

Book Review

Transitions to Democracy: A Theory of the Abnormal?

EMMILINE C. QUINIO *

A review of Guillermo O'Donnell, Phillippe C. Schmitter, Laurence Whitehead, eds., *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Prospects for Democracy* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1986), 4 vols.

Transition begins when authoritarian rulers introduce liberalization in the regime, when certain rights of individuals and groups are guaranteed like *habeas corpus*, privacy, freedom of movement and speech, etc. It ends when the chain of consequences of liberalization results in the installation of a new regime.

The four-volume *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Prospects for Democracy* contains the results of a workshop sponsored by the Latin American Program of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars that studied transitions from authoritarian regimes to democracy in five South European countries which include Spain, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Turkey and eight Latin American countries, namely, Uruguay, Venezuela, Brazil, Bolivia, Mexico, Peru, Argentina, Chile. This study is precisely intended to arrive at some generalizations, "pieces of a map," that may guide those that venture into democratization. The insights drawn from the experiences of these South European and Latin American countries provide Filipino scholars and students of transition governments with necessary information and conceptual tools in understanding and coping with the problems afflicting our very own fragile government striving hard at redemocratization.

Central to understanding the study are the editors' definitions of regime, transition, democracy, and liberalization. According to them, regime is "an ensemble of patterns, explicit or not, that determines the forms and channels of access to principal governmental positions, the characteristics of the actors who are admitted and excluded from such access and the resources or strategies that they can use to gain access."

Democracy, on the other hand, is differentiated into two, in ascending desirability: political, and economic or social. Political democracy centers on the principle of citizenship, on the "rules and procedures that govern the rights

*DPA Student, College of Public Administration, University of the Philippines.

and obligations of individuals and their rulers." Individuals, as equals, make collective choices in a polity. Implementors of these choices are accountable and accessible to all individuals. Rulers respect those choices, ensure their effectiveness and protect the continued survival of the polity. At the minimum, there should be electoral procedures agreed upon by political party elites and professional politicians that guarantee political superiority to winners, acceptance by losers that winners can make binding decisions, possibilities of losers winning in the future, and the acceptance by citizens of such competitions provided outcomes are reflective of their collective choices as expressed through fair and regular elections. Economic democracy or "socialization" relates to "providing equal benefits to the population from the goods and services generated by society," as well as participation in decision making of institutions that produce these goods and services. However, socialization may create passivity, clientelism and dependence when it results in welfare state, or overall inequality in a corporatist socialist democracy. On the other hand, the relatively stable "mix" of political democracy may freeze existing social and economic arrangements. The essence of democracy is rule-setting contingent on consent which necessarily varies from society to society.

Democratization means the principle of citizenship is applied to political institutions that may have been previously governed by principles of tradition, coercion, or expertise, to name a few. It may mean extension of suffrage to those previously excluded, or participation by citizens in formerly inaccessible institutions such as the military, state enterprises, and interest groups. Like liberalization, it admits of gradations: "limited democracy" is characterized by restrictive electoral processes, selective accountability while "liberalized authoritarianism" or "tutelary democracy" assumes that immature subjects need to be tutored prior to full exercise of citizenship rights; economic stabilization precedes democratization. Transitions from authoritarian regimes usually entail the "double stream" of liberalization and democratization. The editors believe that transitions are possible without violent revolutions; in the first place, they also think that violent revolutions have low chances of success nowadays.

Some generalizations and conclusions of the study are particularly relevant to countries that have reached a certain "state-ness" with more than minimally activated sectors and reasonably complex capitalist economies. Regime changes for societies with "less differentiated stratification systems... extensive patrimonialist practices and scarcely capitalist economies" would probably require violent revolutions. Although generally characterized by extensive powers exercised by the military, authoritarian regimes are not monolithic. It could be forged from an alliance of the military, the economic and bureaucratic elites to form a bureaucratic authoritarianism.

Successful transitions are influenced by the presence of mediation and political expression possible. The representative institutions and the civil society that preceded authoritarianism are central to transition processes. Fortune and character play vital roles. There could occur fortuitous events that facilitate transition in which singular individuals succeed in influencing complex historical processes. Most participants found that domestic factors and local personages play the dominant role in transitions to democracy, although in recent decades, transitions took place in the context of military defeat and democracy more probably occurred due to occupation by a foreign democracy.

There are several paths transition can take: internal restoration after external reconquest, external reformulation, externally monitored installation, initiated from within authoritarian regime, society-led regime termination party pact, organized violent revolt coordinated by democratic reformist parties, and Marxist-led revolutionary war. Transitions do not necessarily lead to the establishment of democratic regimes; the newly-installed regime could also be authoritarian, or even totalitarian. Transitions can be reversed at many stages so that no democratization takes place at all.

The authoritarian regime's ideological schizophrenia provides the tension that trigger liberalization. Usually, a legitimating ideology is adopted to temporarily forego freedom and democracy in order to achieve economic development. Inherent contradictions brought about by this ideology, however, create internal tensions within the regime especially when overcome with economic crisis that deprives the regime of resources to "buy" support from the populace through patronage benefits, subsidies, incentives, and the like. These internal tensions bring out "hard-liners" and "soft-liners" in the regime: the latter believe that "opening" or liberalization of the regime should be made to regain popular support, while the former believe that so-called democratic practices are political "pathologies" requiring "surgical incisions." These conflicts create cleavages that translate into signals to potential regime opponents to demand liberalization. In all cases studied, transition occurred due to cleavages created by hard-liners and soft-liners.

The preferred transitions mode in the study is negotiation, the crafting of pacts between the regime and private groups. Ironically, democratization is undertaken through incremental agreements among elites, an essentially undemocratic procedure. Three factors facilitate negotiated transitions: a reasonably successful authoritarian regime that can guarantee agreements, a weak and politically inactive popular sector, and a reasonably strong party system that represents the popular sector.¹ A vital precondition to participation in these pacts is the establishment of acceptable guarantees that deferred demands shall be satisfied in the future. A limited democracy is thus attained

through undemocratic means, but all countries studied that did not negotiate such pacts reverted to authoritarianism.

It can happen that the regime's capacity to rule is simultaneously vitiated by various crises: a war, a general strike, unavoidable devaluation; a death or popular upsurge could precipitate its collapse. In this instance, liberalization barely precedes democratization. The regime is totally discredited and is literally catapulted to democracy, or even socialism. Rulers completely lose their leverage against opponents. In transitions where dominant classes and the armed forces are under-represented however, ensuing disloyalties and confrontations among parties usually result in severe authoritarian reversals.

When limited democracy or liberalized authoritarianism is followed by re-emergence of civil society, the timetable for elections is hastened, its scope widened. The rules under which electoral contest shall be conducted become the new focus of everyone's attention. Democratization is the institutionalization of uncertainty precisely because it essentially means the elimination of control over outcomes.

The most immediate problem of the new regime is *coup d'etat*.² Although soft-liners have been coopted to political democracy, certain policies affecting the military institution must still be adopted. Foremost among which is the policy of retribution directed at those who perpetrated excessive or inhuman repression. Any retributive policy is potentially dangerous but the new regime needs to confront the worst facet of its past and mete justice according to due process of law. Another policy must be evolved confining military role to society's defense while increasing its civilian contacts, even if this means allowing military men to occupy civilian positions. The last policy concerns the protection of the military as an institution by making provisions for military expenditures.

The authoritarian regime usually leaves the economy in disarray and saddled with huge foreign debts. Reliance on market forces, supposedly the most efficient equilibrators of efficiency, cannot solve poverty; their sole operations in fact, increase poverty. Negotiated solutions seem more promising: selective protection, high taxes on consumer goods, gradual wage increases, decreased military spending, selective welfare programs, guarantees to private property ownership or assurance of compensation and selective foreign investment.

The military and the economy are the greatest source of derailment of newly-installed political democracies. Assuming their successful manage-

ment, consolidation will be greatly enhanced when a successful and peaceful alternation of power takes place under the new rules of the game.

The editors end with the metaphor of a multi-layered chess game: "First, the players must be compelled by the circumstances of the transition to compete for spaces and pieces, rather than struggling for the elimination of opposing players; second, those players do not have to attain a prior consensus on democratic values before muscling their way into the game. They can be made to respect the rules that emerge from the game itself. Political democracy is produced by stalemates and dissensus rather than by prior unity and consensus. It emerges from the interdependence of conflictual interests and the diversity of discordant ideals Transition toward democracy is by no means a linear or a rational process." Thus, O'Donnell and Schmitter posit the hypothesis that a theory of transition will be a theory of undetermined social change, even a theory of abnormality.

Unlike breakdowns of democracies where so-called objective structural factors play the dominant role, O'Donnell and Schmitter hypothesize that breakdowns of authoritarianism are not only characterized by the predominance of domestic factors but, more importantly, by "the high degree of indeterminacy of social and political action and the inordinate degrees of freedom that collective and individual action may have at some momentous junctures of the transition." Macro-structural factors do not largely determine what actors do and do not do.

There are analytical and conceptual problems in the posited hypothesis. The first relates to time which is problematic in two ways: the time lapse between regime change and its analysis is too close, and the time span of transitions is too extended. Except for Italy which effected regime change in 1948 and Portugal in 1976, all the rest experienced regime instauration in the '80s, with Uruguay realizing its regime change in 1984. Everyone, the editors included, admit the limitations imposed by close proximity of regime change and its analysis, the most obvious of which is the absence of definitive assertions about the viability of democracies installed. Although the hypothesis relate to transition processes, the more substantial question is whether the new democratic regime will endure. In most cases, the crucial questions of military subordination to civilian authorities and economic crises are unsettled despite unanimity of belief that these two are the greatest sources of regime derailment. The second important limitation imposed by the proximity of analyses to regime change is the necessary tentativeness of analyses made. In time, more information about the countries will emerge which may refute, modify or enhance the preliminary findings contained in the studies.

The other problem related to time is the definition of transition which starts when an authoritarian regime begins to liberalize and ends when a new regime is installed. Only Portugal has a transition of two years. Italy has five years, Spain has six, Greece has ten, Bolivia has three, Peru eight and Uruguay seven. Cavarozzi even begins in 1955, giving Argentina a transition period of twenty-eight years. Since no regime change has taken place in Chile, Brazil and Mexico, they are still in transition. These extended transition periods result in the tremendous dilution of O'Donnell and Schmitter's hypothesis about transition processes in which they emphasize rapidity of occurrences that precipitate political actors to make decisions, the outcome of which are unknown to them. This narrow focus would certainly reveal a situation of chaos, of abnormality, which would not seem so when perspectives are widened to cover significantly longer periods before and after this "warlike" situation. The length of transitions are such that they could hardly be called transitions at all.

Some conceptual limitations and contradictions are traceable to the selection of countries studied, all of which were part of the liberal, constitutional and capitalist hegemonies and which have reached a certain level of governmental, social and economic complexity. There is preponderance of findings about similarities in social, political and economic phenomena that take place in such countries. Laurence Whitehead in his excellent article raises two points about this: no case of democratization by conquest was discussed, and that the generalization were applicable only to a particular geographical area in a specific historical period. Furthermore, the other preferred concept belies the indeterminateness of outcomes that they underscore. They posit conditions that will increase the chances of certain outcomes: a certain kind of civil society, exposure to democratic practices prior to authoritarian regimes, existence of political parties and elites, relative success of authoritarian regimes to give them leverage and control of transitions, favorable international context, and so forth.

The second set of analytical problem that arises from the hypotheses relate to the subordination of so-called objective factors to conflict resolution by political groups and actors - to "rule setting," in fact. Most of the authors balked at this. The writers largely subsume the concepts about regime openings, elite realignments, social and political mobilization, voting patterns, negotiations and pacts or their collapse, to historical, social and economic factors they deem vital in explaining directions that regime changes take. The exception is the role played by charismatic individuals and fortuitous events that succeed in influencing the direction of regime change. They all are in perfect agreement with the editors in this. Overstressing the political actors' "multi-layered chess game" is not only rash. It is a highly inadequate explanation of social orders and their continuity and change. Most of the Latin

American countries were former colonies of Spain that fortuitously avoided the social and political transformations brought about by the Enlightenment. Almost to the end of her colonial power, Spain was a theocracy. This has deep consequences in the colonized countries. The coexistence of profound pietism and rabid anti-clericalism cannot be understood except in this light. Passionate discourse on property relations must be understood in terms of the Spanish *encomienda* system.

The third set of analytical problems relate to the subordination of external factors to domestic factors. The editors say that there was overwhelming agreement on this point. I would agree to this in the sense that the main actors are local, caught up in localized circumstances and events. But I would not subordinate external factors. It is even possible that at this time, the future of many nations will be determined by factors beyond and outside their control. In almost all the countries including those of Eastern Europe, democratization was inextricably tied to the adoption of the market economy and its linkage to the international market, the desirability of foreign investments, the adoption of a particular mode of industrialization and their concomitant technology transfers.

This brings to fore irreconcilable contradictions in the conception of democracy, especially when political democracy is supposed to precede social democracy. Liberalism is presumed in political democracy - individuals and groups are assumed to enjoy certain freedoms, of speech, privacy, assembly, occupation, religion, etc. The ideal of political democracy is formalized pluralism; the interests of citizen are represented by various groups that are accommodated by institutionalized channels of mediation and representation in the political system. The role of political elites is central in this pluralist system. The attainment of the ideal of economic equality in social democracy will be blocked by the ideal of political democracy. This inherent contradiction led the editors to observe that social democracy seems to require authoritarianism, at least initially. This also led them to conclude that political democracy is desirable, per se. It certainly is preferable to authoritarianism, especially of the kind the Latin America has had. Furthermore, the conservative path to democratization arrived at through negotiations among political, regime and military elites to establish political democracy satisfies substantial popular demands but excludes the more radical groups that represent these demands. In the end, therefore, a form of limited democracy is prescribed. The unspoken hope is that political democracy will somehow, sometime soon, be genuinely and truly practiced and lead to social democracy. This seems improbable. Unfortunately, although the free market economy of an unimpeded private sector in both domestic and international spheres had never existed from its inception in England, the dominant democracies have inextricably linked this economic model to the democratization of peripheral

countries. The nationalist economic policies of these nations inevitably give way to international pressures. This linkage between politics and economics is further exacerbated by the strategic, security interests of the world powers. Most developing countries are presently trapped between external and elitist pressures to create free markets and popular pressures to correct massive economic inequalities in their populations.

The study is an attempt to contribute to theories about social change, wherein one basic paradox is the simultaneous interdependence and distinctiveness of human beings. What mechanisms, institutional arrangements and processes will make possible and predictable human interaction and the maintenance of the social divisions of labor? The editors reject the structural-functional theory associated with Talcott Parsons that stresses the disequilibrating tendencies existing between society and its environment, and the strain between normative and structural elements of the social system as the main sources of social change. O'Donnell and Schmitter tend to lean toward the conflict-exchange model that stress motives, interests and conflicts between social and political actors as the source of social change. The other writers combine the structural-functional and symbolic-structural theories - that social change results from a combination of structural and cultural relations among forces of production, and relations among production, alienation and class consciousness.

The Metaphor of the Multi-Layered Chess Game

In the final analysis, their theory of the abnormal applies to that very narrow time interval when an authoritarian regime collapses and frenetic activities ensue among various political actors in establishing a new regime. During this time, indeterminacy of outcomes prevails. Actors assess situations based on limited information, make indecisive choices, and undertake actions with unperceived consequences. Normality is restored when new political rules are crafted and a new regime is installed. Outside of this, most elements of their various propositions or "conceptual tools" have been explicated before: regime openings, mobilization, role of elites, pact making, demilitarization, etc. O'Donnell and Schmitter "fudge" the issues somewhat: preconditions are set and the outcome is not democracy. The conservative path to transition, the control that the regime must retain over transition processes, the exclusion of more radical forces even if election results must be rigged, the indefinite postponement of substantive reform, and the reduction of political democracy to polyarchy are not synonymous with democracy. That democracy will eventually prevail and social democracy will finally rest on some amorphous growing consensus about their desirability, seem to be wishful thinking.

In Eisenstadt's *The Political Systems of Empires*,³ he empirically extracts factors that lead to the establishment of bureaucratic empires. The same

factors, in particular combinations, also lead to modern states. In brief, the necessary preconditions are that the rulers have autonomous goals and that society has a certain level of social differentiation making "free floating" resources available. The dynamics of these interrelationships creates contradictions, incompatibilities and necessary accommodation that effect continual change in the political system. To the extent that the demands of autonomous and differentiated social groups are accommodated and in effect act as restrictions on rulers, changes could lead to modern states. This happens when the distinction between the goals of rulers and the goals of the ruled weaken, when more types of political institutions and processes are developed, and when the social and political aspirations of different groups are incorporated into the goals of polity.

What this illustrates is that the same dynamics operate in Eisenstadt as in O'Donnell and Schmitter's hypothesis. But in Eisenstadt's case, they lead to empires. In other words, the dynamics per se do not guarantee the ideology of the political system. Absent still is the crucial question of how democracy is installed. In the case of Western Europe and the United States, this came about because the dominant ideas that were internalized by their peoples were democratic. They came about through a long process of philosophizing and ideation from the Greeks and Romans through the Renaissance through the Enlightenment and Reformation, until the liberal state was established. The dilemma of new nations and Third World countries is thus extremely difficult to resolve. First their natural development was intruded upon through colonization. Political and social values associated with the societies of colonizers create contradictory impulses to emulate and repudiate in colonized countries. Without resolving this basic contradiction, Third World countries are enmeshed in the international economic and political systems with their own distinctive demands and domestic pressures. Considering the deadly seriousness of this dilemma, and considering that lives of people are often lost in the process, I find the metaphor of the multi-layered chess game very cavalier.

Endnotes

¹The first pact is with the military. In exchange for restoring basic rights and allowing some "civic contestation" over policy, no resort to violence shall be made, neither an immediate insistence on the right to govern, nor will sanctions against military officers be sought. The next pact governs the distribution of representative positions and collaboration between political parties in policymaking. The policy agenda is limited, benefits sharing is proportionate and political participation of outsiders to the pact is restricted. The final pact is economic, aimed at assuring the bourgeois of their property rights, and working classes and employees that their demands for compensation and social justice will eventually be met.

*To avert coups that threaten transition at every point, the conservative path to political democracy is suggested. The preferred electoral outcome in a political democracy is a center-right victory, even if this outcome must be "helped along" by rigging electoral rules. The rightists cannot lose since they may resort to conspiracy and destabilization. They cannot be allowed to win either, or the founding election will be regarded as farcical. If leftists win, they are bound to make extreme promises and drive investors to divestment and capital flight. A center-right victory is most desirable for post-authoritarian rule with the Center-left and Left as opposition who may optimize their eventual electoral strength and minimize their being violently excluded from taking office at all.

¹S. N. Eisenstadt, *Political Systems of Empires* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, Inc., 1963).