

ADVANTAGES & DISADVANTAGES OF PRESIDENTIAL SYSTEM OF GOVERNMENT

Advantages of the Presidential System of Government;:

i) Quick and decisiveness in Decision-making

The presidential system of government makes for decisive actions because the president knows that ‘the buck stops on his desk’, a phrase popularised by the late Harry Truman, when he decided to use nuclear weapons against two Japanese cities in order to bring about a decisive end to World War II. In America and Nigeria, the constitution did not even make it mandatory for the president to call a meeting of the executive council before he can take action on any issue.

The president is at liberty to either consult his ministers or any of them, or refuse to seek their opinion in taking decisions. The ministers or any other functionaries are mere advisers to the president and it is not binding on the president to go along with the council of ministers, unlike the case under the parliamentary where the prime minister is always at pains to secure the support of the cabinet, and unanimity of opinions among its members. This promptness in decision-making therefore makes the response of government to issues, especially in situations where any delay in taking action may be dangerous.

ii) Presidential discretion in Appointments

One major advantage of the presidential system of government is that the President has a free hand in appointing his ministers and other government appointees. Ministers could be chosen from outside the president’s party, a situation that confers high degree of latitude on the president to select the best materials from any part of the country. Since the bulk stops at his desk, the president can easily replace or fire any of his appointees because they are directly responsible to him.

iii) A single countrywide constituency

The fact that the electorate popularly elects the president makes the whole country a single constituency for him, and as such, the party does not have an overbearing control over him, beyond offering him advice at party caucuses. He rather than his party or his appointees bear singular responsibilities for his actions and inactions. This constitutes a consistent source of pressure on him to perform since he cannot shift blame to any other person.

iv) Merits of Separation of Powers and Checks and Balances

The mechanism of separation of power enhances the effective performance of each arm of government in its functions while checks and balances also ensures that a president who by nature is dictatorial can be brought under constitutional checks. The combination of the two devices will obviously improve the performance of government as whole and its capacity for optimal service delivery.

v) Fixed Tenure of Office

The fixed tenure in office enjoyed by a president under the presidential system makes for the stability of the government and the continuity of policies. A stable government also allows for both medium and long term planning, rather than the instability that characterises a parliamentary system of government. A new general election can be called in a parliamentary system any time a vote of no confidence is passed on the government. For example, the fixed tenure is 4 year in the context of USA.

vi) Individual Ministerial Responsibility

Unlike the parliamentary system, which allows a non-performing minister to shelter under the concept of collective responsibility, the presidential system makes it easier for an ineffective minister to be identified and singled out for blame or even dismissal. His dismissal will not affect other ministers or even, in the extreme make a government to collapse.

vii) Insulation from Party Politics

The president is often described to be above party politics. This therefore offers him unlike the Prime Minister in a parliamentary system who is enmeshed in party politics to view every issue on its merits and not solely, and sometimes unwisely, according to party dictates. This has often been the case in the United States when the two parties are able to rise above the traditional party divisions in what is normally called a bi-partisan approach to national issues. Many past U.S Presidents and congressmen have been able to view major issues like during the Vietnamese War, the Persian Gulf War and the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack outside the prism of political party affiliations.

Disadvantages of the Presidential System of Government;

i) Prone to Dictatorship

The presidential system is prone to dictatorship or abuse of office, which is dangerous to the democratic process. This is a result of enormous power that is concentrated in the office of the president. Presidentialism focuses too much on the personality of the president and his capacity; and when that individual is undermined the office is undermined and the system may even be threatened. For instance it took a long time before the presidency in the United States recovered from the shock that gripped the office due to the Watergate Scandal, which occurred due to one moment, though grave act of indiscretion by President Richard Nixon. The disposition of president to be autocratic can also be attributed to the cumbersome process that is required before a sitting president can be impeached. President Obasanjo's tenure in office can best be described as a chronicle of alleged constitutional breaches, yet all attempts to remove him from office through impeachment failed.

ii) Friction among Government Organs

Separation of powers can cause delays in the execution of government programmes, especially in situations where executive-legislative relations are not properly managed. In less matured democracies of the developing world, this problem is more acute when different political parties are in control of the executive and the legislature. A water tight separation of power often inhibits the smooth running of government, especially if attempt by one organ to moderate the activities of the other through the mechanism of checks and balances is being resisted.

iii) Lack of flexibility in Tenure of Office

The operation of the presidential system has been criticised for being too rigid and not amenable to changing circumstances. For example in the United States during World War II all the scheduled elections under the stipulated electoral calendar were held since the system did not allow for any flexibility in form of postponement. What only ensured stability of the system and continuity of U.S. 'war policy was the popularity of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who was re-elected twice during the World War II. However, during the same period in Britain the tenure of the government that was held together under a war coalition structure was easily extended. Such flexibility is unknown to the presidential system in the United States or Nigerian and could not be contemplated without a prior constitutional amendment. Nigeria is presently (October 2010) embroiled in a debate on whether the

Independent National Electoral Commission can conduct credible General Elections in January 2001, in view of the time constraints imposed on it by the amended 1999 constitution and the newly enacted Electoral Law.

iv) Very Expensive to Operate

Another disadvantage of the Presidential system is that it is very expensive to run. The parliamentary system is considered to be more cost effective since it is from the elected members of the parliament that the Prime minister and other ministers, who constitute the nation's cabinet, are appointed. This arrangement is economically more efficient than that of the presidential system, which requires elected members of the legislature to resign before they can be appointed as ministers. The system also put a lot of public funds such as security vote and contingency fund, which are not subject to legislative scrutiny or public audit at the disposal of the president. This presidential spending latitude creates opportunity for lack of fiscal discipline, or even corruption of all forms.

v) Absence of Party Discipline

Unlike the parliamentary system where party discipline is very strong and which fuses the cabinet and the parliament into one like a Siamese twin which must swim and sink together, this is not the case in a the presidential model. The fluid party under the presidential system structure may make the relationship between the executive and the legislature prone to disagreements and less easy to manage; and thus hamper the operation of the business of government.

vi) The process of Lobbying can encourage Corruption

Although lobbying, if decently applied, has become an acceptable means by which pressure groups influence public policies; yet it is also open to abuse or misuse by a more than determined chief executive who is determined to have his ways at all costs. This was very evident during the early days of the fourth Republic in Nigeria when 'Ghana Must Go' bags allegedly funnelled from the presidency and meant to bribe members of the National Assembly were displayed publicly for everyone to see