

Getting to Democracy

Lessons From Successful Transitions

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Almost five years ago, mass protests [1] swept the Egyptian autocrat Hosni Mubarak [2] from power. Most local and foreign observers believed that Egypt was on the path to a democratic future; some even proclaimed that democracy had arrived. But the election of Mohamed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party led to polarization and violence, and in 2013, after more mass protests, General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi seized power [3] in a military coup. Since then, Sisi's regime has killed more than 1,000 civilians, imprisoned tens of thousands more, and cracked down on media and civil society.

Nearby Tunisia has fared better [4]. The wave of Arab uprisings began there in 2010, and the democratic government that Tunisia's revolution ushered in has survived. It succeeded at one of a transition's critical tasks: agreeing on a new constitution, an achievement recognized by the Nobel Committee when it awarded its Peace Prize to a quartet of civil society organizations active in Tunisia's transition. But Tunisia's democracy remains fragile, threatened by political violence, a crackdown on dissidents, and human rights violations. In Cuba, too, there are finally hopes for a democratic future, as aging authoritarian rulers begin to introduce reforms. And in Myanmar (also known as Burma), a slow and uneven transition from military rule to inclusive governance may be under way, but it remains fraught with difficulties.

What determines whether attempts at democratic transitions will be successful? Past experience offers some insights. We conducted extended interviews with 12 former presidents and one former prime minister who played vital roles in the successful democratic transitions of Brazil, Chile, Ghana, Indonesia, Mexico, the Philippines, Poland, South Africa, and Spain. Some were leaders in authoritarian regimes who nevertheless helped steer their countries toward effective democracy. F. W. de Klerk, as president of South Africa, negotiated with Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress (ANC) to bring an end to apartheid. B. J. Habibie, vice president under Indonesia's long-ruling dictator, Suharto, became president after Suharto's resignation [5] in the face of massive protests. Habibie then freed political prisoners, legalized trade unions, ended press censorship, allowed the formation of new political parties, and transformed the rules of Indonesian politics, paving the way to constitutional democracy.

Other leaders were prominent in opposition movements that brought an end to authoritarian rule and subsequently helped build stable democracies. Patricio Aylwin, a leader of the opposition to General Augusto Pinochet, Chile's long-ruling dictator, became his country's first elected president after the restoration of democracy in 1990. Tadeusz Mazowiecki, a Catholic intellectual and a leader of the trade union Solidarity, became the first prime minister of postcommunist Poland.

We also interviewed bridge figures: leaders who straddled autocracy and democracy, such as Aleksander Kwasniewski, a cabinet minister in Poland's communist government who was involved in the Round Table discussions that led to Poland's democratic opening [6]. Later, as president, he helped build Poland's democratic institutions. Fidel Ramos, a high-ranking military official in the Philippines under the autocratic regime of Ferdinand Marcos, joined the opposition during the massive People Power demonstrations in 1986. He later served as defense minister and then as the second president of the post-Marcos democracy.

Although broader social, civil, and political forces played important roles, these leaders were key to their countries' successful transitions. They helped bring authoritarian regimes to an end and built constitutional democracies in their place, institutionalized through regular, reasonably fair elections, combined with meaningful restraints on executive power and practical guarantees of essential political rights—and none of these transformations has been reversed. Democracy remains a work in progress in some of these countries, but the transitions fundamentally changed the distribution of power and the practice of politics.

Of course, there is no one-size-fits-all model for democratic change. Yet past transitions do offer some broadly applicable lessons. Democratic reformers must be ready to compromise as they prioritize incremental progress over comprehensive solutions. They must build coalitions, reach out to some within the regimes they seek to overthrow, and grapple with questions of justice and retribution. And they must bring the military under civilian control. Those interested in building democracies from the ruins of dictatorships can improve their odds by following these best practices.

PREPARING THE GROUND

A successful democratic transition begins long before elected politicians take office. The opposition must first gain enough public support to challenge the regime's capacity to govern and position itself as a plausible contender for power. Opposition leaders have to mobilize protests; denounce the imprisonment, torture, and expulsion of dissidents; and erode the regime's national and international legitimacy.

This often requires bridging deep disagreements among the opposition about aims, leadership, strategies, and tactics. Most of the transition leaders we interviewed worked assiduously over time to overcome such divisions and build broad coalitions of opposition forces, uniting political parties, social movements, workers, students, religious institutions, and key business interests around a common agenda. In Poland, the trade union Solidarity worked closely with student organizations, intellectuals, and elements of the Catholic Church. Brazil's opposition movement convinced industrialists in São Paulo to back its cause. In Spain, opposition groups resolved many of their differences in the negotiations leading up to the Moncloa Pacts of 1977, where they agreed on how to run the economy during the transition.

By contrast, wherever the opposition fails to unite, the prospects for democracy suffer. In Venezuela, serious divisions over how confrontational to be toward the government have thus far prevented the opposition from taking full advantage of the regime's economic mismanagement. In Serbia, Slobodan Milosevic was able to rule in an increasingly authoritarian manner after taking power in 1989 thanks in part to the inability of the Serbian opposition to present a unified front. In Ukraine, the Orange Revolution of 2004⁶⁵ [7] overturned an election result widely considered to have been rigged. But divisions among reformers then held back the further development of democratic institutions and the rule of law, leading to another decade of oligarchic rule and political corruption.

Democratic opposition movements also need to build bridges with those who cooperated in the past with the regime but who may now be ready to support democratization. Focusing on past grievances tends to be counterproductive, so democratic reformers should instead consistently project a positive and forward-looking vision of the transition to counter the pervasive fear that authoritarian regimes instill. At the same time, they should marginalize those who refuse to renounce violence or who insist on uncompromising demands for regional, ethnic, or sectarian autonomy.

But uniting the opposition is not enough; democratic forces must also understand and exploit divisions within the incumbent regime. To persuade elements within the regime to be open to change, reformers must make credible assurances that they will not seek revenge or confiscate the assets of regime insiders. Opposition movements should work hard to become viable interlocutors for those within the authoritarian regime who desire an exit strategy, while isolating those who remain intransigent. For example, the Brazilian reformer Fernando Henrique Cardoso's [8] core strategy was to induce elements of the military to reach out in search of an exit.

Incumbents who recognize the need to turn away from authoritarian rule, in turn, must find ways to maintain the support of their core constituencies while negotiating with opposition groups. The "bush retreats" de Klerk held with members of his cabinet in 1989 and 1990 are a model for this. At these talks, he built a secret consensus within his cabinet for the dramatic steps he would announce: legalizing the ANC, freeing Mandela and other political prisoners, and opening formal negotiations.

Direct contact between the opposition and the regime can take place secretly at first, if necessary, as was the case with the initial contacts between government officials and ANC representatives, which were held outside South Africa in the mid-1980s. Informal dialogues, such as the Round Table discussions in Poland, can help members of the regime and the democratic opposition understand each other, overcome stereotypes, and build working relationships. As de Klerk observed, "You cannot resolve a conflict without the parties involved talking to each other. . . . In order to succeed with negotiations, you have to put yourself in the other party's shoes. One must think through their case and determine . . . [the other party's] minimum requirements in order to ensure their cooperative, constructive participation in the negotiation process."

Throughout this process, reformers must exert pressure on the regime and take risks to achieve continuous progress, even if it is only gradual and incremental. They must be prepared to make compromises, even if these leave some vital aims only partially achieved and some important supporters frustrated. Dismissing maximalist positions often calls for more political courage than hewing to attractive but impractical principles. Transition-making is not a task for the dogmatic.

In Ghana, for instance, John Kufuor, the leader of the New Patriotic Party, rejected his party's boycott of the 1992 election, arguing that the party should participate in the 1996 election, even though it might lose. Kufuor's subsequent victory in the 2000 election led to a peaceful transfer of power through the ballot box, a pattern that has continued for 15 years. And in Mexico, Ernesto Zedillo, although a prominent member of the long-ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), supported incremental reforms [9] in electoral procedures negotiated with the opposition at a time when the PRI seemed unlikely, after seven decades in power, ever to cede control. Later, as president, he agreed to further changes regarding campaign finance and supported a reform to strengthen the electoral authorities that helped open the way, in 2000, for the unprecedented transfer of power from the PRI to the opposition.

The dangers that lie in a refusal to compromise were clear in the case of Egypt. During the Muslim Brotherhood's brief reign, the group insisted on an Islamist agenda as it drafted a new constitution, and this alienated large swaths of the population. In Chile, extreme leftist members of the opposition espoused "all forms of struggle," including violence, against the Pinochet regime. By 1986, a majority of the opposition movement understood that they could not unseat the dictatorship by force and that association with the extreme left tarnished the opposition. They turned instead to peaceful contestation and pledged to build a "homeland for all." This approach helped the opposition triumph over Augusto Pinochet in the 1988 plebiscite, an election that many in the opposition had initially wanted to boycott.

CIVILIANS AND SECURITY

Toppling an authoritarian regime is one thing; governing is quite another. Transition leaders often face pressure to clean house entirely and start anew, but they should resist: governing requires perspectives, personnel, and skills that are quite different from those needed for opposition. Once the opposition takes power, the most important step is to end violence and restore order while ensuring that all security forces act within the law. Our interviews provided fascinating accounts of the protracted challenges that civil-military relations pose. Reformers have to bring all the security services under democratic civilian control as soon as possible, at the same time as recognizing and respecting the legitimate roles of these services, providing them with sufficient resources, and protecting their leaders from sweeping reprisals for past repression.

To accomplish this, the police and the domestic intelligence services should be separated from the armed forces. Leaders should inculcate new attitudes among the police toward the general population by emphasizing the responsibility of the security forces to protect civilians rather than repress them, without reducing the forces' capacity to dismantle violent groups. Reformers should remove top officers responsible for torture and brutal repression, place senior military commanders under the direct authority of civilian ministers of defense, and insist that active-duty military officers refrain entirely from political involvement.

Such steps are easier to prescribe than to enact, and implementing them requires keen political judgment and courage. In some circumstances, they can be addressed early on; in others, they will take considerable time. But they should receive high priority from the start, as well as sustained vigilance. As Habibie explained, discussing civil-military relations in Indonesia, "Those who lead a transition . . . have to show, not by talking or writing, but by action, the importance of civilian control."

Senior civilian officials charged with overseeing security forces should be knowledgeable about security matters and respectful of their peers in the military, the police, and the intelligence

services. This can be difficult where democratic movements have clashed violently with the security services, where mutual distrust persists, and where there is little respect for civilian expertise in military affairs.

Transition leaders also have to balance the desire to hold the previous regime accountable with the need to preserve the discipline and morale of the security forces. They have to foster peaceful mutual acceptance among formerly bitter enemies—no easy matter. Only then will citizens begin to trust a state that many understandably have rejected as illegitimate and hostile, and only then will security forces cooperate fully with citizens they have previously regarded as subversive.

Subjecting the security services to civilian control is one of the most protracted challenges new democracies face. The continued supremacy [10] that the Egyptian military enjoys over any elected institution lies at the heart of Egypt's failed democratic transition. And in countries as diverse as Gambia, Myanmar, and Thailand, the absence of civilian authority over the security forces remains the most important obstacle to a successful democratic transition.

THE CONSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGE

Bringing the military under civilian control can help transition leaders inspire domestic trust and international legitimacy. So, too, can the development of electoral procedures that reflect the will of the majority and that reassure those who lose elections that their core concerns will be respected under the rule of law. In most countries, drafting a new constitution is essential, although Indonesia retained its 1945 constitution with some altered provisions and Poland did not adopt a full new constitution until several years after the end of communism.

A wide range of participants should be involved in drafting a constitution that addresses the central concerns of key sectors, even when this means accepting, at least temporarily, procedures that restrict democracy. Consider the biased electoral systems maintained in Chile [11] for 25 years after the end of the Pinochet regime to placate the military and conservative groups and the granting of the post of deputy president to the opposition leader in South Africa. Building broad support for a new constitution may also require incorporating lofty aspirations that need to be scaled back later or else implemented gradually, such as the ambitious socioeconomic provisions of Brazil's 1988 constitution, which called for expansive labor rights, agrarian reform, and universal health care.

Although the exact wording of a constitution matters, it may matter more how, when, and by whom the constitution is adopted. Its framers must achieve broad buy-in and **make sure that it is neither too easy nor practically impossible to amend the constitution when conditions warrant.** Many criticized Aylwin's formulation that the truth commission in Chile could provide justice only "as far as possible" but what was possible expanded over the years. The key aim should be to establish broad acceptance of the basic rules of democratic engagement. As Thabo Mbeki [12], South Africa's second postapartheid president, observed, "It was important that the constitution be owned by the people of South Africa as a whole and therefore that the process of drawing up the constitution be inclusive."

The process must include supporters of the former regime, who will need assurances that their rights will be respected under the rule of law. The wholesale prosecution of former officials is unwise. The new leaders should instead establish transparent legal processes to seek the truth about past abuses, provide recognition and perhaps reparation to victims, and, when feasible,

bring major culprits to justice. Although full reconciliation may be impossible, mutual tolerance is an essential goal. Compromises, once again, are vital.

BALANCING ACTS

As democratic transitions take hold, the public often blames democratic leaders and sometimes democracy itself for failing to meet economic or political expectations. **The new authorities typically inherit deep-rooted patterns of corruption and inefficiency.** Movements that united in opposing the authoritarian regime may fragment. Civil society organizations that contributed to anti-authoritarian opposition movements sometimes decay or adopt disruptive positions, especially after many of their most talented leaders enter government or party politics.

Building constructive relations between a new government and a new opposition is an ongoing challenge. Competition between a government and its opposition is healthy for democracy, but complete obstruction by the opposition or the suppression of all criticism by the government can quickly destroy it. An independent judiciary that holds the executive accountable without blocking too many new initiatives and free and responsible media can help entrench a sustainable democracy.

Political parties also play an important role, so long as they do not become merely the vehicles of particular individuals and their cronies. Well-organized and programmatic democratic parties provide the best way to engage people of all classes, mobilize effective pressure, organize sustainable support for policies, channel public demands, and identify and promote skilled leaders. The development of strong parties requires careful attention to procedures and safeguards regarding candidate selection, campaign finance, and access to the media. Continuing challenges to democratic governance in Ghana, Indonesia, and the Philippines are due in part to weak political parties.

Although transitions are usually triggered by political, rather than economic, causes, economic challenges soon become a priority for new governments. Reducing poverty and unemployment may conflict with the economic reforms needed to promote long-term growth and macroeconomic stability. Before strong popular support erodes, the government should implement social measures that mitigate the hardships endured by the most vulnerable, but it also needs to exercise fiscal responsibility. The leaders of all the transitions we studied adopted market-oriented approaches and prudent macroeconomic monetary and fiscal policies, but most did so cautiously to avoid fueling popular fears that public interests were being sold out to the privileged. Even those who were initially hostile to free markets accepted that markets were necessary in an increasingly globalized economy, alongside strong social policies that could produce more equitable economic development.

As the recent history of Western interventions in the Middle East amply demonstrates, democracy is not an export commodity. But external actors, governmental and nongovernmental, can effectively support democratic transitions if they respect local forces and become involved at their invitation. Sometimes, they can provide the conditions necessary for quiet dialogue among opposition leaders and between the opposition and representatives of the regime. They can offer advice on many practical issues, from how to conduct a campaign to how to make effective use of the media, and eventually how to monitor elections. Economic sanctions can help curb repression, as they did in Poland and South Africa. And foreign countries can offer aid and investment to support democratic transitions, as they did in Ghana, the Philippines, and Poland.

International economic assistance during a transition can provide room for political reform when delivered in response to local priorities and in cooperation with local actors.

International intervention cannot take the place of domestic initiatives, however. External actors are most likely to be effective when they listen, raise questions that arise from their experience of similar challenges, and encourage local participants to consider issues from various perspectives.

A CHANGING WORLD

New actors, technologies, economic pressures, and geopolitical dynamics have transformed the context in which today's democratic transitions will take place. Anyone with a mobile phone can now spark mass protests by recording police violence. Social media can rapidly reshape public opinion and allow organizers to assemble large numbers of followers. But these new technologies cannot substitute for the hard work of building institutions. As Cardoso, the Brazilian reformer turned president, observed, "The problem is that it is easy to mobilize to destroy but much more difficult to rebuild. The new technologies are not sufficient by themselves to take the next step forward. Institutions are needed, along with the capacity to understand, process, and exercise leadership that is sustained over time." As Kufuor put it: "The masses cannot construct institutions. That's why leadership is important."

In the years ahead, social movements and civil society organizations, enhanced by digital networking, will perhaps pressure autocratic regimes more often and more effectively than in the past. Yet these movements cannot replace political parties and leaders. It is these actors that must ultimately build institutions, construct electoral and governing coalitions, win public support, prepare and implement policies, elicit sacrifices for the common good, inspire people to believe that democracy is possible, and govern effectively.

It is hard to build functioning and sustainable democracies in countries where there is no recent experience of self-government, where social and civic organizations are fragile, and where weak state institutions are incapable of providing adequate services and security. Democracy may also be difficult to establish in countries with strong ethnic, sectarian, or regional divisions. And democratically elected governments can nonetheless rule autocratically by ignoring, weakening, or paying mere lip service to the legislative and judicial restraints that democratic governance requires. Yet it is precisely all these countries that need democratic change most urgently. The examples of Ghana, Indonesia, the Philippines, South Africa, and Spain show that these challenges can be met under many different conditions, even in profoundly divided countries.

More educated young people than ever can be mobilized today to demonstrate in public squares for democracy, especially where employment is scarce. The challenge, however, is to engage them on an ongoing basis in constructing durable political parties and other institutions. Democracy does not emerge directly or inevitably from crowds in the street. Building democracies requires vision, negotiation and compromise, hard work, persistence, skill, leadership, and some luck. Despite all the obstacles, however, democratic transitions have succeeded in the past. Learning and applying the lessons of these successful experiences can help end autocracies and forge sustainable democracies in their place.

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