uganda, South Africa, and Zambia, have formed electoral coalitions in recent years. Coalitions allow disparate parties to pool their meager financial resources and thereby launch a larger campaign. In addition, coalitions allow a party to appeal to a broader constituency beyond its original narrow base, thereby reducing the possibility of splitting the opposition vote to the incumbent's benefit. In divided societies, coalitions may have the added benefit of encouraging dialogue among parties that transcends ethnic, linguistic, or religious differences.

However, this paper argues that electoral coalitions exacerbate the second challenge to democratic consolidation. Specifically, coalitions preclude opposition parties from developing distinct platforms and policy differences, thereby preventing them from garnering a loyal constituency base. Often, parties with seemingly contradictory ideological bases coalesce solely around their collective goal of undermining the ruling party. At best, this exacerbates the tendency of voters to select their favored candidate according to personality rather than policies. At worst, it increases voter disillusionment over the lack of genuine party alternatives and foments apathy.

The empirical support for this argument is twofold. First, in-depth interviews were conducted with political elites and voters in Senegal, which is a country with a long history of political party coalitions. This data reveals that opposition parties lack distinct party platforms and voters cannot easily differentiate amongst them. Secondly, indicators of electoral volatility and degree of party attachment were collected from both election and Afrobarometer data for 15 countries over the last decade. Overall, the paper illustrates that electoral coalitions pose severe trade-offs for achieving consolidation in Africa.