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Riker in the Tropics:
The Theory of Political Coalitions (1962) and the politics of change in developing countries

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As the development community moves towards a better understanding of, and engagement with, the political economy and politics of development, it is important to ensure the clarity of the concepts and terms used for analytical and policy purposes. This series of DLP Concept Papers is intended as a contribution to that effort. We hope that this series will also provide guidance to students and early career researchers about operationally useful concepts that are not the standard fare of academic courses. Written as short essays, the Concept Papers will focus mainly on concepts used in DLP research and policy messages (for example, leadership, coalitions, structure and agency). But they will also deal with wider issues in the political analysis of development processes, such as 'political settlements', 'collective action' and 'political economy'.

Abstract

It is more than 50 years since William Riker published his classic book on ***The Theory of Political Coalitions*** (1962). The important role that coalitions of many different kinds play in the complex politics of development has become increasingly recognised. As a result, this paper revisits Riker's work to see what contribution his insights and conclusions may have for understanding the success (or failure) of developmental coalitions in the politics of developing countries. The paper suggests that in a number of ways Riker identified certain key issues that remain relevant for understanding the formation, functioning and activities of coalitions. But by restricting the analysis to narrowly political (electoral and legislative) coalitions in stable and consolidated institutional environments, the theory has some important limitations when applied to a wider set of coalitions and especially those in unstable or multiple institutional contexts that are common in developing societies.

The paper first briefly re-states the central theory of the book and some of its important insights. Using these as a springboard, it goes on to explore some of their limitations in terms of both method and application – especially for politics in unstable institutional contexts. Finally, the paper outlines some questions and research issues that need attention if policy-makers and practitioners are to better understand the centrality of coalitions in the politics of development and also consider whether, when, where and how to promote, broker, facilitate or support the emergence and activities of reform and developmental coalitions, nationally and sub-nationally, as well as in all sectors and issue areas.

Given the importance of achieving a better understanding of the politics of development in which coalitions are central, this re-evaluation of Riker's important book forms part of a series of work by ***The Developmental Leadership Program (DLP)*** on this subject.

1. Introduction

The core focus of ***DLP*** is the role of political processes in development and, especially, the role of developmental leaderships and coalitions. Our aim is to utilise the best research and theoretical insights to guide the most appropriate practice, and to use the rich experiences of practitioners to inform theory and comparative understandings. In particular, we seek to draw on the many traditions and frameworks of analysis in political science to offer better understandings of the problems and prospects of development, with guidance for policy-makers and practitioners alike.[1]

The ***DLP*** research findings thus far, plus an avalanche of evidence from other work, all point to the centrality and pervasiveness of developmental coalitions in the politics of policy and institutional innovation and reform in countries which have achieved sustainable growth, political stability and inclusive social development. Moreover, such coalitions, in the broadest sense, appear to be one of the critical *political* mechanisms for solving the pervasive collective action problems that define most challenges of development - and indeed of politics more generally (Ostrom, 1998). Whether formal or informal, long-lasting or transient, national or sub-national, sectoral or issue-based; whether within or between interests or organizations of civil society and those of the state; whether in democratic, semi-democratic or authoritarian polities, coalitions of individuals, groups and organizations are always to be found. Of course, not all coalitions are progressive or developmental: they may be predatory, collusive and profoundly anti-developmental, too (Bavister Gould, 2011). Indeed, the evidence is clear that some of the worst instances of political instability, oppression and the curtailment of sustainable growth can be attributed directly to the behaviour and policies of predatory and collusive coalitions, as in Zimbabwe (Bratton and Masunungure, 2011). While the term 'coalition' is usually reserved for what might be called 'actually existing coalitions' – that is, formally or informally and self-consciously organized coalitions - it is sometimes also used as a descriptive term to identify a *de facto* (but not organized) 'alliance' of interests that constitutes a 'ruling coalition' without it being organized as such (Kjaer and Muhumuza, 2012).

Shifting established ways of thought is the first step in making analytical and policy progress. And one of the problems to be overcome straight away is that 'coalitions' are often thought of exclusively as governing coalitions, or governmental coalitions, which bring together two or more political parties to form a government where one party is unable to do so on its own – as occurred in the United Kingdom from 2010, but much more commonly in other countries such as Italy, Belgium and Israel. But the practice of coalitions is far wider than that and occurs in all areas of social, economic and political life, formal and informal, at national and sub-national levels and in all sectors and issue areas. Understood quite simply as individuals, groups or organizations that come together to achieve social, political or economic goals that they would not be able to achieve on their own, coalitions are part and parcel of the normal everyday politics in all organizations and societies and should be central to our understanding of the politics of change and development. Using a framework of analysis that has coalitions as its focus has an enormous explanatory advantage in 'delineating who sides with whom, against whom, and over what' (Yashar, 1997). Though no agreed or standard classification exists, coalitions may have a variety of purposes and may thus take a variety of forms, including, for instance: legislative coalitions, electoral coalitions, governmental coalitions, ruling coalitions, 'event' coalitions, protest coalitions, advocacy coalitions, policy coalitions, reform coalitions, growth coalitions and distributional coalitions, not to mention predatory and collusive coalitions and even trans-national coalitions (Olson, 1982; Nelson, et al 1989; Brautigam et al, 2002; Levi and Murphy, 2006; Etchemendy, 2001; Tarrow, 1998; Tattersall 2010; Whitfield and Therkildsen, 2011; Bavister-Gould, 2011; Bandy and Smith, 2005; Sabatier, 1988). Even below this level of generality, short-lived coalitions of common interest constituted by a group of colleagues who organize in advance to drive through a policy change in a meeting are very common.

Moreover, coalitions emerge, form, organize, and

act to pursue very different goals in very different institutional and political contexts and in response to very different challenges or opportunities. Consider the contrast between the social protest youth coalitions that formed in Egypt in the spring of 2011 (Ezbawy, 2012) and the 'Healthy Places' coalition organized by the Prevention Institute in California, where it works to promote public health involvement in land use and transportation planning in the state (Prevention Institute, n.d.). Or consider the contrast between (a) a 'regime' level coalition (formal or informal) of interests (political, ethnic or economic) that pursues developmental goals (as in Mauritius, Botswana and Singapore, from the 1970s), or predatory goals (as in Zimbabwe from the 1990s), or acts largely to retain power, as in Uganda (Kjaer and Kausiimeh, 2012); (b) examples of the so-called 'reform coalitions' in the 1980s and 1990s in Latin America that pushed for economic liberalization (Schneider, 2004); and (c) advocacy coalitions that have sought to promote institutional innovation or improvement in legislation relating to violence against women in four very different political environments of South Africa (Hodes, Thorpe & Stern, 2011), Egypt and Jordan (Tadros, 2011) and the Philippines (de la Cruz and Domingo, 2012 forthcoming).

The point here is that they are all coalitions of sorts, but different, in different contexts and with different goals. It follows that understanding the factors that shape the origins, form and function of coalitions – and what makes for their relative success or failure – also requires us to adopt an analytical approach that traces the relations of 'structure' and 'agency'. This means understanding both the formal and informal institutional context; the political economy (the distribution and relations of economic and political power); and how politics is played out within those institutional and power structures. In short, it is necessary to explore how different coalitions frame, strategise and pursue their interests and their aims (agency) against the background of often very different working (political, economic and institutional) environments (structure) and challenges.

There is a considerable literature on legislative and electoral coalitions in formal institutional settings, much on the USA (for instance, de Swaan, 1977; Austen-Smith and Banks, 1988; Laver and Shepsle, 1990; Iversen and Soskice, 2006), and also related work on protest coalitions and social movements within countries (Tarrow, 1998; Levi and Murphy, 2006; Tattersall, 2010) and trans-nationally (Bandy and Smith, 2005). There are also common references to 'growth coalitions' in the literature on 'state-business relations' that go back 25 years or more in the development literature (Mackie, 1988; Haggard, 1990; Hawes and Liu, 1993; Brautigam et al, 2002; IPPG, 2010; Brady and Spence, 2009). Yet despite the abundance of cases and examples in everyday politics, our understanding of how these and other kinds of coalitions are formed, managed and funded, and what makes for successful coalitions, remains remarkably limited, especially with regard to the advocacy, reform and developmental coalitions in developing countries where the formal structural (institutional and political) environment is neither robust nor consolidated.

It might be argued that coalitions – like alliances – are so varied, and hence *sui generis*, that no systematic patterns could ever be identified. However, the common presence and use of coalitions in the politics of reform – and reaction – suggests that we can learn a great deal more that will be relevant and useful for those wishing to understand better the inner politics of development and to forge or support progressive coalitions in the politics of development.

Accordingly, ***DLP*** is devoting an important part of its work to addressing this gap with a view to sharpening our understanding of these crucial political processes by analysing and comparing developmental and reform coalitions in diverse institutional and political environments. The central aim of ***DLP*** is to derive significant policy and operational messages from this work and to formulate practical guidelines for donors and practitioners about whether, when and how to broker, facilitate or support progressive developmental coalitions across sectors and issue areas.

This concept paper is the second of a series of contributions to that work. and we thought it

would be fruitful to re-visit one of the first and few theoretical studies of coalitions in political science, *The Theory of Political Coalitions*, by William Riker (1962). Whatever its limitations may be for the contemporary understanding of coalition politics (of various kinds) in developing countries, or coalitions other than electoral or legislative coalitions, Riker's account offers interesting, important and provocative insights and ideas that serve as a useful platform and starting point for further discussion, questions and research.[2]

Riker's (1962: vii-viii) expressed aim was to construct a formal theory of coalitions that would be useful for studying politics. This was based on the assumption that "the abstract interpretation of political events" by the use of mathematical symbolism can "illuminate behavior in the real world" and be of use to "those persons who must make policy on the basis of the theory of politics". Riker's book of 50 years ago was largely concerned with what he termed 'political coalitions'[3] (legislative or electoral) in a robust institutional environment (where the rules of the game are clear, agreed and established), and framed in terms of game theory. Its focus was also mainly on coalitions of individual actors (Congress-persons or voters) and not organizations or groups. Nonetheless, despite these limitations, the book still offers some sharp spurs to thought that may go some way toward understanding the dynamics of coalition politics more generally, when applied to contexts in developing societies.

The next section of this paper offers a compact account of Riker's theory of political coalitions. Section three then goes on to explore some of the limitations of the argument, especially when applied to a range of different kinds of coalition, with diverse aims in less established or stable institutional environments. The fourth section concludes with an account of some of the important questions that need to be addressed in the theory and practice of coalition formation and maintenance in the politics of development.

2. Outline of William Riker's *'The Theory of Political Coalitions'*

The prospect of a science of politics

At the time he was writing (early 1960s), Riker was confronted by widespread academic scepticism regarding the validity of a 'behavioural science', that is the application of scientific methods of study to human activity, including politics.[4] At the outset, Riker (1962: 4-7) addressed three principal criticisms.

- Whereas scientific statements are concerned with objective facts about the world, statements about politics were more concerned and inextricably bound up with issues of right and wrong and are therefore subjective and normative.
- The vast scale and complexity of political events such as wars, famines, depressions, and so on, means that political analysts cannot use the kind of precise terminology and definitions that scientists use to describe relationships between physical objects.
- Political scientists cannot easily make use of the idea of causal determinism, which is a key explanatory tool for the physical scientist, largely because human beings have choice (though obviously not unconstrained choice).

For Riker, although these were genuine obstacles, it was premature to abandon altogether the pursuit of a science of human behaviour. Economists and psychologists have used scientific methods to develop coherent theories and verified statements about their respective subjects, he argued, and the success of their endeavours should be encouraging for political scientists (*ibid*: 6). The differences in the respective *subjects* of enquiry of the physical and behavioural sciences should not deter proponents of the latter from availing themselves of the *methods* of enquiry used by the former. However, in conceding the very real differences between their subject matters, political scientists may be advised to temper the degree of certainty with which they express their conclusions, in comparison to physical scientists (*ibid*: 7).

Having established to his satisfaction the scientific

merits of the exercise, Riker went on to defend three core propositions about the nature of coalitions, which together form his theory of political coalitions. These propositions are founded upon precise definitions of politics and rationality, which are outlined briefly in the following sub-section.

The foundation of the argument: defining politics and rationality

Riker (1962: 10-12; citing Easton, 1953) defines politics as the procedures through which groups of people make conscious and authoritative decisions over how to allocate and distribute resources. Rational behaviour is defined as the decision to pursue the option with the larger pay-off, where there are two or more alternative options with differing outcomes of "money, power or success" (Riker, 1962: 23).

Defining a coalition-model

A coalition, for Riker, is an association of three or more individuals *within* a wider group (for instance within a legislature or an electorate). According to rules that are accepted by the members of this wider group, the coalition is a small group that wins the authority to make decisions for the whole (*ibid*: 12). Elaborating this point, one would say that in a legislature, a group of legislators who come and vote together on an issue (or set of issues) is a coalition. And, if they win, they are a 'winning coalition'. In an electorate, the considerably larger group of voters who (organized or not) vote for a particular candidate or party is also a 'winning coalition' if their candidate or party wins. So from the outset, Riker situates coalitions within a stable, formal institutional environment; that is, within established rules about how power and authority is legitimately obtained and allocated, and how legitimate and binding decisions are taken. Political parties in a democracy (which are thus *legislative coalitions*) fit Riker's specification (though some would see these as organizations).[5] Such parties are sub-groups of the populace and the legislature. According to the democratic 'rules of the game' (democratic institutions), they have a mandate to make binding decisions for the electorate, should they come to power in a freely held election.

Riker states that three core principles govern the formation and behaviour of such coalitions: the size principle, the strategic principle, and the disequilibrium principle. These principles are said to operate only when coalitions are engaged in particular competitive situations with other coalitions. These are 'zero-sum' competitions: that is political situations where the rules and the stakes are set such that the winner takes all, and where the spoils of victory are directly equal to the losses suffered by the losers. Electoral competition is a clear example of a zero-sum game, as the following sub-section makes clear. [6]

The Size Principle

The ***size principle*** states that where coalitions are engaged in a zero-sum competition with other coalitions over a limited resource (such as trying to win votes), and where coalition leaders can offer bribes, money, promises, or other things of value to induce outsiders to join them (what Riker terms 'side-payments'[7]), rational coalition leaders will aim to attract only the *smallest* number of members into their coalition that they need in order to win the competition (*ibid*: 33, 47, 100, 211). For example, when two political parties are competing for votes in a general election, and if the electoral rules state that a party needs, say, 51% of the vote in order to form a government, it is rational for parties to aim to win *no more than* 51% of the vote. A party that achieves *exactly* 51% of the vote is at precisely the "minimum winning size" (*ibid*: 100). This is the 'minimum winning coalition' (*ibid*: 40). The side-payments of political coalition-formation include money, promises on policy or about other subsequent decisions, flattery and love, and the threat of reprisal (*ibid*: 108-123).

For Riker, it is *rational* for the leaders of coalitions to aim for the minimum winning size, because rationality consists in aiming to achieve the largest payoff in any given decision. If a party aims for more than the minimum winning size, it may end up wasting its resources and possibly lowering the lowest common denominator of policy commitments, for a number or reasons. First, it will be using its limited fund of side-payments to attract voters that it does not strictly need in order to win the election. Second, the spoils of victory will have

to be divided amongst more coalition members, which of course means less for each individual member (*ibid*: 96). This can happen, too, in 'ruling coalitions' of the patrimonial kind found so widely in Africa, as Catherine Boone illustrated so effectively in the case of Senegal (Boone, 1990).

Two additional propositions on the size principle

i. **Greater information about the preferences of voters leads coalition-makers to form smaller coalitions; less information leads to bigger coalitions (Riker, 1962: 88-89).**

For example, if a party knows with a degree of certainty that it can count on the support of 58% of the electorate, the size principle dictates that the party will aim to secure no more than 58% of the vote. Conversely, if a party is uncertain about the level of support amongst the electorate, it is rational for the leaders to aim to secure more votes than they strictly need, in order to better ensure their chances of victory.

ii. **Political parties often have an incentive to be ambiguous about their stance on key issues or policies, to win votes from members of the electorate that have conflicting preferences (*ibid*: 97-101).**

For example, in the run-up to the UK general election in 2010, the Conservative party placed great emphasis on its commitment to the 'Big Society'. Prior to the election, the Conservative leader, David Cameron, never defined very precisely what the Big Society meant. It is telling, in light of Riker's analysis, that the announcement of the branding preceded the announcement of any specific policies that would be launched under the Big Society label.[8] Instead, it was constructed precisely to mean different things to different people, both within the Conservative party and across the electorate more generally. For the Conservative right wing, it represented a socially acceptable vocabulary with which to describe the reduction of the size, scope and role of the state. For those on the left of the Conservative party, it represented a move towards the centre in its embrace of the concept of 'society' as a force for social good (Blears: 2011).

The Strategic Principle and the Disequilibrium Principle: Two Implications of the Size Principle

The ***strategic principle*** follows for Riker from the size principle. It states that, in the final stage of forming a coalition, leaders will aim for the minimum winning size (Riker, 1962: 211). Riker states two further subsidiary points within this principle. First, for sub-groups within a decision-making body with a unique advantage or bargaining power, the main task is to exploit the advantage for their own gain (*ibid*: 138). For example, in the UK general election in 2010, the Liberal Democrats had a unique advantage to form a coalition with either Labour or the Conservatives. They exploited the advantage by seeking promises on key policy reforms, e.g. voting policy. Second, for sub-groups within a decision-making body *without* a unique advantage or bargaining power, the main task is to minimise the advantage of others (*ibid*). In 2010, Labour tried to minimise the Conservative's democratic advantage – which consisted in a higher share of the vote – by alluding to the promise of the far-reaching electoral reforms that were desired by the Liberal Democrats, should they have chosen to form a coalition with Labour over the Tories. It was felt by Labour strategists (incorrectly, as it transpired) that this was the best way to minimise the electoral advantage of the Conservatives, as the Tories had previously been strongly if not bitterly opposed to electoral reform (Rayner & Kirkup: 2010).

The strategic principle is essentially a re-statement of the size principle. What is more interesting here is Riker's third principle, concerning the lack of equilibrium or stability within coalitions. The ***disequilibrium principle*** states that political systems, in which the size and strategic principles are in operation, contain forces that lead to the "elimination of participants" (Riker, 1962: 211). The "elimination of participants" means the fragmentation of either (a) a coalition of coalitions (such as the current Liberal Democrat/Conservative coalition government in the UK); or (b) a single coalition (such as the Liberal Democrat party in the UK). Both types of fragmentation happen primarily through the mismanagement of resources and/or changes in the relative power or influence of some

participants, either within or outside the coalition in question. Indeed one can see how sub-coalitions or proto-coalitions may exist or form within political parties to promote a policy which others may oppose. If the tensions inside a party on these differences get too strong, the party may break up or split.[9]

For example, an imperial nation may exhaust its resources in maintaining the international *status quo* to such an extent that it cannot exercise sufficient control over the sub-groups within its coalition. According to Riker, this was the case with the French and British empires in the aftermath of the First and Second World Wars (*ibid*: 209). In other cases, a winning coalition may spend all its resources (which may also be declining) in trying to maintain its dominance in relation to other, competing coalitions. Fragmentation can then occur when the coalition is no longer able to meet the cost in side-payments of maintaining and building upon its membership base, or when the value of the side payments to the recipients decreases. Riker (*ibid*: 211-243) applies this principle to the fortunes of the United States and the U.S.S.R and their respective allies after World War II: two coalitions in direct competition at the time he was writing. Riker predicts, on the basis of his disequilibrium principle, that they will progressively exhaust their resources in trying to maintain their respective coalitions. The price, in side-payments, for attracting neutral nations into coalition will rise; allies will charge more in side-payments for their continued allegiance; and the arms race will grow in cost. As these costs eventually become prohibitive, both the American and the Soviet coalitions will fragment and other nations will emerge as world leaders.[10]

The *disequilibrium principle* also applies to the internal dynamics of single coalitions. For example, in the midst of an electoral competition the leaders of a coalition may 'play it safe' and overspend to attract followers that they do not strictly need to form a winning coalition. After the coalition is secure in its winning position, leaders may then decide to cut down on "minor" members in a rational effort to ensure that no further resources are 'wasted' on maintaining their loyalty (*ibid*: 214). In other cases, coalitions may face internal conflicts between their members as a result of ideological, tactical or strategic differences or squabbles over the division of goods and benefits. These internal disputes are more likely to come to the fore when there is a lack of external pressure on the coalition from opposing political groups or forces (*ibid*: 66). The example of the revolutionary settlement in late 17th Century England supports Riker's point here. The 'Glorious Revolution' of 1689, when James II abandoned the throne in the face of the invasion of William III and Mary II, was the outcome of a long and politically complex process of Parliamentary reform. The revolution and the subsequent settlement unfolded through a dynamic political process that was shaped by the alignment of the interests of key elites and coalitions in the military, the Anglican clergy, the landed gentry and noblemen, and the commercial class (Laws: 2010). In the face of their united opposition to the winning coalition under James II, these various proto-coalitions were able to put aside their many personal and political differences in order to back the ascendance of a new coalition under William III.

William was invited to invade England by a small coalition of politicians and noblemen, later known as the 'Immortal Seven'. James swiftly took flight to Europe. He left in his wake a host of complex institutional questions. A cross-party Convention Parliament was hastily formed to address "the succession, the power of the Crown, the preservation of Parliamentary independence and electoral freedom, the rights of the judiciary and juries, martial law, (and) the position of the established church and of dissenters" (Jones, 1972: 312). The Convention was divided by personal and political rivalries; the peers and MPs who made up the proto-coalition belonged to bitterly antagonistic parties and court groups. However, there was an urgent need to settle the institutional vacuum through the formation of a new winning coalition. Not least of all, the imminent prospect of military conflict in Ireland, Scotland and Wales provided just the kind of external pressure, from opposing coalitions, that Riker (1962: 66) identifies as a condition for minimising the internal conflicts within coalitions "over the division of spoils".

However, consensus was short-lived. The agreements that were reached by the Convention Parliament regarding the legitimacy of the new coalition under William III "were followed by… faction-fighting, patronage questions and personal and party recriminations about issues of the past" (Jones, 1972: 319). This provides a neat illustration of Riker's (1962: 66) point that "when pressure from the outside diminishes, there is less urgency to settle the internal conflicts amicably".

3. Limitations of the theory

The ideas and approach advanced in Riker's book provide much food for thought in the analysis of the politics of contemporary developing societies. But equally, there are some limitations in the approach which are set out here. And in the following section we go on to suggest the kind of agenda of issues and questions that require more comprehensive comparative analysis.

1. Riker's model is a formal one, based on game theory, and hence somewhat abstract. That was his purpose. One problem of game theory, however, is that it naturally presupposes a 'game' in which all players know and, broadly, accept a single set of rules of the game: that is, where the institutional arrangements (rules of the game) are established.[11] The situation is much more complicated where there is no agreed game, and hence no single established and agreed set of rules, but – as is often the case – multiple, competing or overlapping games. This is commonly the case in many new or born-again democracies where political leaders have to seek legitimate authority in order to remain in power by attending to *both* formal electoral politics and also the politics of pervasive patronage, a good example of which can be found in a recent analysis of politics in Uganda (Kjaer and Katusiimeh, 2012). In these situations, and especially where development is urgently needed to overcome pervasive poverty or political violence (and commonly both), the real challenge lies in crafting locally appropriate institutions (economic and social as well as political) amongst a range of contending interests that will, at least, facilitate stability and, perhaps or hopefully, promote economic growth and benefit for all. This is the critical collective action problem. For this to happen, coalitions that bring such interests into some degree of alignment and agreement about the rules of the game are vital, because they represent a local political solution to the collective action problem. And it involves a very different sort of coalition politics to that of winning elections or getting a piece of legislation passed that was of concern to Riker. We return to this point in the next section where collective actions problems are discussed again.

2. Riker's account is of what he calls 'political coalitions'. But it can of course be argued that *all coalitions* are political, both by definition and practice, and it may have been more useful for him to have confined his analysis to 'legislative' or 'electoral coalitions'. Moreover, Riker's account remains limited largely to those situations where legislators or voters (in his main examples) form a coalition in a competitive zero-sum context, against other coalitions, in order to achieve their preference (the election of a candidate or the enactment of a policy or institution). It is not immediately apparent that the factors which shape the behaviour of such coalitions are the same (or are the only ones) that shape behaviour in the range of other, wider and more diverse coalitions. These may range from well-organized advocacy and reform coalitions to the looser coalitions of political, social and economic interests that have sometimes been described as 'ruling coalitions', a description that is in some respects quite close to the notion of a ruling 'class' - which may be constituted by both narrowly political elements in control of the state as well as wider economic interests that are associated with them and support them (Whitfield and Therkildsen, 2011: 16).[12]

3. Riker does not adequately distinguish between coalitions and organizations. At some points in the theory, political parties, legislative majorities and 50%+1 voters are all used as examples of coalitions. While it could certainly be argued that all organizations are in some respects (formalized) coalitions, it is not true that all

coalitions are organizations, though they may have some organizational principles or core holding them together. A key feature of coalitions is that the participating groups retain their identity, though some coalitions may go on to 'merge' and later become organizations.

4. As shown in the previous section, Riker's three core principles are designed to apply to coalitions that are situated in a stable institutional structure with widely accepted 'rules of the game' concerning the distribution of power and the legitimacy of democratic decision-making procedures. The case-studies and examples in his text draw primarily on the application of game theory to state-level electoral processes and international politics, where the 'payoff' or criteria for success for the coalition is measured in terms of votes and/or authorised or legitimate political power. However, in the real world there are many different types of coalitions, with varying aims and goals, set in a variety of different institutional circumstances. Hence Riker's theory has some limitations with regard to its wider applicability to a broader range of coalitions, such as some kinds of 'event', protest or advocacy coalitions, or for on-going 'ruling coalitions' that need to service constantly both their electoral and clientelistic constituencies.

5. The focus of Riker's work is primarily about *individuals* and *individual* behaviour in narrowly defined contexts of political competition – legislators or voters. One limitation of this approach is that the individual players do not seem to have to worry about what their followers may think. Yet in many coalitions between *organizations*, for instance the current (2012) Conservative-Liberal coalition government in the United Kingdom, leaders and elites within the constituent parties *do* have to worry greatly about what their followers (and prospective voters) think about the coalition and the negotiated deals they may make. Leaders in this context are involved in a 'two-level game' (Levi and Murphy, 2006: 655). One level (the horizontal one, so to speak) is about their relations with other leaders in other organizations (for example in 'pacts' and negotiated agreements between the elites and leaderships); the second level is about their (vertical) relations with their followers, or the 'followership'. Once these two levels are introduced, the study and understanding of coalition behaviour becomes much more complex. The explanatory reach of the parsimony of game theory in this context runs into some difficulty.

6. It is far from clear that all coalitions strive only for the minimum winning size. While this may appear a rational strategy in theory in a legislative coalition (to ensure minimum expenditure of effort and resources, limited promises to supporters and non-dilution of the rewards), it does not hold generally. In practice many other kinds of coalition seek to achieve the widest possible participation and membership in order to bolster support, increase image and appear both persuasive and enjoying wider support. Even the legitimacy and authority of a government or politician elected, say, by a majority of one, will be considerably compromised by comparison with a government or candidate with a landslide victory. Another example would be the global 'Make Poverty History' campaign of the early 2000s, a coalition of many different groups that sought maximum inclusion and size to increase its impact. In the Philippines, the coalition that has been campaigning for a Freedom of Information Act has sought to mobilise as wide a coalition as possible to be able to indicate powerfully to the government (and especially the President) the extent of support there is in the country for such legislation from different sections and organizations of the population (Romero and Reyes, 2012, forthcoming). Inclusive coalitions of this kind, it should be added, can often face severe problems of maintaining coherence and focus with respect to both goals and tactics – both factors which can precipitate break-up (see Levi and Murphy, 2006, on just such problems in the 'coalitions of contention' during the protest against the WTO in Seattle in November 1999).

7. Central to Riker's model is the 'size principle'. But this principle depends on the particular aim or goal of the coalition. It may well be

that a legislative coalition only needs 51% of the votes to get the legislation passed. But if the overall goal of an advocacy coalition is to forge an ideologically broad and comparatively non-partisan coalition – such as, for example, groups that campaign for cleaner air – then it makes sense to aim for a maximum size, to ensure a wide range of different groups that can endorse that goal. However, if an advocacy coalition wants to achieve a very specific, contentious or potentially divisive aim, then it may be rational to keep the size of the coalition to a minimum, to ensure that the message is not diluted. This is because, by forming minimal winning coalitions, coalition-leaders have fewer concessions to make to new members. For example, the Countryside Alliance in the UK is a coalition that came together in 1997, as an amalgam of the British Field Sports Society, the Countryside Business Group and the Countryside Movement. The Alliance was created specifically in response to the newly elected Labour Government's vow to outlaw fox-hunting with dogs. Given the very specific – and comparatively divisive – aim of the group, it seems rational for the leaders to have kept the coalition at a minimum size. If - during its formative months or years - the group had sought to attract other groups with a broad interest in woodland management, for instance, the core message and policy goal could have been diluted, as defending fox-hunting is not necessarily an aim that is shared across all groups that have a stake in woodland management.

8. The validity of Riker's core principles, when applied to coalitions in the real world, also depends on the particular institutional structure within which coalitions are situated. For example, the 'Occupy Movement', which commenced in 2011, is a global advocacy coalition whose success is related directly to the extent to which it can generate mass support, i.e. a maximum size. This is partly due to the fact that, broadly speaking, the institutional contexts in which the Occupy Movement is looking to establish a foothold permit mass demonstrations of public dissent against the 'rules of the game' (in this case, institutions governing global commerce and banking in New York and London). However, in other political contexts, where the institutional structure and prevailing political authority does not tolerate mass demonstrations, advocacy coalitions may have a motive to form a more limited size – and to work more 'quietly', behind the scenes, exploiting personal contacts and networks that reach into the centre of power, or using their 'technical' knowledge (about legislation, for instance) to influence policy. In present-day Burma, for example, it is rational for some advocacy coalitions to remain small, maintain a low profile and to advocate moderate reforms in politically non-contentious areas to avoid persecution at the hands of the state. This was also the strategic lesson of the Jordanian women's coalitions discussed by Tadros (2011). When, why and how small, cautious coalitions expand – sometimes into powerful mass movements – is another matter to be explored.

9. The broader point here is that, as political agents, coalitions shape their size, claims and strategies in order to adjust to the political and institutional context, or structure, in which they are situated. This is what is meant by the relationship between 'structure' and 'agency'. Riker's model, with its fixed set of assumptions about the nature of the competition between coalitions (i.e. his assumption that coalitions are situated in a stable institutional environment and are engaged in a zero-sum game with other, competing coalitions), is not sufficiently attuned to the interplay between agency and structure that occurs in real world politics, and especially outside formal and stable institutional environments.

10. Another example can be drawn from work on African governmental coalitions. According to the evidence provided by Arrioloa (2009), a common strategy amongst African leaders trying to deter challenges to their position is to recruit more elites into their coalition. In circumstances of political uncertainty, leaders tend to expand the size of their coalition in order (a) to reduce their dependence on any one single ally; and (b) to frustrate co-ordina-

> tion among potential rivals looking to establish counter-coalitions. Increasing the number of high-level government appointments is thus a rational strategy for coalition-leaders who are at risk of being overthrown. The large cabinet size of many African states, where ministerial appointments are often unrelated to policy-priorities or budget size, attests to the validity of this proposition (Arriola, 2009: 1346-1347; citing van de Walle, 2001: 103).

When assessed in the light of these qualifications, Riker's three propositions seem to be rather blunt instruments for analysing the wider range of coalitions that exist in the real world. The validity of the three principles in Riker will be significantly affected and moderated in any given case depending on the particular *type* of coalition, the core *aims and goals* of the group, and the particular *institutional structure* in which it is situated.

However, these qualifications do not necessarily mean that the theory is unhelpful for understanding the dynamics of coalitions in developing countries. In the following section we suggest some of the issues and questions that his theory raises and which require further research if we are to understand better how coalitions form and work. It is especially important that we understand this in order to be able to assess what, if anything, external players (donors or intermediary organizations) can or should do to support the emergence and activities of progressive and developmental coalitions – at any level or within any sector or issue area – to promote the goals so clearly set out in countless documents from the international community on issues such as sustainable economic growth and transformation, political stability, effective service delivery and inclusive social development.

4. Further questions for research

What, then, are the areas where work needs to be done to get a better handle on the prospects for the emergence and success of *developmental* coalitions in the politics of developing countries, rather than collusive or predatory ones? We suggest a preliminary list of issues that require much more comparative attention.

1. Classification

First and foremost, there is a need for work to be done to classify coalitions. The multiple ways in which the concept is used can be dizzyingly confusing. For example, whereas an 'advocacy coalition' may be a self-consciously organized coalition that brings together a group of organizations and individuals around a specific policy or institutional concern that they all wish to promote or change, the idea of a 'ruling coalition' may imply no such cohesive and organized common purpose, but rather a somewhat looser mutual identity of interests. And if there are any principles shaping the relative success or failure of coalitions, given different contexts and goals, do they apply equally to all types of coalition?

2. Distinctions – coalitions, organizations, alliances, networks

It will also be important to distinguish between a variety of other forms of closely-allied concepts and phenomena – including alliances and other 'inter-organizational relationships' that range from 'informal networks', through 'formal networks', 'collaboration' 'joint ventures' and 'mergers' (in a new organization).[13]

3. The size question

A key point in Riker's account is his discussion of the 'minimum winning coalition' – that is the size question. This is clearly an issue of considerable importance because it addresses questions about 'inclusion' (as it does in relation to issues about 'political settlements'). There is enough evidence to suggest that the degree of inclusion for a successful coalition will depend critically on context, goal and strategy. There may well be a trade-off between effectiveness and size. Large and loose advocacy coalitions with multiple goals – however necessary to gather and convey wide public support for an issue - may find their goals and policies reduced to the lowest common denominator and internal conflict may sap energy and purpose. 'Less may mean more' (Tattersall, 2012). However, there may be circumstances where it is important for a coalition to generate a wide support base in order for policy makers to take the group's

message seriously. De la Cruz and Domingo (2012), for example, found that women's coalitions campaigning for legislation on domestic and sexual violence in the Philippines had more success in influencing the relevant policy-agenda by bringing together numerous stakeholder groups. When a coalition is trying to achieve a policy reform that contravenes long-standing political and/or social norms and conventions, the "language of numbers" may be an important factor in getting policy makers to accept the legitimacy of a coalition and its policy or legislative goals. And where the goal is to build the political capacity and confidence of constituent organizations – for example, women's organizations in contexts where they have been ignored or excluded – the degree of consensus about ideology or goals may matter less.

Nonetheless, large, inclusive coalitions sometimes have difficulty in achieving positive developmental reforms, as they struggle to reach internal consensus on key issues or strategy (Phillips, 2011; Hodes, Thorpe & Stern, 2011). This observation has not escaped the notice of other theoretical accounts of coalition-formation. De Swaan (1973: 74), for example, points out that in the real world it is more common for "actors (to) strive to join coalitions of minimal ideological diversity, rather than to maximise payoffs". A coalition that strives for minimal ideological diversity *may* be of a small size, but that is contingent on a range of factors, including the nature of the ideology (i.e. whether it appeals to a large number of people or groups), and whether the leaders prefer to keep the coalition small for strategic reasons.

Theorists since Riker, such as Leiserson (1970), suggest that reasons of strategy often lead coalition leaders to prefer *minimal* ideological diversity *combined* with a small number of members. Having a minimal range of different ideological interests within the coalition is best achieved through keeping to a small size, which in turn makes it easier for the coalition to achieve its objectives. "Closed" ideological coalitions with small numbers tend to have greater success in achieving their aims "since negotiations and bargaining are easier to complete, and a coalition is easier to hold tighter, other things equal, with fewer parties" (Leiserson 1970: 90). If smaller, exclusive coalitions are, in some circumstances, more effective in overcoming developmental challenges such as economic stagnation, then donor agencies may have to sacrifice support for social and political inclusivity in the short to mid-term for the sake of promoting developmentally optimal results in the longer term.

But the key point here appears to be that the question of size has much to do with the goals of a coalition, and it cannot be taken for granted that inclusion is always appropriate or effective for the goals of a coalition.

4. Instability

Riker offered a number of important reasons why electoral or legislative coalitions are prone to instability. Evidence from a wide range of other coalition experiences - from advocacy and event coalitions to governmental, ruling and reform coalitions – seems to confirm this. The point has important implications not only for questions of inclusion and the relative size of coalitions, but also for the question of how to accommodate and consolidate what might be different interests, ideologies, ideas and incentives – and strategic or tactical preferences - amongst the members of a coalition, even though there are some points of agreement. Riker's point that an external threat or a continuing challenge to a coalition can help to sustain its coherence and momentum is also confirmed by empirical evidence of a contemporary and historical kind.

5. Collective action problems, coalitions and institutional solutions

The question of collective action is probably the central concern of political science (Ostrom, 1998). The collective action problem refers to a far more complex issue than simply that of achieving better cooperation or sorting out coordination problems. Collective action problems are those very common public and political dilemmas that we can all recognise if we stop to think for a moment. They occur when individuals, groups and interests would all be better off if they could devise agreed institutional arrangements (that is rules) that would limit the short term and immediate self-interests of each so that they would all would benefit in

the longer run by sticking to the rules. Environmental and transport issues are good examples of areas where collective action problems are sharp. But they apply equally across the board in all areas concerned with sustainable economic growth and political stability and order. Institutional solutions – which may vary considerably from context to context – are the necessary condition for resolving these collective action problems. It should thus be clear why they are so central to the complex politics of development at almost any level and in every sector and issue. And overcoming these nested collective action problems is fundamentally a political problem and thus represents one of the greatest challenges in the practices of development. The role of coalition politics in resolving these problems (by devising agreed rules of the game) is something that needs much greater attention, especially in those contexts where the challenges seem especially harsh, that is where interests, ideas and incentives appear to diverge so sharply and thus where the need for locally appropriate institutional solutions is greatest.

6. Negotiating goals, agreeing objectives

If instability and the potential for fission are common features of coalitions, it is clear that negotiating clear and agreed goals and tactics is crucial if a coalition is not only to be effective but survive internal tensions and strains (Levi and Murphy, 2006). Consensus-building and policy reform on the part of developmental coalitions takes time. For example, Tadros (2011: 24-28) found that it took eight years for the coalition on the Protection of the Family against Women in Jordan to establish a consensus around the coalition's cause across a range of different stakeholders. This involved building bridges between groups and organizations with different agendas, formulating a common understanding of what the key issues were, and discovering the most effective terminology with which to frame the message. How is this done and what are the compromises needed to ensure coherence but also effectiveness? The same questions apply to 'growth' or 'developmental' coalitions in national or sectoral contexts that may take a lot of time both to establish and to manage and sustain over time.

7. Networks and trust

There is interesting evidence to suggest that the existence of prior networks, relations and common experiences can be positive factors in the development of trust, yet not enough is known about whether and to what extent such networks have preceded the emergence and success of effective coalitions. In some countries – for instance in the Philippines, Egypt and South Africa – there is evidence to suggest that in the social sector (for instance in health, education or gender issues) the membership of these coalitions (and especially the leaderships) may re-cycle themselves through a number of iterations and causes.

8. Framing and strategies

Questions of size, agreeing objectives and building trust all relate to how the goal or goals of a coalition are 'framed' and presented; and what tactics are used or not used. This applies whether it is a reform or advocacy coalition operating within politicized civil society seeking to affect policy or institutional change from 'below', or whether it is a national level coalition of reformers seeking to redirect economic policy (Schneider, 2004). Aggressive framing of an issue may antagonise those who a coalition may be keen to win over to its side; and differences about tactics might, likewise, cause splits in a coalition (Levi and Murphy, 2006).

9. Management and leadership

All of these issues point to the need for effective management and leadership of coalitions. More needs to be known about what works and why, but initial evidence – which is intuitively obvious – suggests that transparency is crucial. But the exact nature of the most effective managerial arrangements, procedures, behaviour and means for resolving the inevitable conflicts that will arise requires more detailed analysis. The more informal coalitions appear to be less vulnerable to issues of management as they are, by definition, looser and more ad hoc arrangements. But the more formal policy or issue-based coalitions using either endogenously generated funds or funds from external sources may need to address directly issues of transparency and accountability in the management and distribution of resources if they are to avoid damaging internal conflict.

10. Funding

This is always an issue, especially with social sector or reform coalitions that arise politically within civil society to pursue a particular policy goal and seek support or financial assistance from abroad. But at a different level entirely, resources are equally important for a 'ruling coalition' that has to sustain its patronage networks. Transparency in the financial management of coalitions, including external funding and the structure of side-payments used to attract followers, will often be crucially important for preserving the cohesiveness and/or public legitimacy of the coalition. For example, Hodes, Thorpe & Stern (2011: 28-90) found that internal conflicts over the distribution and transparency of funding was one of the primary set-backs to the co-ordination and effectiveness of the Working Group coalition in South Africa. So, how donors can best support emerging coalitions needs to be investigated, and especially how they can do so without creating a 'funding feeding frenzy' - that is, a competitive scramble for money that can in turn compromise the integrity of a coalition and hence significantly compromise its function in solving collective action problems.

11. Brokering and facilitating

This leads directly to the related and critical question of whether, when, where and how external actors can or should help to broker and facilitate the emergence and success of developmental or reform coalitions - in the short, medium or long term. This question applies equally to the national level (for instance promoting interactions and coalitions between state, capital and labour over economic institutions and policies) or both to the relations between organizations and individuals in civil society and also between them and organizations and individuals in the state around key social and other sector reform issues.

12. Duration

By definition, coalitions are not organizations (though they may require an administrative or organizational core), and hence are far more time-bound, normally disbanding when their goals are achieved or when continuing is pointless. In Riker's model the 'game' is won when a victory is achieved (a candidate elected or a law voted through) in a legislative or electoral context. However, many formal and informal coalitions have to sustain themselves over quite long periods, whether their goal is to stay in power or whether their goal – as an advocacy or reform coalition – is to maintain public pressure for the passing or abolition of a law or the pushing through and onwards of new economic policies and institutions. In these situations, for instance the on-going decade-long campaign to achieve reproductive health legislation in the Philippines (Ocampo, 2012, forthcoming), the game is constantly changing as political, contingent and other factors change and re-fashion the context.

13. Parsimony and theory

Finally, the 'theory' of political coalitions itself deserves more detailed analysis and development, anchored in a much wider body of evidence. The parsimonious logic, core assumptions and applications of game theory suggest and deploy a limited range of variables that shape behaviour. In a developmental context, with unstable institutional arrangements, competing incentive structures and (often) dangerous and oppressive politics, coalition formation and behaviour may be a lot more complicated.

Conclusion

Using Riker's early theory as a springboard, this paper has raised some wider issues, implications and questions for further research. This is only the start. That work has yet to be done and we have only scratched the surface. But we have sought to show that despite its somewhat abstract and theoretical nature, there are still some very important insights to be gleaned and challenges to be met arising from *The Theory of Political Coalitions* and, especially, some important spurs to further analysis.

More work will follow that will lead to clear policy messages and operational notes of guidance for practitioners.

Endnotes

1 Future papers from the DLP will explore the limitations in much current 'political economy' analysis.

2 William Harrison Riker was one of the key founders and promoters of the 'positive' theory of politics based on neo-classical theory in economics and game theory, which he developed in the Department of Political Science at the University of Rochester in the United States. The influence of this work, as 'rational choice' theory in politics, has been both very significant and very contentious. His book on political coalitions represents one of the earliest manifestations of this school of political analysis.

3 It might be argued that all coalitions are, by definition, political; and that it would have been clearer to talk, in Riker's case, of electoral or legislative coalitions rather than 'political coalitions'.

4 In the preface to *The Theory of Political Coalitions*, Riker (1962: viii) notes the degree of "intellectual ferment among political scientists today owing to the fact that the traditional methods of their discipline have wound up in a cul-de-sac". The debate over the prospect of a genuine science of politics was very much a live topic in Anglo-American academia when Riker was writing. Although the dust has since settled and the major positions have been staked out by key players, the debate is re-invigorated periodically by developments in modern philosophy of knowledge and of science.

5 There is clearly some confusion in Riker's work here as he seems not to distinguish between coalitions and organizations. While it might be said that all organizations are coalitions, it is certainly not the case that all coalitions are organizations. We return to this point in the final section where we suggest the need for a better classification of these different but related phenomena.

6 However, the 'winner takes all' assumption of the zero-sum game in the reality of democratic politics needs to be treated with great caution, as Adam Przeworksi (1987) has noted. Przeworski treats democracy as the 'institutionalization of uncertainty', meaning that the democratic process can, in principle, return any kind of government, subject to two critical conditions. The first is that losing parties or candidates must know that they can have another chance of trying again in the next electoral round, in a given number of years; and secondly – and equally crucially – that the winner ***does not*** take all. For instance a winning party that used its majority power and legitimate authority to systematically attack and destroy the interests and capacity of opposition groups (rendering them unable to try again, for instance) would be highly likely to force such groups to evacuate themselves from the democratic process and turn to other (non-democratic) means to retaliate. The situation would slide from (democratic) politics to civil war. In short, for democracy to persist, winners should ***not*** take all.

7 'Side-payments' refer to anything of value that the leaders of coalitions are able to offer potential followers to attract them into a coalition. For example, in the immediate aftermath of the indeterminate general election in the UK in 2010, both Labour and the Conservative Party offered side-payments to the Liberal Democrat party to persuade them to form a coalition. A pivotal side-payment was the promise of an all-party committee of inquiry into electoral reform - a policy area that was very prominent on the Liberal Democrats' agenda (Rayner & Kirkup: 2010).

8 Since the Conservatives have come to power in coalition with the Liberal Democrats, the 'Big Society' slogan has been accompanied by a reasonably clear policy strategy of decentralisation and of greater power for local authorities and local communities, though many remain puzzled by the practical implications of this.

9 Much of the empirical work on different kinds of coalition also seems to support the view that most coalitions are unstable or prone to fragment.

10 This example that Riker uses is unusual in the context of his theory, which has individuals as its focus; here he appears to be using governments as the units of his analysis. But many other factors shape how government policy is made.

11 On the sporting analogy used in the language of 'game' theory, the point here would be that people know that they are playing tennis, not sumo wrestling. The rules of each require very different behaviours and actions. It gets hard to predict or understand behaviour when the rules get mixed or confused.

12 Whitfield and Therkildsen define a 'ruling coalition' as '... the groups and individuals behind the rise of the ruling elites to power and/or those groups or individuals who give the ruling elite their support, typically in exchange for benefits'. These ruling coalitions, they argue, serve to keep the ruling (that is, political) elite in power in many African contexts by organizing political support for them through patron-client networks (2011: 16).

13 We owe this insight to Jared Raynor who explained it at a DLP Workshop in February 2012, and he in turn based his ideas on Wolf's 'A Practical Approach to Valuations of Collaborations' (Wolf, 2009). Raynor's work (2011) on 'What makes an effective coalition' is a very insightful survey of the more recent literature.

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