UNIT 19 POLITICAL REGIMES

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19.1 INTRODUCTION

We live in the world of nation-states. There are about 200 nation states in the world today. Every state has a separate geographical boundary in which people live under their own political regime. The term ‘regime’ is different from the term ‘system’. While system implies major concepts, functions and structures, the term regime stands for specific institutional arrangements, how relationships are arranged, patterned and organised in a given society. The term political regime denotes the particular political institutional arrangements: how political relationships are structured, and organised in a given society. According to Roy Macridis, a renowned scholar of comparative politics, “a political regime embodies the set of rules, procedures, and understandings that formulate the relationship between the governors and the governed. In every political regime there are a variety of political institutions—the legislature, the political party or parties, bureaucracy, to mention a few—that perform the allotted tasks and roles involved in governance.”

People live in different types of political regimes in which various political institutions play a great variety of roles and perform differently, although the institutions may carry the same name label. Thus legislatures or political parties or bureaucracies play different roles and perform differently in different regimes. Also each political regime is the product of its own peculiar historical, cultural, economic or social and international factors, which condition the political behaviour and the attitude of those who govern and those who are governed. Regimes may also vary in their stability and legitimacy, degree of institutionalisation, status of their development, and the kind of rules that determine the relations between the governors and the governed. They differ “in the organisation of political power, the forms of political participation, the organisation and articulation of interests, and the configuration of political rights.”

For a comparative study of politics, it is essential that we develop some general concept that will help us determine the similarities and differences to enable us to arrive at some
descriptive generalisations. Thus it is first necessary to establish a general theory or a framework in terms of which we can identify similarities and differences, classify different political regimes, and generalise about them, in order to understand our political universe.

19.2 GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF POLITICAL REGIMES

It is difficult to arrive at a consensus on the general characteristics of all types of political regimes as such. Different theorists identify different characteristics of political regimes according to the ways they interpret the functions of political institutions or the specific relationship between various functionaries. Thus for the systems theorist, “a political regime denotes the particular ways and means in which these functions are structured and patterned into institutions and procedures and of their specific relationships.” According to them, as summarised by Macridis, a regime must:

1) Generate commonly shared goals and to do so, it must provide for socialisation, for a common acceptance of the goals and the institutions through which these goals are to be realised, i.e. the prevailing ideology.

2) Provide the mechanisms for decision making.

3) Establish mechanisms for articulation of interests and the aggregation of interests that determine policy.

4) Provide for the ways and means whereby decision makers are selected, together with the rules for their succession.

5) Maintain order by providing for effective controls against disruptive behaviour.

6) Be capable of self-preservation.

All political regimes try to perform these functions in different degrees through the institutions they so constitute, and they are assessed in terms of their ability to perform them.

19.3 FUNCTIONING OF A POLITICAL REGIME

The functioning of a political regime is characterised by four major interacting processes, each one performed by different institution(s).

1) The Organisation of Command—in essence the state and its agencies, which is often referred to as “the government”

2) The Organisation of consent

3) The Configuration of interests and

4) The Organisation of rights.

Let us discuss these processes in a greater detail to further analyse the concept of political regime.
The Organisation of Command

As we know, politics and the study of political regimes is concerned with the exercise of power, irrespective of why and how that power is exercised. We use the term state to denote the existence of political power within a given territory. Long time back Harold J. Laski, a noted British political scientist, has defined state as consisting of a “relatively small number of persons who issue and execute orders, which affect a larger number in whom they are themselves included: it is of the essence of character, that within its allotted territory, all citizens are legally bound by those orders.”

Thus the state, as an association, is different from other associations in its purposes, which are far wider and encompassing in scope than other associations, which is all-inclusive and has awesome powers over the various components of the society. While in a society one can move from one association to another or get out of it, it is extremely difficult to get out of the state that one belongs to and most important, the state has the monopoly of power and coercive force to secure compliance to its decisions, but at the same time must secure the loyalty of the majority of its citizens to comply with its citizens. As long as the majority of its citizens comply, the state can function with a minimum use of force, but if the majority do not comply, then the state cannot even exist.

The Formal Organs of Command

Despite their differences, all political regimes have similar formal command structure, the executive branch is at the top, administration or bureaucracy subordinates it: the legislature makes laws; and the judiciary applies the laws and settles disputes about the law. They are also similar in the way that their relationships are arranged by a Constitution—a written (in some cases unwritten also) set of rules that prescribes the limits of power, the manner in which power will be used, and the responsibilities and freedom of the citizens.

The Governing Elite

The study of command structure and the institutions and agencies operating within it is not limited only to those officially appointed or elected. In many political regimes, the decision makers, the officials are also part of the governing elite, which, “generally consists of people with greater income or knowledge and skills, or status and political influence, including those who occupy decision-making positions.” Industrial leaders, managers, intellectuals, political leaders, religious leaders, representatives of major interests and other groups and associations, doctors, lawyers, engineers—they all make up elite. It must be remembered that in the study of political regimes, we always try to link the command structure—the government with the elite.

19.4 TYPES OF POLITICAL REGIMES

Political regimes in modern times can be classified as: democratic regimes, totalitarian regimes and authoritarian regimes.
19.4.1 Democratic Regimes

In a democratic society individuals are assumed to be free. Clearly defined and demarcated “limitations” and “responsibilities” are the two key features to recount the essence of a democratic regime. Limitations, both procedural (the manner in which the political power is exercised) and substantial (rights, liberties, various structures etc.) serve as checks on the powers and authority of the state. While limitations negate the state to interfere in the activities of the individuals, responsibility demands certain definite and positive actions on the part of the state and its involvement in various activities with a view to further individuals’ well-being. All democratic regimes have a Constitution—short or detailed, written or conventions-based. The Constitution establishes in various ways the responsibility and accountability of the public functionaries to the citizens. It clearly spells out the limitations and responsibility of the individuals’ rights, organisation and structure of government, specific roles and powers which are assigned to the three major organs of the government: executive, legislature and judiciary. Some Constitutions make a mention of political parties, army and other consultative bodies too.

The nature of executive in a democracy can be either a presidential or parliamentary or it may be a combination of the two. In a parliamentary form of democracy, legislature enjoys supreme power to make laws, control the finances, and make appointment and dismissal of the head of the government (Prime Minister and his Ministers). However, in practice, the cabinet and the PM (and bureaucratic agencies) have emerged as quasi-independent policy making bodies. The parliamentary regime is cabinet government, whereby the leadership of the majority and its leader (Prime Minister) commands supreme political power. The cabinet has acquired the totality of the executive power. The cabinet also qualifies for the accountability, but for that the following five conditions must be fulfilled as prescribed by Macridis.

1) The political parties must be well-disciplined; their members in Parliament must vote as one. Cross-voting should be the exception.

2) The parties must be few in number, ideally only two. Parliamentary regimes with more than two political parties cannot provide for a strong and stable cabinet government since there will be no clear majority to support it.

3) The right of dissolution of parliament and holding a new election is explicitly and unequivocally given to the Prime Minister with no strings attached.

4) It is generally expected that the winning party will have a majority and not a mere plurality of the popular vote. If over a period of time a mere voters’ plurality is translated into a comfortable parliamentary majority, the strength of the command structure may become weakened. People will dispute its right to act as if it represented the majority. This has been the case, increasingly, both in England and in the Federal Republic of Germany.

5) Finally it is expected that neither one of the major parties will retain a majority over a long period of time. In most parliamentary regimes the major parties, or party blocs, alternate in office.
In the Presidential types of democracy the president is the head of the state as well as the government. The Constitution of the US (the most notable example of Presidential system of democracy), mentions the President of USA as the Commander-in-chief, foreign policy negotiator, manager-in-Chief, party leader, spokesman of the public interest, and broker of ideas and policies in the civil society. The President heads the executive branch with his own office, and is arranged by a personal staff, the White office.

The nature and patterns of political regime in France (Fifth Republic, 1958) can be described as semi-presidential and semi parliamentary regime. The French president holds the supreme executive power in reality. Also there is a cabinet led by him who conducts the policy of the nation and is responsible for it before the parliament.

Participation and elections, two very fundamental premises of democracy, give the people at large the instruments to determine the major policy guidelines and choose their representatives accordingly; and enable to evaluate/judge, and on the basis of performance of their representatives, decide whether to vote for them or not in the general elections. General public participate in the state activities only by means of letter-writing to the government or to the press, forming clubs, and voting in the elections. A political party on the other hand is an association that activates and mobilises the people; represents their interests, and provides a ground for a political leadership. The functions of all political parties in the democratic regime have been summed up by Macridis in the following manner:

1) They represent the views of societal groups and forces and organise and structure participation and representation.
2) They advocate policies. Policies are embodied in the party programme, fora, or manifesto
3) Democratic parties have concrete and often limited objectives as opposed to the populist or utopian parties, which advocate a radical transformation of the society. At the most, democratic parties aim to reform, not to transform.
4) In their activities, they tried to both belies the citizenry and to aggregate interests and demands.
5) Most democratic parties aim at capturing and controlling the government, but in a number of democratising regimes this is never possible because they can never win the required majority. It is only by forming coalitions with parties they are able to participate in the government or influence it directly.
6) They provide training for future leaders; they recruit men and women who are interested in politics and can rise to positions of leadership.

In all democratic regimes the citizens have several rights and interests. In fact no other feature than the presence of citizens’ rights and interests, distinguishes the democratic regimes from the non-democratic ones.
19.4.2 Totalitarian Regimes

The essence of totalitarian regimes lies in the ideology. Ideology offers a set of comprehensive propositions about the problems of society. General public is tightly organised in the name of the ideology, with the goal of disseminating it and imposing it. All totalitarian regimes are based on the single-party system. The totalitarian regimes can be classified as the communist totalitarian regimes like erstwhile Soviet Union, and other Eastern European countries and the Balkans (except Greece), Cuba, Vietnam, Mongolia, Ethiopia, Angola and Mozambique, Nicaragua, etc. and the non-communist totalitarian regimes like Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy.

Totalitarian and authoritarian regimes share many common characteristics. In both authoritarian and totalitarian regimes political power is concentrated and the command structure is not subject to the limitations and rules of responsibility that we find in democratic regimes, the political leadership manipulates and controls consent, very little or no attention is paid to the individual rights—usage of various methods to subordinate and control interests and interests association, utilisation of force (police and other para-military force) to ensure the control of public media.

Despite the above similarities some differences should also be understood between the totalitarian and authoritarian regimes. Firstly, in totalitarian regimes the leadership develops new institutions to bring societal forces under their control like economy, the family, churches, universities and schools, and other cultural associations. In authoritarian regimes, though controls and restrictions are also imposed, they hardly attempt to reshape and restructure the society and the individual actors.

Secondly, the totalitarian governments tend to be highly ideological in the goals they set forth, while authoritarian regimes do not develop the same all-encompassing official ideology. With the use of ideology and the party, the totalitarian regime strives to organise consent and to develop a broad consensus. A positive communication network is built with people at large. Authoritative states do not attempt to build a consensus. The emphasis is laid on obedience.

Thirdly, though both authoritarian and totalitarian regimes endeavour to institutionalise the political organisations, totalitarian regimes often succeed in legitimising the authority. Since institutionalisation is related to the levels of modernisation, authoritative states are backward in the society and the economy than the totalitarian states.

19.4.3 Authoritarian Regimes

Nearly half of the political regimes in the world are based on authoritarianism. They can be classified as personal regimes (Saudi Arabia), single-party regimes or outright personal tyrannies, states and bureaucratic and military regimes. Before going into the nature of the authoritarian regimes, let us first try to find out some causes as to why a society gets transformed into an authoritarian regime.

Firstly, authoritarianism can be related to the nature of formation of a nation-state. Sometimes, centralised control and repressive mechanisms tend to evolve with the view
to deal with the dissidents-ethnic, regional economic tribal and religious groups. In some states, especially when they are insecure or weak, the rulers of the day show a tendency to get authoritarian of course in the name of acquiring strength to deal with the external forces and provide security to the nation.

Secondly the particular political culture of the country too plays a role in the emergence of authoritarianism. Macridis opines that authoritarianism has developed in countries where there has been the absence of the following values:

i) Where there is a highly unbalanced relationship between the civil society and the state.

ii) Where the middle classes are weak and unable to form associational representative parties or networks that limit the state.

iii) Where there is a hidden or inherent tendency toward statism or, to put the same idea negatively, where restraints against the state are few and weak.

Thirdly, authoritarian regimes emerge when fast economic modernisation takes place. In the process of modernisation, the traditional patterns of economic and social life get disturbed and the aspirations and demands of the people are also heightened. Authoritarian rule is often looked-for in order to curb social conflicts and tensions.

Features of Authoritarian Regimes

The following, according to Amos Perlmutter, are some of the important characteristics of the authoritarian regimes.

1) The military is highly significant and influential in such states.
2) The level of popular participation is very low.
3) Rights especially political rights are either non-existent or nominal.
4) There is normally absence of any ideology to mobilise the masses.
5) While trying to subordinate societal and interest groups, authoritarian regimes do not undertake restructuring of the society.

Types of the Authoritarian Regimes

There are four types of authoritarian regimes: (A) Tyrannies, (B) Dynastic regimes, (C) Military regimes, and (D) Single-party regimes.

i) Tyrannies

In tyrannies, the political power is acquired and wielded by a tyrant in a personal and absolute manner. The instruments of coercion are carefully developed through the police and the army, to include prevention, repression and surveillance and intimidation. Though usual services like maintenance of law and order, public health, transportation etc are delivered in such regimes, the status of the army gets reduced as the personal guards of the tyrant. In some cases, his guard consists of relatives or, more likely associates.
who owe allegiance. Thus the tyrant is associated by such organisations as the army, police, the intelligence services who later develop their own practices and become somewhat autonomous in their functioning. Some political regimes in Latin America and Africa since World War II, like Batista in Cuba, Somoza in Nicaragua, “Papa Doc” Duvalier in Haiti, Emperor Bokassa in Central Africa, Idi Amin Dada in Uganda are some of the examples of this type of political regime.

ii) Dynastic regimes

Dynastic regimes are different both from the monarchies and the tyrannies in the sense that power is not acquired on the basis of force. In dynastic regimes political power is shared by the king’s family. The Sultan of Brunei, after achieving independence, appointed his family member to various posts. In dynastic regimes the power of the king is tempered by immemorial customs, conventions, understandings and religious standards. There is no distinction between the wealth of kingdom and the personal wealth of the king. In other words, the wealth of the nation is the whim of the king. Another feature of the dynastic ruler is the lack of people’s participation and representative institutions. There are some countries like Morocco, which have evolved some form of parliamentary government with the king actually manipulating the legislature and other bodies dealing with decision-making. The dynastic kingdoms represent a peculiar combination of traditionalism and wealth. But a change in the traditional values or a sudden fall in income may destroy the source that gives dynastic rulers their support. Some traditional Dynastic regimes like Nepal are in recent times turning into constitutional monarchies.

iii) Military Regimes

Military government is the most common form of contemporary authoritarianism. The reasons for military intervention into politics are two fold: Firstly, a strong and genuine affinity between the officer corps, the governing elite, and the public at large about the political norms, values and institutions of the political regime. The acceptance of civilian rule and its institutions is internalised in the officer corps. Army intervention is considered improper and unacceptable by everybody concerned: the government, the people, and, most importantly, the officers themselves. Secondly, civilian governance has developed roots that are so deep and legitimised that the prospects of a successful army intervention appears very dim even to those among the military who may entertain the thought of a military takeover (Roy C. Macridis, p.226). Especially in the developing countries military intervention takes place in special circumstances like breakdown of political process, counter-revolution, military aid, breakdown in succession.

Military rule can be either direct or indirect through military control, arbitration and veto. Indirect military control ranging from arbitration to army veto is prevalent in some pseudo-democratic countries where despite the constitution, regular elections, democratic power structures, and other democratic processes, the military dictator controls and influences the decision-making process. In this category of political regimes can be mentioned countries like Argentina, Brazil, Peru, Bolivia, Uruguay, Guatemala, Colombia etc.
iv) **Single-Party Authoritarian Regime**

Single party authoritarian regimes whether military or civilian exist in Syria, Iraq (before the US military attack leading to Gulf War II in April 2003), Tunisia, Tanzania, Egypt, Kenya and Mexico, where there is a rule of dominant party. In such regimes the single political party is the only one of the organisations the regime establishes or allows in order to maintain its rule and gain supports. Single parties are just support agencies to the government. They provide only limited channels of popular participation; they are manipulated by the power-holders to provide a countervailing force against other groups or potential centres of power; after a period of flow, usually associated with a mobilising phase to achieve national independence. Such regimes have failed to institutionalise themselves in contrast to single parties in totalitarian regimes.

### 19.5 EVALUATION OF POLITICAL REGIMES

Thus we have seen that modern political regimes can be classified into three main categories for the purpose of understanding and analysis: democratic regimes, authoritarian and totalitarian regimes. On the basis of the above can be drawn some conclusions regarding the strength and weaknesses of particular regimes. Firstly let us talk about which regime is more durable and stable. There is nothing to affirm that democratic regimes last longer than the authoritarian or totalitarian regimes. The communist totalitarian regimes and authoritarian regimes show discernible durability. The Soviet Union continued in existence for almost seventy years before it collapsed in early 1990s. China and Cuba are other examples to substantiate the above point. The period of existence of the totalitarian regimes is much longer than that of some of the democratic regimes like German Weimar Republic (12 years), Portugal or Spain (10-12 years). The history of Algeria and Mexico also establish the durability of the authoritarian regimes, but sooner or later they all eventually collapse.

Second issue is related to the question of adaptability. Every regime, like all other institutions, must adapt itself to new realities of the society and make use of the openings. Democratic regimes are found to be more adaptable as compared to the other two types. Totalitarian and authoritarian regimes are less adaptable to the new conditions and circumstances as both of them have a system of concentrated power-structure, homogeneous and cohesive political power, and rigid official ideology.

Third parameter of comparison and evaluation can be the process of legitimisation in a particular regime. Legitimisation means acceptance by the governed of the authority of those who govern. It involves the process of participation, socialisation, representation, political parties, and elections. The level of legitimisation is higher in the democratic regime than the other two. In authoritarian regimes legitimisation is distorted as there are uncertain consent and support. In such regimes, sole emphasis is on maintaining law and order and hence no alternative voice is allowed. In totalitarian regimes, legitimisation is the product of an ideology—communist or fascist. Roy C. Macridis says, “But we have no way of testing legitimacy in totalitarian and authoritarian regimes except when they collapse. If they do not, compliance should not be presumed to indicate acceptance and legitimacy”.
Maintenance of civil order is another parameter of evaluation. Totalitarian and authoritarian regimes perform far better than democracies in maintaining law and order. In countries like Egypt and Algeria, or Chile either there are no strikes, demonstrations etc or they are peaceful. In democracies, though demonstrations are peaceful, yet often they resort to violence. Thus, as Macridis says, “authoritarian/ totalitarian regimes seem to bask in the serenity of an orderly society while democracies seem to be constantly on the brink of anarchy”. However, if we go in deeper analysis it is observed that while in the democratic regimes there is more organised and collective violence, in authoritarian or totalitarian regimes there is far more public violence in the form of coercive and repressive practices by the state and its apparatus. It is worth recalling views of Harry Eckstein, who argues, “But the persistent coercive repression of large social collectivities surely denotes political failure of some sort; if it is reasonable to expect polities to reduce private conflict, it is also reasonable to expect them not merely to displace it onto the public level”.

The extent to which the governmental agencies reach the societal forces is another consideration for evaluation. In democracies, the societal forces maintain their autonomy and independence of thought and action. In totalitarian communist governments and also in a number of authoritarian regimes, the economy, cultural and religious associations are immune to governmental penetration. The democratic regimes are more responsive to the demands of the public than the authoritarian and totalitarian ones and hence they get greater support from the public.

19.6 POLITICAL REGIMES: SIMILARITIES AND DISSIMILARITIES

There are points of convergence and divergence in the modern political regimes. Firstly, in all three, the role and position of legislature has been incapacitated. Legislations are enacted mainly on the initiative of the executive. The executive solely controls the army, budget, and foreign policy. While in democracies it is just a platform for debates and discussion, in the authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, even this role is missing. Secondly, there has been a growth in the role, power and position of the executive in all types of political regimes. The executive branch has grown in number and its scope of activity has expanded. Thirdly, states in all regimes have become welfare states with increasing role and intervention in the individual’s life. However there can be difference in degrees. Fourthly, the role and influence of the military has grown, including the democracies.

The differences between the democratic and authoritarian or totalitarian regimes lie in the style in which the relationship between the society and state is structured. In communist totalitarian states, the emphasis was on engaging societal forces into the state and makes them conform. In democracies, the emphasis is always on separating society from state. Coming to specific differences in matters of institutional trends we find that in all democratic countries (whether unitary or federal) there is decentralisation of decision making. Local and regional autonomy is emphasised. In those states where the economy is nationalised, there is devolution of powers to the provincial units and