



HYBRID REGIMES AND THE CHALLENGES OF DEEPENING AND SUSTAINING DEMOCRACY IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

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I. Understanding the ‘Third Wave’ of democratisation

A wave of democratisation (originating in Portugal and Spain in the 1970s) swept across the developing world in the 1980s and 1990s. This so-called ‘Third Wave’ (Huntington, 1991) moved across Latin America and Eastern Europe, and later Asia and Africa. The transformation in the nature of political regimes was remarkable: while in 1974 there were 41 democracies among the existing 150 states, by 2003, 121 of 193, or about three-fifths, of all the world’s states¹ were considered formal democracies (Diamond, 2006), however imperfect they might be.

The advent of the Third Wave of democratisation challenged many of the assumptions that scholars and policymakers alike had made about the relationship between democracy and development. In particular, the modernisation approach espoused in the mainstream literature of the 1960s and 1970s (Lipset, 1959; Almond and Verba, 1963; Moore, 1966) emphasised that democracy was more likely to emerge in countries with high(er) levels of socio-economic development.² Some studies also emphasised the importance of cultural and religious factors, and of historical legacies (i.e. previous experiences with democratisation). Such structuralist approaches to democratisation understood the emergence of democracy as a consequence of the transformation of class structure, the emergence of a bourgeoisie, economic development, increasing urbanisation, the prior development of democratic values, and other socio-economic factors.

While the modernisation argument provides an explanation for transition in South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand and Chile, many of the movements towards formal democracy from the 1980s onward took place in countries where such transformation

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¹ 121 of 193 according to Freedom House (<http://www.freedomhouse.org/>).

² Much of this literature was based on Lipset’s seminal work of 1959, where he highlighted one of the most enduring correlations in the social sciences: the relationship between high levels of economic development and democracy. However, correlation does not mean causation – a strong correlation between high levels of economic development and democracy does not necessarily mean that economic development causes democracy.

would not have been expected based on low levels of economic development and other socio-economic indicators. A large number of countries experiencing a transition to democracy during the Third Wave fell in the bottom third of the Human Development Index. Third Wave transitions also defied cultural arguments positing that democracy is incompatible with certain faiths and religious values.³ The only region that seems to remain relatively outside this wave of democratisation is the Arab World (Stepan with Roberston 2003).⁴ Thus, a broad consensus has emerged that economic development *per se* is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for democratic transition (see O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986 and Przeworski and Limongi, 1997 among others).

In response to the perceived limitations of modernisation theory, a budding literature has emerged since the 1980s that seeks to understand democratic transitions from a process-oriented approach.⁵ This literature emphasises the importance of decisions, ideas and the interaction among strategic domestic political actors in bringing about transitions in 'unlikely places', while acknowledging the importance of structural factors in shaping actor choices to varying degrees.⁶ The focus of this literature is on elite interactions. In some cases, however, widespread social mobilisation and (the threat of violent) protest from below were instrumental in bringing about democratic change. This was very visibly the case in both South Africa and the Phillipines, as well as more recently in Ukraine.

In addition, with limited exceptions (including Huntington 1991), this process-oriented model of democratisation tends to focus on internal dynamics almost exclusively. It thus has most relevance in the Eastern European and Latin American experiences, where democratisation transitions were driven mostly from within⁷. On the other hand, in Asia and especially in Africa (and possibly low-income and aid-dependent countries elsewhere), external actors played a much stronger role in these political transformations. In many cases, such as Kenya and Nigeria, these transitions were the result not only of the determination of national political actors, but also of

³ (Peaceful) transitions to democracy took place in countries evincing every major religious or philosophical tradition, including Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian and Muslim. For a critique of these cultural arguments, see Zakaria 1997.

⁴ Stepan (with Robertson) (2003) suggests that there are important differences between Arab and non-Arab Muslim countries and their democratic potential. The authors attribute the 'democracy gap' of Arab countries primarily to the political and socio-economic contexts — which include factors such as oil, the geo-politics of the region and the manipulation of the Arab-Israeli conflict, among others — and only to a lesser degree to anything inherent in Arab culture itself.

⁵ See especially O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986) as one of the founding academic studies of this agency or process-oriented approach.

⁶ A fundamental weakness of the earliest studies following a process-oriented approach is that their emphasis on contingent choice may lead to excessive voluntarism. By understating the role of structural incentives and constraints in its analysis, this literature tends to assume that actors are freewheeling agents independent of any political, economic, social and/or historical context. Yet, consideration of such structural determinants is crucial in explaining individual preferences, relative bargaining power and how interests may change over time. Since the 1990s, there has been an attempt to combine structural and agency-related factors in an attempt to provide a deeper and more balanced understanding of what drives democratic transition processes. Some of the most notable works using this combined approach include Haggard and Kaufman (1995), Rueschemeyer et al. (1992), Huntington (1991), and Bratton and van de Walle (1994).

⁷ But even in Eastern Europe (as well as the former Soviet Union) Gorbachev's policies and the end of the Cold War were key factors in triggering democratic transformation.

external pressures and incentives (for example, diplomatic pressure and the withholding of aid from repressive regimes).

II. Challenges to democratic deepening: The emergence of ‘hybrid’ regimes

Hybrid regimes

Despite the momentous transformation that the Third Wave has brought about to formal political structures in much of the developing world, it is essential to keep in mind that democratisation processes are not linear. In fact, only a limited number of countries that have undergone transitions to democracy have succeeded in establishing consolidated and functioning democratic regimes. Instead, many of these new regimes have ended up ‘getting stuck’ in transition, or reverting to more or less authoritarian forms of rule. These incipient democracies, which have been variously described as ‘illiberal’ (Zakaria, 1997), ‘delegative’ (O’Donnell, 1996) or, more generally, ‘hybrid’ regimes (Diamond, 2002),⁸ constitute ‘ambiguous systems that combine rhetorical acceptance of liberal democracy, the existence of some formal democratic institutions and respect for a limited sphere of civil and political liberties with essentially illiberal or even authoritarian traits’ (Ottaway, 2003). Thus, they have come to occupy a precarious middle ground between outright authoritarianism and fully-fledged democracy,⁹ and their democratic structures remain fragile (see Table 1).

Table 1: Classification of regimes in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, 1972 and 2005

	1972			2004		
	Autocracies	Hybrid regimes	Democracies	Autocracies	Hybrid regimes	Democracies
Sub-Saharan Africa	25	9	2	15	17	10
Latin America and Caribbean	4	9	7	2	8	10

Source: Freedom House (2007) ‘Country Ratings’ (<http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=15>).

Over the past few years, academics and policy-makers alike have focused increasing attention on the challenges and dilemmas that these ‘grey zone’ countries confront in regions across the globe.¹⁰ The wave of ‘democratic optimism’ in the 1990s associated with the global triumph of democracy and capitalism around the world – what Francis Fukuyama (1992) enthusiastically described as ‘the end of history’ – has now given way to more sober appraisals about the current health of democratic

⁸ It is important to note that ‘hybrid regimes’ are not the same as what donors have increasingly come to call ‘fragile states’. For an analysis of what ‘fragile states’ mean to different donors and a discussion of different approaches to provide assistance to such states, see Cammack et al., 2006.

⁹ According to Carothers (2002: 9), ‘[o]f the nearly 100 countries considered as “transitional” in recent years, only a relatively small number – probably fewer than 20 – are clearly en route to becoming successful, well-functioning democracies or at least have made some democratic progress. The leaders of the group are found primarily in Central Europe and the Baltic region ... though there are a few in South America, ... Asia [and Africa].’

¹⁰ Some of the most significant analyses in this growing literature include Diamond (2002), Carothers (2002), Gyimah-Boadi (2001), Linz and Stepan (1996), O’Donnell (1996a), Ottaway (2003), Zakaria (1997) and Schedler, ed. (2006).

systems in the developing world. There is growing recognition that the holding of elections alone does not offer a cure for the deeper political and social problems besetting states in many developing countries. In particular, the inability of many of these new democracies to meet the demands and basic needs of its citizens, including the promotion of economic development, has led to critical questions about their nature, quality, efficiency and sustainability over time.

On the other hand, it is also important to recognise that there is considerable variation in terms of democratic developments within democracies in the developing world, especially those that emerged during the Third Wave. While the general tendency has been toward some kind of hybridisation of democratic structures and institutions, some incipient democracies may be moving (however slowly) in the direction of consolidation as formal rules gradually begin to displace informal ones not only in rhetoric but also in practice, while others may be slipping towards more authoritarian and personality-driven practices. In Latin America, for instance, there is a considerable difference between the quality of democratic politics in places like Bolivia and Ecuador, where formal institutional processes seem to fall short in terms of substance, representation and effectiveness, and Argentina and Brazil, where despite considerable ups and downs and abrupt and unexpected changes, progress towards more formalised democratic institutions is definitely moving forward. In the African region, democratic deepening in general has thus far remained more limited. Still, countries like Ghana and Mozambique seem to be much more firmly positioned than others like Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda, or Zambia to address some of the challenges besetting their incipient democratic structures. Other countries, like Malawi and Ethiopia, may be moving even further down the route of (formal) institutional deterioration towards a situation of political meltdown.

Challenges to democratic deepening

While, as noted above, the most recent literature on transitions to democracy emphasises that there are very few preconditions for the emergence of democracy, analysts seem to be reaching a consensus that structural factors – such as underlying economic, social, and institutional conditions and legacies – may have a considerable impact on the prospects of democratic consolidation. Above all, democratic consolidation requires the evolution of a democratic political culture where all the main political players (both in the elite and the mass public), parties, organised interests, forces and institutions view and accept democracy as ‘the only game in town’. This, in essence, is the main concept embedded in Adam Przeworski’s (1991) definition of democracy as ‘institutionalised uncertainty’: in a democracy, all outcomes are unknown and are open to contest among key players (e.g. who will win an electoral contest, what policies will be enacted, etc.) – the only certainty is that such outcomes will be determined within the framework of pre-established democratic rules. In other words, the democratic process needs to be viewed as the only legitimate means to gain power and to channel/process demands. Admittedly, the building and strengthening of such a democratic political culture is bound to take a long time, and this is the main challenge hybrid regimes are facing today.

Because, for the most part, a broad consensus among both the elites and the mass public to uphold democracy as the only viable system of rule is lacking, hybrid regimes tend to be particularly unstable (Levitsky and Way, 2005). Commitment to the rules of the game is at best ‘instrumental’ (i.e. based on performance) and not

‘principled’ (i.e. based on political attributes) (Whitehead, 2002). In the particular case of Africa, analysing public opinion data in several countries in the region, Michael Bratton, Robert Mattes, and E. Gyimah-Boadi (2004) find that popular support for democracy is wide, but that it remains considerably shallow. As Bratton (2007) has put it, ‘people may be attached to the general *idea* of a democratic regime, but have limited knowledge or commitment to its specific component institutions’. According to Afrobarometer data, one out of three of those interviewed did not prefer democracy to any other form of government, a figure that seems considerably high.

In a much discussed quantitative analysis, Przeworski and Limongi (1997) find that, while there is no minimal level of economic development (measured in terms of per capita income) that is necessary for a country to be able to make a transition to democracy, economic development has a very important impact on the *sustainability* of democratic systems. Looking at cross-regional data from 1950 to 1990 on a wide variety of well-performing and poor-performing democracies, the authors find that the less successful democratic regimes are in generating economic growth, the more likely they are to break down. The fact that, contrary to what Przeworski and Limongi would have predicted, there have been few full-fledged, formal reversals to authoritarianism even among the poorest countries may offer some solace. This may be due in part to the fact that, given the current international discourse in favour of democracy (at least formally), outright authoritarian ‘solutions’ to domestic problems are a lot less likely to be tolerated.¹¹ But it remains true in any case that democracies that have failed to produce developmental outcomes remain much more fragile and unstable – again because commitment to them is instrumental and not principled. Thus, expectations for these incipient democracies to deliver tend to be rather high and unrealistic, which adds to the considerable strain they are often under.

III. Characteristics of hybrid regimes

While as highlighted above there is considerable variation among hybrid regimes,¹² some general traits may be observed:¹³

Presidentialism and governmental accountability: These regimes tend to be characterised by populist politics, unaccountable ‘delegative’/strong-man leadership, and opaque decision-making processes. This kind of leadership has a long tradition in many parts of the developing world, including in particular Africa and Latin America, and it does not seem to be abetting with the advent of democratic politics. As van de Walle (2003:310) has noted in several African countries where party systems have emerged, ‘[r]egardless of constitutional arrangements...power is intensely personalized around the figure of the president...He is literally above the law, controls in many cases a large proportion of state finance without accountability, and delegates

¹¹ This is why many regimes are happy to go along paying lip service to democracy while still exerting authoritarian control. Nevertheless, the international community has turned a blind eye to formal authoritarian reversals in Bangladesh and Pakistan, perhaps because these countries are of strategic importance to other foreign policy, military, and other interests.

¹² For instance, Carothers (2002) makes a distinction between hybrid regimes characterised by ‘feckless populism’ (regimes where there is considerable pluralism and competitive electoral processes but where democracy remains shallow and troubled) and those characterised by ‘dominant-power politics’ (where there is some space for political competition but one grouping dominates the system so that there is little prospect for a real alternation of power).

¹³ The following discussion on hybrid regimes draws, in part, on Fritz and Rocha Menocal (2006).

remarkably little of his authority on important matters...Only the apex of the executive really matters'. Moreover, Michael Bratton (2007) has also highlighted that in many African countries, popular perceptions about democracy are still based in terms of whether individuals enjoy special access/ties to the incumbent president.

Levels of credibility and/or trust in formal (democratic) institutions: Trust in state institutions is essential for political stability and compliance with the law. However, despite considerable democratic advancements, especially in the area of elections, in hybrid regimes many formal institutions that are crucial to make democracy work suffer from a lack of credibility and/or trust. In an article on public opinion and democracy in Latin America, for example, Marta Lagos finds that, between 1996 and 2001, national legislatures and political parties have shown to be the institutions least trusted by the population, ranking well below the Church and, indeed, the armed forces. As highlighted by many of the electoral contests that took place in the region in 2005-2006, this lack of faith in political parties and congress seems to remain unabated (Rocha Menocal 2006). This state of affairs is particularly troubling if one considers that parties play a crucial role in nurturing and sustaining democratic governance: if the health of the party system in a particular country deteriorates, so will the quality of its democracy. In the case of Africa, for his part, Michael Bratton finds (2007) that the supply of many key formal institutions of the state fail to meet popular demands. On the positive side, there is growing evidence that regular elections are becoming routinised and institutionalised features of political life. Yet many people seem to harbour doubts that elections can actually result in the alternations of power.¹⁴ In addition, public support for other formal institutions of democracy – such as multiple parties and legislative and judicial independence – continues to lag considerably behind. African parties are weakly institutionalised and characterised by poor organisational capacity. They often lack a structure that can penetrate the national territory, have dormant organisations between elections and few, if any, organisational resources (Rakner and Svåsand, 2004). Institutions that are meant to check the executive are widely perceived as performing below par.

Political participation: In general, shallow political participation outside elections and weak governmental accountability lead to a sense of collective public frustration about what democracy can deliver and what can be achieved through formal political institutions. Because there is a widespread feeling that key institutions, such as political parties and the judiciary, cannot be trusted or are not adequately representative, political participation often takes place outside formal institutional channels. This leads to the further de-institutionalisation of fragile democratic structures (Bolivia in particular comes to mind). In addition, civil society organisations and media critical to the incumbent government often find themselves harassed or otherwise victimised by government sanctions.

Rules of the game: As Goran Hyden (2006) has noted in the case of Africa and O'Donnell (1996) has argued in the case of Latin America, in these types of regimes the rules of the game are contested, with formal and informal institutions coexisting in ways that are often not complementary. Formal institutions are often perceived as biased/unfair, and therefore cannot secure compliance (Uslaner 2007). Informal

¹⁴ Indeed, of the 92 presidential elections conducted within the continent between 1990 and 2004, only 13 featured an electoral turnover (van de Walle, 2006).

practices (including presidentialism, clientelism, and corruption) persist and often take precedence. In short, there is no ‘institutionalised uncertainty’ as defined by Przeworski (1991). The rule of law, which is intended to establish formal rules and regulations *a priori* to order political interactions and make politics more transparent and predictable, is, at best, applied unevenly. This means that the equality of citizens before the law cannot be guaranteed. As above, all of these practices and dynamics lead to the ongoing deterioration of (already weak) formal democratic structures. On the other hand, as Gretchen Helmke and Steven Levitsky (2006) have shown, it is important to recognise that informal institutions may cut both ways for democracy in terms of having both positive as well as negative impacts. Clearly, practices like corruption or the selective application of justice undermine trust in formal institutions. But where formal institutions remain weak, personalised ties may be essential in providing legitimacy for fragile democratic structures (Bratton 2007).

Corruption and clientelism: As has been noted, hybrid regimes are driven by personalised interests, and public officials often act to further their own gains without much concern about a broader sense of the public good. The result is often the persistence of clientelistic structures and high levels of corruption, especially when citizens have few means of holding elites to account beyond elections. Nigeria and Kenya offer stark examples of such endemic problems related to corruption and to patron-client networks (Uslaner 2007). Elections themselves can be a source of corruption, since campaigning is expensive, and politicians often seek to raise funds or win votes in various illicit ways (e.g. through government-controlled procurement processes) (Whitehead, 2002). The civil service often continues to suffer from a mix of ethnic/regional and political clientelism – ranging from the creation of additional ministries to accommodate important support groups to the abuse of civil servants to rally support for incumbents during pre-election periods. As Booth et al. (2006) have noted with reference to Malawi, ‘Malawi has a hybrid, “neopatrimonial” state, where there is a framework of formal law and administration but the state is informally captured by patronage networks. The distribution of the spoils of office takes precedence over the formal functions of the state, severely limiting the ability of public officials to make policies in the general interest’.

Popular expectations and state capacity: State capacity remains persistently weak, but at the same time more actors demand to be included in decision-making processes and expect better services and enhanced state accountability. This dual dynamic reinforces the prospects for instability. The state may be overwhelmed by the new demands brought about by democratic pressures, and unable to respond adequately because it lacks the necessary institutional and administrative capacity, and even the legitimacy and credibility, to do so. In the case of Africa, Bratton (2007) has found that popular support for democracy has fallen from 2000 to 2005 as people begin to perceive that ‘democracy has distinctive shortcomings ... including unruly political discourse, a poor record of service delivery, and new opportunities for corruption’. He also notes that, for the first time in 2005, mass satisfaction with democracy fell under the critical threshold of 50 percent. There seems to be a growing nostalgia for a return of the army to politics – even though the proportion of people who reject military rule remains relatively high (73 percent in 2005).

The resulting disillusionment about how democracy is seen to be working in practice can be potentially destabilising. For example, in Ethiopia, the elections in May 2005

triggered more than a year of civil unrest concerning the results. This reflected wider discontent with the ruling party and was followed by bloody repression in November of that year (de Renzio, 2006). Many of the elections that took place in Latin America in 2006 also reflected this growing disillusionment with (incomplete) democracy and pointed to the resurgence of populist candidates in the region (Rocha Menocal, 2006).

Elite reversals: In a number of cases, reversals have been induced by political elites rather than by pressures from below. For example, a number of presidents in these incipient democracies in the developing world have sought to reverse the term limits imposed on them by amending the constitutions adopted in the 1990s.¹⁵ Political leaders have justified such reversals on the grounds that more authoritarian measures are needed to strengthen state capacity. In many cases, as perhaps most prominently in Russia but elsewhere as well, democratic reversals initiated by political elites have often been met with acquiescence from broad sectors of the population. These elites are perceived as strong leaders who will be able to provide some order to the disorder and lawlessness often associated with (incomplete) democratisation (see Rose, 2001, for example).

IV. Concluding reflections: Where have we gotten to?

Based on this discussion about the emergence of hybrid regimes, the overall trend towards democratisation can be said to have both advantages and disadvantages. On the positive side, even ‘unfinished’ democratisation processes have opened up new opportunities for participation and for the alternation of power through formal institutions. This has helped to institutionalise leadership changes, a serious challenge under previous authoritarian regimes (van de Walle, 2001). However, it must also be acknowledged that the emergence of hybrid regimes entails important risks as well. In particular, expectations are raised that are very difficult to satisfy, and clientelistic systems continue or even intensify where the potential for authoritarian top-down control is not replaced by effective checks and balances and accountability to citizens.

Highlighting the challenges embedded in hybrid regimes does not imply that the risks of democratisation are not worth undertaking. A deeper understanding of the problems that these regimes face is desirable because it provides a more realistic assessment of how democratic politics function in settings that remain undefined as well as a sobering appraisal of what these incipient and fragile democracies can be expected to achieve. We have certainly not reached the end of history. On the other hand, it is also undeniable that some considerable gains have been made, at the very least in terms of an (almost) universal recognition of the primacy of democratic forms. How to give substance to those forms so that they don’t ossify as the hollow core of democracy is a formidable endeavour, but one that is well worth pursuing. However imperfect, democracy is still better than the available alternatives.

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¹⁵ While the attempt to do so was unsuccessful in Zambia, Kenya, Malawi and most recently Nigeria, the presidents of Namibia, Uganda and Togo succeeded in changing the constitutions to allow themselves another term in office. In Venezuela, President Chávez is now in the process of trying to eliminate term limits so that he may remain in office indefinitely.

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