

## Introduction

Modern democracies are characterized by shared decision-making responsibilities by the legislative and executive branches of government. Generally, a country's constitution formally structures this interaction. Practicality, precedent and habit then fill in the gaps to create the political system under which a government operates on a daily basis. Because these circumstances differ considerably in each country, democracies vary widely in how political power is shared and the relative influence each branch of government has over policy formulation (NDI 2000).

For legislators to be able to play their role of representation, oversight, and legislation, "...there needs to be a certain degree of cooperation between the branches in policymaking (each side must be willing to bargain and compromise in order to get some policy benefits), the legislature must have some capacity to monitor the executive, and the executive needs to be willing to comply with legislative enactments," (Remington 2004).

The role of parliament in government varies depending on a number of factors. This course examines the effect of four factors: the type of political and electoral system, formal legislative powers, political will and political space, and technical capacity.

The question of the role of parliament in government has become even more important to understand in the past decade as more and more countries are making a transition to democratic forms of government. These countries that are making the transition are faced with a number of new challenges as well as opportunities.

In nearly all democracies, leaders of the executive branch (i.e., presidents, prime ministers, cabinet ministers) typically command much of the political power, control the country's financial resources, maintain staff dedicated to developing policies and implementing laws, produce the bulk of legislation, manage government contracts, and administer government programs. Despite executive dominance in many countries, the relative balance of power between the legislative and executive branches in a country can be changed. If new legislatures are going to have a central role in a nation's governance, it is up to legislators themselves to build strong legislative institutions, by asserting themselves in the regular law-making or

oversight functions, or through specific structural changes via constitutional amendment, legislation or rules of procedure (NDI 2000).

This course attempts to document some of the current efforts by which legislatures are trying to play a more influential role in government. Unit 1 of this course defines the central functions of parliaments. Unit 2 presents four models of legislatures, depending on the power and influence they have on the executive. Unit 3 outlines some factors that impact the relative power of the legislature and the executive. And finally, Unit 4 describes some of the efforts that parliaments are making to strengthen themselves. The concluding section briefly summarizes the course.