doi.org/10.65826/IJPCR.1.3.2026.62
Vol. 01, Issue 03, pp. 250-267, 2026 International Journal of Peace and Conflict Research (IJPCR)

RESEARCH ARTICLE Open Access

The Social Dominance Theory's Hypothesis of Subordinates' Participation in Maintaining the Status Quo: An Examination based on Peaceocracy in African Competitive Authoritarianisms

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Received: 28.06.2026
Accepted: 27.09.2026

Publication Date: 01.10.2026

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ISSN: 3108-6136

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Abstract

In African competitive authoritarianisms, peaceocracy, or the (supposed) reign of peace, consists, for the incumbents, of instrumentalizing the narrative of safeguarding peace, stability, and order to legitimize authoritarian practices likely to push citizens to give up their civil and political freedoms in favour of a "negative peace", under an atmosphere of widespread fear of violence that inhibits dissent. The specialized literature, relatively recent and little documented, reports that peaceocracy, which is not the subject of an autonomous theorization, is analysed in various theoretical frameworks emerging from peace, African or colonial studies. From an innovative psychosocial perspective, this study apprehends it as a mechanism aimed at legitimizing elites' use of coercive tactics to maintain the political status quo (status boundary reinforcement hypothesis). This research orientation, which theorizes "peace" as a means of political domination through official terror, allows the present study to put into debate the questionable hypothesis of subordinates' participation in the intergroup cooperative game which maintains the status quo, as defended by social dominance theory.

Keywords: *Peaceocracy, Social Dominance Theory, Systematic Terror, Felt Systematic Terror, African Competitive Authoritarianisms.*

Cite this article: MESSANGA, G. A., TAFFO NEMBOUE, W., & TSOGO À BEBOURAKA, M. P. (2026). The Social Dominance Theory's Hypothesis of Subordinates' Participation in Maintaining the Status Quo: An Examination based on Peaceocracy in African Competitive Authoritarianisms. *International Journal of Peace and Conflict Research (IJPCR)*, *1*(3), 250–267. https://doi.org/10.65826/IJPCR.1.3.2026.62

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1. INTRODUCTION: SOCIAL DOMINANCE THEORY AND THE QUESTIONABLE HYPOTHESIS OF SUBORDINATES' PARTICIPATION IN MAINTAINING THE STATUS QUO

Social dominance theory can be understood as an explanatory model for group oppression (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999); oppression being conceived as "a state or process of domination where the ability of the oppressed to achieve wellness is obstructed through exploitation, marginalization, discrimination, and violence" (Jeong et al., 2025: 3). This theory views all familiar forms of group-based oppression as revealing cases of a more general human tendency toward the formation and maintenance of group-based hierarchies (Sidanius et al., 2004). According to its conceptors, social dominance theory was developed to try to understand how these group-based hierarchies, composed of one or more dominant and hegemonic groups at the top, and one or more subordinate groups at the bottom, are formed and maintained (Pratto et al., 2006). These hierarchies follow a trimorphic structure comprising: i) the age system, in which adults have disproportionate social power over children; ii) the gender system, in which men have disproportionate social, political and military power compared to women; and iii) the arbitrary groups system (or coalitions in primates), in which groups built on arbitrary bases, i.e. not linked to the human life cycle (nationality, clan, race, ethnicity, social class, etc.), have different access to things of positive and negative social value (Pratto et al., 2006). Unlike the other two types of hierarchical systems, arbitrary group systems emerge only in societies that produce a substantial and stable economic surplus (industrial and post-industrial societies, for example). This surplus frees certain adults from having to devote most of their time and energy to food procurement and survival, leaving them free to specialize in the art of coercion, for instance. These specialists are then used by political elites to establish and impose expropriatory socioeconomic relationships with other members of society (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Once those relationships are established, attempts to dismantle them generally fail, as evidenced by the fact that popular revolutions are often rare and unsuccessful (see Svolik, 2012).

According to social dominance theorists, social hierarchies are produced and maintained by three proximal processes: aggregated individual discrimination (the everyday discriminatory acts of individuals against one another), behavioral asymmetry (collaborative activities between dominant and subordinate groups that produce better outcomes for the former than for the latter), and aggregated institutional discrimination (the set of discriminatory rules, procedures and actions of institutions, including those that may be unconscious, unintentional or covered up) (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). The first two types of processes are situated within an ideological logic that inclines individuals and groups, regardless of their status, to support asymmetrical hierarchical power relations (see Tesi et al., 2022). These processes, extensively documented within the framework of social dominance theory, thus reinforce the idea that low-status groups members contribute to their own subordination, notably through their obsequious and deferential behaviour towards dominant groups. This makes them not only objects but also agents of the oppression that afflicts them (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), despite the fact that they are denigrated, excluded from public consideration, and subject to the most severe punishments and dangers (Pratto, 2026).

The processes related to institutional discrimination, much less documented, contrast sharply with this collaborative logic, since they are activated in cases where low-status groups members are more inclined to challenge asymmetrical power relations; forcing dominant groups to resort to coercive tactics, such as systematic terror (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), to keep them in their place and preserve the integrity of the hierarchical intergroup boundaries (status boundary reinforcement hypothesis; Thomsen et al., 2008). Systematic terror refers to the use of violence or threats of violence disproportionately directed against subordinates (Sidanius, 1993). It takes three forms: official (violence and threats of violence that are legal and public and disproportionately perpetrated against subordinates by state organs); semiofficial (violence or intimidation directed against subordinates by state officials such as the police, secret police, or paramilitary organizations, but not openly, publicly, officially, or legally sanctioned by the state); and unofficial (violence or threats of violence perpetrated against members of subordinate

groups by individuals belonging to dominant groups, and tacitly, or even actively, supported by government agencies) (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Its function is to maintain the existing expropriatory relations between dominant and subordinate groups, reinforce subordinates' continued deference to the dominant groups, and maintaining intergroup boundaries inviolable by keeping subordinates in their place (Thomsen et al., 2008), through violence and threats of violence perpetrated by state organs or members of its security apparatus, often acting with complete impunity (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). It is likely to be more ferocious in cases where subordinates directly challenge and confront dominant groups' hegemonic control.

Although social dominance theory proposes these three proximal processes to explain the production and maintenance of hierarchical social systems, analysis reveals that it has chosen to focus primarily on documenting the idea that it is subordinates' passive or active cooperation in their own oppression that gives group-based hierarchies their remarkable degrees of resilience, robustness, and stability (see Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Indeed, this theory views the coercive mechanisms that dominant groups might employ to maintain hierarchical social systems, such as systematic terror (see Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), merely as temporary solutions (see specifically Thomsen et al., 2008, on this point). Consequently, these mechanisms play a secondary role in the creation and maintenance of the hierarchical social systems, as their significance is far outweighed by the intergroup collaborative processes in which subordinates participate, despite the unfavourable outcomes for them. In fact, it is as if subordinates' consent to existing social arrangements were the norm, while their challenging of them were the exception, and thus a temporary or occasional phenomenon, to be countered by systematic terror in order to restore normality, or, if you will, the established order. This position is strongly criticized in the research by Turner and Reynolds (2003), which focuses on inconsistencies in social dominance theory. On this specific point, these authors challenge the theory's central hypothesis according to which: « low-status groups also work to maintain the hierarchies which oppress them ('behavioural asymmetry', BA) » (p. 199). Indeed, by arguing that subordinate groups members' support for the maintenance of asymmetrical intergroup relations (Social Dominance Orientation; see Pratto, 2026 for a review) is not an underlying cause or antecedent but rather a product of social life, these authors suggest that subordinates' "participation" in the intergroup collaborative game that enshrines their inferiority is a consequence (impacting their beliefs, theories, and ideologies), of their position at the bottom of the social structure and, consequently, of the treatment they experience, particularly through their interactions with dominant groups. For us, this position can be understandable by drawing on the literature regarding dominance, particularly in the field of ethology.

In ethology, hierarchical social systems are produced by coercive mechanisms (aggression, force, and dominance; Milewski et al., 2022). Once they are established, they are often maintained by the same mechanisms, expressed through threats, punishments, and self-reinforcing behavioral mechanisms. They can then stabilize and become more pacifying, provided that subordinates no longer react aggressively to dominants' coercive manoeuvres, thereby acknowledging their inferior status (see Tibbetts et al., 2022). It follows that one might ask whether: i) these subordinates' non-aggressive reactions (see Milewski et al., 2022 for an analysis in animals), which guarantee the stability of the hierarchy, are assimilable to consent (see Chow, 2013), if one considers that consent is an affirmative act which must be voluntary, i.e. produced without coercion, pressure, threat, intimidation or fear; or ii) whether they are the manifestation of a passive submission which marks the involuntary nature of a given consent or an absence of affirmative consent (see Konow, 2014 for a distinction between coercion and consent), due to the action of coercive factors, even if these factors are not apparent in the current situation?

In our view, these questions challenge the meaning of what social dominance theory considers to be subordinates' active or passive participation (in the sense of involvement, contribution, collaboration, or engagement) in the intergroup cooperative game that reinforces their inferiority, and which some theorists call "consent" (see Chow et al., 2013), while from a certain perspective, this behaviour could

also be conceptualized as "submission" (in the sense of surrender or compliance). In this vein, it is important to note that, in the context of interpersonal relationships in both animals and humans, dominance and submission (not consent) form a dichotomous pair in which the assertion of dominance, power, and status by some aims to generate deference, acquiescence, and submission from others (Burgoon & Dunbar, 2000). In this light, and drawing on Turner and Reynolds' (2003) perspective, subordinate groups' recognition of their inferior status can be viewed as the behavioral and attitudinal consequence of the coercive manoeuvres imposed by dominant groups, rather than an act of acquiescence. It would therefore be a matter of submission. According to Montesquieu (1748), submission is the very essence of the tyrant's influence on civil society. This submission, he argues, is less a matter of power than a product of fear; thus, revealing that the principle of servitude is more psychological than physical, since the despot perpetuates his power by humiliating citizens and stifling all their attempts to challenge the established order through terror. The characteristic of this fear is that it permeates everything, even man's most intimate feelings; its source ultimately becoming internal (Kovacs, 2014).

The construct of felt systematic terror allows us to outline answers to the previous questions. Following the proposal by Messanga and Taffo Nemboué (2025), felt systematic terror refers to the emotional reactions of the subordinates when confronted with the violence and threats of violence characteristic of systematic terror—reactions that either inhibit or catalyse the challenging of the status quo within hierarchical social systems. The contribution of this construct to social dominance theory falls within the perspective of analysing not only the experience, among subordinates, of the systematic terror used by the dominants, but also the questioning of its temporary nature (see Thomsen et al., 2008). This questioning focuses in particular on authoritarian sociopolitical systems where the regimes in power tend to reign unchallenged for several decades (see Jacquemot, 2019 in an African context), creating an atmosphere of often diffuse terror. This diffuse terror instils emotions like fear in the minds of citizens who have been direct victims, direct witnesses or simply who have been exposed, through socialization within their families and communities, to the reality of terror, with potentially lasting effects over time, that is, well beyond the actual use of coercion (see Blackman et al., 2024 on the link between political socialization and the legacy of repression). Messanga and Taffo Nemboué (2025) argue that, from this perspective, these persistent effects of coercion may be mistaken, in certain circumstances, for subordinates' consent to their inferiority, whereas in reality, they could be more accurately described as their forced submission to dominant groups' hegemonic logic; one of the predominant means of which is coercion (see Gramsci, 1971). According to them, this confusion could arise from the absence of a current coercive action by the dominant groups, which, however, cannot be equated with an absence of coercion, since the latter may have been internalized by its direct victims, who could then have transmitted it within their groups (see Blackman et al., 2024). It follows that this mechanism of action by the dominant groups on subordinates could have permanent effects, that is, even in the absence of a current direct coercive action.

Because social dominance theory has leaned heavily towards theorizing the explanation of the status quo of the hierarchical social systems through subordinate groups' consent rather than through the coercion exerted on them by dominant groups, it has, until now, very little explored the relationship between a regime and its population in authoritarian contexts, where institutional authorities often resort to state terror as a means of political control (see Messanga & Taffo Nemboué, 2025 for this critique of social dominance theory). It follows that little is known about how these coercive mechanisms contribute to the psychology of dominance, particularly in those sociopolitical contexts where violence, threats of violence, intimidation, arrests, summary and extrajudicial executions (see Mix, 2014 in the African context), for example, are employed daily with the aim of ensuring authoritarian durability (see Jacquemot, 2019). In this vein, the points raised in the preceding paragraphs lead us to question the position defended by social dominance theory, according to which the function of systematic terror

exercised against subordinates is to "keep them in their place" when they threaten the integrity of the group status hierarchy, rather than to maintain a constant reign of collective terror (Thomsen et al., 2008). This makes systematic terror a temporary mechanism for the production and maintenance of the hierarchical social systems (see Messanga & Taffo Nemboué, 2025). However, from our point of view, it seems difficult to consider the use of systematic terror in authoritarian regimes as a temporary rather than a permanent strategy, if we conceive it in the perspective of authoritarian durability, sometimes over several decades (see Jacquemot, 2019). Following Provost's (2023) perspective, we rather defend the idea that oppression is not an "episodic", therefore temporary injustice, but rather a "continuous", therefore permanent effort to stifle and crush the oppressed to generate their submission (and not consent) to the oppressors' hegemonic project. It is this idea that we explore in the present study through an analysis of the electoral-political strategy known as "peaceocracy," which aims notably to maintain hegemonic sociopolitical systems through coercion, in environments supposedly governed by the principles and rules of liberal democracy.

2. PEACEOCRACY AND THE ISSUE OF ITS THEORETICAL FRAMING

In many African countries, electoral competition can be considered an imported, grafted, or even imposed phenomenon integrated into political habitus. Consequently, their results, which are generally suspect, disappointing, and far removed from their stated objectives of democratization, constitute a source of frustration, tension and instability (Jacquemot, 2022). This reality is partly linked to the fact that the incumbents are sometimes inclined to resort to electoral violence to increase their chances of winning elections, because victory is vital for their political survival (Médard, 1991). However, authoritarian regimes do not perpetuate their hegemonic position solely through the use of such coercive tactics (see Gerschewski, 2013). Indeed, political manoeuvres aimed at authoritarian durability tend to instrumentalize both coercive and consensual strategies (Cheeseman et al., 2024). In this vein, authoritarian regimes make use of legitimation mechanisms, clientelist co-optation of elites, or the search for citizen apathy (see Edel & Joshua, 2018; Messanga et al., 2020). They also resort to propaganda (Rosenfeld & Wallace, 2024) and legitimizing ideologies, essential to autocratic stability (Grauvogel & von Soest, 2024), because these strategies allow them to substantiate their right to govern, build popular support or, failing that, generate passive acceptance of their rule among popular masses (Gerschewski, 2013), especially in situations of internal crisis.

Faced with internal crises, particularly post-electoral crises, which are recurrent on the African continent (see Bjuremalm, 2022 on the case of Kenya), authoritarian regimes often resort to the narrative of "peace"; a rhetorical and strategic instrument for conflict resolution or prevention (see Pastory & Makulilo, 2024 for the case of Tanzania), structured around the "ideology of order" inherited from the colonial period, which perceives multiparty politics as a source of division and danger, thus justifying the centralization of power as a means to guard against division, chaos and disorder (Lynch, 2020). The reason for this is that peace can be listed in the category of terms of procedural legitimation (Yavuz, 2024), which are constructs that emphasize the legal, institutional, and rational mechanisms justifying authoritarian rule. From this legitimizing perspective, peace is invoked only to prioritize stability, security, and the continued control of power by elites; therefore, taking the contours of negative peace (Galtung, 1967), which certainly refers to an absence of organized and overt violence, but also, insidiously, to a state of non-resistance, or even acquiescence, imposed by the power of the authorities' coercive arsenal. In African competitive authoritarian regimes, this negative conception of peace is often instrumentalized by governing authorities to prevent or resolve crises related to elections that are generally rigged (see Nhamirre, 2025 on the case of Mozambique), by delegitimizing protest to justify the excessive use of force. This is the reality that the concept of peaceocracy summarizes (see Lynch, 2020; Lynch et al., 2019).

The term peaceocracy was used by various commentators after the 2013 elections in Kenya (see Shah,

2015) to describe how the ruling political alliance (The Jubilee Alliance), which won the election, prioritized "peace" over genuine democracy in its strategy (Cheeseman et al., 2014). This electoral strategy was based on the argument of fearing that the country would descend into events similar to those of the 2007-2008 elections, which were marred by violence that caused over a thousand deaths and approximately seven hundred thousand displaced persons (Lynch et al., 2019). Its implementation consisted of legitimizing the strategic deployment of security forces, delegitimizing public demonstrations by the opposition or open debates on topics with the potential (alleged by the authorities) to generate divisions. Moreover, it urged people to participate in the vote and to peacefully accept the verdict of the ballot box (Lynch, 2020), in a regional context where, however, electoral fraud should be considered less as the result of technical and procedural weaknesses than as a deliberate and institutionalized strategy adopted by the regimes in place to maintain their domination (Nhamirre, 2025). It is in this context that we can conceive peaceocracy as an institutionalized political strategy (and not a political system; Arregui Olivera & Cheruiyot, 2023) whose essential characteristics include: 1) the presentation of an existing peace as being constantly threatened, therefore fragile; 2) a state discourse articulated around the presentation of the institutional authorities as the undisputed guarantors of peace, order and stability; and 3) a normative conception of citizenship defining the "good citizen" as one who would work actively for the maintenance and protection of a fragile peace, notably because he watches the results of the elections and accepts them (Bjuremalm, 2022), and the "bad citizen" as one whose attitudes and behaviours would be likely to threaten this peace (Lynch, 2020), notably because he protests following the elections.

In African competitive authoritarianisms, elections, which represent a moment of potential challenge to the hegemony of institutional authorities sometimes reigning for several decades (see Jacquemot, 2019), often take place in a climate of tension due to threats of violence (see Ndawana, 2026 on the case of Zimbabwe), and an atmosphere of diffuse (Arendt, 1973), inherited, and transmitted fear (see Assiene Bissossoli & Loumou Mondoleba, 2025). This climate results, at least in part, from a political construction and strategic efforts to present electoral competition as a threat to peace and security in order to create a "state of exception," with the aim of generating favourable conditions for the suspension of democratic rights and facilitating the slide toward authoritarianism (Gündüz Arabaci, 2025). It serves to legitimize tactics that openly distort the electoral process to maintain the dominant political actors in power (see Pastory & Makulilo, 2024, on the case of Tanzania): intimidation of the opposition; creation of a militarized environment; and restriction of freedoms of assembly and expression (Jenkins, 2020); all under the argument of preserving peace and stability, used as a technique of political control (see Hassan et al., 2022). It is based on the triptych: « orderly elections, political instrumentalization and the fear of violence » (Lynch et al., 2019: 606), which explains the greater emphasis placed on the message of peace than on any other narrative and justifies the assimilation of peaceocracy to a tyranny of peace messaging (Cheeseman et al., 2014), by which a state ensures, by resorting to violent or non-violent coercive tactics that terrorize its opponents and minimize resistance, that its citizens obey the law and maintain peace (see Bamnjo, 2026 in the case of Cameroon). In this vein, peaceocracy appears as a mechanism for transforming the discourse on peace into an instrument of governance, normalizing coercive practices and producing emotional reactions such as a silencing fear (Pearlman, 2016) within populations (see Jenkins, 2020); inscribing them in a trajectory of submission (Keltner, 1995). It is therefore a technology of power used to produce popular consent through the fear of disorder (Cheeseman et al., 2019), justifying the prevention of chaos through the maintenance of order, the justification of surveillance, the delegitimization of opposition (Bjuremalm, 2022), and ultimately the production of a widespread terror within populations. Under these conditions, the absence of an open social conflict could be interpreted as a sign of social peace, whereas it could also result from a climate of internalized insecurity (see Messanga & Taffo Nemboué, 2025); an alternative thesis examined in the present study.

Peaceocracy is a relatively recent concept on which little research exists (see Arregui Olivera & Cheruiyot, 2023; Bjuremalm, 2022; Cheeseman et al., 2014; Cross, 2021; Elder, 2021; Lynch, 2020; Lynch et al., 2019). While it was initially confined to the empirical analysis of the African electoral contexts that gave rise to it (specifically the 2013 Kenyan elections), it is now expanding beyond these contexts. Based on this argument, Bjuremalm (2022) believes that it has moved beyond simply describing an empirical phenomenon to become a fully-fledged theory, even though he notes that its level of theorization is not yet substantial, due in particular to the fact that it has so far only been applied to a few specific cases. However, according to him, it is a concept ripe for further theoretical development, that is, well beyond peace research framework in which its conceptors currently situate it. From our point of view, this position deserves to be re-examined.

If we refer to the notion of theory, which, in a certain sense, is a general proposition or a system of logically linked general propositions that establishes a relationship between two or more variables (Abend, 2008), it is possible to express reservations about the idea that peaceocracy is a fully-fledged theory. Indeed, it must be noted, first of all, that the authors to whom Bjuremalm (2022) refers to justify his position (Cheeseman et al., 2014; Cheeseman et al., 2019; Lynch, 2020) do not themselves refer to it as a theory. Lynch (2020), for example, continually refers to it, describing it as a term that accounts for a political situation or strategy. Research on this topic is more focused on the narrative trajectory of how this political strategy is implemented (see Cheeseman et al., 2014). However, the authors do not demonstrate any effort to systematize their elaborations to constitute a theoretical model, for example. Furthermore, even when research adopts the perspective of analysing various cases, the theoretical framework employed, developed from other constructs (peace, ideology, violence, post-colonialism, for example; see Lynch, 2020), is not sufficient to establish peaceocracy as an autonomous theoretical model. More specifically, Lynch (2020) and Lynch et al. (2019) are more concerned with situating this concept within the existing theoretical literature in the fields of peace studies, African studies, and colonial studies. This reveals no ambition that could make peaceocracy a fully-fledged theory. From our point of view, this therefore raises the problem of the theoretical framework of this term, which seems to lie at the intersection of various theoretical perspectives, due in particular to the complex realities it encompasses.

3. PEACEOCRACY FROM A SOCIAL DOMINANCE THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Understanding the concept of peaceocracy from a theoretical perspective reveals its full complexity, which concepts such as authoritarian peacemaking (Stafford, 2025) or violence of peace (Branch, 2014) aptly convey. Because, at the very least, peace is invoked in it, it can first be situated within the theoretical framework of peace studies. However, Bjuremalm (2022) expresses some reservations about including peaceocracy within this framework, due to its limited grounding in this domain, whose central concerns revolve around the reduction and, ultimately, the eradication of war, and the control and resolution of violent conflicts through peaceful means (see Lawler, 2008). Indeed, even if peaceocracy refers to peace, this peace can be described as negative (see Galtung, 1967), because it refers less to peace as an objective than to the narrative of peace as a means of legitimizing the brutal use of violence in laws and actions to discipline citizens and limit dissent (Lynch, 2020). Following this line of thought, peaceocracy could therefore be included within the literature on the mechanisms of authoritarian legitimation (Grauvogel & von Soest, 2024). This would have the advantage of broadening its explanatory spectrum beyond electoral and post-electoral contexts, post-conflict, or presenting a peace that could be considered fragile, since it would fall within the broad field of the substantialization of the right to rule in authoritarian regimes (Gerschewski, 2013). However, this option could have the disadvantage of focusing the analysis of this concept on the tactics implemented by the governing system, without considering how they are experienced by subordinates. This could therefore deprive this concept of a significant part of its substance: the relationship between the governing system and the

political opposition, civil society, and citizens around the narrative of peace. This relationship is documented by existing research, which reveals that peaceocracy is a political manoeuvre whose objective is to generate, among citizens, either adherence to the logic of the governing system or fear of disorder, which fosters passivity that inhibits any inclination to protest (see Lynch, 2020; Lynch et al., 2019). This means that, from our point of view, these two theoretical frameworks do not allow us to fully capture the complexity of the realities contained within the notion of peaceocracy.

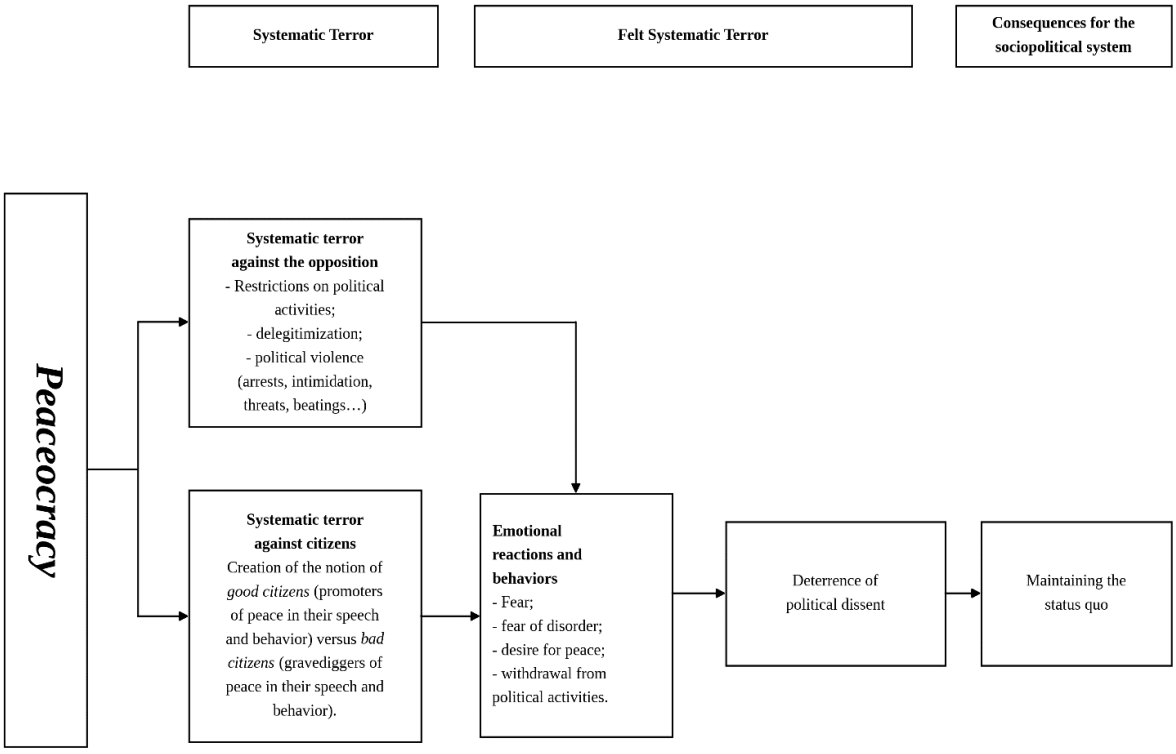
On analysis, peaceocracy appears as a political strategy articulated around the narrative of peace, to justify the maintenance of the status quo by state or official terror (arrests, intimidation, bans on public demonstrations for the opposition, muzzling of the press; see Bjuremalm, 2022; Cheeseman et al., 2014). From this perspective, we see it as a mechanism for maintaining the political status quo, consisting, for the authorities in place, of the instrumental use of the narrative of peace, security and stability, in order to deter political forces and citizens aspiring to overthrow the social hierarchy, by provoking emotional states such as fear in them, which have the effect of inhibiting their desire to challenge the existing socio-political hierarchy. In this vein, it can be suggested that it oscillates between the consent of the popular masses, among whom the institutional authorities try to consolidate their legitimacy as the guarantors of peace, and coercion, exercised to control these popular masses in general, and "bad citizens" in particular (Lynch, 2020). From this perspective, peaceocracy could take on the contours of a hegemonic tactic (see Gramsci, 1971), because it constitutes a mechanism by which one group (the ruling elite) exercises absolute domination over others (opposition, civil society, and citizens), over whom it exerts control through a (falsely) pacifying ideology and coercion (see Arregui Olivera & Cheruiyot, 2023 in the Kenyan context).

This conception, not considered until now, is likely to bring peaceocracy closer to the theoretical framework of social dominance, the aim of which is to elucidate the socio-psychological mechanisms responsible for maintaining intergroup relations of domination, reproducing inequalities, and preserving the status quo of existing social systems (Chatard et al., 2005). In this vein, we suggest that peaceocracy can be seen as a mechanism for reinforcing social hierarchy, because it contributes to maintaining the existing hierarchical sociopolitical system (see Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) in the countries where it is implemented, within a framework of dominance, understood as behaviours aimed at increasing or maintaining one's position relative to others, through power based on the possibility of resorting to force (see Rivers & Josephs, 2010). Concretely, remaining true to its conceptual trajectory, we argue that peaceocracy could simultaneously be understood from the following two perspectives: i) A political strategy that instrumentalizes the narrative of peace, implemented by dominant elites to maintain the existing sociopolitical hierarchy through the activation of terror and intimidation tactics (Jenkins, 2020), with the aim of ii) instilling an emotion such as fear in subordinate populations (Bjuremalm, 2022; Lynch, 2020), which is likely to inhibit their inclination to challenge the status quo. Within the theoretical framework of social dominance, these two aspects, referring respectively to systematic terror (see Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Thomsen et al., 2008) and felt systematic terror (Messanga & Taffo Nemboué, 2025) favour the thesis that the status quo is maintained through subordinates' submission rather than through their consented collaboration. This analytical perspective represents this study's contribution to the issue of how hierarchical social systems are produced and maintained, particularly in authoritarian sociopolitical contexts; a blind spot in social dominance theory (see Messanga & Taffo Nemboué, 2025). Empirically, it is structured around the analysis of peaceocracy, following the model presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1 shows that peaceocracy, conceived as a coercive political strategy, targets two categories of actors capable of challenging the political status quo: political opponents and the general population. The former sees their political space shrink, their activities delegitimized, and face political violence (arrests, intimidation, beatings, etc.). The latter are divided into two categories, good or bad citizens, depending on whether or not they are promoters of peace. If they are not, they could face the fate reserved

for political opponents. The emotional and behavioral consequences of the coercive tactics employed by the authorities in power are that both categories of actors may develop a fear that drives them to withdraw from political activities in general and discourages political dissent, thereby tending to maintain the status quo. The model therefore posits that the maintenance of the status quo in authoritarian sociopolitical systems is linked not to the population and political opponents' consent, but rather to the level of terror these systems instil. They thus perpetuate the status quo through submission secured via state terror.

Figure 1. The Peaceocracy Model of Analysis From A Theoretical Perspective of Social Dominance



3.1. Peaceocracy: Systematic Terror, Authoritarian Peace, And Maintenance of the Political Status Quo in African Competitive Authoritarianisms

To understand peaceocracy, it is necessary, from our perspective, to analyse the general climate in which elections take place in an African context. In this regard, the questions posed by Jenkins (2020: 1) seem fundamental to us: "Why do elections across sub-Saharan Africa generate such high levels of fear, even in historically peaceful contexts? How are these climates of fear being constructed? By whom? For what purpose? And with what implications?" Using the illustrative cases of Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia, this author argues that the fear surrounding elections is a political construct and the result of strategic efforts by the regimes in power, largely aimed at portraying elections as a threat to peace and security. According to her, by instrumentalizing peace, security, and order, these regimes seek to intimidate and coerce opposition and justify the use of political tactics that ultimately distort the electoral process. In more concrete terms, Jenkins (2020) notes that these regimes adopt a policy of fear and election securitization, allowing them to manipulate elections to win, under the guise of peaceful and security-focused rhetoric that lends an air of legitimacy. It is in this context that peaceocracy is situated. It takes shape on a continent where the so-called Western-style democracy is being debated, challenged in particular by the idea of a "developmental authoritarianism" (see Ngcayisa, 2021 in the cases of Ethiopia, Rwanda, and Uganda) which, by postulating that authoritarian regimes would be more able to facilitate

countries' economic development: i) legitimizes authoritarianism or sham democracy (Angelo, 2021); ii) provides a political environment conducive to authoritarian durability through control of the media and civil society, repression of opposition activities, and a normative conception of disciplined citizenship through laws and repressive actions; and iii) prioritizes rapid economic development, industrialization and modernization at the expense of citizens' civil and political freedoms, due to their (alleged) potential to provoke disorder and violence and fuel divisions (see Lynch, 2020).

By placing peaceocracy within the framework of authoritarian durability and its repressive logic, we assign it the function of systematic terror within the theoretical framework of social dominance. In fact, that political strategy exists within a context where many regimes are required to organize elections to legitimize their rule in the eyes of their national public and the international community. However, because these elections allow for challenging the existing political hierarchy, these regimes, obsessed with maintaining the status quo (for example: Cameroon, since 1982; Equatorial Guinea, since 1979; Uganda, since 1986; see Jacquemot, 2019), tend to move towards electoral authoritarianism (coexistence between electoral competition and violation of the democratic principles of freedom and fairness; Kim, 2017). In concrete terms, competitive authoritarianisms attempt to legitimize an "authoritarian social contract" (Lynch, 2020), offering populations peace and development in exchange for political acquiescence or loyalty. In doing so, they insist on the imperative of political uniformity behind elected leaders to (officially) preserve national peace and stability, but also, indirectly, to maintain the existing sociopolitical system. Added to this proposition is a delegitimization of the political opposition, portrayed as not only problematic, but also unpatriotic and dangerous; hence the fact that it is subjected to what Beresford et al. (2018), cited by Lynch (2020), call political abjection, which is characterized by the marginalization and exclusion of the opponents of the parties in power from the political sphere considered "acceptable". This specific treatment reserved for dissenting groups is understandable within the framework of social dominance theory, in the sense that systematic terror is particularly ferocious towards subordinates who directly challenge and confront dominants' hegemonic control (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) and much less so towards those who cooperate in maintaining the status quo (see Thomsen et al., 2008).

As an illustration, Lynch (2020) reports that during the 2016 elections in Uganda, the incumbent, Yoweri Museveni (in power since 1986), and his political movement presented a discourse centered on their role as the architects of the country's peace; their sole ability to guarantee it; their promise that any individual or political movement threatening to sow chaos would be dealt with accordingly; and that the country could relapse into war if the incumbent government lost the elections. This author goes on to note that, in addition to these threats, the regime engaged in: the strategic deployment of security forces in opposition strongholds to intimidate the population and prevent potential demonstrations; the organization of politicized community policing initiatives; the intimidation of journalists and civil society activists; and the arrest of several opposition figures. These repressive manoeuvres, coupled with the use of state resources, contributed to creating a manifestly unequal electoral process, guaranteeing the victory of the regime in power. The 2013 Kenyan elections (see Bjuremalm, 2022), following the deadly 2007 election, follow the same pattern, as they were marked by a pervasive pacifist discourse from the authorities, calling on citizens to participate in the vote and accept the results peacefully. While this discourse certainly helped to significantly reduce the risk of violence, it also undermined democratic gains by restricting the scope of legitimate political debate and dissent. This, combined with the strategic deployment of security forces in opposition strongholds, has put politicians and opposition supporters, as well as civil society and the media (Arregui Olivera & Cheruiyot, 2023) in an uncomfortable position to deploy their protest actions and reporting. This prioritization of peace clearly served the interests of the ruling elites, who controlled the state's security forces and thus the legitimate use of force to quell any security threat. They also used other state powers and resources to limit the debate and the actions of dissident groups. The Rwandan authorities, for their part, exploit the 1994 genocide, the

understandable fears of renewed violence, and the role claimed by the ruling Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) in helping to end the violence. This allows them to grant themselves a special status as protectors of peace, legitimize their power in the eyes of the national and international communities, and repress, often with extreme violence, pockets of potential political opposition. This is why Desrosiers and Thomson (2011), cited by Lynch (2020), describe the so-called "benevolent" leadership of President Paul Kagame (in power since 2000) as a tool designed to win the favour of the international community, silence the opposition, and discipline Rwandans by reminding them of hierarchy, authority, and the need for obedience and submission, in order to stimulate popular support or, failing that, limit dissent.

In this same vein, it can be observed that peaceocracy consists, in practice, of resorting to systematic terror in general and official terror in particular, with the objective of authoritarian durability; that is to say, maintaining existing authoritarian political systems in their current state, despite electoral competition supposedly capable of potentially challenging them. In this logic we suggest to consider systematic terror as a permanent rather than temporary mechanism (see Messanga and Taffo Nemboué (2025), particularly in authoritarian societies, where the despot can only maintain power through continuous threats, both physical and psychological (Kovacs, 2014). The distinctive feature of the regimes that govern these societies lies in the range of coercive measures they are prepared to implement daily to ensure their survival, especially when: they want to drastically reduce the likelihood of social change; ensure their continuous access to the state's political, economic, and security resources; and control state violence in order to mobilize it, through state repressive agencies, against threats to their continuity (see Schedler, 2010). In the long term, this violence has a potential socializing effect on dissident forces, who are forced, through coercion, to avoid problems and thus to discipline themselves (see Bjuremalm, 2022; Lynch, 2020; Lynch et al., 2019; Schedler, 2010), by no longer opposing the reproduction of the ruling elites' hegemonic projects. This angle of analysis highlights the (sometimes permanent) psychological effects induced by individuals' confrontation with systematic terror; a poorly documented aspect of social dominance theory, summarized by the concept of felt systematic terror (Messanga & Taffo Nemboué, 2025).

3.2. Peaceocracy: Felt Systematic Terror, Deterrence of Dissent, And Maintenance of the Political Status Quo in African Competitive Authoritarianisms

As conceptualized by Messanga and Taffo Nemboué (2025), felt systemic terror is articulated around the idea that subordinates' behaviours in the face of oppressive situations are influenced by emotional or moral reactions that reveal their subjective experience of these situations. The nature of these emotions depends on the level of systematic terror they experience. In practice, a high level of felt systematic terror is likely to generate non-aggressive emotional reactions (fear, resignation, despair), which discourage subordinates from challenging the status quo of the hierarchical social systems that oppress them. Conversely, a low level of felt systematic terror is likely to trigger aggressive emotional reactions in subordinates (moral outrage, indignation, anger, resentment), which can lead them to question the oppressive system.

The most striking element when analysing the literature on peaceocracy from the perspective of the population (or subordinates in a social dominance perspective) is the recurrence with which "fear" is invoked. Fear is an intense emotion aroused by the detection of an imminent threat, and felt during the avoidance or flight from an aversive stimulus (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2018), in an act of self-preservation whose consequence is often to drive individuals to obedience, dissuading them from taking actions likely to expose them to coercive measures (see Westermayr, 1915). In this vein, we argue that peaceocracy operates according to the following pattern: strategically using the narrative of peace to justify a regime of terror through repression, thereby generating and instrumentalizing fear (Lynch, 2020); an emotion that fosters conformity and, consequently, neutralizes tendencies toward dissent and thus toward challenging the status quo. Indeed, according to Messanga and Taffo Nemboué (2025), when

internalized, fear, which is an emotional reaction to systematic terror, can become a permanent and not temporary source of citizens' political behavior. These authors argue that it is therefore no longer limited to an immediate response to a circumstantial episode of repression, but is situated more within a trajectory of behavioral regulation that has inscribed repression as a systemic mechanism that must be taken into account, even when institutional authorities have not explicitly activated it (draw a parallel with the construct of internalized oppression; see Williams, 2012). It this perspective, it can be suggested, following these authors, that it is a diffuse terror that haunts citizens and forces them into obedience, without the authorities having to intervene permanently to force them to do so. This is why we believe that the empirical literature on peaceocracy supports felt systematic terror's theoretical propositions, drawing on examples from various countries which share the characteristic of being governed by regimes considered to be competitive authoritarian systems, as electoral competition there is often marked by authoritarian practices that skew the playing field and enable the regimes to perpetuate their hold on power, sometimes for several decades (see Jacquemot, 2019). Similarly, existing literature reveals that the concrete actions they employ to implement their electoral strategy are similar: portrayal of the ruling authorities as guarantors of a fragile peace, surveillance of opposition strongholds, intimidation, arbitrary arrests, and violence against dissidents, for example (see Lynch, 2020; Lynch et al., 2019).

Cameroon is a country where the regime in power often uses the narrative of peace and stability to justify authoritarian practices (see Lefort-Rieu, 2024), as exemplified by its Head of State (in power since 1982), who presents himself as a "mendiant de la paix (literally: beggar for peace)" (see Mowoundo, 2018-2019). In this country, citizens' political docility, linked to the fact that repression has annihilated dissent, eradicated protest and imposed conformism as the only option for political survival (see Dzuetso Mouafo et al., 2023). This docility may explain why the regime of this competitive authoritarianism has survived for decades (see Jacquemot, 2019), through the violation of civil liberties and high-intensity state repression (score almost always at or above average in the Gibney's Political Terror Scale since 1992) and electoral fraud (see Morse, 2018). In this vein, peaceocracy instrumentalizes the fear of violence to push citizens to consider their civil and political liberties as low priorities (Lynch, 2020). For example, in a survey conducted in Ghana (September 2015), Uganda (December 2015), and Kenya (June 2017), Lynch et al. (2019) asked participants: "What is the most important factor for free and fair elections?" Although respondents were given a choice of several factors related to election outcomes (such as ballot stuffing and voter bribery), the most frequent response in all three countries was: "A peaceful process." These results suggest that respondents were more interested in peace than in the quality of the electoral process. This priority appears particularly important, given that only a small minority of respondents had actually experienced election-related violence in previous elections (Lynch et al., 2019); revealing the long-term effects of political violence, including on individuals who have not directly experienced it. Under these conditions, prior to the 2013 elections in Kenya, a particular conception of the "good citizen," conceived as a defender of peace, contributed to restricting political debate and dissent. This constrained opposition supporters and the media in their demonstrations and reporting, stifling any frank discussion on crucial issues due to the imperative of safeguarding peace at all costs. This imperative has, among other things, led the media, gagged in the name of peace, to practice widespread self-censorship and to prioritize peace at the expense of denouncing abuses of power by the authorities in place (Lynch et al., 2019).

In short, in the context of peaceocracy, due to the underlying threat of violence, demands for a negative peace tend to gain prominence on the political agenda (Bjuremalm, 2022), to the detriment of protests related to respect for civil and political liberties. This author notes that this threat doesn't even need to be real; simply fearing that elections will degenerate into disorder and violence is enough to ensure the message from the authorities is effective. This narrative of peace, at the expense of democracy, is then considered preferable to direct violence, even if it may imply that the government maintains peace through repressive and violent means. In this context, we can speak of a violence of peace (Branch,

2014), which can be considered a productive violence, since it serves the interests of the ruling elites who, through the use of extrajudicial procedures such as police violence, presented, however, as a law enforcement operation, can silence dissenting forces with impunity and maintain the political status quo. This strategy is particularly effective because citizens often choose, due to fear of the ruling elites' coercive power, to stay out of political contests (see Dzuetso Mouafo et al., 2023 on the case of Cameroon), based on the idea that those among them who accept and cooperate in maintaining the political status quo (the "good citizens"; Lynch, 2020) would potentially be less exposed to dominant classes' recourse to systematic terror (see Thomsen et al., 2008). Conversely, those among them who directly confront and challenge the political status quo (the "bad citizens"; Lynch, 2020) would be the most likely to fall victim to a ferocious level of systematic terror (see Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

Based on the above elements, we suggest that peaceocracy forces "good citizens" into obedience and attempts to deter dissent among "bad citizens" through coercion. Indeed, coercion is understood as the intentional exertion of pressure on a person to induce him to make a decision under the threat of a sanction in case of non-compliance. It has three characteristics, including: intentionality, which reveals that the person exercising it seeks to coerce; the cost that is threatened, which must relate to the victim's right; and efficacy, which indicates that it must force the person to make a choice he would not have made without this threat (Konow, 2014). In this instance, the violence and threats of violence perpetrated by the regimes' repressive apparatus, particularly during election periods, aim to force citizens, through coercion, to avoid problems and thus to discipline themselves (see Bjuremalm, 2022; Lynch, 2020; Lynch et al., 2019; Schedler, 2010). In this configuration of the relations between governing authorities and citizens, we argue that the hypothesis that "citizens freely consent to maintaining the socio-political hierarchy as it stands" can reasonably be called into question. In the Cameroonian context, for example, one formula can summarize this behavioral logic: « je veux voir mes enfants grandir (literally, "I want to see my children grow up") » (Assiene Bissossoli & Loumou Mondoleba, 2025). Revealing the close links between logics of repression and political socialization to fear, this formula accounts not only for the perceived risk of investing in a political field that is particularly intolerant of dissent (see Messanga & Ekango Nzekaih, 2022), but also for the internalization of threats associated with partisan engagement, revealing habitus shaped by a culture of fear, where the cost of political participation is a structuring factor in citizens' trajectories of mobilization or demobilization (Assiene Bissossoli & Loumou Mondoleba, 2025); the final result of which is the maintenance of the political status quo for four decades.

4. CONCLUSION

Social Dominance Theory is an explanatory model of oppression that raises questions regarding several of its propositions (see Turner & Reynolds, 2003, for details). One of the most controversial concerns subordinates' participations in the intergroup collaborative game that cements their inferiority, rendering them not only victims but also accomplices in the oppression that afflicts them. This study examines this proposition within the context of authoritarian sociopolitical environments in Africa; many of which are characterized by the coexistence of electoral institutions, which would be mistaken to label democratic, and persistent authoritarianism that is particularly intolerant of dissent (Messanga & Ekango Nzekaih, 2022). Ruling authorities in these countries subtly employ rhetoric regarding the preservation of peace and stability to justify authoritarian practices that stand in stark contrast to their officially democratic political structures. This phenomenon, known as peacocracy, serves, in this research, as the empirical basis for questioning the hypothesis that subordinates participate in maintaining the status quo, because, in our view, it rest on two pillars: 1) the activation of the mechanism of systematic terror by the dominant elites against dissident forces, with a view to maintaining the political status quo; and 2) the provocation, in these dissident forces, of a felt systematic terror consisting of inhibitory emotions (fear for example) of their attempts to challenge the status quo.

From our point of view, the narratives gathered from existing literature (Bjuremalm, 2022; Cheeseman et al., 2014; Lynch, 2020) support the idea that peaceocracy is indeed an instrument serving to maintain the political status quo through systematic terror which, by primarily eliciting an emotion such as fear, dissuades individuals from challenging it. In this light, we argue that the status quo is not the product of the subordinates' approval, but rather the result of their capitulation in the face of the ruling system's repressive arsenal. In this vein, we believe that more empirical research, including psychometric studies, should examine this construct, its experience by individuals who use it or are subjected to it, and the resulting political behaviours. Indeed, given that peaceocracy is a "negative peace", i.e. a peace characterized by the presence of hostilities, inequalities, and injustices likely to fuel conflicts (Lynch, 2020), it would be interesting to analyze, from its victims' point of view, its potential to trigger frustrations and anger, which are emotional reactions likely to generate a challenge to the status quo (see Messanga & Taffo Nemboué, 2025 on this point) and therefore sociopolitical instability in the societies concerned.

Acknowledgements
The authors wish to express their sincere thanks to the editor and the anonymous reviewers for their critical reading and valuable suggestions, which have significantly improved the quality of this manuscript.

Declaration of Competing Interest
The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process
No AI was used in the writing of this manuscript.

Funding
The authors received no institutional funding to conduct this research.

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