

# *The Perils of Parliamentarism in Contrast to Presidentialism in Democratic Transition*

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**Abstract:** The paper raised some doubts on a few academic literature's arguments that Parliamentarism is better than Presidentialism for new democracies in the transitional period. It instead found that parliamentarism could also lead to critical perils to democratic transition, at least in some particular political situations, like increasing the instability of the government, encouraging political speculation and polarization, and allowing ruling parties to self-benefit from the manipulated electoral system. Instead, presidentialism could be conducive to addressing these perils of parliamentarism and enable a more robust, stable, and successful transition from authoritarianism to democracy for many countries. This paper took examples of presidentialism in Philippine and Taiwan. Compared with presidentialism, parliamentarism has several key weaknesses. They include government instability under minority rule, polarization in countries with enormous social cleavages, encouraging politicians to pursue political speculation and defect their electorates, and the likelihood of electoral system maneuver by ruling parties. Thus, for new democracies, presidentialism may perform better than parliamentarism, at least on some occasions.

**Keywords:** parliamentarism, presidentialism, democratization, political transition

## 1. Introduction

Nowadays, most political regimes have acknowledged democratic principles as the source of their legitimacy and claim themselves to be democracies. However, not all self-claimed "democracies" have established robust institutions that can respect and defend democratic values. For many countries undergoing political change, their democratic transition's fates usually hinge on whether their democratic institutions can balance stability and efficiency with inclusiveness and pluralism [1]. Therefore, it is crucial for these transitional regimes to make appropriate institutional choices and arrangements.

One of the most decisive choices that many new democracies are confronting and debating is whether to adopt parliamentary or presidential system. In parliamentary democracies, the executive branch's legitimacy rests on the confidence of the parliament. Presidents or monarchs of parliamentary regimes are usually symbolic figures as the head of state but with few substantial executive powers [2]. In contrast, under presidential systems, the president is both the head of state and the head of the government, whose legitimacy is independent of the legislature [2]. Both systems have advantages and disadvantages. For democracies in the transitional stage, many scholars like Linz [1] prefer parliamentarism to presidentialism based on the consideration of stability and

pluralism. However, this paper will discuss the potential perils of adopting parliamentarism in new democracies. The paper will first discuss the potential risks of parliamentarism from both theoretical and empirical perspectives and compare it with presidentialism in some transitional political entities' cases, then try to defend the advantages of presidentialism in contrast to parliamentarism by taking some new democracies as examples.

## 2. The Perils of Parliamentarism

Some literature argues that parliamentary system is better than presidentialism in maintaining political stability in democratic transitions. In the parliamentary system, the government is formed by the legislature's majority party. As Linz [1] argued, the system can function well to avoid the conflict between the executive and legislative power. It technologically could avoid the legitimacy conflict between the popularly elected president and parliament that may belong to divergent political camps. However, this advantage can become a source of governmental instability if the ruling party fails to enjoy an absolute majority in the parliament. In this circumstance, the incumbent party usually has to resort to forming a coalition government by seeking support from other minor parties to keep itself in power. On this occasion, the temporary coalitions could be very fragile. The possibility of such kind of government finishing their full terms then drops dramatically. Therefore, the potential conflict within the ruling coalition and between the weak government and strong opposition parties can bring uncertainties to countries at the critical transition stage [3].

Besides the possibility of the minority government, parliamentarism could also encourage another source of regime instability to emerge, which is political speculation behaviors. Parties defeated in the general elections by popular vote may use various means, like the promise of governmental positions, making political concessions, and granting economic benefits as enticements to lure ruling party representatives to turn to support them [3]. This situation is more common and detrimental in those fragile democracies where political integrity and accountability are yet to be fully established and widely honored [2]. Parliamentarism provides incentives and opportunities to ambitious politicians of opposition parties to make such political speculation because the executive power is generated from the legislative branch and can only be held accountable to the legislature. Thus, the defeated side could regain power through the "back door", as long as their parties get a majority of legislators' support. The people's will and democratic accountability mechanism could then be bypassed, as regime changes could happen regardless of previous election results [2].

The political instability in Malaysia from 2020 to 2022 is an example of the peril of parliamentarism. In 2018, the first democratic transfer of political power happened in this country, as Barisan Nasional (BN), a conservative ruling coalition since the independence of Malaysia for 61 years, was defeated by Pakatan Harapan (PH), a more liberal and multi-ethnic coalition [4]. While Malaysia was considered an electoral authoritarian state in the past as the BN regime was criticized for implementing discriminative policies against ethnic minorities and systematically repressing domestic oppositions for years, this change was widely regarded as a remarkable progress of Malaysia's democratization process [4]. According to the election results, The PH coalition should have enjoyed an absolute majority with 113 out of 222 seats [5]. However, unexpectedly, the reformist government collapsed merely two years after their victory. At the beginning of 2020, some PH representatives defected to the BN. The BN leaders, defeated by the popular vote in the 2018 election, returned to power by making use of the intra-coalition conflicts of the PH and persuaded enough legislators to defect to the PH-led government. [6]. Although the power transition occurred overnight regardless of the will of voters, it was consistent with the principle of parliamentarism as the leader of the majority party or coalition could form the government regardless of whether the majority is gained from elections or defections [2]. If Malaysians could choose their head of the government by popular vote under a presidential-style electoral system, the winner of this election

could enjoy at least a five years term even if his party lost control of the legislature. The defection would be meaningless because the source of legitimacy of the executive branch comes directly from the elections. The relative independence of the executive branch can also enable the head of the government to carry out reforms in his term more conveniently and comprehensively without worrying about being defected by allies and being threatened by the radical wing of the opposition parties.

On the other hand, parliamentarism may also exacerbate political polarization. Linz [1] credited parliamentarism for avoiding zero-sum games and winner-take-all competition. There are also arguments that parliamentarism is better for democracies' consolidation by isolating extremists and encouraging consensus building [2]. But based on empirical observation, arguments in favor of parliamentarism may be true to countries where ideological cleavages of political powers are minor but may not be well applicable to states that are struggling against divisiveness. In a political environment with a high degree of division, the strengths of centralists are too weak to be influential, political powers on both sides of the spectrum may have to turn to find their allies from extremists of their respective side and shift further away from the center [7]. Under the presidential system, the president is expected to be the representative of the whole country. The need for broad representation incentivizes candidates to expand their coalition and appeal to more moderate. In contrast, parliamentary system gives extreme parties more space to survive. It allows them to win seats and share political powers by only appealing to their core electorates and consolidating their support even at the cost of increasing polarization.

The breakdown of the Weimar republic can be an example to illustrate what may happen in a divisive state adopting parliamentarism. Although the Weimar Republic was not a typical parliamentary regime, it had many characteristics similar to parliamentarism, like the division of the head of state and government and the Chancellor was usually the leader of the parliament's majority party. Due to the socio-economic crisis and the proportional representative electoral system, the party system in the parliament became increasingly fragmented and divisive in the late 1920s [8]. Both far-left and far-right parties gained tremendous ground during this period, and the space of centralists was significantly narrowed. This trend rendered the Weimar Republic to become a dysfunctional democracy as negotiations and compromises were almost impossible between parties at two extreme ends political spectrum, and finally led to the victory of the far-right Nazi Party in 1933 [8]. Instead, a strong presidential system may save the democracy of the Weimar Republic as long as the president elected is a unifying figure who could exert his relative independence from partisan struggles in the parliament and make attempts to represent the divisive country as a whole.

Moreover, for authoritarian states and new democracies, parliamentarism may have negative impacts on their democratization. Comparative research found that the electoral authoritarian regimes adopting parliamentarism enjoy longer life spans compared with presidential regimes [9]. One of the main reasons is the parliamentary system enables governing parties to institutionalize themselves instead of centering on or being unduly influenced by the presidents. The institutionalization also undermines elites' incentives to oppose the governments by sharing power with them [9]. For instance, although BN (the former governing coalition of Malaysia) was alleged to be dominated by the Malay power, it had successfully maintained its support from the elites of minorities by constantly sharing government positions with them for more than half a century, which is considered as a reason for why Malaysia's first transfer of political power came so late and arduous [4].

On the other hand, compared with presidential elections in which the whole country is a single voting unit, members of parliament are usually elected from their respective constituencies. This difference renders it easier for ruling parties to maneuver election results by various means like gerrymandering and setting electoral rules that are advantageous to them [9]. Take Singapore as an example, its ruling party (People's Action Party, PAP) has a long historical record of manipulating

election results by using a multiple magnitude plurality (MMP) electoral system and unfairly drawing the constituencies' boundaries. The MMP system is favorable to the PAP, which enjoys much more local resources for campaigns and candidates to run, while disadvantaging the opposition parties by raising the threshold to be elected. Meanwhile, gerrymandering ensures PAP distributes supportive electorates more equally in each district and dilutes the opposition parties' electoral base [10].

Therefore, overall, although parliamentarism solves the problem of dual legitimacy of presidential systems, the legitimacy of its own is easier to be weakened as the parliament is the only directly elected institution on the national level. Once the representativeness of the legislature is distorted or diminishes, few approaches are available to remedy that and to enable the expression of the authentic opinion of the majority. Now I will turn to presidentialism by using two successful new democracies' examples to illustrate its distinctive advantages to transitional regimes in comparison with parliamentarism.

### **3. Presidentialism's Merits in the Philippines and Taiwan's Democratization**

The first example is the end of Marcos' dictatorship in the Philippines in 1986. In 1972, President Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law and became the dictator of the Philippines. Facing the increasing pressure calling for democratic reform domestically, Marcos authorized a constitutional amendment in 1981 that allowed Philippine citizens to elect their president directly instead of elected by the government-controlled parliament, which was seen as opening the door to democratization [9]. In the 1986's general election, Marcos encountered the challenge of the opposition parties' leader, Corazon Aquino. Although Marcos declared victory by winning 53.6% of the votes, opposition parties refused to concede and claimed large-scale electoral misconduct happened in the election. The anger led to a series of protests against Marcos, known as the People Power Revolution, and finally compelled him to flee to the US and end his dictatorship in the Philippines [9]. Thinking retrospectively, if the head of government was elected by the parliament instead of voters, then Marcos could extend his dictatorship easily by unfairly drawing the constituency map or forming a coalition with minor conservative parties, even if he failed to win the popular vote in parliamentary election [9]. Presidentialism accelerated the Philippines' democratization by eliminating some advantages Marcos enjoyed and forcing him to compete relatively fairly with the opposition.

Besides, Taiwan's democratization could further justify the advantages of presidentialism from another perspective. The authoritarian regime of Kuomintang in Taiwan started in 1949 and continued for almost half a century. In the last years of the 1980s, forced by internal and external pressures, the regime's leader (Chiang Ching-Kuo) had to loosen the control of Taiwan society and allowed the formation of opposition parties. After the death of Chiang, his successor Lee Teng-hui continued to put forward reforms by ceasing martial law and dissolving the National Assembly, whose representatives had been seated for 44 years without elections [11]. However, these reforms not only caused the resistance of conservative fractions of Kuomintang but were also criticized as too slow and accompanied by corruption by opposite parties. In 1993, some conservative KMT politicians left the party and formed the New Party, criticizing Lee Teng-hui and the KMT establishments for acquiescing to corruptive "black gold" politics and conniving the expansion of pro-independent political forces [11]. In the legislative election two years later, Kuomintang almost lost its majority in the legislative Yuan while opposition parties won 79 of 164 seats in total [12].

In this situation, if Taiwan adopted parliamentarism instead of presidentialism, it was likely that the incumbent KMT cabinet would not pass the confidence vote with the objection of both the radical Democratic Progressive Party and conservative fractions of the KMT. Under a parliamentary system, even if the KMT still (unlikely) held a slim majority, the incumbent cabinet may still need to take collective responsibility for seat loss and give its way to more conservative political figures. The pace of democratization may therefore slow down and even stagnate. Otherwise, the opposition parties

may unite together and elect a new premier to take place the KMT and accelerate reforms, which may, on the other hand, damage the interests of conservative KMT fractions and the KMT-affiliated military, which remained controlled vast resources and political clouts despite the primary steps of democratization. With their strong objections, the risk of political instability may rise substantially. No matter which situation happened, not only would political polarization increase, but also the prospect of Taiwan's democratization could be in serious question. Fortunately, presidentialism gave the incumbent president four years of fixed-term without direct threats and challenges from both sides and enabled the reformist administration to materialize a moderate reform platform without causing uncontrollable political division. Therefore, in the critical transition period of democratization, presidentialism, at least in many cases, has distinctive advantages of enabling political stability compared with parliamentarism [2].

#### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, in contrast to some academic literature's argument, compared with presidentialism, parliamentarism has several key weaknesses. They include government instability under minority rule, polarization in countries with enormous social cleavages, encouraging politicians to pursue political speculation and defect their electorates, and the likelihood of electoral system maneuver by ruling parties. Thus, for new democracies, presidentialism may perform better than parliamentarism, at least on some occasions. However, the analyses by no means indicate that parliamentarism is inferior to presidentialism for all democracies, or presidentialism can guarantee the success of democracy. There are many other factors that can influence the improvement and consolidation of democracy, including social consensus and public participation. Only by considering all these factors, we can make wise choices and arrangements for our democracy and achieve the common good of our political community.

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