

AMBIDEXTROUS DEMOCRATIZATION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR MENA

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Democratization is an ambidextrous process. On the one hand -- let us say, the left one -- it triggers a universalistic set of events, processes and symbols. Citizens acquire human rights and civic freedoms they did not have before. Access to different sources of information proliferates. Political parties are allowed to form and to compete openly with each other. Elections are held whose outcome is uncertain and they continue to be held regularly. Voters freely go to the polls and their votes are counted fairly. Winners are declared and allowed to occupy seats in parliament or positions of executive office. Constitutions are revised or drafted anew and ratified. If successful, the transformation in regime results in the country's acquiring a new and exalted status by being admitted to the international club of 'real-existing' democracies (REDs).

On the right hand, democratization involves a much more particularistic set of 'realistic' adaptations to the circumstances of individual countries. These are typically pragmatic adjustments or negotiated compromises to be found in the implementation of the above set of prominent events, processes and symbols. The rights and freedoms that citizens acquire may be formally identical, but social,

economic and cultural barriers prevent citizens from accessing them effectively, least of all equally. Constitutions usually contain special guarantees for privileged groups, particularly propertied ones, and assured status for powerful institutions, especially military forces, state religions, civil services and para-state corporations that protect them from the uncertain outcomes of legislative elections and rotation in executive power. Elections may seem competitive, but incumbents often have access to state resources and control over the media that ensure their victory. Voters may be free from coercion in going to the polls and the tabulating of their votes may be accurate, while the constituencies within which they are grouped may systematically benefit some at the expense of others. Winners, even opposition ones, may be allowed to take their seats, but in parliaments that have little or no effective power either to initiate or to modify legislation. Executives, whether elected directly or indirectly by parliaments, may be empowered to rule by decree during “emergency conditions.” And, finally, the criteria for membership in that club of REDs (and the benefits in terms of regional or global, material or symbolic rewards) are fuzzy and easy to ignore when it is to the advantage of existing members. So-called ‘hybrid regimes’ have managed to make it into even the most select regional club of REDs: the European Union.

Summarizing greatly, three ‘right-hand’ factors seem to be at work behind the imposition or negotiation of those realistic compromises that distort what democracy’s left-hand is trying to achieve: first, **patterns of internal social cleavage**, especially with regard to cultural, religious or linguistic groups with intense preferences and fears of being displaced by sheer numbers; second, the **imperatives of a capitalist system of production and distribution** that controls the resources for the viability of the national state and for the satisfaction of the

demands of private workers and consumers; and third, **the security threats and alliance constraints** emanating from the international context within which democratization is occurring. A few fortunate cases may ignore some of these factors. Their populations may be exceptionally homogenous in cultural, religious or linguistic terms. They may even be devoid of potential aggressors on their borders or in their region. But no contemporary democratization can avoid compromising with capitalism and, what is more, its imperatives are becoming more and more constraining with the globalization of financial flows and production systems. Shadowy actors with no accountability, except to their equally shadowy shareholders, can take decisions that nullify those of even the most democratic governments and that deprive citizens of their expected benefits – and these financial ratings and flows are backed up by powerful international and regional organizations.

My previous work on democratization has been resolutely “left-handed.” I have focused attention on those events, processes and symbols that all transitions to democracy have in common – at least since the mid-1970s. I (with Terry Karl) have gone out of my way to reject the notion, usually advanced by country or area specialists, that because of differences in culture, geographic location, previous type of autocracy, or level of development the outcome was pre-destined to be different.¹ Seen from this possibilistic and universalistic perspective, there are no pre-requisites for democracy – just varying degrees of difficulty. It was possible for any country to make the switch from some form of autocracy to some form of democracy – which was not to say that it was equally likely. No one who studies this process could deny that there were many factors that contributed to making such a successful outcome easier and more probable: a more prosperous and developed economy, a higher

rate of economic growth, a more equitable distribution of income and wealth, a more ethnically and religiously homogeneous society, a colonization by a more benevolent European or American power, a lesser dependence on petroleum or natural gas -- not to mention other potentially lootable natural resources, a history of previous attempts at democratization, an absence of civil war or threatening neighbors, a relative short period of previous autocracy – the list could be (and has been) extended almost infinitely.ⁱⁱ

By placing an emphasis on the combination of uncertainty and agency that defines the transition process and its ‘abnormal’ politics, these previous pre-requisites became facilitating factors that could be overcome by what Machiavelli called “virtù” – the capacity of an individual political actor (or, today, an organized group of political actors, a party for example) to assess the rapidly changing situation, see the opportunities for creative responses, and to come up with a set of ‘right-handed’ rules and practices that accommodated to the specifics of a given polity – while respecting the three generic principles of democracy, namely, political equality or citizenship, participation in collective action and accountability of rulers.ⁱⁱⁱ One complicating but indispensable element in modern REDs is that all of this was tied together by an intervening process called representation. Citizens rarely act directly; they usually depend on the indirect intervention of elected (or, in many instances, non-elected) representatives.^{iv} In other words, contemporary democracy is not “rule by the people” as its etymology suggests, but “rule by politicians and experts” claiming to act “for the people.”

In this essay, I will switch to a ‘right-handed’ perspective. My self-assigned task is to examine the peculiarities of a specific subset of countries as some of them have begun to experiment with democracy, in each case after a lengthy period of

autocracy. This subset consists of the Arab-Muslim countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Unfortunately, my right-hand is severely handicapped by the fact that I am not a specialist on this region; indeed, I am not even sure where it begins and ends. Which means that I cannot even “fondle,” much less examine carefully, the ‘usual suspects’ that have been invoked to explain the region’s resistance to democratization:

- (1) The fact that Islam as a religion does not distinguish between itself and the state and that, recently, it has bred a form of political opposition that is hostile to the practices of ‘real-existing’ democracy.
- (2) The fact that Arab culture is rooted in hierarchic and patriarchal family relations and that this breeds fatalism and submissiveness to authority and undermines individual self-confidence and initiative.
- (3) The fact that Arab societies are rooted in tribal affiliations and, hence, resilient to the formation of political parties, interest associations and social movements that cut across these primary loyalties.
- (4) The fact that the middle class in these societies is unusually dependent upon the state for employment and, hence, unlikely to risk entering into open conflict with existing public authorities.
- (5) The fact that virtually all of the countries in the region have suffered from internal (civil) or external (international) wars and, hence, have an unusually great dependence upon their respective militaries.

- (6) The fact that most MENA countries are highly dependent upon exports of petroleum and natural gas and, hence, the rulers of these rentier states have a strong financial capacity for co-opting citizen dissent.

To an outsider, all of these hypotheses have some plausibility. The MENA countries do seem to form an unusually coherent world region with their common language and religion, not to mention geographic propinquity and roughly similar colonial experiences. Academics and policy-makers tend to treat them as if they were some sort of a socio-cultural unit and, therefore, expected to react similarly to the same stimuli and to learn quickly from each other's experiences. Yet the closer one examines these alleged communalities, the more they dissolve into disparities and differences. Moreover, all of the usual suspects are static in nature which seems to negate the impact of socio-economic and cultural changes – some of which could very well have substantial political implications, including the promotion of aspirations for democracy.

My 'right-handedness' is, therefore, confined to a set of speculative observations that seem (to me) to describe significant differences between late-democratizing efforts in MENA and earlier ones in Southern Europe, Latin America and Eastern Europe in terms of their 'external' setting. The simple fact that they began later, in a more globalized capitalism and a different moment of its business cycle, and in a different geo-strategic location seems to have considerable significance with regard to their likely outcome. To put it bluntly, these elements of change suggest that their successful democratization will probably be more difficult – but, I hasten to add, not impossible.

1. Today, democracy is less appealing to mass publics because it is less closely associated with a protracted period of economic prosperity, job security, greater social equality and enhanced risk protection. Those who were caught in the wave that began in 1974 and that was given additional momentum in 1989 could confidently expect that – after paying some transformation costs – they would end up being not only freer but richer. The “*Trentes Glorieuses*” as the French called them – the thirty years after the end of the Second World War -- and the social contract that produced them have ended. Since the 1980s, not only have growth rates fallen, but social and economic inequality has risen dramatically in most countries of Western Europe and North America. Neo-liberal policies of privatization, deregulation and de-taxation have severed the nexus linking marginalized national citizens from increasingly powerful and trans-nationalized producers. The welfare state that tied together democracy and capitalism is being “re-negotiated” and “down-sized” and the promise of full employment has been reneged upon, even by leftist parties. Embarrassingly, the close association between regime type and superior economic performance has switched to autocratic technocracy and state capitalism – with China as the leading exemplar
2. Something also happened to one of the core institutions of all REDs: political parties. Historically, the formula for successful democratization was: “Get the Parties Right!” They would emerge with the convocation of credible competitive elections to nominate candidates, produce programs, conduct campaigns, fill legislative and executive positions and form governments. Once they had accomplished this, the citizens were expected to accept the limited policy alternatives they offered and settle reliably into the identities

they proffered from one election to another. Already in well-established Western democracies by the 1980s, citizens were less likely to become members of parties or even to identify regularly with them. Their participation in elections began to decline and so did their trust in party politicians. The early democratizers in Southern Europe and some of those in Latin America had relatively well-established parties that had survived and struggled against autocracy so they continued to play a key role in the consolidation process, but in Eastern Europe this was not the case and the best that most parties could do was to adopt Western labels and symbols. The resulting party systems have been an enduring source of problems, not a solution to them. What then can one expect of political parties in the present MENA context where the historical legacy is even less favorable?

3. The technology of politics has been changing rapidly. The importance of personal, face-to-face communication has been declining for some time in REDs, replaced by reliance upon mass media, first radio and later television. In the initial transitions from capitalist autocracies where the media were largely in private (and often very concentrated) ownership, the main effect was to privilege conservative parties, but not to the extent that it became problematic. In the former socialist autocracies with their state media monopolies, however, their ownership and regulation became one of the most contentious issues during the transition. Democracy in MENA is emerging in a quite different media context, namely, that of the new information and communication technologies (ICT). What this has done is to undermine the saliency or both private ownership and state regulation and to replace it with forms of political communication that are highly dispersed, difficult to control

and especially available to young people. The net effect seems to be to enhance the possibility of rebellion through the capacity to assemble large numbers of participants in a short time and to do so in a way that makes police repression much more difficult. The problem is the ephemeral and fragmenting nature of these facilitated collective responses – and the consequent difficulty in transforming them into formal organizations capable of elaborating a common strategy and committing their followers to follow it. Democracy – at least as we have known it – requires real not virtual communication and organization among citizens – whether in political parties, interest association or social movements.

4. On paper MENA looks like a region, certainly more so than Europe or Latin America. And we know that democratization does benefit from a ‘neighborhood effect.’ Diffusion of its ideas and models seems especially intense among countries that are near to each other and share common linguistic, ethnic and/or religious traits. What MENA does not have are viable and attractive regional organizations capable of ensuring the existence of a security community, exercising political conditionality and rewarding conformity to it. The fact that the combination of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union did offer such features to the nascent democracies in Southern and then Eastern Europe was of considerable importance in explaining their relatively rapid and successful transitions. By insisting that all candidates for membership had resolved their (many) outstanding conflicts with bordering states and that all their governments were democratic, respectful of human rights and the rule of law and capable of administering their treaty obligations (the so-called

Copenhagen Criteria), the latter post-communist group was effectively guided through their respective transitions. It should be noted, however, that the combination was not sufficient to prevent the violent conflicts that ensued from the breakdown of the Yugoslav Federation – and the resulting polities in Bosnia and Kosovo remain in political limbo. In the case of Latin America, the regional organizations were much weaker (and under the hegemony of an extra-regional power, the United States), but they did intervene to positive effect when crises occurred in Paraguay, Peru, Guatemala and, much less effectively, Honduras. MENA has, of course, the League of Arab States (and much less relevantly, the African Union), but neither have the material capacity or the political unity to intervene in order to promote or to protect democracy.^v

5. MENA countries, with good reason, are much more suspicious of the motives of Western powers (especially, the United States) when these countries offer or attempt to meddle in their respective regime transformations. In Southern Europe and Latin America, outside intervention was relatively unimportant, but it was tolerated and did not generate much internal conflict.^{vi} In Eastern Europe and among the Baltic Republics of the former Soviet Union it was welcomed with open arms. Virtually all political forces openly declared their desire to imitate Western democratic practices. Indeed, when combined with the anticipation of economic prosperity, the desire to become 'normal' European polities was a major determinant of actor motivation during the transition. The result was a literal invasion by US and European national aid agencies, foreign NGOs and regional IGOs – first and foremost the European Union, but also the Council of Europe and its Venice Commission. Whole

chunks of new legislation were copied verbatim from foreign texts; many associations and movements were funded almost entirely out of foreign funds; outside advisors played a key role in the conduct of electoral campaigns. As far as I can judge, very few actors in MENA are so strongly motivated to imitate Western political practices. They are certainly less admiring of them and more wary of the motives hidden behind those who proffer them as models. What seemed to be appealing to the demonstrators were freedom and dignity, rather than democracy and voting. When it came to the founding elections, voters seem to have preferred security and respect for traditional values – at least in the Egyptian case. Whether this will eventuate in the search for some alternative model for an authentically Arab-Muslim democracy is not yet clear, but – if so – the effort to reach agreement on its content will certainly serve to prolong the transition period.

6. One of the peculiarities of the post-1974 democratizations was the greater frequency of what Terry Karl and I have called ‘imposed’ or ‘pacted’ transitions.^{vii} Historically, the usual modes for achieving regime transformations were either ‘reform’ (relatively peaceful popular mobilizations by outsiders) or ‘revolutions’ (violent overthrow by mass insurrection). In short, efforts at democratization from below seemed to be giving way to efforts from above – either from within the incumbent autocracy due to intra-elite factionalism or by negotiation between ‘soft-liners’ with the *ancien régime* and moderates within the democratic opposition. With a few exceptions – Peru in Latin America, but South Korea and the Philippines in Asia, Czechoslovakia in Eastern Europe, South Africa in Sub-Saharan Africa – mobilization from below tended to occur **after** not before a transition had

begun. Granted that in virtually no case was there a complete absence of mass popular acclaim for democracy, but it was usually sporadic or ineffectual and the actual transition really began when elites – incumbents with or without challengers – decided to initiate it, admittedly, often in fear of greater future mobilization from below. In retrospect the shift in mode seems reasonable. For one thing, incumbent autocrats had become more capable of physically suppressing revolutionary threats or even of diverting reformist challenges. What they could not prevent was factionalism within their ranks – especially in situations involving an impending succession to the highest position of executive power. Usually one faction takes the initiative to impose a (carefully controlled) change in regime or to enter into a (cautious and contingent) negotiation with moderate elements in the opposition. What seemed to promote this solution was a growing awareness among conservative supporters of autocracy that democratization in the contemporary context was not as great a threat to their property, privileges or capacity to compete politically as they had thought. Transitions in MENA seem to have reverted to the previous modes of transition. Either it takes mass mobilization by those excluded from the *ancient régime* to which a ruling faction responds by deposing the former leader and introducing substantial reforms while preserving their own positions of power (*vide* Tunisia, Egypt and, perhaps, Yemen) or the mobilization from below is resisted violently by the *ancient régime*, but this proves ineffectual and the former rulers are defeated and replaced by a new elite (Libya and, perhaps, Syria). Our hypothesis was that the ‘reform’ and ‘revolutionary’ modes were less likely to result in an consolidated democracy in the near future.

A Sort of Conclusion

Area and country specialists have been discussing for some time the six 'usual suspects' that were supposed to have been impeding the democratization of MENA. The events that began in Tunisia and have spread (unevenly) throughout the region have perhaps given them some reason to doubt their validity or at least led them to paying more attention to how these alleged constants have become more variable in recent decades. As a non-specialist, I have nothing to contribute to this discussion.

What have interested me in this essay have been the more conjunctural, rather than structural or cultural, suspects that seem (to me) likely to play a markedly different role than in those previous attempts at transition to democracy that I have studied. One could model these features of timing and contingency as variables intervening between the region's suspected structural and cultural constants and the eventual outcome. I hesitate to claim that they will turn out to be more important, but I do believe that they should be taken into consideration in a more comprehensive analysis of MENA's transitional politics.

Unfortunately, all six of them point in the direction of a less favorable outcome and, hence, an even greater role for 'right-handed' politicians in coming up with the inevitable compromises and hybrid solutions that transform the basic principles of 'ideal non-existing democracy' into 'real-existing democracy' at a specific time and place. I hasten to re-assert the basic principle of possibilism: there are no insuperable pre-requisites for democracy, there are only facilitating and impeding factors. Any polity can become democratic, but for some it will take more *virtù* than for others.

ⁱ This issue emerged in an especially polemic fashion with the wave of democratization that began in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union in 1989. For a debate on this issue, see "The Conceptual Travels of Transitologists and Consolidologists: How Far East Should They Attempt to Go?" (with Philippe Schmitter), Slavic Review 53, no. 1, (Spring 1994), and "From an Iron Curtain of Coercion to a Paper Curtain of Concepts: Grounding Transitologists or Confining Students of Postcommunism?" (with Philippe Schmitter), Slavic Review 54, no.4 (Winter 1995), as well as Valerie Bunce, "Comparative Democratization: Big and Bounded Generalizations, *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 33, No 6-7 (August-September, 2000), 703—34.

ⁱⁱ Which is why so many scholars believed sincerely that viable liberal democracy was a regime only suitable for a very small and privileged subset of countries – about twenty as of 1960 according to Robert Dahl. Polyarchy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960).

ⁱⁱⁱ In the contemporary political science literature, this is often labelled as "leadership," which in my view has a much more encompassing meaning and implies a reciprocal relation with "followership." *Virtù* is more specifically political (and occasionally not democratic as such) and can be exercised without the consent of others. Even more misleading has been the concept of "charisma" as a transitional device to successful democratization. This type of leader has proven to be disastrous from the point of view of creating viable democratic institutions or practices.

^{iv} As I have argued elsewhere, this is the Achilles Heel that is threatening even the most established of REDs. "Diagnosing and Designing Democracy in Europe," in Sonai Alonso et al., The Future of Representative Democracy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 191-211.

^v The present active role that the Arab League has taken with regard to the Syrian crisis is unprecedented and, so far, ineffectual. In the case of Libya, it provided some symbolic support for the intervention of an extra-regional organization, NATO.

^{vi} An exception was the role played by foreign communist parties in the first year of the chaotic Portuguese revolution which was controversial within its emerging party system. However, it was relatively modest and proved to be very ephemeral in nature. Much more important (and less visible) was the intervention of the German party foundations: Adenauer, Ebert and Naumann.

^{vii} "Modes of Transition in Latin America, Southern and Eastern Europe", International Social Science Journal, No. 128 (May 1991), pp. 269-284.