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The Crucial Role of Leaders in Democratic Transitions

Democratic Transitions: Conversations with World Leaders

Edited by Sergio Bitar & Abraham F. Lowenthal
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In sharp contrast with the democratic euphoria of the 1990s and early 2000s that was triggered by the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent rapid transitions towards democracy, we are now in a period of exaggerated democratic pessimism. Certainly, there have been disappointments and setbacks over the past decade—particularly the failed uprisings in all but one of the “Arab Spring” countries. Yet during the same period there also have been significant democratic breakthroughs, for example, in Ukraine, Sri Lanka and Myanmar. The net number of democracies in the world has in fact held essentially even.

The recent publication of *Democratic Transitions: Conversations with World Leaders* by Sergio Bitar and Abraham Lowenthal could not be more timely—nor more pertinent—to countering the facile assumption that we are now in an era of unstoppable democratic regression. As the authors point out, successful democratization involves a long, difficult and non-linear process. Thus, some of today’s pessimism and defeatism stems from earlier naive expectations as to how far and how fast the initial wave of post-communist liberalization could be expected to carry. The 1990s were not, in fact, “The End of History.”

Authoritarian pushback and regression has received more attention recently than the success stories. But if one compares the present to the mid-2000s using the most credible measures, the balance between democracy and authoritarianism is essentially stable or at worst marginally negative. However, it is nevertheless true that we are currently witnessing a much more intense clash between the democratic ideals professed by the U.S. and its allies and the advocates of a newly assertive “illiberal nationalism.” Autocrats around the world have found new guises and story lines, along with new methods of maintaining their own autocratic rule. We are currently in a period of standoff. The story of Samuel Huntington’s “Third

Wave” of democratization is not yet complete. It is, thus, important to gain an accurate understanding of the issues surrounding these attempted transformations.

In *Democratic Transitions*, Bitar and Lowenthal have documented masterfully the immense change required for a successful transition from entrenched authoritarianism to consolidated democracy. They demonstrate that, even in the most propitious of cases, the process is long and difficult. It involves strategic patience, prolonged negotiations and courageous action. This volume provides detailed accounts of the adversities and challenges encountered by key transitional leaders from nine pivotal countries. These case studies serve to underline the fact that short-term pessimism can often be misguided, and that success requires a persistent vision, a long-term strategy, and skillful, patient leadership. Even where circumstances have seemed highly discouraging in the past, these traits have ultimately led to successful democratic consolidation.

Independent of the pessimism/optimism debate, however, *Democratic Transitions* represents a major contribution to the literature of comparative political transitions. This volume is invaluable partly because of its unusual approach. The authors focus on leaders from nine carefully chosen countries, in four major regions of the world, who have helped to lead exemplary democratic transitions. The centerpiece of each of these case studies is an interview with one or two of the key leaders who consolidated their country’s democracy. These interviews are prefaced in each case by a concise but expert history of that country’s transformation, with particular attention to the seemingly daunting challenges that they faced. This approach gives the reader a full sense of the complex “warp and woof” of each individual transition. At the same time, it throws light on some of the recurring themes and processes, which are similar across the case studies, despite the wide range of cultures and institutions involved.

Bitar and Lowenthal have chosen their country case studies judiciously. For Latin America, the authors focus on Brazil, Chile and Mexico, thus providing two examples of entrenched military dictatorship, and one of long-institutionalized single party rule. In Europe, they examine Spain and Poland, comparing the decline of a right-wing, personalistic dictatorship supported by the military and the conservative Catholic church hierarchy with a classic Soviet-backed communist regime, in this case opposed by the Catholic church.

For Africa, the authors explore the case of South Africa, one of the largest and most influential countries on the continent, and one with powerful racial divides. They contrast South Africa with Ghana, a smaller, more homogeneous country, and one of the most British-influenced in the sub-Saharan region. In Southeast Asia, the authors choose Indonesia, the world’s largest Muslim nation, long dominated by the military. And, in the Philippines, Bitar and Lowenthal study a predominantly Catholic country with deep ties to the United States.

The names of the leaders that Bitar and Lowenthal interviewed will long be remembered in the annals of democratization: Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Ernesto Zedillo, Patricio Aylwin and Ricardo Lagos; John Kufuor and Jerry Rawlings, F. W. de Klerk and Thabo Mbeki; B. J. Habibie; Fidel Ramos; Felipe Gonzalez; and Tadeusz Mazowiecki and Aleksander Kwasniewski.

In contrast with much of the political science and policy advocacy literature, this book places great emphasis on the role of individual leaders. It examines their countries' transitions from their own personal perspective. Furthermore, the authors treat these leaders not as "ideal-type" heroes, but as real individuals who must persuade, cajole, compromise and take large risks. They all struggled to assemble very disparate coalitions in order to create stability, prosperity and effective governance after the inevitable fading of the initial revolutionary euphoria that brought them to power.

Although the 13 leaders interviewed for the book came from a wide variety of backgrounds, they share many essential traits: a strategic sense of direction; an ability to capture the mood of their citizens; a spirit of inclusiveness and coalition-building; resolution and courage; patience and persistence; the self-confidence needed to make difficult decisions; the ability to attract and retain competent associates; skill in communicating with competing elites and with the broader public; the ability to attract external support without becoming foreign instruments; and, crucially, the ability to adjust rapidly to unexpected developments while still maintaining the initiative.

In the end, this focus on individuals is a useful corrective to a field that at times is overly focused on structures rather than on decisions. The authors end this section by quoting the eminent Samuel Huntington's observation that "A democratic regime is installed not by trends, but by people. Democracies are created not by causes but by causers." The case studies bear this out.

However, this book is about much more than just leaders. It is about the whole process of transition, starting from well before the fall of the authoritarian regime and its replacement by a reform movement. One of its virtues is the close attention it pays to understanding the nature of the prior authoritarian regime, and the importance for reformist leaders of laying the proper groundwork before its demise. The authors correctly stress the need for these leaders to reach out to key individuals in the old regime, and to win over the military and other security services which had previously defended it. While there is room for some retributive justice against the most blatant criminals of the old regime, the new democratic leaders inevitably need to retain a majority of the inherited governmental cadres and security personnel if they are to deliver effective governance, let alone avoid a counter-coup. Striking that balance is one of the greatest challenges that new leaders face.

In their concluding chapter, "Learning from Political Leaders to Shape the Future," Lowenthal and Bitar draw not only upon their interviews and their case studies, but clearly also upon their own rich personal experience. Although they convey their personal conclusions with modesty and understatement, this chapter provides an excellent overview of what it takes to accomplish a successful transition and, thus, of the most important lessons that future reform leaders can learn from past experience.

Space permits a mention of just a few highlights of their rich conclusions. Most successful transitions involve extended processes rather than single dramatic events. Once they begin they proceed at different speeds, with advances and retreats, and often with zigzags. Most take many years to reach maturity and full

institutional consolidation. They are helped by the prior existence of professionalized security services and of political parties; of constitutional, legal and moral norms; and of civil society organizations. Also important are tacit or explicit negotiations between the emerging opposition and the upper ranks of the authoritarian regime.

Our authors also describe the limited but important role that external actors can play. Although domestic factors and processes are essential for successful transitions, external factors matter, too. These include the broad international context as well as specific external players. Linkage to established democracies and integration into the global economy are among the important positive factors. Support from other countries and from international organizations can also help legitimize new democratic leaders. The authors conclude that “Although international actors alone were not decisive, [...] in virtually all these cases international reinforcement of (and interactions with) local actors and the withdrawal of external support from the authoritarian regime were important.”

In sum, *Democratic Transitions* is a balanced, thoughtful, empirically-based volume that adds an important dimension to our understanding of both the theoretical and the policy issues surrounding the spread of democracy abroad. It is a major addition to the literature on post-authoritarian transitions and on the “how-to” of consolidating democracy after dictatorship. In an era of undue pessimism about the fate of democracy worldwide, it is a timely reminder of how democratic transitions can be made to work.

