

# Factors affecting success or failure of political transitions

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## Question

*What evidence is there in the literature and country case studies on the main risks, trade-offs and factors that determine success or failure of political transitions?*

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## 1. Overview

Political transitions from authoritarian rule to democracy can have a variety of outcomes. This rapid literature review looks at the factors affecting the success or failure of political transitions. Because of the diverse nature of the countries that have experienced political transitions it is very difficult to come up with a list of 'best practices' (Lowenthal & Bitar, 2015, p. 16). However, there are a number of general factors affecting the success or failure of political transitions. These include:

- **The type of regime prior to the political transition:** Dominant party regimes are the most likely form of autocratic regime to democratise.
- **The characteristics of the new leader of the transitional government:** These have a significant influence on the success or failure of the transition process.
- **The influence of ICT:** ICT can have both a positive and a negative influence on political transitions. It can bolster support for democracy but it can also serve to spread anti-democratic messages.

Key actors can have a significant impact on the success or failure of transition processes:

- **Military:** Both the domestic military and international armed forces can play a part in ensuring the success of political transitions.
- **Non-state actors:** Labour unions have played an important role in mediating disputes between political parties in Tunisia.
- **Political parties:** Political parties play a key role in political transitions.
- **Elections:** The degree to which the first election held following the fall of the old regime is free and fair has a significant impact on the way in which future elections are conducted, and therefore on the democratisation process.
- **International actors:** International actors can play a significant role in supporting new governments in the transition phase. However, this is dependent on the leverage they have, and the linkages between them and the country undergoing the transition. Moreover, any assistance provided should be at the request of local actors and should be sensitive to local conditions.

There is a considerable body of literature on political transitions. The literature consists of books, peer-reviewed journal articles and opinion pieces. The studies considered in this review use both quantitative and qualitative methods. In terms of regional focus, much of the literature looks at political transitions in the Middle East and North Africa in the context of the Arab Spring. The literature identified during the course of the research was largely 'gender-blind' and did not consider the perspectives of persons with disabilities.

## 2. General factors affecting success or failure of political transitions

A report published by International IDEA on successful political transitions, argues that 'given the diverse circumstances and trajectories of transitions from authoritarian rule toward democracy, there can be no 'one size fits all' model or simple manual of 'best practices' for such transitions' (Lowenthal & Bitar, 2015, p. 16). It finds that while 'iconic events can play a vital role in catalysing

or symbolising political transformation, the road toward democracy often begins years before (and extends years after) these moments' (Lowenthal & Bitar, 2015, p. 10). Moreover, once these transitions begin, they proceed at different speeds, with progress often being followed by a temporary reversal in progress (Lowenthal & Bitar, 2015, p. 11).

International IDEA finds that in order to ensure the success of political transitions, those who took power had to (Lowenthal & Bitar, 2015, pp. 20-21):

- create civil order and end violence, while ensuring that all security and intelligence forces would be subject to control by the new civilian authorities.
- inspire domestic trust and gain international legitimacy. This often involved developing inclusive and fair electoral procedures.
- assure that those who took office would be well prepared, technically and politically, for their new governing responsibilities.
- balance the need for bureaucratic, technocratic, security and judicial expertise against the aim to limit the influence of the previous regime.
- balance responding victims of human rights violations perpetrated by the previous regime and holding perpetrators accountable while preserving the loyalty of security forces (some of whose members had been involved in these violations).
- establish or protect the autonomy and authority of independent judiciaries and independent media that could hold national executives and others accountable.
- achieve economic growth, increased employment, and control inflation, while improving the provision of services and increasing public expenditures to meet the needs of the poor. Leaders of all the transitions included in the International IDEA study adopted market-oriented approaches and prudent monetary and fiscal policies.

## Regime type

A quantitative study of the conditions that increase the likelihood of democratisation after regime change shows that personalist dictatorships are less likely to democratise than dominant-party regimes. Moreover, monarchies are unlikely to be overthrown and are very unlikely to be followed by democracy if this does happen. The study finds that the way old regimes were overthrown in the MENA countries is also likely to lower the likelihood of democratisation. Autocratic regimes that end in violence are less likely to democratise, as are those that are forced out rather than ceding power via negotiated transitions (Geddes et al, p. 37).

## Leaders

According to International IDEA, the prospects for building democracies are highly dependent on the performance of the new leader during the transition period. In cases of successful transitions leaders had the following qualities (Lowenthal & Bitar, 2015, pp. 50-51):

- Each had a strategic sense of direction toward more inclusionary and accountable governance, and a fundamental preference for peaceful and incremental transformation.
- They captured the mood of citizens and reinforced the efforts of political parties and social organisations to progress toward democracy.
- They diversified and expanded their own support bases and were able to assess the interests and influence of multiple power centres and interest groups. Moreover, they often found paths toward political compromise and accommodation.

- Many showed resolution and courage, sometimes risking their lives in conditions of polarisation and violence.
- They had the self-confidence needed to take difficult, decisive and timely decisions with conviction.
- Most relied heavily on competent associates who shared political values and specific expertise in order to deal with contentious issues. Although they could (and did) make key choices personally, the majority focused on building consensus, forging coalitions, constructing political bridges, and communicating consistently with key constituencies and the general public.
- They were generally able to persuade others to accept their decisions by understanding and responding to the core interests of diverse actors, including adversaries.
- Although they were deeply grounded in their respective national societies and relied primarily on domestic relationships, each of these leaders knew how to mobilise external support without becoming instruments of foreign actors.
- They adjusted rapidly to events and were able to seize the initiative.

## ICT

The International IDEA report also addresses the issue of ICT and its influence on transition processes, both positive and negative. It argues that those who want to undertake or support democratic transitions need to learn how to use new technologies and combine them with 'deliberation, negotiation, coalition building, compromise and consensus building' (Lowenthal & Bitar, 2015, p. 46).

## 3. The role and impact of key actors in political transitions

### Military

One study on the role of the military in political transitions argues that the military can generally suppress most challenges to authoritarian rule. However, in some conditions they support political liberalisation, such as when faced with popular demonstrations. It goes on to argue that the military are likely to support transitions from authoritarianism when there is intense conflict within the military; and when as a result of this conflict, marginalised officers either enter into a pact with the domestic opposition or have foreign backing to act against the regime. These marginalised officers' decision to turn against authoritarianism is a move to both overthrow the regime, and to eliminate their rivals within the armed forces (Lee, 2009).

According to Blair (2016, p.10), the military in mature democracies can play a part in influencing transition processes. Armed forces have many points of contact, including attachés in their embassies, visits of delegations, joint exercises and international military events, and education and training in each other's countries. Blair argues that military democratic influences are spread by example. He posits that the most advanced, skilled, and respected armed forces in the world are those of the mature democratic countries and that military leaders of other countries often seek to emulate them. The paper also argues that officers from autocratic countries who have served in peacekeeping missions with officers from democracies are generally more progressive within their own armed forces on return to their home country (Blair, 2016, p. 10).

## Political parties

According to Fukuyama (2014) democratisation has three stages: (1) initial mobilisation to oust the old regime, (2) holding free elections, and (3) being able to deliver public services and public goods. He argues that while the first stage often succeeds, the second and third stages are very hard to realise because of lack of experience with the organisation of political parties.

According to Lowenthal & Bitar, in successful transitions, political parties played a key role. They established regional and territorial networks, built ties with social movements and civil society organisations, helped design and implement strategies to counter the authoritarian regime, and mobilised international support. Moreover, parties helped to select candidates for, organise and carry out electoral campaigns; prepare platforms and programmes for electoral competition and governance; train cadres for public service; mediate conflict among political allies; and ensure that governments did not lose touch with their support base (Lowenthal & Bitar, 2015, p. 33).

## Non-state actors

Labour unions can play a role in political transitions, but this role and its success varies from country to country. In Tunisia the UGTT (Tunisian General Labour Union) has arguably been a 'pivotal player' in the transition mediating political divisions between Tunisia's political parties (Bishara, 2014, p. 8). In Egypt, the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU) and the Egyptian Democratic Labor Congress (EDLC) were established in 2011. There was a huge increase in the number of independent unions: in late 2013, EFITU claimed a membership of around 300 unions, as did the ELDC. The EFITU and the EDLC have a democratically elected leadership, making them 'legitimate representatives of their members' interests' (Bishara, 2014, p. 3). However, the post-Mubarak regime took measures to limit these organisations' ability to operate freely (Bishara, 2014, p. 4).

## Elections

The context in which elections take place can affect their democratising potential. According to Cheeseman, 'structural conditions such as poverty, ethnic heterogeneity, a history of civil war and resource dependency are known predictors of democratisation' (Forthcoming, p. 218). Moreover, a quantitative analysis in an edited volume finds that if the first multiparty elections that a country holds are free and fair, this sets the expectations of citizens and political actors for future electoral contests (Van Ham & Lindberg, forthcoming, p. 232). Such elections tend to generate trust among the losers of the elections. As a result they have greater reason to believe that if the elections continue to be fair, they will have a chance of winning the next elections (Van Ham & Lindberg, forthcoming, p. 232). In addition, those who win the elections, such as parliamentarians and ministers, do so because of due process. They therefore have an interest in maintaining these processes even if the party leader wishes to return to pre-democratic ways. On the other hand, flawed first elections make political actors and citizens believe that electoral manipulation is an acceptable way of competing in elections. Thus, a flawed first election generates losers who may not accept the results, and winners who will be motivated to undermine the quality of future elections (Van Ham & Lindberg, forthcoming, p. 232). Moreover, in severely flawed elections opposition parties and leaders may be excluded, as political exclusion is commonly used as a tool of electoral manipulation in Africa. In such cases, incumbents often enjoy inflated majorities, and therefore have more room to undermine institutions that could monitor elections, making it possible for them to rig future elections more

easily (Van Ham & Lindberg, 2017, pp. 232-233).

The study also finds that an election that is neither completely flawed nor completely free and fair does not provide the same level of clarity to political actors and citizens, nor does it create such a clear division or concentration of power. If poor election quality was the result of administrative problems, political actors and citizens may believe that future elections can still be free and fair. Moreover, in elections falling into this category problematic flawed, opposition actors are likely to win at least some representation. This means that the quality of subsequent elections will depend on the outcome of power struggles between those in power and the opposition after the first elections. According to the authors, it is therefore unsurprising that democratic change is most likely to occur in regimes that start off by holding 'ambiguous' elections (Van Ham & Lindberg, 2017, p. 233). The study finds that while elections can lead to greater democratisation they can also serve to legitimate authoritarian leaders, who institutionalise non-democratic elections, thereby stabilising their autocratic regimes (Van Ham & Lindberg, 2017, p. 234).

## International actors

In successful transitions, international actors have provided assistance in areas that typically put transitions at risk, based on their prior experience. These include civil-military relations, transitional justice, the conduct of credible elections, police reform and the oversight of domestic intelligence agencies, as well as in disarming hostile surveillance and intelligence activity (Lowenthal & Bitar, 2015, p. 37). They have also promoted peer group communication and training opportunities with counterparts in the armed forces, business and labour groups, professional associations and other sectors, which sometimes helped reinforce democratic attitudes among these groups. In addition, they have provided reassurance and practical advice (Lowenthal & Bitar, 2015, p. 38). International organisations, governments, foundations and non-governmental organisations sometimes play an important role in responding to social and economic needs during transition periods. International economic assistance can be crucial when it is provided in response to local needs and in cooperation with local actors (Lowenthal & Bitar, 2015, p. 38).

According to International IDEA, democracy can only take root in a society once it becomes the most accepted way to contend for political power. International actors can achieve a lot to encourage progress towards democracy, but they cannot replace domestic actors, and should provide support at their request. International actors should 'avoid impatient, ineffective and counterproductive interventions and instead contribute more consistently over the longer term.' (Lowenthal & Bitar, 2015, p. 38). Instead they should 'listen, raise questions that arise from comparative experience, and encourage local actors to consider issues from various perspectives, instead of promoting pre-packaged answers' (Lowenthal & Bitar, 2015, pp. 38-39).

Levitsky & Way (2010) discuss international leverage and the concept of linkage and how they affect the outcome of political transitions. They define leverage as the extent to which a country is vulnerable to external pressure to democratise.

- **High leverage** – a country lacks bargaining power and is strongly affected by Western punitive action (e.g. cuts in external assistance, sanctions, etc.)
- **Low leverage** – a country has significant bargaining power and is not significantly affected by Western punitive action.

Linkage refers to the density of ties and cross-border flows with the West. It has six dimensions:

- **Economic linkage** – flows of trade, investment, credit
- **Intergovernmental linkage** – bilateral diplomatic and military ties, participation in Western-led alliances, treaties and international organisations
- **Technocratic linkage** – share of the country's elite that is Western educated or has professional ties to Western universities or western-led multilateral institutions
- **Social linkage** – flows of people across borders, including tourism, immigration and refugee flows, and diaspora networks
- **Information linkage** – flows of information across borders via telecommunications, internet connections and western media penetration
- **Civil-society linkage** – local ties to western-based NGOs, international religious and party organisations, and other transnational networks (Levitsky & Way, 2010, pp. 43-44)

Geographical proximity is however the key source of linkage, as it creates opportunities for interaction between states and can also create interdependence between them (Levitsky & Way, 2010, p. 44). It is important to note that not all linkage is with the West, and that strong ties to non-Western countries can affect how countries respond to Western pressure (Levitsky & Way, 2010, p. 50)

According to Levitsky & Way, linkage increases the chances of authoritarian collapse leading to 'stable' democratisation (2010, p. 51) Incentives for successor governments to democratise in high-linkage contexts include:

- Officials in successor governments maintain ties to Western actors that were created while they were in opposition. These frequently take the form of resources, protection, and legitimacy. These leaders are 'unlikely to "bite the hand that helped get them there."'
- New governments tend to face same level of international scrutiny as their predecessors in cases where international monitoring remains in place. Therefore, even former opposition leaders who are not inclined to lead democratically, face strong pressure to do so.

Where linkage is low, external pressure is often insufficient to bring about stable democratisation. In these cases political transitions are more likely to result in new undemocratic governments coming to power, or in new regimes being more vulnerable to 'authoritarian reversal' if they have democratised (Levitsky & Way, 2010, p. 52) The authors argue that this holds true even in situations where there is high leverage. This is because even though international pressure may be high it is often 'limited and sporadic' focusing on 'minimally acceptable elections' (Levitsky & Way, 2010, p. 53). Weak linkage means that this pressure often ceases after elections bring about a change in government, enabling the new government 'to violate democratic norms at low external cost.' The authors state that this is the situation in much of sub-Saharan Africa (Levitsky & Way, 2010, p. 54).

## 4. Case studies

### Tunisia

Following the fall of former President Ben Ali in January 2011, civil society and state bureaucracy helped to rapidly reestablish institutions and guide the transition through parliamentary elections

and constitutional processes. While challenges remain, the proper conduct of the 2011 elections by transitional authorities and commissions was an important step towards an 'organised political life' (Droz Vincent, 2012, p. 123). Moreover, the military was clear that it would not interfere in politics regardless of the results of the elections. It played a key logistical role in securing electoral processes, but maintained a strong 'apolitical and legalist' role (Droz Vincent, 2012, p. 123).

A report published by the International Peace and Security Institute (IPSI) outlines reasons for the relative success of the Tunisian transition as well as highlighting challenges faced during that transition (Sarsar, 2013, p. 3). One of the key challenges was that despite a push for change, the first transitional government was composed of several ministers who worked under former President Ben Ali. The report argues that this explains the failure of the first provisional government (Sarsar, 2013, p. 3). It does not however provide detailed information or analysis on this point.

The same report argues that the creation of new "consensus gathering" institutions was key in overcoming crises experienced during the transition. One such institution was the HIROR (the High Authority for the Achievement of the Revolution's Objectives, Political Reform, and Democratic Transition). HIROR was the source of all laws during the first transition period, including those related to political parties, associations, electoral law and the communication sector. Membership consisted of political parties and civil society groups. HIROR was responsible for the drafting of the electoral law, in which particular attention was paid to gender equality (Sarsar, 2013, pp. 3-4).

Civil society also played a key role in the Tunisian transition. This included acting as a mediator between the government and the opposition and participating in the dialogue for the proposal and enactment of new bills (Sarsar, 2013, pp. 3-4).

## Egypt

Following the fall of former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in 2011, the country entered a period of political transition. According to one peer-reviewed journal article, the military were 'tacitly entrusted' with the survival of the authoritarian regime. (Awad, 2013, p. 289). The military subsequently opted to partner with the Muslim Brotherhood. According to Awad, this was because they believed that 'the Muslim Brotherhood's organisation could enable them to ensure that the country is smoothly run while they would take care of strategic orientations and keep their privileges' (2013, p. 289). Awad argues that the military's indifference to democracy had a significant impact on the political transition in Egypt (2013, p. 289). Morsi was removed from power in a coup d'état in 2013 following popular demonstrations against his rule. He was succeeded by General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who remains in power, marking a return to military rule. According to Springborg, the military's continuing dominance in Egypt can be attributed to their prevention of any viable civilian alternatives from emerging. He argues that the military will remain in power 'unless and until it fractures from intra-organizational dissent or from conflicts between it and other components of the deep state, or is overwhelmed by wide-scale chaos and systemic breakdown' (Springborg, 2017, p. 496).



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