
THE DILEMMA OF DEMOCRATIZATION IN FRAGILE STATES

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Conventional thinking juxtaposes democracy and dictatorship as mutually exclusive systems. It is often assumed that when one system collapses, it is replaced by the other, as if this was the natural order of things. Some theorists, such as Francis Fukuyama, argued that liberal democracy had decisively defeated tyranny with the collapse of the Soviet Union, which marked the “end of history”. Indeed, since then, while there have been setbacks in countries such as Ukraine and Zimbabwe, dictatorship has been in retreat.

The most dramatic wave of change has been the Arab Spring, in which strongmen in North Africa and the Middle East have been deposed since January 2011. In less dramatic fashion, several countries in sub-Saharan Africa have also moved incrementally toward democratic rule over the last decade. According to *The Economist*, of 1 October 2011, since 1991, 30 parties or leaders in sub-Saharan Africa have been removed by voters. While outcomes have varied, and violence has sometimes followed, grass roots political action, not military rule or assassinations, is emerging as the primary method of removing unpopular leaders.

However, states often go through fleeting periods of democratic reform which may not fully materialize, or teeter in the balance for prolonged periods of time. Myanmar is an example of democracy crushed for half a century. The military has ruled since 1962, and the current junta since 1988, when it violently suppressed a pro-democracy movement. In 2011, a civilian Government was installed, dominated by the same military or ex-military leaders. It initiated a series of positive steps, including giving more freedom to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the popular opposition leader who won the 1990 elections. The Government also loosened restrictions on the media and the Internet, suspended construction of a controversial hydroelectric dam supported by China, and released more than 200 political prisoners in October 2011. While these steps are encouraging, Myanmar has far to go. It remains one of the most closed countries in the world, where the army continues the repression of ethnic minorities, the main op-

position political party was banned until November 2011, and hundreds more political prisoners languish in jail, though the Government released some prisoners in October 2011.

Nigeria is an example of a country with democratic promise that remains unfulfilled. Credible elections were conducted in 2011, the first since the return of civilian rule in 1999, and it resulted in the historic installation of a president from a minority ethnic group. Yet this singular event, which deservedly earned worldwide praise, did not fundamentally change the political system. There is a vibrant press, an increasingly active civil society and an enterprising population; yet the country faces formidable problems, including ethnic, religious, and economic friction; endemic corruption; severe economic inequality; deepening violence; and a political culture dominated by competing cliques of ex-generals and business tycoons who act as behind-the-scenes power-brokers. Thus, while Myanmar remains an authoritarian State with inklings of political reform, Nigeria is an electoral democracy with undemocratic traits. In neither country is democratization assured.

Mixed outcomes

In 1989, there was widespread hope for democratic transformation when the Berlin Wall came down. However, the death knell for authoritarianism had not rung in many of the capitals of the successor republics that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, especially in Central Asia. In Russia, a popular leader appealed to his people's desire for order and national pride over the chaos of an oligarchy and the loss of superpower status, which resulted in a “managed democracy”, which cloaked authoritarian rule in democratic trapping.

Mixed outcomes are also possible in the Middle Eastern countries embroiled in the Arab Spring and in African States struggling with democratization. Most lack the historical experience, institutional foundations, and social consensus to undergo smooth transitions. There are no preordained outcomes. The leadership, timeframe, resources, and

circumstances are different in each transition. Positive results have been seen, for example, in Liberia, despite two civil wars that killed an estimated 250,000 people. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the first elected female African Head of State, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011, succeeded in preventing a recurrence of fighting, getting international debt relief, attracting economic aid, and keeping her country on track toward democracy since she was first elected in 2005. Despite that, Liberia remains a fragile state.

Elections are an essential part of democratization, but they can also be conflict-inducing if they are held too soon, are blatantly manipulated, lack transparency, or are marred by violence. Moreover, even if conducted efficiently, they may result in power shifts that not only marginalize powerful elites, but entire communities, creating sectarian or ethnic conflict. The Kenyan elections in 2007 did both.

In Nigeria, Northerners did not feel that the 2011 elections were free and fair, as most observers reported. The north – the poorest region in the country – is where most of the post-election violence which killed hundreds was concentrated, and where, perhaps not coincidentally, terrorist incidents attributed to Boko Haram, a radical Islamist movement, have escalated since the polling.

Populations may be loath to return to old authoritarian rulers, but they also do not want to see continued violence. Thus, after a full-blown conflict or revolutionary change, they often turn to new strongmen as saviours to impose order on chaos – often based on clan, ethnic, or religious identities. There is also a temptation to grasp for quick solutions, hold snap elections, push through slapdash constitutional arrangements, use shotgun power-sharing agreements, or defer to transitional councils led by security forces – measures that undermine the foundation for democracy.

State-building

In truth, the biggest danger facing fragile states in transition is not the rise of a new dictatorship, as is often assumed, or even the emergence of extremist factions, which usually represent a minority of the population. These outcomes are possible, but the larger threats are civil war, state collapse, mass atrocities, humanitarian emergencies, and a possible break-up of the country.

One way to avoid such scenarios is to institute an intermediate process of state-building, focusing not only on writing a new constitution, holding elections, and providing for basic freedoms, but also on building or restructuring core state institutions: the police, military, civil service, and judiciary, legislative and executive branches of Government. State-building cannot be bypassed by political accommodation. There still needs to be a solid state infrastructure for long-term stability, the provision of pub-

lic services, adherence to the rule of law, and promotion of economic opportunity.

Thus far, Tunisia has provided the best model of how it should be done. Within a year of driving its former authoritarian leader into exile, Tunisia became the first Arab Spring country to hold elections for a constituent assembly to write a new constitution and appoint an interim Government. The gradual and ordered political transition will allow time for the people to shape the structure of Government, and for new political formations to emerge, including political parties and civil society. Most of all, it affords the interim Government the chance to lay out a roadmap for the future, including how to structure the transfer of power and set up state institutions. South Africa followed a similar path during its four-year-long transition to a post-apartheid society, from the time that anti-apartheid parties were legalized and political prisoners released in 1990, until the landmark election of Nelson Mandela in 1994. That interim period was crucial for laying the foundation for a peaceful and lasting democratic transition. It was remarkable that there was no external military intervention nor, contrary to widespread expectations, a race war, a collapse of the state, or a return to political violence.

Guidelines for external parties

Democratization in fragile states is a complex process that cannot be rushed nor taken for granted. All parties should be cognizant of certain realities. First, there is no such thing as an instant democracy. No assumptions should be made about the capacity of fragile states to fulfil their democratic aspirations, nor should their capacity to do so be underestimated. What is important is that, whatever the capacity of the newly-formed state to transform itself, the process will not occur overnight.

This leads to the second reality – vacillation, even back-sliding, are not uncommon. Most states in democratic transition are embarking upon huge tasks – the rebuilding of the state, restoring national cohesion, and creating a representative government. As long as the general trend is in the right direction, one can expect setbacks along the way. Volatility – not stability – is the natural order of things in the march to democracy.

Third, there must be political inclusion with all major factions allowed to present their views for open political discussion, debate, and political participation. However, a minority of spoilers can be destructive. Thus, in fragile states undergoing rapid change, groups or individuals that openly advocate violence, use hate speech, maintain their own militias, or engage in illegal practices should be restricted from running for public office and held accountable under the law so they do not ignite a new wave of retribution or revenge. If former war-lords and powerbrokers want to move from the battlefield to the ballot box, they should be allowed to do so, provided they give up

their arms and refrain from keeping private armies in reserve in case they lose elections. Here the international community can be of vital assistance by providing technical support for the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of former combatants; supplying legal aid to institute the rule of law; offering financial assistance to get the economy going; and training professionals to run state institutions honestly and efficiently.

Fourth, the conditions must be right for holding elections – a secure and safe environment which allows for a proper nomination process, unrestricted media coverage, full and open campaigning by candidates, and citizen participation without intimidation. There must be electoral transparency, independent monitoring, and a well-trained election staff overseen by a commission of respected individuals, with sufficient authority and financial resources to meet the logistical challenges of nationwide voting, which often takes place over several days, in remote areas, and under extreme weather conditions. While it may sound contradictory, elections are not only an all-important pivotal milestone in a democratic transition, but merely the first step. The real tests will come in the second and third elections, and those that come after, when power is transferred peacefully from one party to another.

The balancing act

Beji Caid Essebsi, the 84-year-old transitional Prime Minister of Tunisia, faced a series of protests after the overthrow of the ousted dictator, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, with Tunisians demanding jobs, wages, and immediate retribution against the former rulers. It was not always clear that the transition would be a smooth one. Essebsi summarized the dilemma that he and other leaders across the Middle East and Africa are facing today: “Sometimes the proponents of freedom have demands that go beyond logic, and it is more difficult to protect freedom from the proponents of freedom themselves, than from the enemies”, he said. “When someone is hungry asking for food, you only give him what he needs,” Essebsi noted, describing his step-by-step approach. “You don’t give him more, or else he might die.”

The collapse of tyranny, Essebsi seems to be saying, is not the end of history: it is just the beginning. Democracy mismanaged, or descending too quickly, could kill nascent freedom, while democracy delayed, or descending too slowly, might lead to a new dictatorship or inspire further insurrection.

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