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**Goran Hyden**

**Working Paper**

No. 6 Jan, 2010

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Published on behalf of the Africa Power and Politics Programme (APPP) by the Overseas Development Institute, 111 Westminster Bridge Road, London SE1 7JD, UK ([www.odi.org.uk](http://www.odi.org.uk)).

The APPP Working Paper series is edited by Richard Crook, Professorial Fellow, Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex, Brighton BN1 9RE, UK ([r.crook@ids.ac.uk](mailto:r.crook@ids.ac.uk)).

The Africa Power and Politics Programme is a consortium research programme funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID), with additional support from Irish Aid, for the benefit of developing countries. The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and not necessarily those of DFID, Irish Aid or the Programme as a whole.



# Political accountability in Africa: is the glass half-full or half-empty?

Goran Hyden\*

*How does the idea of ‘working with the grain’ apply to the issue of political accountability as it is confronted by parliamentarians in Africa? Drawing on interviews with Ghanaian MPs in the context of the APPP research stream on parliamentarians, this paper offers an answer. It proposes a framework for a comparative study of MPs’ accountability across countries which would shed further light on the issues raised by the Ghanaian respondents. It argues that parties and party systems are bound to play an important role in strengthening MPs’ accountability, and that making progress towards democracy entails politicians being allowed to ‘live’ their own rules rather than being prematurely forced into Western institutional straitjackets.*

## 1 Introduction

Political accountability is a central theme on the international donor agenda. It figures prominently in governance projects and research sponsored by donors like DFID, USAID and Sida, and it features as one of the priority areas in the African Power and Politics Programme (APPP). Because of this prominent place in the minds of the donors, much of the effort, both in theory and practice has been devoted to assessing the progress that African countries have made towards an accountability system based on criteria drawn from a model of Western democracy. While many countries have made some progress in this regard, not the least with holding free and fair elections, governance assessments continue to highlight institutional shortcomings. On the scale offered by these assessments African countries, with a few exceptions, tend to occupy the bottom end. Using a metaphor, the glass tends always to be presented as half-empty, emphasizing what is missing, rather than being labeled half-full and thus conveying a message that progress has been made.

Turning this around is the key objective of the APPP. Finding out how Africans cope with governance challenges using their own wits and assessing the prospect that these patterns will lead to a shift toward better governance is its practical research agenda. This implies a focus on institutional diversity and varying outcomes rather than an assessment of a single institutional model expected to produce a preferred outcome, which is the way current mainstream approaches to governance in Africa work. It also implies a review of the key concepts and how they may be operationalized and used in obtaining relevant and valid empirical data. In short, it calls for a new way of studying political accountability in Africa.

This does not mean that the APPP starts from scratch. Its agenda builds on what others have said and done. Papers by David Booth (2008) and Staffan Lindberg (2009), the former trying to find a sufficiently strong and meaningful platform for all members of the consortium to work from, the latter laying the ground for how accountability may be approached in individual

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\* University of Florida. The author acknowledges helpful comments and suggestions by David Booth, Diana Cammack, Richard Crook, E. Gyimah-Boadi and Staffan Lindberg.

projects, have been important stepping-stones for preparing the empirical phase which members are now entering. This paper builds on these significant contributions while at the same time trying to add new insights into how political accountability of Members of Parliament may be better understood and studied.

The purpose of the paper is to discuss what an approach to political accountability that starts from the premise of 'working with the grain' in Africa would look like. It begins with a brief review of the concept of political accountability. The primary empirical material, admittedly limited in scope, is a series of interviews with MPs in Ghana in June 2009. The findings from these interviews are discussed in the light of what has been said about MP accountability elsewhere in Africa, especially in East Africa, thus providing a comparative perspective on the issues raised by the Ghanaian respondents. The paper then proceeds by highlighting the conceptual and methodological implications of the empirical findings before proposing the framework for a comparative study of MPs' accountability that would include other African countries where such a study would add further insights of both theoretical and policy value. Its main conclusion is twofold: parties and party systems matter in any effort to strengthen the accountability of elected representatives in Africa. At the same time, however, these politicians must be allowed to make progress toward more effective institutions by being allowed to 'live' their own rules according to their own culture and habits rather than being prematurely forced into Western institutional straightjackets that frustrate rather than facilitate progress toward democracy.

## **2 Political accountability revisited**

Political accountability involves a relationship between two parties where one – the agent (A) – is expected to perform certain tasks in response to expectations held by another party, usually referred to as the principal (P). As Lindberg discusses (2009: 9), this relationship is typically confined to a specific domain. It can also be described as a relationship between a bearer of a right or a legitimate claim (P) and the agent (A) responsible for fulfilling or respecting that right (Lawson and Rakner 2005: 9). The principal sets the terms under which the agent must report on actions taken within the relevant domain and what sanctions can be directed toward the agent if the terms are not met. Accountability, then, centers on two central criteria: (1) responsiveness and (2) answerability. Responsiveness is the extent to which the agent has acted in a manner that meets the expectations of the principal. Answerability refers to how far the agent has given a truthful report on what measures have been taken and with what consequences.

Responsiveness involves a reference to *what* has been done; answerability is more complicated and demanding since it includes the responsibility to report not only on what was done but also *how* it was accomplished. For example, development in Africa during the first three decades of independence was carried out largely in terms of responsiveness. Did government respond to the needs of citizens? Did they meet the targets agreed upon with the donors? In the last two decades, answerability has become an important add-on. Development cannot be carried out without reference to principles of good governance, in which the answerability dimension of accountability has become especially important. It features in support of elections, civil society and also public sector reforms.

As Lindberg (2009: 11-14) demonstrates, accountability arises as an issue in many relationships, both political and non-political. For the purpose of this paper the types of accountability that are

most central are vertical and horizontal because MPs are affected by both. Vertical accountability can be divided into two sub-types: (a) electoral accountability in which citizens delegate political power to their representatives and hold them accountable through periodic elections, and (b) societal accountability in which citizens check the use of government power via such means as the media, civil society organizations and popular protests. Horizontal accountability refers to the intra-governmental control mechanisms between the different branches. In addition to the legislature and the courts, these mechanisms may also include special oversight institutions such as the auditor-general's office, human rights commissions and the ombudsman. In any discussion of horizontal accountability in Africa, it is also important to include an external type. It includes regional African institutions like the African Union, ECOWAS or the East African Community, but also, and perhaps foremost, the donor agencies, whether bilateral or multilateral like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

MPs are on both the supply and demand side of the political accountability game. In relation to government, they are the principal, especially so in parliamentary systems or where such systems coincide with presidential ones as the case is in most African countries. They have an oversight role and government is expected to give an account to parliament. In relation to the citizenry, they are the agents supplying the account. They are the ones to report back to their principal – the electorate.

The accountability relationship is confined to a specific domain, arena or 'space'. A domain is usually legally defined and reporting tends to follow specific parameters created by law. An arena is defined in broader political terms. For instance, the electoral arena defines the relationship between elected and electors. Space is defined in reference to a policy and may be created by government or non-state actors. For example, civil society organizations may intervene to call for an improvement in the quality of education and government is forced to respond to and engage the issue on terms other than those set by itself.

Arena is the broadest and loosest of the three concepts since it has no firm boundaries and lacks a specific policy adherence. Domain is a mid-level concept in that it refers to a specific sector or public mandate that is defined by formal rules. Policy space is the narrower concept and tends to be confined to a particular policy controversy. Those in the donor community who study accountability with a view to enhancing it often prefer the latter because it is more manageable than the other two more general concepts. Above all, the expectation is that an intervention into a specific space is more feasible: it can be done (a) with less risk of accusations of interference and, (b) in ways that ensure measurable outcomes.

A focus on policy space also allows donors to broaden their engagement to include non-state actors. It allows them to broaden the context in which accountability is being assessed while at the same time allowing for a more effective assessment of outcome. This combination of a narrower focus and a broadened engagement seems to be the logical conclusion from experiences with trying to reform whole sectors or systems. Governance measures including enhancing public accountability at sector or systems level have been too ambitious and abstract to make a measurable difference. These measures have also tended to create an imbalance in favor of a focus on government rather than governance.

If studying the 'politics of specific policy spaces' may be a step in the right direction in order to get a better sense of what drives changes in power relations and how results are obtained, there

is still the question of the framework within which studies are made and the methods used to make the assessments of performance. Mainstream consultancy work – in response to terms of reference set by donor agencies – tends to focus on formal rules and structures and the limits they set to agency. Such studies usually highlight the shortcomings rather than the achievements. They fail to see beyond the primary objective of their study – to assess the influence of the rules on the behavior of decision-makers. Thus, such a narrow focus easily ends up ignoring basic facts like the competitive and embedded settings in which these rules are applied. Above all, as Berk and Galvan (2009) argue, they overlook an important thing: actors, whether MPs or ordinary citizens, do not necessarily follow rules or enact cognitive schemas but really more realistically ‘live’ institutions in the sense of learning how to align situations, actions and expectations. Echoing an influential description of the way policies in the U.S. are made: decision-makers ‘muddle through’ achieving only incremental steps at a time (Lindblom 1959). Others, like Grindle (2007), have made similar observations with reference to developing regions. Such an experiential approach to the study of institutions may be necessary to capture what is really happening and allow for a fairer assessment of political accountability in Africa. In order to justify such a turn, it is necessary to take a closer look at the empirical material collected from semi-structured interviews with the MPs in Ghana and how it compares with data from other African countries.

### **3 MPs on accountability**

The Parliament in Ghana is located in central Accra, the capital. Built in an open area surrounded by a number of other non-descript buildings it would have been difficult to find had it not been for Project 600, the never-finished government building that was started by Kwame Nkrumah, the country’s first president before he was overthrown in 1966. This charcoal-colored mastodon of a building towers over much of central Accra and in its shadow the present Parliament building – originally built as the Assembly Hall for the 1965 Organization of African Unity (OAU) meeting – looks quite attractive.

Entrance to the Parliament grounds and the building itself is controlled by security police. They are not always at their post and getting in and out seems to be rather easy. When on post, police require that bags are checked by a modern security machine but even if the alarm bell goes off, a personal follow-up check is rarely conducted. This is partly because people passing through are known to the police or escorted by an official into the building.

Parliament meets in plenary sessions three days a week – Tuesdays to Thursdays. There is no session on Mondays and usually no committee meetings either. Friday mornings before MPs leave for the weekend – typically to their home constituency if it is not too far away – committee meetings may be held. It is mid-week therefore, that is the busy time for the MPs in the Parliament. For the researcher this is the time to meet the parliamentarians and to observe their day-to-day activities.

Sessions usually begin at 10 a.m., are adjourned for lunch at the discretion of the Speaker, and continue till evening although no specific time is set for adjournment for the day. Many MPs arrive early because they have agreed to meet somebody before the session opens. Still, when the Speaker rings the bell and is set to open the plenary, a significant number are absent. Some have not even arrived at the parliamentary grounds; others are engaged in discussions with visitors. Throughout the day, the spaces outside the Chamber, including the spaces set aside for

committee meetings, the tea room and the lobby on the ground floor are filled with people. MPs meet informally to discuss matters of common interest or just to take tea or lunch together. Others are visitors from near and afar who have come to see their elected representative. Mingling with the MPs are also representatives of phone companies trying to sell their most recent cell phone products, media persons – and the odd researcher interested in interviewing the MPs. From morning till evening Parliament is a busy and bustling place filled with loud debates and laughter.

Visiting the Parliament and observing the parliamentarians provides a valuable initial insight into how they handle their dual role as a check on the executive and a voice of their constituents, and how they balance their official obligations in the Chamber with outside social and political obligations. It is clear that they are pulled in different directions; that they are caught between matters formal and informal. What observation does but interviews alone do not reveal is the way that the MPs respond to these cross-pressures; how they ‘live’ institutions by maneuvering the legal and political environment in which they constitute the main actors. What interviews help to show us is what variation exists in how they handle their role.

We interviewed a total of thirty parliamentarians most of them during the middle of June, 2009.<sup>1</sup> The length and quality of the interviews varied. Some MPs had no problem spending over an hour discussing the issues, while others were in a hurry or were frequently interrupted by phone calls or people, including fellow MPs, coming to see them on some urgent business. The interviews extended over a terrain that stretched from why and how they won their seat in the 2008 election, what kind of accountability pressures they faced, how they responded to these pressures, and how they saw themselves performing the oversight of the executive.

The first striking thing coming out of these interviews is the variation in their responses. MPs think and act differently. One reason is the location of their constituency. Parliamentarians from the rural and largely poorer northern regions of the country see their role differently from those coming from the more densely and generally wealthier south, not the least the capital, Accra. This ‘structural’ difference, however, does not explain the whole story. MPs differ among themselves also in terms of how they live their institutions, i.e. how they cope with the challenges that they face, whether they are formal or informal. Their reality is definitely a mixture of both. The difference manifests itself especially in terms of their ‘management’ of constituency demands. There is one group of MPs who have no specific strategy to handle these demands and tend to give in to requests regardless of whether they are private or community-based needs or development-oriented. They tend to give so much weight to being responsive that it easily undermines their ability in the long-term to remain effective without incurring

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<sup>1</sup> ‘We’ here refers to Staffan Lindberg, the author of this paper and the contributions made by staff at the Center for Democracy and Development (CDD-Ghana). The latter is a partner in the APPP research stream focusing on this subject. Before the author arrived in Ghana, Lindberg and our Ghanaian collaborators had earlier carried out some interviews on their own and continued with a few more after Hyden left Ghana. The choice of interviewees was not based on a single formula since the main point was not to obtain representative voices of particular pre-coded categories. A balance was attempted, however, between the majority party and the opposition (the former ruling party plus a sprinkling of smaller parties or independents). A gender balance (reflecting the actual balance in the Chamber) was also attempted. When the exercise was jointly done by Hyden and Lindberg, one conducted the interview while other took notes. All interviews were recorded by hand and transcribed into an electronic format at the end of each day. This material constitutes the basis for the discussion below of how MPs experience their dual accountability role.

heavy personal debt or finding other sources – legal or illegal – of funding. The other group consists of MPs with a strategy to manage their delegate role. Some of these are incumbents but others are first-time MPs who have experience of living and working outside Ghana (e.g. U.K, U.S. and Italy). They have followed election campaigns in these other countries and also spent time building a base in their home constituency by demonstrating not only that they have the personal money to finance the campaign but also a commitment to delivering goods to people. They were less likely to yield to requests for private goods (typically with the exception of token support to funerals) and emphasized their support for development projects that they were ready to lobby for and support. This was evident in their preference for working with communities and local government authorities rather than to taking all the praise (and possibly blame!) of a patron.

The ideal of Parliament may be that of a deliberative democratic forum but this notion tends to be overshadowed by the view that the MPs have of themselves as delegates and guardians of their constituents. Their dual role follows from constituents' demands that they not only promote but also guard their interests. In his well-known analysis of what made the states in Asia developmental, Evans (1995) pointed to the fact that they were at one and the same time autonomous and embedded. By this he meant that public institutions had enough power to produce public goods that did not reflect merely vested interests but were also sufficiently representative of dominant values that their actions were not called into question on grounds of legitimacy. The MPs we interviewed do not constitute the state but they are representative of officialdom in Ghana. Evans never produces enough evidence to show where on a spectrum between autonomy and embeddedness the Asian state was located in order to be successful. Since development, however, implies ability to act independently and chart a new path, it is reasonable to assume that the location was closer to autonomy than embeddedness. On a similar spectrum, one is inclined to conclude from the interviews in Ghana that the MPs there are too 'embedded' and too little 'autonomous'. They do think first and foremost about how to be elected or secure re-election, an orientation that has been documented also in Tanzania (Lawson and Rakner 2005). Lindberg and Morrison (2008) interpret more systematic survey data to conclude that voting is clientelistic, i.e. primarily oriented toward producing private or 'club' rather than public goods, while Young (2009) in a comparative study of Kenya and Zambia, argue that MPs are likely to be elected if they give priority to public goods, in his view interpreted as development projects – what Lindberg and Morrison call club goods. In either case, however, the MPs are likely to be on the embedded rather than the autonomous side of the spectrum.

The third thing of interest is the explanation by the MPs that they are simultaneously engaged in providing private, common ('club') and public goods. They may differ in degree in terms of what emphasis they lay on each of the three, but they all report giving private goods such as money for funerals, scholarships for individuals and 'instant' money for personal emergencies among their constituents. They also provide common goods for specific groups and communities, typically in instances where there is a matching contribution by the beneficiaries. They also help produce public goods whether in terms of national policy or the provision of such support in their own constituencies. The latter occurs with the help of special funds that the MP can make use of in order to enhance the provision of specific goods, e.g. education or public health for all. The literature (e.g. Wantchekon 2003, Lindberg and Morrison 2008, and Young 2009) juxtapose the choice between clientelism and 'developmentalism', implying that the former – in political terms – produces an inferior type of goods than the latter. The interviews



with the Ghanaian MPs suggest that this is a false or oversimplified dichotomy, since MPs are well aware of the distinction and do not themselves really experience this dichotomy as they conduct their political activities. The juxtaposition may be stemming primarily from the methodology used to collect the data. Survey data naturally tend to simplify reality and thus choices in situations that are complex. The semi-structured interviews that we used served not only as a valuable complement to survey data but also as a corrective by not forcing the MPs to answer a battery of pre-coded survey questions. It helped illustrate the full complexity of the choices that MPs live with and are forced to make using their own wits or in deliberation with others.

A fourth thing of interest is the extent to which MPs are left on their own when it comes to financing their campaigns. The main sources tend to be one's own sources, relatives and friends. Compared to East Africa, where corporate capital often helps finance the campaign not only of the President but also individual important MPs, there is little evidence of such sources playing a significant, if any, role in Ghana. The only exception seems to be members of government ministries who by virtue of their control of critical public resources are tempting targets of corporate funding (bribery?). The ordinary MPs – and especially those running for the first time – are left to their own devices and virtually all of them complain about the financial burden that they incur by being an MP. According to their own estimates (and they are not necessarily exact), the costs incurred by an MP varied from some \$15,000 in a remote northern constituency to approximately \$300,000 in a couple of constituencies that were hotly contested in the south. There was little, if any, support provided by their party. Even party symbols, like T-shirts and flags, had to be purchased by the MP. This finding is corroborated in an earlier study (Bryan and Baer 2005) on party financing in 22 countries, half of which were in Africa. Own contributions and those of friends and relatives constituted around three-quarters of all money that candidates could raise in the African cases. Many individual candidates went into a perpetual debt as a result of borrowing money for their campaign. Some political parties were financed by wealthy individuals and virtually constituted their own 'property'. Candidates wishing to stand had to pay their party in order to get nominated. In Ghana, MPs indicated that a large chunk, in a few instances the bulk of the money that they spent, was used in the primary election of their own party where they had to persuade a caucus of some 100 delegates to choose them. To the extent that parties contributed at all, Bryan and Baer's study suggest that it was more in kind than cash. For example, providing a vehicle for the campaign was one way of supporting those who were not incumbents and thus could count on the vehicle that they received from Parliament (with indirect funding by Government) once they were elected.

The fifth point about the information gathered through the semi-structured interviews is a confirmation of the relatively weak position of the parliament vis-à-vis the executive. Although there is not necessarily a positive correlation between legislative development and democratization as Barkan's edited volume (Barkan 2009) on the subject argues, and there is evidence from a smattering of countries like Kenya and South Africa, that the legislative branch has been able to expose weaknesses in the executive, e.g. corruption in the Kenyan case, the Ghanaian parliament is still a rather tame institution according to the MPs themselves. They mention the political costs associated with taking an independent position or one that exposes government in an unflattering light. That does not mean that MPs are quiet or fail to express criticism but there are few, if any, that can get away with it if government ministers begin to feel too embarrassed by it. They also admit that when it comes to voting for a government policy or measure, key MPs receive 'brown envelopes' containing cash meant to ensure a vote in favor of

government. Once more, MPs seem to know where the limits are and often when debating an issue consciously adopt a position that makes them an ‘uncertain bet’ and thus a candidate for the ‘brown envelope’. The conclusion that could be drawn from these interviews is that Ghana may be a ‘superstar’ when it comes to democratization in Africa but its legislature continues to be rather weak. Party whips have some control but many MPs ‘play politics’ on their own in the sense of portraying themselves as sufficiently critical to merit attention for favors, whether it is the cash money dished out at critical voting occasions in the Chamber or it is emerging as a candidate for cooptation into the higher ranks of the party or government.

The findings from these interviews are not conclusive but indicative of an institutional variation that invites further research to identify more specific factors that may make a difference and how agency relates to structure. As such, there is a need for thinking through what approach to use, what key variables to include, and what variation to look for as outcome. The rest of this paper will address these issues.

## **4 Researching MPs’ accountability**

The preliminary research in the Ghanaian parliament, backed up as it is by findings from other countries raises a number of questions regarding how accountability is understood and practised as well as how it may be best studied. The following questions seem to be of special relevance: (1) how is accountability being understood? (2) how is it being practiced? (3) what is the scope for improvement? and (4) how can research on political accountability become more effective in capturing changes and trends?

### *4.1 How is accountability understood?*

There are strong indications in the interviews that to most MPs accountability equals responsiveness. Their interpretation of answerability is much less explicit and really overshadowed by their commitment to ‘constituency service’. This commitment is rational since it enhances the chances of election or re-election but it is only fully understood if the expectations of the electorate are added. The latter are clearly relevant as confirmed by the frequent comments by the MPs that they are driven by these expectations as they dispense favors (private goods) or help organize and fund community projects. The lens that they – MPs and electorate alike – use is not necessarily the one that those brought up in a Western rule-of-law culture apply.

It is important to remember that the prevailing logic in African societies tends to be based on the execution of primary forms of reciprocity characterized by non-negotiated (in the formal sense) and self-enforcing exchanges or transactions. There is no appeal to a third instance to adjudicate between parties. Conflicts are resolved ‘within the family’, so to speak. Justice in these contexts is seen in reciprocal terms. It implies readiness to pay back without a contractual obligation that can be enforced from the outside by a third party. Reciprocal transaction does not have to be simultaneous as the case is in the market-place where justice is ‘instant’ in the sense that without paying a stipulated price for a good, the transaction ends up being unilateral, e.g. in the form of no sale or theft. The second is that there is no external standard, like money, that regulates the value of what is being exchanged. Justice, in this sense, is much less precise. Rules are not a set of abstract principles that apply regardless of context. Justice is interpreted in the

light of particular circumstances. This is the cultural context in which transactions between MPs and their constituents take place. On paper, it seems to favor the former, but as indicated in the interviews, they are aware that they are also ‘principals in the hands of their agents’, i.e. the constituents.

Justice in Western societies, especially those where a dose of social liberalism prevails, tends to accept the position of Rawls that there are universal rules on which every one regardless of social or cultural background can agree upon. Justice in these societies is based not merely on the content of justice but also the terms for how, through reasoning, agreement can be reached (Rawls 1971). It defines justice as impartiality grounded at two levels: (1) principles and rules that are capable of forming the basis of free agreement among people seeking agreement on reasonable terms, and (2) personal behavior that is not motivated by private considerations (Barry 1995). Another way of stating this may be to argue that impartiality – or justice – in this context means that you would not do to any person what you don’t like others do to you, a principle that is referred to as The Golden Rule of justice.

Partiality in the sense of private considerations entering into a judgment that should be made on public grounds has been condemned in the Western tradition of justice ever since Hobbes recognized its force. In more recent times, Max Weber’s well-known analysis of bureaucracy stands out as one of the most powerful condemnations of partiality. A state official – a bureaucrat or judge – is someone who acts *sine ira et studio*, without hatred or passion, and thus without affection or enthusiasm. At one point Weber writes: ‘Bureaucracy develops the more perfectly, the more it is ‘dehumanized’, the more completely it succeeds in eliminating from official business love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements which escape calculation’ (Weber 1978:225).

An ‘underdeveloped’ private realm may be the price that Westerners are ready to pay for such values as impartiality, efficiency, and rule of law. All of those presuppose a self-binding commitment to rules that stand above things private. They would argue that agreement on principles such as impartiality of justice is the only way that we can reach a universal standard for what is good or bad.

Justice as impartiality presupposes a situation in which the public and private realms are clearly differentiated. Measures are being taken in that direction in African countries but they still have a long way before it is the ‘only game in town’. The introduction of competitive elections in the past two decades may have had the effect of making the task more difficult. Campaigns tend to reinforce traditional social reciprocities and thus a weakening of the principle of justice as impartiality. More specifically, competitive elections encourage a populist orientation among MPs according to which proving the ability to give away benefits – patronage – to the constituents is becoming a trap in the efforts to strengthen political accountability in the wider sense of answerability. Research aimed at throwing more light on this issue would be a step in the direction of knowing more about how far the ‘African grain’ lends itself to change toward greater recognition of the significance of not only the responsiveness but also answerability dimension of accountability. Responsiveness comes naturally wherever the principle of reciprocity prevails. Answerability, however, requires a degree of transparency that does not come easily in societies where reciprocity permeates not only the socio-cultural but also the political sphere.

## 4.2 *How is it being practised?*

As indicated above, MPs are fully aware of the various aspects of their role. As the interviews in Ghana indicate, when asked, they can explicate the expectations linked to both vertical and horizontal accountability. At the same time, they are aware of the limits to practicing it. The executive has the upper hand and uses it to achieve compliance in the legislature when necessary. There are also different interpretations of the vertical relations: some allow responsiveness to take so much of their time and effort that answerability is overlooked or reduced to a secondary concern. The dilemma seems to be that MPs allow themselves to be so deeply socially embedded that their sensitivity to and ability to change power relations between the legislature and the executive are seriously hampered. Political parties don't have the organizational power to steer the MPs away from this predicament. The latter are left on their own to do so, a process that is not easy and carries its own costs.

The literature tends to confirm this image of the parliamentarians. They are first and foremost patrons spending their effort to deliver goods of varying kinds to constituents (Erdmann 2007; Gyimah-Boadi 2007). Because political parties are usually 'catchall' organizations that do not represent special interests but try to recruit broadly from as many ethnic groups as possible, they offer little incentive for members to comply with party ideology and directives. This is especially true for their elected representatives in the national legislature. Because they have an independent power base in their respective constituencies, they are not easy to punish or remove. The hands of party whips in parliament are tied behind their back. It would be interesting to find out whether electoral system (proportional vs. 'first-past-the-post') or degree of political competitiveness (dominant vs. multiple parties) makes a difference.

Tanzania is a relevant case in point. It uses the British system of 'first-past-the-post'. It has produced a single dominant party – *Chama cha Mapinduzi* (CCM). At one time it was the only party allowed (1965-1991) but the re-introduction of multi-party elections has not erased, hardly reduced, its dominance. In the course of three such elections (1995, 2000, and 2005), it has increased its majority in parliament from approximately two-thirds to four-fifths. Does it make the party internally stronger (or weaker) than the two dominant parties in Ghana (NPP and NDC) which share approximately the same percentage of the electorate? How do these cases compare with Malawi which uses the same electoral system but has three parties of roughly equal strength? Or with Mozambique which has a proportional system of representation in which a single party – FRELIMO – has been, and continues to be, dominant? In short, what difference do electoral system and party strength make? Are these the most critical variables or are there others, e.g. the movement legacy<sup>2</sup> or the prevalence of community-based representation that renders the difference between electoral systems less powerful as an explanatory variable (Hyden 2006)?

An interesting illustration of the challenges to party cohesion comes from Tanzania where in the past year (2008-09) parliamentary debates have been characterized by growing dissension among CCM legislators. They have argued over two issues: (1) who owns the continental shelf if oil is found: Zanzibar or the United Republic of Tanzania (of which Zanzibar is an integral

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<sup>2</sup> The 'movement legacy' refers to those countries where the opposition to colonial rule was forced to start a liberation movement outside the country and thus built up a strong organization capable of politically and militarily fight the oppression at home.

part)? (2) the corruption in government institutions and what to do about it? The debates have been frank and in reference to the latter issue, revealed previously confidential material although the MPs fell short of pointing out the names in public that had been revealed in investigations carried out by a professional audit firm. These debates, however, also revealed rifts in the party and its leadership decided to appoint a committee of ‘old wise men’<sup>3</sup> to investigate what is described as ‘frictions among the party’s Members of Parliament’ (*The Guardian*, 16 October 2009).

This example indicates a concern in the leadership about elected leaders ‘getting out of control’. It may be an indication that the roof is quite high inside CCM but there is a limit for how much autonomy MPs can enjoy. CCM is definitely internally not only well organized but also democratic. In parliament, however, its control is not total and if anything the party has lost much of it rather than enhanced it as its majority there has increased. This has interesting implications for accountability! When political parties are not issue-oriented organizations but they continue, as the case is in most African countries, to be loose amalgams of individuals catering first and foremost for their own career, the check on the executive may in fact be stronger in such cases than in situations where parties are driven by issues or ideologies. This is certainly a worthy hypothesis for further research. Its significance is enhanced by the fact that it is precisely the point that Julius Nyerere made at the time of independence in Tanganyika (Nyerere 1962) when he analyzed the role of the party system in democracies. He suggested that where loyalty to the party organization is strong it limits the debate and tends to make the legislature more subservient to the executive than a place where an umbrella-like party organization with less demanding loyalty prevails.

#### 4.3 *Scope for improvement*

Much political science research on democratization has been driven by a model of democracy that is the result of the struggle of many generations, largely in Western countries, to expand and institutionalize political and civil rights. By overlooking the historical dimension in their research, comparativists have found that regions like Africa fall short of democratic values and typically are at the bottom of the scale on any index of democracy or ‘good governance’. They have shown much less interest in how institutions can grow from within taking advantage of what the contemporary international arena offers. As the preliminary research among MPs in Ghana suggests, the challenge is to create space for good governance rules to be developed by local actors. Such space takes time to build especially in circumstances where these rules compete with others and actors have to make sense of these rivaling demands on their time and resources. Rules do not exist outside the mind of these actors. The MPs bring their own personal background and experience into how they interpret their role. They give their own color to how they and the parliament as an institution operate. Because their background and experience differ, however, the parliament is not a static institution. It is in constant flux and thus subject to change both for the better or worse. Democracy is not yet the ‘only game in town’ in Ghana and although there may be broad consensus about the desirability of that particular game, the way it is sometimes played calls into question its legitimacy. Ghana has undergone a shift in government twice – a test that Huntington (1991) would have approved – but in the last

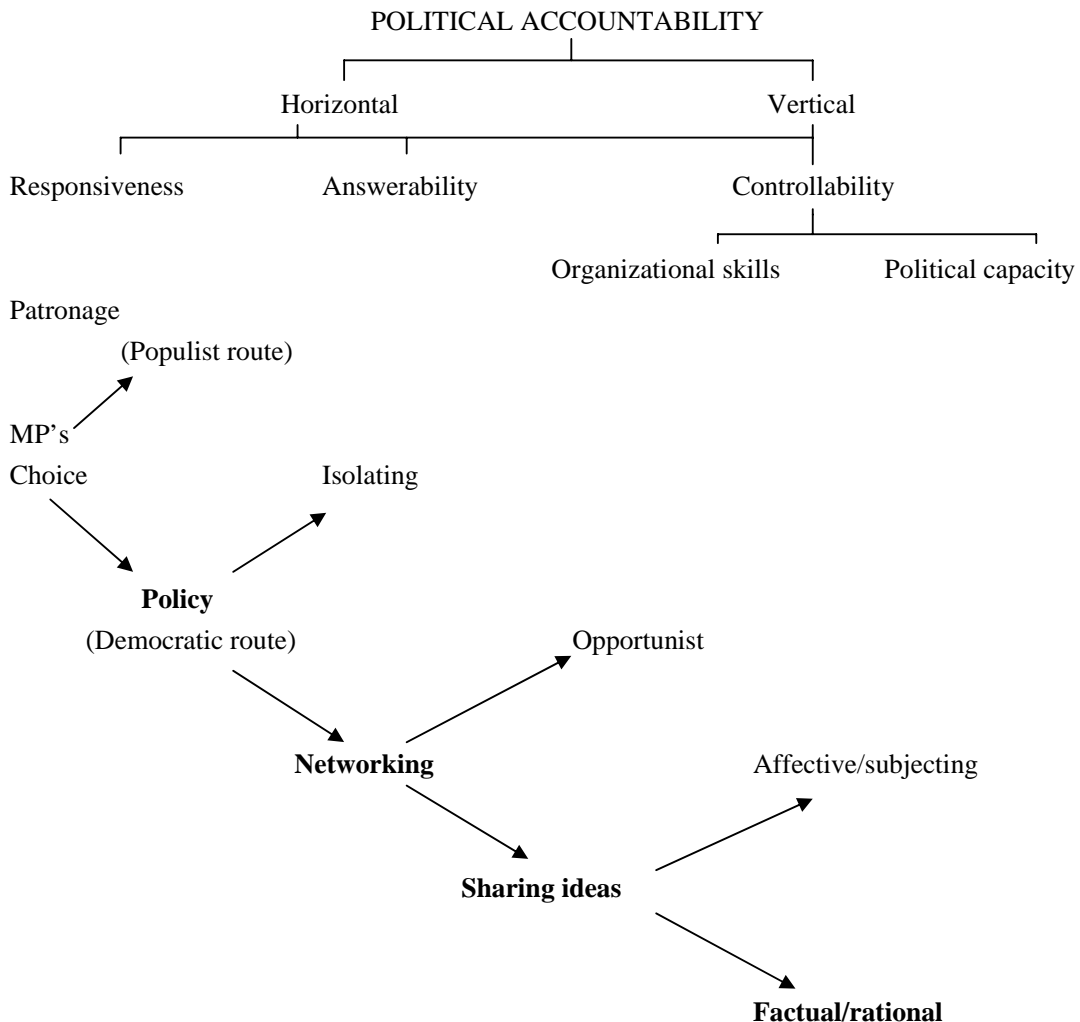
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<sup>3</sup> Members of the committee include a former President, Ali Hassan Mwinyi (chair), Pius Msekwa (currently Vice-Chairman of CCM – Mainland) and Abdulraman Kinana (a former Government Minister and Speaker of the East African Legislative Assembly).

election, it was ‘touch-and-go’ whether the handover of power would be peaceful and considered legitimate. These cracks in the façade, however, should not make the researcher ignore the consequences of learning from events. In addition to their individual background and experience, MPs are likely to heed lessons that they learn as a collective. Parliament, like the individual MPs, is constantly ‘on the march’ reflecting the re-invention of rules by these MPs.

This march is not always going to be straight and effortless. Ideas and interpretations of rules will clash. Sometimes, it is interrupted and it becomes necessary to take a step backward before moving ahead again. Such is the story of most institutions. In looking at the accountability of MPs, there are certain points that provide a sense of direction. This may be treated as a two-step exercise but it is integrated into a single ‘march’. The first involves transcending the responsiveness dimension of accountability in order to develop the answerability one. Responsiveness is the easy task because it involves merely the individual MP. Answerability, however, involves collective action. It relies on MPs ‘ganging’ together to achieve an objective that is widely shared, whether symbolic, ideological or material. This involves strengthening the political party and establishing a ‘party culture’ that serves to hold individuals together. The choices on this road would be something like this:

**Figure 1: The route to enhancing political accountability in Africa**



Fulfilling the dual role of horizontal and vertical accountability, the MPs are faced with a number of challenges which are indicated in the figure above as 'critical choices'. To avoid misunderstanding each choice is not necessarily an 'either-or' choice but one that falls in-between the two suggested parameters. An instrument needs to be devised that captures different degrees. For example, with regard to patronage vs. policy individual MPs may lean more toward one or the other. The same applies to the other pairs. What the figure confirms, however, is that the more a choice is made in favor of what is labeled the 'democratic route', the more likely that it will enhance accountability. It is also important to point out that the various choices do not necessarily have to be read as points along a road where one precedes the other. The preferred characteristics are typically obtained in bits and pieces and may be combined in varying packages. For example, an MP may be factual and rational in approaching policy but falls short of being successful in networking or sharing ideas. The more a legislator has of the various characteristics associated with the democratic route, the more likely that he or she will be successfully exercising accountability.

This framework has been created with a view to studying possible improvements in political accountability that speaks to the African reality where it is comparatively weak. It involves the evolution of the role from being primarily focused on responsiveness – as it currently is among most MPs – to enhancing answerability and beyond that to organizing and demonstrating capacity to argue in a persuasive and productive manner – the controllability needed for effective horizontal accountability. It is for this reason that the study of individual MPs must be augmented with one that asks them to analyze the culture of their own political party. How do they characterize their own party? Is it hierarchical, anomic, networking, or falangist?

These concepts will be discussed further below. It suffices to state here that the interviews with the Ghanaian MPs suggested that the political parties are predominantly anomic and hierarchical. For most of the time, each MP operates with little guidance from the party Whip and an anomic party culture prevails. A hierarchical culture evolves in situations of 'crisis' when party reputation or status is being threatened and everyone is potentially adversely affected. The example from Tanzania discussed above tends to confirm this too.

At the same time, it is evident from the same interviews that all MPs cannot be placed in a single fold. Of special interest are the still few but potentially increasing number of legislators that have work or political experience from other countries. They seem to have a more 'strategic' view of how to go about being an elected representative that involves a better sense of combining responsiveness with answerability. The interviews provided little or no information to gather how far their skills also are adequate for strengthening the role of their political party in parliament and thereby enhancing its ability to control or check on the executive. These are issues that further research on the accountability of MPs can possibly highlight.

#### *4.4 How can research be made more effective?*

Political science research on Africa is caught between a need to demonstrate its relevance to the rest of the comparative politics field, on the one hand, and a desire to be relevant to the problems at hand on the continent. The former invites researchers to become quantitatively

oriented and focused on trying to test cause-and-effect relations. The latter tendency encourages the researcher to tell others how political phenomena should be understood and interpreted. The former claim to have a straightforward answer to what matters and how. The latter are more circumspect and cautious, assuming that the complexity of the issue at hand deserves an answer that does not lend itself to 'instant' policy recommendations but an understanding of the context in which others may be able to make better decisions.

APPP, like DFID, leans toward the latter. It straddles the boundaries between deductive and inductive logic. There is a good reason for this. The African 'grain' remains largely hidden inside its husk. Too little research effort has been made to crack it open in ways that offer a better sense of what drives change. Such research cannot operate with simple models of reality in which the grain is examined under the microscope of some general theory. What is needed, are not microscopic details because the main challenge remains the 'bigger picture' and how the grain fits into it – whether it be Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), good governance, or environmental protection. A more effective research approach, therefore, must settle for providing sensible interpretations of African realities that offer guidance – rather than precise answers – as to what can be done to foster improvement of governance from within. Therefore, the study of political accountability must be embedded in understandings of African realities – what some would call 'culture'.

In dealing with this challenge, it is helpful to go back to Max Weber who argued that it is impossible to offer causal explanations of human acts without understanding the significance that these acts have for the actors (Weber 1968). He does not preclude the possibility of carrying out quantitative studies to uncover these phenomena but he also made it clear that such quantitative studies only make sense if they have been preceded by qualitative research aimed at a *verstehen* – a true understanding of the culture in which the acts take place. Clifford Geertz has probably come closer than anyone else to insert this use of culture in modern social science. His definition of culture is worth reiterating here:

The concept of culture I espouse [...] is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in the webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning (Geertz 1975: 5).

In this semiotic definition of culture, every act consists of two parts: an expression (e.g. to eat with knife and fork) and a meaning (e.g. good manners, practicality, or hygiene) that people depending on their social circumstances attach to the act. Research on culture, therefore, aims at finding the symbols and characteristics that members of a particular group see as theirs and what they use in distinguishing themselves from others.

This is a very different way of studying culture from the one that was developed by Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba in the 1960s. In their book, *The Civic Culture* (Almond and Verba 1963), they treat political culture as the sum of respondents' subjective perceptions and values as they relate to the performance of the political system at large. The frequencies of individual orientations toward the political system become the critical indicators of political culture. Even though this definition of culture was 'mainstream' in political science for many years, researchers more recently have sought their inspiration from other disciplines. The 'historical' institutionalism associated with March and Olsen (1989) is a case in point, especially since it



calls into question rational choice theory in which culture is treated as an 'exogenous' variable, i.e. beyond investigation.

Geertz's definition of culture has the advantage of making it relevant to political science by going beyond the 'informal' and incorporating also formal rules, since they are as much part of culture as anything informal. It aims at a 'thick' description by insisting that recording a particular phenomenon, e.g. the tendency for politicians to act in a clientelistic manner, is not enough. It must be complemented by an explanation of the significance such an orientation has to them and their constituents.

The difference between Geertz, on the one hand, and Almond and Verba, on the other is important. The latter fail to treat culture as an abstract concept that can be adjusted and operationalized for different contexts. Instead, they adopt a definition that in the end makes the study of culture unproductive. This definition reflects the views of anthropologists in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century according to which culture was differentiated into separate categories, e.g. 'tribal' culture, 'modern' culture, etc. and reflected a view that 'culture might be inventoried but never analyzed' (Badie 1993: 12). Mainstream political science has followed this definition which instead of treating culture as an analytical level has been devoted to trying to define precisely what 'political culture' is. The result is that to most members of the discipline, the study of political culture has become a dead end. In the predominant rational choice tradition, it has simply been defined away.

This 'digression' is important in order to pave the way for a more meaningful and effective study of political accountability. After all, if anything, it is about political culture: how individuals define their role and how they see each other in the context of organized groups like political parties. Geertz's definition offers three advantages of relevance to the study of political accountability: (1) it removes the need for a distinction between formal and informal; (2) it acknowledges agency; and (3) it calls for an understanding of local actions ('grains') and their significance to individuals and groups. To this may be added that it incorporates the approach associated with applied anthropologists like Norman Long and the 'Manchester School' as well as scholars like Giorgio Blundo and Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan (both members of the APPP consortium) who take the position that making theory relevant to policy and practice is not, as Booth 2008: 9) underlines, 'tantamount to compromising academic integrity'.

Americans have their own champion of similar ideas: John Dewey! His experiential and pragmatic approach to philosophy is as American to many liberally minded persons as apple pie, but it has been sidelined in academic circles where the mainstream has been positivist – and borrowed from Europe. Dewey's point, as Berk and Galvan (2009:561) put it, is that 'action always takes place in relation to prior rules and practices, which serve not as guides or constraints, but as mutable raw material for new action'. Actors, then, do not live under rules or playing by the rules but they live through rules and actually play them as if they were instruments. They often improvise playing rules. If the latter creative use of rules is being blocked or falls into oblivion, routine occurs. This, however, is not the default position. It is actually the exception and calls for a different explanation than that offered by structural interpretations of institutions.

This phenomenological position falls somewhere in-between structure and reified individual rationality when it comes to explaining institutions. In terms of shifting the focus from order to

ambiguity and fluidity, this approach parallels work by DiMaggio and Powell (1991), March and Olsen (1989), and Streeck and Thelen (2005) all of whom emphasize the imperfections of organizations (cognitive limits, limited social control, conflicting ends, etc.) and thus the often loosely coupled parts of the organization. When it comes to living and practising rules, the approach parallels work by political economist Charles Sabel (1994), legal theorist Roberto Unger (1987) and organization theorist Karl Weick (2001). In their mind, rules are never so precise or persuasive as to determine action. Creating architectural blueprints to control change in detail is a waste of time. A process of '*bricolage*' is more appropriate because when faced with the need for change, people look back to the intimate knowledge they have of the parts of the organization and recombine these parts to put together a new response to a fresh problem.

This does not mean that everything is always in flux and thus impossible to understand. Echoing Dewey – and Bourdieu (1977) – institutions are widespread uniformities of habit or 'rules-in-use'. These habits help us understand how people follow, use and perturb rules in ways that are never exactly the same. As Berk and Galvan (2009:563) suggest, habits live and thrive in ambiguity and they cannot help but necessitate deliberation and their own transformation.

Understanding habit is important for this study for three reasons. First, it is situational which is necessary for understanding improvements drawing on the African grain. This approach challenges conventional notions of institutional action which privileges exogenous rules and abstract schema. Habit makes institutions a matter of skill rather than script. Second, habits are social and historical. The complete legacy of prior habit – custom or institution – is openly available and shared. Third, habits are propulsive in that they constitute demands for certain kinds of activity. This will, however, is not prior to habit or determined by individual preference or moral compulsion. Habit is what Lindblom (1990) calls 'probing volitions' according to which will is discovered and rediscovered through skillful application of principle.

This way of looking at institutions and how they are being constantly reinvented through experience provides a way of understanding that MPs are not just pawns on a chess-board but individuals constantly making sense of the rules they face, taking advantage of the full register of past experiences, and discovering new ways of making headway for themselves, their party or their constituents.

They do differ, however, because habit is not necessarily applied in the same fashion. Impulse, which is also critical to Dewey's philosophy, is what perturbs habits in three different ways: (a) instant action, (b) deliberation, and (c) routine. The first refers to situations in which individuals act in the moment often in a 'blind' or non-deliberative manner. Such acts may be creative but are more often shortsighted and destructive. The second involves the application of reflective imagination to choose between competing paths of action suggested by a new impulse, circumstances or prior habit. This is where actors become '*bricoleurs*' trying to cobble together new solutions by rummaging through the available resources of partially relevant habits, broken or whole (Berk and Galvan 2009:568). Because of the social nature of deliberation is it always a cultural process. It reworks the meaning of institutional custom as it recombines habits in creative experiments. The third – routine – occurs when actors separate habit from thought. Such separation, according to Dewey (1922:61), may result from education and socialization or from domination by a powerful group that find the separation in their own interest. Routine, however, in the long run is not sustainable. The more it faces new circumstances and impulses, the more it produces unintended consequences, confusion of expectations and outcome. Thus,

even in situations where routine prevails, creativity is not lost for good. James Scott's (1985) study of the 'weapons of the weak' is a case in point.

A study of the political accountability of MPs, therefore, would benefit in the following ways from the insights offered above:

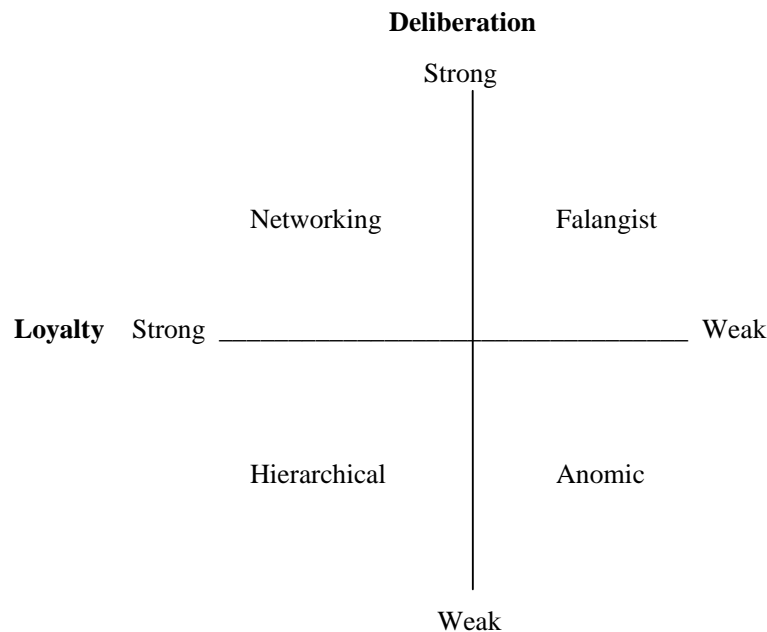
- The identification of the steps necessary to strengthen vertical accountability and make MPs more effective in carrying out their role as checks on the executive (see Figure 1).
- The use of culture as an abstract concept aimed at capturing self-images of the MPs in their political party context.
- The redefinition of institutions as being lived and constantly re-created rather than designed and serving in an exogenous fashion as a guide.
- The usefulness of habit and how it is being perturbed by impulse in different ways and thus producing different outcomes.

There are four basic propositions which could guide such a study:

- The stronger the orientation of the MPs toward responsiveness as their prime preoccupation, the longer the path to strengthen parliament's check of the executive.
- The longer the experience of parliamentary practices in a multi-party system and the infusion of new MPs with fresh perspectives, the greater the prospect of strengthening answerability.
- The stronger the reliance of the MPs on their party organization, the greater the prospect of a concern with horizontal accountability in parliament.
- The greater the sense among MPs of taking responsibility for policy development and how it affects different groups in society, the greater the prospect of a parliament capable of performing its role with regard to both vertical and horizontal accountability.

MPs will differ with regard to how they live their rules. Some are more creative than others. How they use habit to deal with new situations is likely to determine what they can achieve. Those who engage in deliberation stand the best chance of achieving meaningful results from their engagements. Those who rely on instant action may be successful in achieving short-term goals but also expose themselves to the risk of a backlash. Finally, those who fall back on routine, i.e. who do not wish to challenge the status quo through trying something new, will make the least contribution to enhancing institutional development of the parliament. Which of these strategies of action the MPs choose is likely to be shaped by how they conceive of their role in the party organization and how they see their own party in comparison with other parties. The assumption is that party cultures are important in determining the prospects for enhanced political accountability. This can be measured along two parameters: (1) the extent to which the party encourages deliberation to solve problems, and (2) the extent to which the party demands loyalty from its MPs. As Figure 2 below illustrates, this creates the possibility of four types of party cultures that are relevant for assessing the task of strengthening the political accountability of parliaments:

**Figure 2: Types of party cultures**



A *networking* party culture is characterized by strong loyalty to the organization but at the same time an open climate for discussion using rational arguments to achieve policy consensus and thus a single party strategy. Members are networking with each other in ways that generally create positive outcomes and they can afford to network with members of other parties, when necessary, without putting their loyalty at risk. Indicators of this type of party culture would be:

- Policy over patronage interest
- Party over individual interest
- Deliberation over routine or instant action
- Factual reasoning over populist reasoning

A *falangist* party culture presents a different scenario in which deliberation is strong but loyalty is weak. Members are engaged in open discussions but are divided among themselves to the point where party effectiveness suffers when it comes to outcome, including holding the executive accountable. Because loyalty is weak, members may seek alliance with other party groups, even join these groups. Deliberations have factual components but positions on policy reflect interests other than the party. Indicators of this culture would be:

- Policy driven by special interests
- Group interests trump party interest
- Routine trumps deliberations
- Factual reasoning colored by group interests

An *anomic* party culture is characterized by weak loyalty and also weak deliberation. Individuals pursue their own agendas under the umbrella cover of a broad 'catchall' party organization. There are few, if any, lasting and stable groups within the party. Party meetings

may yield policy statements but little is being done to implement them. Deliberations tend to be along populist lines leading to broad and non-committal statements. Indicators would be:

- Patronage over policy
- Individual over party interest
- Instant decisions over deliberations
- Populist over factual reasoning

A *hierarchical* party culture is characterized by weak deliberations but strong loyalty. Party interests tend to prevail and are typically set by a small group of leaders. Deliberations, therefore, do take place but they involve only a limited number of people excluding some MPs. Routine sets limits to how open discussions are. Factual reasoning occurs but only within limits set by the party. Indicators of this party culture would be:

- Policy driven by a small group of leaders
- Party interests limit group and individual interests
- Deliberations take place but are limited by routine
- Factual reasoning occurs but are framed by strong party loyalty

One may assume that networking and hierarchical party cultures have the greatest prospect of producing public goods, whether in terms of substantive policy outcomes in reducing poverty or in terms of good governance like holding the executive accountable. The anomic and falangist party cultures are likely to fall short in these respects and instead pursue goods that are limited to specific group or individual interests. These are markers on the road to a form of democracy that produces public goods. MPs have a key role to play in shaping the outcome of any attempt to move in such a direction. But in so doing, African MPs will typically start from circumstances that make this a long and winding road. Transcending the boundaries of anomic or falangist party cultures will often be the first challenge. It is in relation to overcoming such hurdles that the MPs should be judged; not on why they have not already produced a party culture that guarantees a type of political accountability that exists in Western liberal democracies.

## 5 Conclusions

Before these propositions and assumptions can be tested it would be necessary to sort out outstanding methodological issues. They include (1) choice of MPs (numbers, gender, representativeness); (2) specification of indicators for data gathering purposes; (3) scales for scoring on the different types of party culture; (4) types of data gathering instrument (semi-structured or more open-ended interviews); (5) number of countries; (6) criteria for choosing countries (party system, electoral system, colonial heritage).

The important thing to remember is that studying the accountability of MPs requires an approach that captures their sense not only of what they are doing in their individual capacity but as participants in specific party cultures, some of which are more likely to produce positive governance outcomes than others. For the specific purpose of studying the political accountability of MPs party culture is at one and the same time both an independent and dependent variable. It is a framework that shapes the views of individual MPs while also being

reinvented on a constant basis in ways that cannot be quantitatively measured but appreciated by understanding what it means to the MPs. It is the deeper probing of how they live their role and what it means to them that offer the best prospects of knowing more about how political accountability is being practiced and changes. With such an approach it is possible to get closer to the 'grain', how it can make a difference, and how in the study of political accountability the glass can be turned from being half-empty to being half-full.

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