totalitarian states. Although patron–client relationships are found in all political systems, including liberal democracies, they are of greatest political significance in authoritarian regimes. Particularly in low-income countries, personal networks of patrons and clients can be the main instrument for bringing ordinary people into contact with formal politics; indeed, they are often the central organizing structure of politics itself (Figure 8.2). Despite their informality, these networks underpin, and often overwhelm, more formal channels of participation such as political parties.

So, what exactly are patron–client relationships? They are traditional, informal hierarchies fuelled by exchanges between a high-status patron and clients of lower status. The colloquial phrase ‘big man/small boy’ conveys the nature of the interaction. Patrons are landlords, employers, party leaders, government ministers, ethnic leaders, or anyone with control over resources. Lacking resources of their own, clients gather round their patron for protection and security.

Political patrons control the votes of their clients and persuade them to attend meetings, join organizations, or simply follow their patron around in a deferential manner. These public (on stage) affirmations of support are politically relevant, even though they often fail to reflect clients’ private (off stage) opinion (Scott, 1985). Participation by clients is controlled and mobilized, as in communist states, but the patron–client relationship is based on personal exchange rather than a political party or a shared political outlook.

The patron’s power, and its inhibiting effect on democracy, is illustrated in this comment by Egypt’s President Abdul Nasser, interviewed in 1957 when he was still a reforming leader (Owen, 1993):

We were supposed to have a democratic system between 1923 and 1953. But what good was this democracy to our people? You have seen the landowners driving the peasants to the polling booths. There they would vote according to the instructions of their masters. I want the peasants to be able to say ‘yes’ and ‘no’ without this in any way affecting their livelihood and daily bread. This in my view is the basis for freedom and democracy.

Participation through patronage appeals in authoritarian settings because it links elite and mass, centre and periphery, in a context of inequality. Although inequality provides the soil in which patronage networks flourish, these relationships still act as political glue, binding the highest of the high with the lowest of the low.

By linking people across social levels, patron–client relationships limit the expression of solidarity among people of the same class, such as peasants. For the elite, they are a useful tactic of divide and rule. The decay of such hierarchical networks of