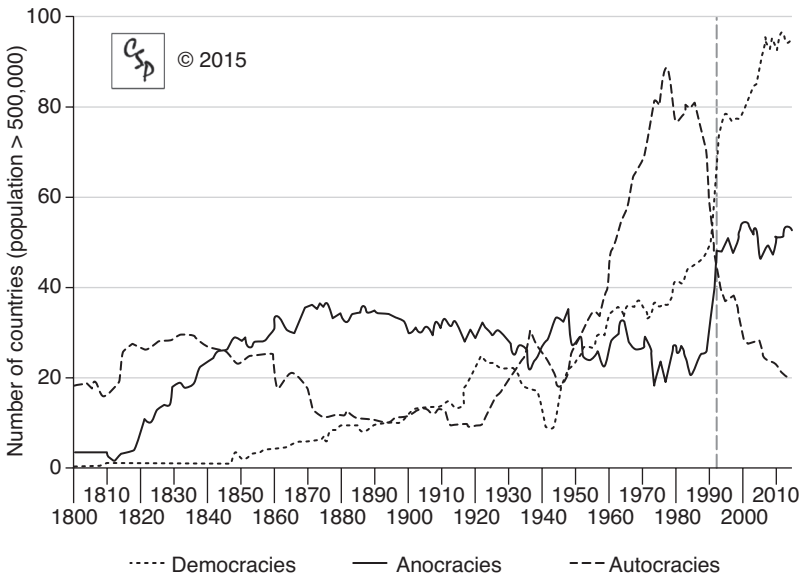


2 Reviving transitology

Democratisation then and now

*Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou and
Timothy D. Sisk*

Since the Revolution of the Carnations in Portugal in 1974 which overthrew the Second Republic *Estado Novo* regime (1933–1974) – much despised for its internal ‘dirty war’ and violations in colonial contexts abroad (notably in Angola and Mozambique) – a pattern of generally increasing democratisation globally seems well-supported in comparative analysis. The Polity regime type data project, managed at the Centre for Systemic Peace, has become the most consistent dataset for comparative, quantitative analysis of regime types since the mid-1970s. The project scores regimes over time on a 21-point scale that ranges from ‘fully-institutionalised’ autocracies through to ‘fully-institutionalised’ democracies. The long-term results are informative, and they have a direct bearing on our argument that the transitions literature has high salience to contemporary cases. [Figure 2.1](#)



[Figure 2.1](#) The global rise of democracies and ‘partial’ democracies (source: Centre for Systemic Peace, www.systemicpeace.org).

shows the long-term trajectories dramatically: over time, the number of democracies in the international system has grown considerably, especially since the end of the Cold War in 1989 following already steady growth in democratisation since the Portuguese transition kicked off the present trend in the mid-1970s. The number of partial ‘semi-democratic’ or ‘semi-authoritarian regimes’ – ‘anocracies’ in the Polity nomenclature – has also risen as the number of fully autocratic regimes has declined.

It is in the nature of periods of transition in the international system to be defined by what came before and after them: bipolarity and unipolarity for the Cold War, nonchalance and insecurity for 9/11 and order (albeit authoritarian) and disorder (albeit democratising) for the Arab Spring. The coincidence of these three successive moments is also, importantly, taking place at the same time as the information and technology revolution. This transition and globalisation context has resulted in a number of fluid¹ and on-going global turbulences in the grammar of international relations, which, it is submitted, can be charted through a framework that deciphers the process that underwrites the passage from one condition to another.

Origins of the transitology concepts

Earlier contemporary eras were dominated by colonialism (the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), wars (the two world wars and the decolonisation wars for most of the first half of the twentieth century) or ideological competition (the second half of the twentieth century with the Cold War). Whether democratisation evolves in waves or causally-related sets of transitions is debatable, primarily because it is difficult to discern one wave from the next. Is there a contagion effect that spreads ideas across borders? For example, the Arab Spring had been preceded regionally by the collapse of the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq by force in 2003 (again, to better or ill effect²), and major countries such as Indonesia witnessed transitions from authoritarian to democratic regime type in the late 1990s following the collapse of the Suharto ‘New Order’ regime in 1998.

Since 1989, the world has arguably been experiencing one large and extended moment of global transition unpacked in three different, yet equally consequential, moments generating transitions: post-Cold War in the 1990s, post 11 September in the 2000s and post-Arab Spring in the 2010s. Indeed, these three phases were preceded by ‘re-democratisation’ in the Americas, notably Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Peru. It was in these cases that now common concerns with issues of transitional justice (which in turn had precedence in early cases, notably in post-World War II Germany and Japan) in particular emerged together with mechanisms that proliferated globally such as truth and reconciliation commissions. It was also in the study of these phases that crucial insights were gained into the role of social movements in toppling control by military-led ‘bureaucratic–authoritarian’ regimes, and aspects of the transition such as the role that pacts between the military and the opposition played in the course of transition.

Moreover, one of the most engaging elements of these early transitions was the strong role played by ‘founding’ elections – those first held in the course of democratisation (or in some cases, re-democratisation, as there had been earlier, failed attempts at democracy in Argentina and Brazil especially). Finally, the celebrated case of ‘people power’ in the Philippines, which saw the ousting of General Ferdinand Marcos in 1986, was a touchstone in the literature on regime change and democratisation; so, too, was the counterpoint of Tiananmen Square in 1989 and the failure of a student-led, putatively democratic movement against the Communist Party of China in Beijing.

In the immediate post-Cold war period, democratisation was aided by a ‘unipolar’ moment globally and ‘turbulence’ in the international system more broadly, which rearranged the nature of external (i.e. Cold War-focused) global alliances. At the same time, in 1989 the focus shifted away from Communist or capitalist global alliances to ‘good governance’ and the emergence of other norms such as ‘humanitarian intervention’ (which would evolve into the global Responsibility to Protect by 2005) that further chipped away state sovereignty, much as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and agreements such as the Helsinki Charter had done during the Cold War. The transitions of the late 1980s and early 1990s were dramatic: countries such as Poland saw non-violent social movements topple Communist party dictatorships; South Africa came through from apartheid as a stable, non-racial democracy by 1996; and other countries such as El Salvador and Nicaragua also emerged from conflict to witness progress in democratisation.

Research on the causes, pathways and outcomes of democratic transition also surged during this period, from large-N quantitative studies of transitional processes to deeply described analytical case studies.³ In such analyses, there is support for the original thesis of Seymour Martin Lipset in 1960 that modernisation, or increasing incomes, education and diversity of economies is closely associated with popular demands for democracy.⁴ In some ways, the modernisation thesis was seen in the most recent cases of the Arab Spring, as the *Arab Human Development Report* of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) had long noted that the Middle East and North Africa region had lower levels of inclusivity and democracy (particularly for women) than its overall level of socio-economic development – especially levels of education – would predict.⁵ The advent of the middle class in developing countries has also arguably been an underlying driver of many transitions in the contemporary period.

In summary, the transitology perspective emerged from analysis of the transitions since 1974 and broadened more extensively in the post-Cold War period. In it, one finds a focus first on the *causes of collapse* of the authoritarian region. In the long view, modernisation does matter – it is much harder to coerce a more wealthy, educated and informed society – and thus human development is critical to setting the conditions for popular challenges to authoritarian regimes.⁶ At the same time, countries that have natural resource rents, such as Libya, have seen more enduring authoritarian regimes that have ruled mostly through

patronage and clientelistic networks, which in effect offset the broader development of middle-class, democracy-seeking spectrums of society.

The literature also addresses the *pathways of transition*, including likely triggering events, collective action in social movements, patterns of revolt, regime repression and escalating political violence. Studies on South Africa's transition, for example, showed that over time the regime was unable to repress a massive and internationally supported social movement. Instead, the apartheid regime gradually negotiated its way out of power in a series of pacts or elite agreements, followed by a more fully inclusive constitutional assembly to draft a new social contract.⁷

Thus, democratisation theory emphasises the importance of strategic interactions between elites and citizens in complex processes that involve revisiting the basic rules of the political game. Such processes are fraught with uncertainty, and are often accompanied by violent conflict as the old order collapses and the new order has not yet fully emerged.⁸ However, given the right conditions the period of transition is a strategic moment for substantial gains in, e.g. women's rights and representation, particularly when conditions are favourable for women to organise in civil society associations across lines of contention, whether these are in terms of supporters of the former or new regime, class or identity.⁹ Moreover, when new institutions are chosen there may be the opportunity, often through a combination of external and internal pressures, to create institutions that include women's quotas in electoral processes and within political parties. In Latin America, representation quotas for women have become a strategically gender-sensitive way to institutionalise norms of more equal gender participation in political parties and governance, even if they are differentially effective in implementation.¹⁰

In the late 1990s and into the early 2000s, Ukraine, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Serbia (among others) experienced the so-called 'colour revolutions' in which large social movements led by civil society organisations and students sought to bring democracy drawing on the principles and tactics of nonviolent civil resistance. Yet, in these varied cases, the revolutions themselves were followed by disputed elections, reversals or democratic decline. However, these cases suggest that democracy does come in waves and that there are 'diffusion' or transnational effects. The often ambiguous outcome of so many colour-revolution transitions has led critics to suggest that the transition paradigm is too teleological and that it is unable to effectively account for countries that start celebrated transitions, but end up in a political limbo – much like the cases of the contemporary Arab Spring.

Critiques of transitology

The lapse in visibility of transitology is a result of the mid-to-late 1990s and 2000s transition fatigue whereby the 'end of the transition paradigm' had, for instance, been forcefully and capably argued.¹¹ That many of the prior celebrated efforts at regime change had ended up with anocratic or 'grey zone' regimes,

and that there were so many concerns about the inability of democracy building aid – often channelled to nascent civil society – to tip the balance in such contexts, soured many analysts to the democratisation perspective. Moreover, the misuse of democratisation as a justification for regime change by force by the neo-conservatives in the United States, in the early years of the George W. Bush administration, led to the ill-considered invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003. This further raised concerns that democratisation was a code word for a realist pursuit of regional power by an ideologically driven unipolar global hegemon, the United States.

The main critique levelled against transitology is that it is excessively teleological. Thomas Carothers argued: ‘the transition paradigm has been somewhat useful during a time of momentous and often surprising political upheaval in the world. But it is increasingly clear that reality is no longer conforming to the model’.¹² It is also argued that the paradigm is geographically narrow in scope and that it is inapplicable to specific (new) situations, whose alleged exceptionalism escapes the boundaries (whatever these may be) of transitology. Yet at the very time that the obsolescence argument was put forward, rebellion was brewing in the Middle East and North Africa leading a few years later to the 2011 uprisings which immediately raised precisely the issue of ... transitions.

Another limitation is that there has not been enough demarcation in the study of the establishment of democracy *ex nihilo*, i.e. where it was altogether absent as distinguished from a situation where some attempts have been made and where the norm needs to be more formally adopted. Admittedly, part of the problem is the vagueness that can be attributed to all three dimensions: ‘transition’, ‘process’ and ‘democracy’. In particular, the consolidation phase was too often addressed together with the transition phase (and indeed the term ‘consolidology’¹³ at times used interchangeably with ‘transitology’). Experiences in the 2010s have indicated that the *rupture* moment – the momentous events associated with a break from the past – can be extended, substantially highlighting the need to devote more attention to the break moment rather than the more elusive phase of consolidation (see, for example, Putnam *et al. Making Democracy Work* and Linz and Stepan *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*). What is then needed is more nuance and complexity in the charting of variegated trajectories away from the rupture moment. The conflation of experiences can be reductionist if the points of departure and arrival are not precisely circumscribed.

Yet another limitation is that transitology has also, to some extent, taken for granted the inevitability of transitions. Yet it may well be that some post-revolutionary situations do not actually initiate, however haphazardly, a transition process, ever lingering for an extended period in the (active or frozen) conflict-ridden aftermath of the uprising. Such a non-transition state may well be what Libya is in today in the aftermath of the NATO intervention and the fall of Muammar Gaddafi, or what Algeria experienced in most of the 2010s in terms of socio-political stasis running parallel to the Arab Spring. Witnessing the debate on the uprisings that have shaken the Arab world since 2011, one is struck by the

minimal comparative attention given by analysts and actors alike to the experience of other democratisation processes.

The scant concern with what took place *earlier* and *elsewhere* in terms of attempts at introducing or reintroducing democratic dynamics partakes of a practice that both questions the universality of these challenges and which proceeds with a region's political culture as the main explanatory starting point.¹⁴ Yet the experiences of Western Europe from the post-Medieval state formation period to World War II,¹⁵ of Latin America's social movements and 'pacted rupture' (*ruptura pactada*), of Eastern Europe's civil society activism and of Sub-Saharan Africa's national conferences¹⁶ are all directly related to the efforts underway in the Middle East and North Africa. Indeed, the strife which, for instance, rapidly overtook Yugoslavia after the optimism of 1990 helps put in perspective the post-Arab Spring evolution of Libya or Syria. The latter-day transformations do not take place in a vacuum, and comparative thinking and practice that learns from other settings has value and merit in that regard. Indeed, research has shown that demands for democracy through mass social mobilisation are often driven by 'pocketbook protests', in which everyday quotidian life is inhibited by poor governance of autocratic, often deeply corrupt, regimes.¹⁷

As noted, up until now few Arab Spring studies have been concerned with transition *per se*. Some attempts have been made to go beyond the specifics of the region, but they remain concerned with the revolutionary phase¹⁸ or with rear-view approaches on the impact of authoritarianism.¹⁹ The minimising of the relevance of earlier transitions betrays, however, a certain self-centeredness, if not a type of neo-Orientalism, on the part of Arabists and other Middle East and North Africa ('MENA') experts.²⁰ Arguably, close examination would reveal that all the related developments so far in the Middle East and North Africa since the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia in December 2010 can be accounted for under the transition paradigm (political and constitutional reform, power competition, disorder and strife, ethnic and religious mobilisation and polarisation, power vacuum, disenchantment, old order nostalgia, military take-over and international influence or a lack thereof).

Finally, transition has brought together political scientists, sociologists and anthropologists but not security experts. Yet, if anything, the post-Arab Spring debate reveals the need to factor in the security dimension in transitions beyond existing general consideration of whether democratisation leads to disorder, strife or civil war. What kind of transition can there be if a prolonged period materialises – years in post-Ba'athi Hussein Iraq, for instance – where violence dominates the daily lives of citizens? The contemporary resistance within the Arab World to analogies with previous transitions is reminiscent of the earlier similar rejection of parallels between Eastern Europe and Latin America, or from Latin America to African contexts. In the same manner that transitologists were shunned away from post-Communism studies, today's students of transitions are kept at bay by Arabists. Yet what might matter more in the next phase of understanding the 'MENA' is not necessarily so much familiarity with the Sykes-Picot treaty but rather with pact-making, constitution-drafting and institution-building.

Investigating comparatively²¹ corporatist arrangements, state retreat from its functions, societal alternatives for political expression, and exclusionary politics enables the sharpening of analytical tools to understand contemporary transformation in that part of the world.

Such invalidating of transitology – as well as the complex empirical challenges its introduction or reactivation has been generating in large parts of the South²² – was also a sign of the times with the combined post-9/11 neo-authoritarian dynamics in many parts round the world²³ merging with an excessive association of the transition framework with the recent experiences of post-Soviet Union countries.²⁴ With good reason, the hybridity that came to materialise at that juncture gave pause to some, generating the coinage of new terms such as ‘uncertain regimes’, ‘semi-democratic regimes’, ‘competitive authoritarianism’, ‘facade democracy’ or ‘illiberal democracies’.²⁵ Moreover, it is clear from research that countries with mixed or semi-authoritarian regime types may be particularly vulnerable to debilitating social violence: autocracies tend to be stable through effective repression, and democracies through participation and compromise, while semi-democratic or semi-authoritarian regimes tend to generate their own violent challengers to the state.

In such contexts, electoral moments in particular are windows of vulnerability to violence as a pattern of opposition mobilisation and repression by the regime threatens to escalate. To be sure, doubts had been expressed earlier as to whether ‘democracy was just a moment’²⁶ and such ‘pessimism’²⁷ was largely the result of admittedly excessive optimism in the wake of the end of the Cold War (a revealing fact is that the *Journal of Democracy* was founded in 1990). In point of fact, the issue of transition to democracy is at once a constant twofold question (how to get there and which means to use?) – made up of cumulative attempts at approximating to a universal process of transition whose components would be identified clinically – and the sum total of different and specific experiences in Western Europe, Latin America, Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa and, more recently, the Middle East and North Africa. In such a context, it is then particularly important to revisit democratic transition theory and uncover what it has to offer to the understanding and management of contemporary transitions. In so doing, it is here understood that:

- 1 What is imperfectly referred to for shorthand purposes as ‘transitology’, and which can also be termed ‘democratisation literature’, is a young, vast and still tentative work in progress.
- 2 Democracy is a complex concept with no consensus on any particular set of institutional manifestations.
- 3 The multiplicity of experiences of seeking to break away from authoritarianism render the attempt at systematising those journeys arduous but not altogether impossible.

Many critics of transitology have focused on the problem of electoral processes in societies emerging from autocracy or from civil war. Some scholars such as

Jack Snyder, for example, have highlighted the motivation of political elites in electoral processes in societies divided along ethnic, sectarian or religious lines to ‘play the ethnic card’ as a way to induce fear among the population and to manipulate a fearful population into supporting more extreme positions on issues such as territorial autonomy or secession. This in turn generates a ‘security dilemma’ among other groups, who counter such mobilisation with their own claims, thereby generating a centrifugal or outward spin to the political system. Under such conditions of deep social division elections become nothing more than an ‘ethnic census’.²⁸

The problem of elections as conflict-inducing is directly related to three additional factors. The first of these is the incredibly high stakes of winning and losing in a context in which losing the election may jeopardize personal or group security (there is no sense that one could live to fight a future election). This problem seems particularly acute in presidential elections (as in Côte d’Ivoire in 2010) when the election is perceived by the protagonists as a zero-sum game with a winner-takes-all outcome. Similarly, in Iraq, insurgents who expected – with good reason in this context – to be systematically excluded from power mobilised to disrupt governorate or provincial elections in 2013. Indeed, sectarian violence increased in Iraq as the process of democratisation has not been sufficiently inclusive of elements of the *ancien régime*, and in 2014 pushed some Sunni segments into the hands of the organisation of the Islamic State (IS).

The second additional factor is the allure to some parties of using strategic violence as a way to influence either the process or the outcome (or both) of the balloting. In parliamentary elections in Afghanistan in 2005, and again in 2010, insurgents targeted election workers (both international and Afghan) and sought to disrupt balloting as a way of undermining the legitimacy of the process and of the regime of President Hamid Karzai. The third factor is that when the capture of state power leads to access to natural resource export derived rents or revenue, there may well be an incentive to use violence, intimidation and electoral fraud as a route to enrichment. Sudan’s elections in 2010 are a case in point: the Khartoum regime used a wide array of tactics to ensure beyond doubt that the ruling National Congress Party (NCP) would stay in power and indeed retain access to the revenue derived from exports of crude oil from South Sudan that is pumped northward through to the oil tanker terminal at Port Sudan.

Finally, the detractors of elections in democratising contexts also see them as sometimes serving to legitimise governments that have won militarily on the battlefield and are able to use the position of state incumbency as a way to cloak the regime in legitimacy while not allowing for open opposition. This is the case with those who view parliamentary elections in Rwanda in 2013 as legitimising the rule of the Rwandan Patriotic Front and President Paul Kagamé in a poll in which opposition forces had been imprisoned or otherwise suppressed for fostering ethnic ‘divisionism’.²⁹ The 2015 extension of a ‘third term’ for the Rwandan president demonstrates that institutions alone do not make for sustainability of the democratic ‘rules of the game’; in this instance, internal norms of what constitutes legitimacy and democratic popular support appear to trump global

norms. Thus, much of the recent scholarship on transitology has focused on the question of electoral processes and the problem of managing election-related violence in contexts where democracy is not yet fully institutionalised, or where the necessary conditions for a sustainable democracy appear to be absent.³⁰

With these important caveats – and noting that the question of the pertinence or the lack thereof of the transition paradigm has been asked before³¹ – it can be said that transitology is not therefore a body of research limited to the historically confined study of 1970s, 1980s and 1990s transitions to democracy in Southern Europe, Latin America, Eastern Europe or Africa. Such forays marked the inception of a crucial field of study concerned with the processes of democratisation that is highly relevant to a new generation of transitions now unfolding, notably in the Middle East and North Africa and in globally significant cases such as Myanmar, raising both conceptual and practical issues.

We argue in this book, first, that the literature already features a measure of consensus on some key elements of the method of transitioning as it relates in particular to the sequence of the transition and its requirements; second, that the current post-globalisation wave of transition has introduced new and important qualitative aspects to the transition cycle, in particular the transnational dimension which was present in prior contexts but must be accounted for more fully in the next phase.

Democratic transition: founding moment and forward movement

What, ultimately, is ‘transition’? The shift from a system built on coercion, fear and imposition (and conflict) to one based on consent, compromise and coalition-building (and peace) is no easy task. Nor is it a quick or linear process. In effect, such a transition in the underlying rules of politics implies a set of transformative tasks towards a form of government where leaders are selected through competitive elections. This has been described as a process of ‘transforming the accidental arrangements, prudential norms and contingent solutions that have emerged (during transitions) into structures, i.e. into relationships that are reliably known, regularly practiced and habitually accepted’.³² Democratic transition is, then, centrally about political *transformation* and re-negotiating the underlying rules of the political game. The nature of the transformation is at the heart of this exercise; not solely the replacement of political regimes, but the creation of a new order aimed at democratisation that gives representation and political voice. As Klaus Müller and Andreas Pickel note when commenting on the different dimensions of a paradigm: ‘*it informs social scientific work* by demarcating fundamental problems ... *it informs policy-making*, especially in terms of fundamental reform approaches [and] ... *it informs ideology and political action* by embodying fundamental values and visions of social order’.³³

Transformation towards what? Democracy is the end result of a process of democratisation and political liberalisation. Specifically, transitions are an open-ended attempt at the realisation of democracy. To the extent that, as noted, the

process to is qualitatively different from the *aimed at* goal, an important dimension arises as it relates to transitions, namely the centrality of performance. Although, ‘transition’ or ‘political transition’ can be found to refer to the passage towards modernity, development, economic viability or democracy, the term and phrase are commonly used to refer to the latter. Democratisation can therefore be defined as (i) a political and socio-economic process characterised by (ii) the gradual evolution/movement/progress/march towards (iii) a system of government anchored in democratic principles, namely and chiefly representation, inclusivity, accountability and civil and political rights. In particular, this implies a process away from an earlier system – an *ancien régime* – which generally took the form of authoritarianism or dictatorship. In turn, it implies a key moment in that sequence of rupture, i.e. a break from the old (non-democratic order) to the new (rights-accommodating) political environment.

Against that background, transitology is not transition. One is the science, the other the object of study. It is important to note that not all insights gathered in the study of the political transformation of a given country away from authoritarianism will apply elsewhere, including in the same region. However, transitology is by nature an eminently comparative exercise, aimed at producing contingent generalisations about the nature and process of political change. Transitology is therefore a specialisation in social sciences continuously concerned with transformation. Though open-ended in the manner in which the sequence comes into play and is unpacked, change is not altogether value free. It is teleological in the sense that the norm pursued is the one of democracy. Even when the phrase is limited to ‘political transition’, the assumption is that such transition is towards democracy.

The literature on transitions to democracy is varied and rich. It is composed of several important contributions³⁴ which do not represent a single, overarching body but rather several strands that meet at key points constitutive of the markers of transition theory. Dankwart Rustow’s April 1970 ‘Transitions to Democracy’³⁵ article is arguably the founding text of democratic transition theory. Writing in *Comparative Politics*, Rustow insightfully argued that transitions do not usually emerge from high levels of modernisation and development but more often from contingent choices and specific local factors. That said, there are typical background conditions for successful transitions, first among which is a shared understanding of national unity: if some sense of who constitutes ‘the people’ is absent, transitions can devolve into competing claims for separate projects and sovereignty. Rustow also argued that transition can be conceptualised as two distinct phases: the ‘preparatory phase’ which involves a long struggle between political factions over the state, and a ‘decision phase’ after the outcome of such a struggle in which political factions (led mostly by elites) agree to democratise in a mutual security pact. The Rustow perspective is echoed in the work of political sociologists John Higley and Michael Burton who, in evaluating cases such as Sweden’s transition to democracy in the 1920s, also argued for a close focus on the contingent choices of elites within democratisation processes.³⁶

Importantly, Rustow argued that the development of democracy depends on the presence of one key requirement, namely national unity. This dimension was then the inevitable basis for the institutionalisation of rule-based political contest. In other words, Rustow proposed a theory revolving around the process and the actor wherein the actors come in equally as regards the struggle, leadership and choice. Following this pioneering work, subsequent authors also explored the essential notion that democratisation is the outcome of contingency and choice, based on actor decisions as they seek to navigate the uncertainty between the old regime and the newly-negotiated order.

Perhaps the most influential of these is the work of Guillermo O'Donnell, Philippe Schmitter and Laurence Whitehead who together produced a four-volume work on *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* in 1986. They, too, emphasised the key role of elite contingency and choice within transition processes as the critical factor in democratisation, arguing that it becomes possible when there are splits within the dominant regime over how to handle protests and, when faced with the inevitability of change, the military switches allegiance from the old governing elites to the newly-legitimated elites. Engagingly, this volume closes with Schmitter's lifelong reflections on observing what appears as a trend line in [Figure 2.1](#) (see [Chapter 10](#)).

A final aspect of transitology is the importance of understanding that transitions involve renegotiation of the basic rules of the game of politics. Many of the issues that arise are on the sequencing of such processes of institutional change, particularly in electoral processes that lead to the election of constitution-making bodies, as has been the case in Tunisia and Libya with the constituent assemblies in 2011 and 2012 respectively. Central among the questions that are left open are the territorial bases of the state and the degree of federal or decentralised rule (a key question in Nepal, for example, which has transitioned from Hindu monarchy into a new constitution that federalises, and secularises, the state) and the basis or political economy of wealth sharing in cases where natural resources are coincident with claims for autonomy (as in the Kurdish region of Iraq). In societies divided by deep ethnic, sectarian or religious social cleavages – many of which are emerging from civil war or widespread political violence such as in Nepal – much of the debate over institutional choice involves a delicate balance among institutions designed to share power and lead to inclusive, yet capable, ruling coalitions.³⁷

What summary lessons does transitology give us? We suggest the following twelve key insights from the transitology literature are most pertinent to today's cases of democratic transitions.

- 1 *Transitions can occur in any structural context.* They represent an explicit choice by a community to try and proceed towards democracy. Mechanisms are necessary to flesh out democracy while institutional controls can vary. The issue of transition raises the question of what specific means are selected to achieve the democratic goal.

- 2 *Transitions tend to congregate in waves.* Materialising sporadically, such cycles are an indication of moments whereby conditions conducive to a demand for democratisation reach a fulcrum point initiating a visible phase. The ‘wave’ analogy was put forward by Samuel Huntington in his 1993 book, *The Third Wave*. This construct implies that democracy follows a ‘global advance’³⁸ logic.
- 3 *Transitions take time,* and there is no uniformly similar end result. Transitions have an unpredictable end result, an ‘uncertain “something else” ... which can be the instauration of a political democracy’.³⁹ The rule-bounded nature of democracy is tested by the open-ended nature of democratisation. Transitions are uncertain because they seek to introduce predictability (of rule, political behaviour, institutional structures and commitment to outcomes). The common project is from a disorderly (violent) system to one that is rule-bounded (peaceful).
- 4 *There is no single path to democracy* but there are requirements and there are necessary dynamics, notably inclusion and redistribution. The values of democracy are similar but their expression can differ in specific contexts. Some struggles to achieve democracy have been motivated by the pursuit of ‘justice’, others have occurred in the name of ‘*égalité*’ (equality) or ‘*libertad*’ (freedom) and yet again others with a view to securing ‘*utumwa*’ (liberation) or ‘*karama*’ (dignity).
- 5 *Transitions represent a founding moment and a forward movement.* This interlinked two-part process is anchored in a rupture from or abandonment of earlier ways of doing politics and the gradual adoption of new ones. If democracy rests on the practice of its components (respect of freedoms, enactment of civic responsibility, tolerance of difference and sharing of communal burden), then similarly democratisation rests on the ideally conscientious acting out of its multiple commitments.
- 6 *Transitions are reversible.* Democratic legitimation is a complex process and authoritarian regression can occur. Regimes can aim to pre-empt crises by appearing to democratise or can seek to maintain a system through a controlled transition that gives the appearance of opening up. Cosmetic, façade or virtual processes that are meant to give an appearance of democracy are particularly detrimental to the securing of democracy in a context where it needs to advance tangibly. Similarly, an increase in undemocratic behaviour in an already democratic setting can lead to a retreat of democracy.⁴⁰
- 7 *Transitions are almost invariably conflictual* and can often lead to violence. While some analysts have perhaps oversold this point, there is good reason to suggest that in the course of transition there is a mobilisation – often along identity lines – that can induce a ‘security dilemma’ and which can lead to transition-related violence. Pre-existing conflicts are collapsed into a new structure which at once inherits them and seeks to solve them in novel ways. In particular, previously repressed voices can find space for expression and empowerment. The challenge of addressing violence is therefore

present before, during and after a political transition. It is both an incipient and a continuing problem.

- 8 *Transitions can unleash new vulnerabilities to social conflict*, particularly in cases of ethnic or narrow minority regimes. Violence can emerge because transitions are inherently uncertain, crisis prone and are typically periods of deep economic and social turbulence. Specifically, this issue comes to the fore because during transitions, the state (*primus inter pares* and holder of the official monopoly of violence) suffers a loss of legitimacy which it has to re-establish on new, representative grounds; regaining the legitimacy of the state to rule is essential if violence is to be managed – as the war riven post-2011 pathway to transition in Libya attests.
- 9 *The economy occupies a central place during transitions*. Economic malaise and popular frustration often precede the collapse of autocratic regimes. Yet the pursuit of political change concomitantly with economic reform creates the reality of a dual process which can yield ‘transitional incompatibility’,⁴¹ bringing the crucial question of sequencing back to the fore.
- 10 *Transitions are a comprehensive process* with ramifications for most dimensions of the social, economic and political environment. In time, a successful transition widens to generate a ‘democratic culture’ and, over time, to ‘habituation’ to the new rules of the political game. Constitutional processes are central to this activity with a constitution representing more than just a text or a narrative; it is the expression of a new social contract.
- 11 *Transition occurs in a sequence of stages*. There exists much ‘uncertainty’⁴² as to the temporal delimitation of the phases, notably as regards the consolidation phase. Sequencing is crucial, particularly with regard to elections. The choice of sequence involves a trade-off between the stability offered by early elections on the one hand, and the political and legal vacuum caused by establishing a new political order without a basic legal consensus on the other. Early elections legitimise the transitional regime, but disadvantage new political parties by depriving them of the necessary time to organise.⁴³
- 12 *Actors are key to the process of transition*. Among these, the leadership piloting the transition and civil society are eminently central to the process. The strategic capacity of these groups is fundamental, as is the dynamic of appearance of new actors. The opening of the system featuring demanding actors (often previously repressed) is a difficult and contentious exercise. Hence, agency is particularly central to the process of transition. It is no surprise that efforts to mediate the Libya transition, following the then successful but ultimately ill-fated transitional elections of 2012, has been a repeated strategic objective of the United Nations’ effort to restore a unified pathway of transition toward stability for Libyan elites.

Conclusions: promises and limits of transitology

The conceptual foundations of this book offer an approach to reviving an important perspective for understanding dramatic political changes in a manner

better informed by experiences of the past. We do assert that even though there is imprecision in the transitology concept – as many of the contributors to this volume note – the notion offers a compelling framework for evaluating in a more contingent and systematic way the opportunity to see both progress and regression in contemporary transitions. The principal utility of the construct is that it illuminates well the vulnerability of the phase(s) during which the development of a democratic ethos and the establishment of democratic institutions are pursued.

Hence, the stripped-down statement of transitology is fourfold:

- (i) an aim to create a generalisable theory of democratisation and the ability to explain processes of democratisation in different social contexts; (ii) the conviction that democratisation is a one-way and gradual process of several phases; (iii) an emphasis that the single crucial factor for democratic transition is a decision by the political elite and not structural features; and (iv) the normative belief of neoliberal nature, that the consolidation of the institution of democratic elections and other reforms of its own accord establish effectively functioning states.⁴⁴

Against this, the primary usefulness of transitology is that it points to a process which carries a measure of universality. In spite of the diversity of authoritarian situations – which include dynamic reconfigurations such as those of the so-called ‘deep state’⁴⁵ – with each new wave, analysts insisted on the novelty or uniqueness of the new situations only to wake up a few years later to realise how little had changed in the basic requirements of the steps needed to generate or regenerate⁴⁶ democracy.

Among the promises of transitology, the following dimensions can be further identified:

- understanding better the conditions under which autocratic regimes are vulnerable to challenge and collapse;
- deciphering the context in which elites choose to negotiate rather than fight;
- contributing to assessment instruments that seek to discern vulnerability to election-related violence and associated conflict-prevention activities;
- identifying the most vexatious choices and sequencing problems on which to focus facilitative international assistance;
- determining which specific institutional manifestations of democracy are appropriate for any given context, consistent with a consensus that arises from internal bargaining and not international imposition;
- seeing contexts in a long-term, appreciative perspective on the nature, pace, scope and end-state of change.

The contributions that follow in this volume achieve these aims in their analysis of contemporary regions, contexts and cases. While we have reserved the final words for an esteemed colleague, Philippe Schmitter, we conclude the

conceptual chapter of this volume with some additional findings on both the promises and weaknesses of the transitology lens. It is clear, by way of immediate admission, that the absence of any single ‘ideal type’ transition process is not in and of itself a weakness. What may be more important is the indication of progress. The overarching value of transitology is, therefore, that it introduces universal categories in order to understand layered developments and the rebuilding of politics. It seeks to understand systematically the journey about societal maturation beyond community defiance and the limitations of the ‘place’ moment (Tahrir Square, Pearl Square, Plaza de Mayo, Puerta del Sol, La Bastille, Umbrella Square, Taksim Square, Euromaidan and so forth) towards the institutionalisation of systemic processes.

In the wake of the Arab Spring, three aspects are emerging as key dimensions of latter-day transitions: the role of *social media*, the question of *transnationalism* and the *security* dimension. First, the long-term impact of the widely acclaimed social media that contributed to the downfall of the autocratic Middle East and North African regimes must be examined further. To be sure, the role of technology will remain intrinsically ambivalent. Social networks may contribute to empowering citizens, but the same technology may also be used against them for control and repression.⁴⁷ Whether virtual groups can ensure democratic or civic compliance is among the questions that need to be explored further as the new transition processes mature. Similarly, the current socio-political transformations are being altered by transnational dynamics which were previously less important or altogether absent. Here again, the transnational dimension of transitions has been noted before.⁴⁸

Second, in the early twenty-first century the transnationalism dimension has overtaken the grammar of international relations. The post-Arab Spring has illustrated the dynamic further taking it into new uncharted territories both of transition and of conflict. The overflowing of the impact of the Libyan revolution onto the Sahel and the engulfing of the Syrian civil war by regional actors – notably from the Levant, the Gulf and the Maghreb as well as foreign fighters coming from the Americas, Europe and Asia, and proxy support for the different protagonists from global powers such as Russia and the United States – indicate how important this new dimension has become.

Finally, developments around the Arab Spring are also shedding light on the importance of successful breakthroughs as preconditions for additional democratic development. A contribution in relation to this question was made by Ray Salvatore Jennings in a 2012 report issued by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP). Calling for ‘the need to identify a breakthrough paradigm’, Jennings identified an important dimension of the gathering discontent storm before the rupture: ‘As revolutionary potential builds in breakthrough venues, “irregular” communities of dissent increasingly test the political waters, some for the first time’.⁴⁹

Transitology is especially useful in looking beyond the immediacy and intricacy of the moment towards a longer-term view that identifies the markers of progress on the road map of democratisation. The road to democracy is indeed

arduous. Change is engineered with difficulty beyond the battle cries (*ruptura, solidarność, perestroika, irhal, dégage*) and political transformation generates uncertainty. Transitions involve struggles for power and the pacification of the political process is no easy task. Transitology's task is then undeniably ambitious and at the same time elegantly simple. It seeks to elucidate the spatio-temporal logic of *a path which is also a moment*. Societies in flux and states in mutation awaken from 'the fairest dawn' to try and morph into a new, more legitimate and responsive political system. Transitions are indeed about a founding moment and a forward movement. Yet the mainstay of the exercise is the explication, which is still an investigation, of the resulting passage. Ultimately, transitology offers the promise of a general theory of political transformation and it appears to stand the test of time in looking forward to perhaps further such moments well into the twenty-first century.

Notes

- 1 On the value of 'fluidity' as a focus for understanding the 'how' of transitions, see Banegas, 'Les Transitions Démocratiques'.
- 2 See Claire Spencer *et al.*, *Iraq*.
- 3 For an overview of this literature, see Geddes, 'What Causes Democratization?'
- 4 Lipset, *Political Man*.
- 5 See Kuhn, 'On the Role of Human Development'.
- 6 Geddes, 'What Causes Democratization?'
- 7 Sisk, *Democratization in South Africa*.
- 8 For an examination of this aspect building on Samuel Huntington's 1968 inaugural *Political Order in Changing Societies*, see Francis Fukuyama, *Political Order and Political Decay*.
- 9 Baldez, 'Women's Movements and Democratic Transitions'.
- 10 Jones, 'Gender Quotas, Electoral Laws and the Election of Women'.
- 11 Carothers, 'End of Transition Paradigm'. See, similarly, the special issue of *Esprit*: 'Transition Démocratique: La Fin d'un Modèle', *Esprit*, January 2008.
- 12 Carothers, 'End of Transition Paradigm', p. 6.
- 13 See the analysis of Philippe C. Schmitter in [Chapter 10](#).
- 14 Barrington Moore notes that 'to explain behaviour in terms of cultural values is to engage in circular reasoning' (Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, p. 486). He adds: 'The assumption of inertia, that cultural and social continuity do not require explanation, obliterates the fact that both have to be recreated anew in each generation, often with great pain and suffering'.
- 15 See Lowe, *Savage Continent*.
- 16 See, for instance, Daloz, *Transitions Démocratiques Africaines*.
- 17 Bracati, 'Pocketbook Protests'.
- 18 See, notably, Bennani-Chraïbi and Fillieule, 'Pour Une Sociologie des Situations Révolutionnaires'.
- 19 See, for instance, Nayed, 'Beyond Fascism'.
- 20 See Mohamedou, 'Neo-Orientalism and the e-Revolutionary'.
- 21 Kamrava and Mora, 'Civil Society and Democratization in Comparative Perspective'.
- 22 Among these challenges, Jochen Hippler notes: 'Weak and poorly functioning state apparatuses are not made more efficient but are in fact made devoid of any function whatsoever ... A 'democratisation' of these structures is then purely a matter of form ... One result is that the citizens in the South become disillusioned with their democracy'. See Hippler, *The Democratization of Disempowerment*, pp. 24–25.

- 23 Notably in the Middle East and North Africa. See, for instance, Schlumberger, *Debating Arab Authoritarianism* and King, *The New Authoritarianism*.
- 24 See, for example, Gans-Morse, 'Searching for Transitologists' and Holzer, 'The End of the Transitological Paradigm?'
- 25 See Diamond, 'Elections Without Democracy'; Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*; and Zakaria, 'The Rise of Illiberal Democracy'.
- 26 Kaplan, 'Was Democracy Just a Moment?'. Kaplan writes: 'I submit that the democracy we are encouraging in many poor parts of the world is an integral part of a transformation towards new forms of authoritarianism'.
- 27 Carothers, 'Stepping Back from Democratic Pessimism'; and Gilley, 'Democratic Triumph, Scholarly Pessimism'.
- 28 Snyder, *From Voting to Violence*.
- 29 'Rwandan Elections: Safe and Sorry', *The Economist*, 21 September 2013.
- 30 See, for example, Bekoe, *Voting in Fear*.
- 31 See, notably, Karl, 'From Democracy to Democratization and Back'; and Jankauskas and Gudžinskas, 'Reconceptualising Transitology'.
- 32 Schmitter, 'Some Propositions about Civil Society', p. 4.
- 33 Müller and Pickel, 'Transition, Transformation and the Social Sciences', p. 29, emphasis added.
- 34 Of particular note, among numerous others, is the work of Lisa Anderson, Richard Banegas, Sheri Berman, Carles Boix, Valerie Bunce, Thomas Carothers, Ruth Berins Collier, Robert Dahl, Larry Diamond, Giuseppe Di Palma, John Entelis, Steven M. Fish, Barbara Geddes, Stephen Haggard, David Held, Guy Hermet, Samuel P. Huntington, Ken Jowitt, Robert Kaufman, Bahgat Korany, Steven Levitsky, Juan J. Linz, Arend Lijphart, Seymour Martin Lipset, Cynthia McClintock, Michael McFaul, Barington Moore Jr., John Mueller, Guillermo O'Donnell, Marina Ottaway, Robert D. Putnam, Lucian W. Pye, Geoffrey Pridham, Adam Przeworski, Benjamin Reilly, Dankwart A. Rustow, Ghassan Salamé, Andreas Schedler, Philippe C. Schmitter, Amartya Sen, Alfred Stepan, Susan Stokes, Crawford Young, Richard Youngs, Lucan A. Way, Laurence Whitehead and Howard J. Wiarda.
- 35 Rustow, 'Transitions to Democracy'.
- 36 Higley and Burton, 'The Elite Variable in Democratic Transitions and Breakdowns'.
- 37 Roeder and Rothchild, *Sustainable Peace*.
- 38 Liu, *Transition Challenges in the Arab World*, p. 2.
- 39 O'Donnell *et al.*, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*, p. 3.
- 40 See Todorov, *Les Ennemis Intimes de la Démocratie*.
- 41 Armijo *et al.*, 'The Problems of Simultaneous Transitions'. See also Haggard and Kaufman, *The Political Economy of Democratic Transitions*.
- 42 Schedler, 'Taking Uncertainty Seriously'.
- 43 Liu, *Transition Challenges in the Arab World*, p. 2.
- 44 Jankauskas and Gudžinskas, 'Reconceptualising Transitology', p. 181.
- 45 For an insightful attempt at conceptualising the deep state, see O'Neil, 'The Deep State'.
- 46 Slater, 'The Architecture of Authoritarianism'.
- 47 Benkirane, 'The Alchemy of Revolution'.
- 48 See, for instance, Cichok, 'Transitionalism vs. Transnationalism'.
- 49 Jennings, 'Democratic Breakthroughs', p. 34. Examples of novel 'irregular community' are the civil society movement known as *le balai citoyen* (citizen's broom or civic broom) which led the campaign to unseat Burkina Faso's president, Blaise Compaoré, in October 2014, or the *ça suffit* (enough) campaign launched in February 2016 by Chadian organisations against President Idriss Déby.