FRIEDRICH EBERT STIFTUNG

Elections as Milestones and Stumbling Blocks for Peaceful Democratic Consolidation

JACK SNYDER
September 2010

- Post-conflict elections mark a turning point in the recovery and reconstruction of countries emerging from civil war. For some, the first post-conflict election ushers them across a threshold towards the consolidation of peace and democracy, but for all too many, the first election serves as a revolving door, spinning them back into war and authoritarianism.

- Recent examples of peaceful democratic transitions show that countries with conducive conditions, such as competent and impartial state institutions, have a good chance of not relapsing into violent conflict. Additional facilitating conditions include the absence of deep identity-based divisions within society, prior experience with democracy and a fairly high level of economic development.

- Another important prerequisite for a successful transition is the careful sequencing of reforms. One key aspect is to avoid holding premature elections when reasonably effective civic institutions and other facilitating conditions are still lacking and the risk of relapsing into violence therefore remains high. At the same time, caution is necessary since claims of »sequencing the transition« might also serve as excuses for authoritarians seeking to subvert progress towards democracy.

- International actors usually have only limited influence on the general trajectory taken by democratic transformation processes. On occasion, however, they can provide decisive impetus for good or ill when it comes to crucial turning points in this process, such as the shaping of civic institutions and the scheduling of elections.

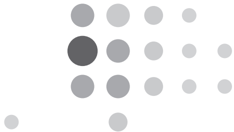


Table of Contents

Introduction **2**

Successful Transitions **3**

Dangers of Early Elections **3**

Sequencing Transitions: Dilemmas and Solutions **3**

References **5**

Introduction

Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, human rights advocates and neoconservative publicists alike have argued that promoting democracy abroad promotes peace. Mature, stable democracies have not fought wars against each other, and they rarely suffer from civil wars. But the path to democratic peace is not always smooth. Stalemated, violent democratic transitions in Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan and the Palestinian Authority were the bane of the Bush administration's »war on terror« and its plans for a »new Middle East«. Likewise, during the 1990s, competitive elections held in the early stages of democratisation led directly to major civil wars in Algeria, Burundi and Yugoslavia.

These cases are hardly unique. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, states that became mired in the initial phase of a democratic transition faced a heightened risk of civil war. (Hegre et al 2001; Goldstone et al. 2005) When authoritarian regimes break down, a host of elite factions and popular groups jockey for power in a setting in which repressive state authority has been weakened, but democratic institutions are insufficiently developed to take their place. This can lead to civil war through the lack of institutional means to regulate or repress factional strife. (Mansfield and Snyder 2005; Hegre et al. 2001: 34)

In some cases, civil war results from the gap between rising demands for political participation and the lagging development of the political institutions needed to accommodate those demands. In these circumstances, threatened established elites, as well as newly rising elites are likely to turn to ideological appeals to win mass support. Populist ideology serves as a substitute for the institutions that are too weak to legitimise political power.

These ideological appeals can be based on almost any social cleavage: nation, ethnicity, religious sect, class, economic sector or urban/rural. Elites, however, tend to prefer nationalism, ethnicity and sectarianism, because these ideologies play down the economic conflict of interest between elites and masses, emphasising instead the purportedly more fundamental commonalities of blood and culture. Threatened authoritarian elites may gamble on resurrection by playing the nationalist, ethnic or religious card in the hope of gaining a mass following by invoking threats from outsiders. Rising elites may find that ethnic or religious groups are easier to mobilise than class or secular constituencies when institutions that cut across traditional cultural groupings are poorly developed. Where ethnic and sectarian cleavages are unavailable for mobilisation, elites may turn to populist economic ideologies, which demand rule in the name of the people but not strict legal accountability. Liberal democratic appeals based on full electoral and legal accountability are likely to succeed only when favourable conditions, such as effective political and legal institutions, accompany the early stages of a democratic transition. (Mansfield and Snyder 2005: 61-62; 2008)

While mass ideological politics is prominent in some cases of democratisation and civil war, in others the demand for mass political participation is muted. Sustained, programmatic ideological appeals to mobilise mass support are absent or superficial in these cases. Politics centres instead on factions – often armed groups – jockeying for power in a setting in which authoritarian and democratic institutions are both weak. Force, patronage and opportunism loom as the trump cards in such environments. Nonetheless, elections may be used as a tool for political competition. Strong factions may see elections as a way to consolidate power, to legitimise their power in the eyes of domestic and foreign audiences, and to demonstrate their superior strength without having to engage in ruinous fighting. Even illiberal politicians can use elections to demonstrate their ability to out-organise their foes in using patronage, media control or intimidation to dominate the electoral campaign (for example, the 1997 election of the ruthless Liberian warlord Charles Taylor). Sometimes this strategy works to institutionalise authority without war and gradually regularises electoral politics. However, in its initial phases, electoral competition often degenerates into violence when the loser of an election chooses to escalate the struggle rather than accept the result, or when the winner tries to reassert ruthless despotism. (Stedman and Lyons 2004: 147-149, 152-157; Lindberg 2006: 15; Mansfield and Snyder 2008)

Successful Transitions

Not all countries experience significant violence during democratic transitions. Brazil, Chile, Hungary, Poland, South Korea and Taiwan are recent examples of peaceful transitions. Transitional countries that were comparatively well endowed with facilitating conditions for democratic politics, such as relatively competent and impartial state institutions, were unlikely to detour into violence. (Mansfield and Snyder 2005) This is a story as old as democracy itself: Great Britain's nineteenth-century path toward mass electoral politics was smoothed by the pre-existing strength of its legal system, representative institutions and free press. Building effective state institutions before holding unfettered elections is the key to reducing the risk of violence during a democratic transition. In addition to working institutions, other conditions facilitating peaceful democratic consolidation include a fairly high level of economic development, an economy that is not based on oil production, the absence of deep identity-based divisions within society, prior experience with democracy and democratic neighbours (Carothers 2007; Byman 2003; Moon 2009).

As Robert Dahl (1971) and Samuel Huntington (1968) noted nearly four decades ago, the British-style sequence of forging effective state institutions prior to starting a democratic transition has become increasingly rare, although it does still occur. Post-apartheid South Africa successfully followed such a sequence in the 1990s, adapting apartheid-era institutions to the needs of post-apartheid democracy. The likelihood that this favourable sequence will be rare among future transitions is precisely why democratisation may often go awry, as occurred in recent elections in the Middle East.

Dangers of Early Elections

Post-conflict elections mark a turning point in the recovery and reconstruction of countries emerging from civil war. For some, the first post-conflict election ushers them across a threshold towards the consolidation of peace and democracy, but for all too many, the first election serves as a revolving door spinning them back into war and authoritarianism. Whether first elections lead to consolidation or conflict depends in part on how soon after a war ends elections are held. In general, the earlier they are held, the more likely war is to recur. (Brancati and Snyder 2009) Post-conflict elections occur more quickly today than in the past, so the dangers posed by early elections are ever more acute.

Holding early elections is not especially risky if conditions are favourable: that is, if one side has won a decisive victory; if rebel armies have been demobilised; if the country has frequently held successful elections in the past; if administrative and legal institutions have been strengthened; if power sharing guarantees are in place to reassure the losers of the election; and/or if robust international peacekeeping forces are in place. But an increasing number of countries are jumping the gun and holding elections before establishing these facilitating conditions.

Countries tend to hold risky early elections when conflicts end in a negotiated settlement rather than in decisive victory. This is likely to happen when one of the sides insists on elections because it thinks it can win them, either fairly or unfairly. If the other side challenges the electoral process or does not accept its outcome, a return to violence is likely. International actors can exacerbate this when they push for early elections but do not provide adequate peacekeeping and do not insist on sequencing military demobilisation and institution-building before holding elections.

Sequencing Transitions: Dilemmas and Solutions

The key point here is not only that democratisation is often violent (Berman 2007), but also that premature, out-of-sequence attempts to democratise may make subsequent efforts to democratise more difficult and more violent than they would otherwise be. When elections are held in an institutional wasteland, such as Iraq, for example, political competition typically coalesces around and reinforces the ethnic and sectarian divisions in traditional society. To forge liberal, secular coalitions that cut across cultural divisions, it is necessary to have impartial state institutions that provide a framework for civic action and a focal point for civic loyalty. Without reasonably effective civic institutions, the outcome in culturally diverse societies is likely to resemble Iraq and Lebanon. Once a country starts on an illiberal trajectory, ideas are unleashed and institutions are established that tend to continue propelling it along that trajectory. A key danger is that premature democratisation will push a country down this path.

Carothers is less concerned about the lasting birth defects of untimely democratic transitions. He suggests that an »historical experience with political pluralism«, even a failed one, gives a country a leg up in subsequent attempts. (Carothers 2007: 24) This is not completely implausible. In Latin America, for example, the accretion of quasi-democratic institutions – parties, labour unions, courts and the press – left a legacy of some outward institutional forms that could be re-animated in later bursts of political reform. Nonetheless, there are other cases where failed attempts at mass electoral politics left a legacy of ethnic nationalism, military populism and few useable democratic institutions. President Bush asserted that »it is the practice of democracy that makes a nation ready for democracy« but all too often the reverse is true. (Mansfield and Snyder 2005: 2)

When will gradual or partial steps be helpful, and when will claims to be sequencing the transition simply serve as excuses for authoritarians who seek to subvert progress toward democracy? Dictators in countries such as Tunisia have often used reforms tactically to co-opt, divide and weaken resistance to autocracy. (Bellin 2002) However, dictators in Chile, South Korea, Taiwan and, arguably, Malaysia have presided over economic and administrative reforms that have had the unintended consequence of improving the country's subsequent chances of a successful democratic transition.

That said, dictators are not the most likely implementers of well-sequenced reforms leading to democracy. This role is more commonly played by moderate groups that seek to curtail the power of the old authoritarian elite, but that also fear a rapid descent into the chaos of mass politics. Historically, a constructive role has sometimes been played by partial reforms that are designed to protect a liberalising coalition, such as the British Whigs and liberals (or Nelson Mandela); from a backlash by threatened traditional elites, such as the Tories (or apartheid elites); and from radical mass groups, such as the working class Chartists (or advocates of racial or tribal confrontation). Controlled reforms create a breathing space in which the reformers can put in place rule-of-law guarantees that reassure all constituencies while they negotiate golden parachutes with old elites to induce them to relinquish power. As for the precise mechanisms of sequencing or gradualism, a variety of tactics might be useful in the right hands: amnesties, elite-protecting pacts on property rights, professionalized but not unregulated news media, rule of law reform that starts with the bureaucracy and the economy, and the internal democratization of ruling elite institutions such as the ruling party. Such expedients have effectively facilitated peaceful democratic transitions in Brazil, Chile, El Salvador, Mozambique, Poland, South Africa, South Korea, Taiwan and elsewhere.

Carothers is right that outsiders can rarely have a major effect on the choice of trajectory, but on occasion they can provide a decisive impetus for good or for ill. (Carothers 2007) The astute tactics of the European Union in conditioning Romanian and Slovak accession on the adoption of policies to guarantee the rights of minorities, backed by a strengthened rule of law, helped to support the efforts of democratic coalitions to create favourable conditions for transition. Conversely, the decision of international donors to compel the ethnic minority Tutsi military dictatorship of under-institutionalised Burundi to hold free and fair elections in 1993 contributed heavily to the more than 200,000 subsequent deaths from ethnic violence. At the margins, realistic knowledge about the sequencing of transitions may help to promote a few successes and avert a few Burundi-style disasters.

References

Bellin, Eva (2002): *Stalled Democracy: Capital, Labor and the Paradox of State-sponsored Development*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Berman, Sheri (2007): How Democracies Emerge: Lessons from Europe. *Journal of Democracy* 18 (January): 28-41.

Brancati, Dawn/Snyder, Jack (2009): *Time to Kill: The Impact of Election Timing and Sequencing on Post-Conflict Stability*. Presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Toronto (September).

Byman, Daniel (2003): Constructing a Democratic Iraq: Challenges and Opportunities. *International Security* 28:1 (Summer): 47-78.

Carothers, Thomas (2007): How Democracies Emerge: The 'Sequencing' Fallacy. *Journal of Democracy* 18 (January 2007): 12-27.

Dahl, Robert A. (1971): *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Goldstone, Jack A./Bates, Robert H./Gurr, Ted Robert/Lustik, Michael/Marshall, Monty G./Ulfelder, Jay/Woodward, Mark (2005): *A Global Forecasting Model of Political Instability*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, 1.9.-4.9..

Huntington, Samuel P. (1968): *Political Order in Changing Societies*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Lindberg, Staffan A. (2006): *Democracy and Elections in Africa*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

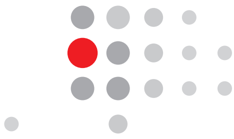
Mansfield, Edward D./Snyder, Jack (2005): *Electing to Fight: Why Emerging Democracies Go to War*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Mansfield, Edward D./Snyder, Jack (2007): The Sequencing ›Fallacy‹. *Journal of Democracy* 18 (July): 5-9.

Mansfield, Edward D./Snyder, Jack (2008): *Democratization and Civil War*. Occasional papers of the Saltzman Institute of War and Peace Studies, February, posted on the Saltzman website at http://www.columbia.edu/cu/siwps/workingpapers and on Columbia International Affairs On-line.

Moon, Bruce (2009): Long Time Coming: Prospects for Democracy in Iraq. *International Security* (spring).

Stedman, Stephen John/Lyons, Terrence (2004): Conflict in Africa, in: E. Gyimah-Boadi (ed.), *Democratic Reform in Africa*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 141-158.



About the author

Dr. Jack L. Snyder is the Robert and Renee Belfer Professor of International Relations in the political science department and the Saltzman Institute of War and Peace Studies at Columbia University, New York.

Imprint

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung I Global Policy and Development
Hiroshimastraße 28 I 10785 Berlin I Germany

Responsible:
Marius Müller-Hennig, Global Peace and Security Policy

Tel.: ++49-30-269-35-7476 I Fax: ++49-30-269-35-9246
http://www.fes.de/GPol/

To order publications:
Sandra.Richter@fes.de

The views expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung or of the organization for which the author works.

This publication is printed on paper from sustainable forestry.

ISBN 978-3-86872-419-6