

# One Party State: Is It Good or Bad for Governance?

Written by Margaret Monyani

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2018/05/25/one-party-state-is-it-good-or-bad-for-governance/>

MARGARET MONYANI, MAY 25 2018

A one party system or a one party by definition refers to a political framework where a one/single political party forms and runs the government. This may happen in two ways. Firstly, the activities of the opposition may be completely outlawed such that even the opposition leaders are not allowed to participate in elections. Secondly, the chances of the opposition to clinch power are thwarted by the unfavourable legal framework that is in place. Notably, in some cases a dominant political party that is in power only allows other less dominant parties who are allied to it to exist, while completely outlawing the opposition parties. According to Renske and Nijzink (2013) one party state could operate in an authoritarian context or even in some cases in multiparty framework set up. What matters is the legal framework in place and other social, economic and political factors that will be discussed later in this article.

A one party system was a characteristic of many African states particularly immediately they gained independence and more rampant in the period between 1960s to the 1980s. Many scholars have attributed this to various factors including the fact that democracy was considered as alien to Africa. For instance, apologists of the one party regime such as Mwalimu Nyerere maintained that African traditional societies were akin to one party system (Nyong'o, 1992). Others like Kwame Nkrumah, maintained that democracy or multi party regimes were divisive hence unfit for the newly independent African states which needed a unified energy and enthusiasm so as to move forward (Widner, 1992). Additionally, most of the leaders that transcended into power at that time did so through the huge support from locals who were mainly subsistence farmers. Therefore, in order to have control over this electorate, socialism was favoured while capitalism was shunned. The expectation was, the post-independence governance structure would mirror the archetype of the colonial master's home country. For instance, in the British colonies it was anticipated that those who lost will definitely form the opposition wing in parliament. This did not happen automatically as a number of African countries including Kenya, Ghana, Zambia, Mali, Senegal and Tanzania adopted the one party system (Renske and Nijzink, 2013). In most cases, the dominant party of the day and the charismatic leaders who played the lead role in the fight against colonialism assumed the leadership of such parties. Using Kenya as a case, this article delves into the critical question of whether a one party state is good or bad for governance.

Kenya was a British colony that attained independence in 1963. A year later, Jomo Kenyatta's party the Kenya African National Union (KANU) merged with the main opposition party of the day to form a single party that would run government. In 1964 when Kenya became a Republic, Kenyatta led the legislature into creating the position of the president with substantial executive powers. Just like many newly independent African nations, it was assumed that adopting the one party state framework would ensure cohesiveness and unity especially because of the multi ethnic nature of many African countries. Under the leadership of the first president of Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta, KANU remained some sort of a party run by a group of elite close knit politicians.

At that time, there was some considerable freedom for debate and criticism even within the party itself. For instance Kenya remained a de facto single party state up to the year 1982. During this time, a system of open party primaries which allowed aspirant candidate to participate was maintained (Tordoff, 1997). This allowed some level of competition within the party which also made it easy for KANU to win the general elections. However the freedom started to deteriorate over the years as the party started to crystallise into a de jure single party authoritarian (Widner, 1992). When Moi ascended to power, KANU and its leadership continued to curtail the freedom of the citizens especially those that came from smaller tribes. In order to deal with the marginalisation, the smaller tribes sought other forms of political expression through the formation of welfare societies. In 1980 these welfare societies

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were banned and KANU became a de jure single party system in 1982. All ethnic and regional welfare societies were disbanded due to the fact that they acted as catalysts for political candidates. Even within KANU itself factions and disciplinary wings were created so as to punish those who went against the president's commands. The president became actively involved in the selection of party leaders and other key officials who were expected to pledge full allegiance to the party and its leader. During the KANU era a centralised form of governance was embraced. The single party system blurred the boundaries between government and the party and even more interesting the presidency. The president was in total control of the executive arm and his office would oversee the implementation of various policies closely. According to Ayittey (1992) this kind of control is great to the extent that it brings about order in policy enactment and implementation. In order to streamline governance and make public officers conversant with their duties, they underwent mandatory governance training from the Kenya Institute of Administration (KIA). It was expected that such training in key areas such as communication, management and development will equip the government human resource with prerequisite skills to propel the country to a better economically standing.

In order to determine whether a particular political framework is good or bad for governance one needs to first of all determine the criteria for such. Neuberger (1974) argues that there are three important factors that determine such and they include; political stability, economic development and nation building. Most importantly there is need to allow some level of freedom and healthy political competition within whatever political framework is adopted. At the end of the day it all boils down to the essence of governance which is all about the structures and processes designed to ensure accountability, transparency, rule of law, equity and inclusiveness, empowerment and broad based participation.

Using Kenya as a case study provides a scenario where the single party system degenerated into authoritarianism and thus becoming a hindrance to economic development. The party became a breeding ground of corruption. Disregard for merit and reward of loyalty manifested in all forms as those that pledged full loyalty to the party and the president ended up holding powerful positions in government. This became a recipe of separatist tendencies especially among the smaller tribes that sought to express themselves through welfare societies. This was in a bid to fill the gap of having no adequate representation in government. This degenerated into some sort of post-colonial struggle which was catalysed by the polarization of the periphery and most importantly the link between economic rewards and political power. Nation building cannot be achieved where the freedom of members of the Legislature, interest groups, local authorities and other avenues of popular participation, the media and the bureaucrats is curtailed. Surveillance and the use of Watch dogs during the one party system era in Kenya led to fear and thus no real political competition and debate even within the party itself was allowed.

The one party framework was deemed to be an important ingredient for nation building. A single party system if well-structured and committed to the social contract could be a better conduit for budding and upholding important values that are required for national building. During Jomo Kenyatta's reign *Harambee* (pooling together) which became the motto and slogan of the day was encouraged at all levels. The citizens were encouraged to pool their efforts and resources to build a better Kenya. When Moi took over he came up with a slogan of *Nyayo* (footsteps) which meant that he was following the footsteps of the first president. During his reign the values of peace, love and unity were the motto then was promoted and ever. The importance of values cannot be undermined when it comes to governance. It can be termed as the software through which management of public affairs are managed. Having common values was to be a recipe for accountability, transparency and responsiveness especially on the part of government officers. During the fight against colonialism some Africans chose to collaborate while some resisted and so the one party system was expected to help in bringing the two factions together for the sake of developing the newly independent nation. The one party state was also a beneficial in an African context because generally African states were very weak at the time of independence. Not so many citizens depend on formal institutions for survival. In Kenya for instance majority of citizens depend on subsistence farming. It therefore becomes difficult for governments to have control in such a case where the social structures are stronger than the state structures. The one party system therefore becomes an avenue of control. For instance during former president Moi's eras it became mandatory for people to have a membership card. The one party system was all favoured because it was believed that having a centralised form of governance would hasten economic development. The argument was that a one party state framework provides absolute control of government and resources which make it easier to plan and implement

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projects for public consumption. In Kenya this was very evident in the way the government maintained that whatever development projects that were being rolled out throughout the country were courtesy of the KANU regime and its commitment to deliver good service to the people. Even during general elections, the president would lobby for support from the electorate on the basis of KANU's development record. As aforementioned the difference between government and the dominant party and office of the presidency was actually blurred. In conclusion, whether one party state is good or bad for governance is dependent on various factors. In my opinion it all boils down to the question of what is the essence of governance. What are the expectations of the citizenry? Is whatever political framework in place committed to social contract as espoused by Thomas Hobbes? Are the party leaders committed to serving the people? This is because all political frameworks have shortcomings depending in the context in which they are employed.

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**Margaret Monyani** is a doctoral candidate at the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa pursuing a PhD in International Relations. She also holds a Masters degree in International Relations and a Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science from Moi University, Kenya. She has four years university teaching experience in the Department of Political Science and Public Administration at Moi University where she has taught various undergraduate courses on topical issues ranging from African governance and politics, international relations, gender, human rights, security and international migration. She is a versatile, upcoming scholar and author with skills in execution of academic and policy research projects as well as leadership experience ranging from civil society to academic spheres. She can be reached at [mmonyanim0@gmail.com](mailto:mmonyanim0@gmail.com).