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# Bringing Back Transitology

## Democratisation in the 21st Century

Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou and Timothy D. Sisk

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# Executive Summary

Can political and socioeconomic transitions be systematised beyond their own contexts and specificities? In examining political liberalisation attempts taking place in the early twenty-first century, notably those leading up to and in the wake of the Arab Spring, dominant perspectives have featured a conspicuous absence of the literature on transitions to democracy of the past forty or so years. For all its insights and shortcomings, the framework of transitology (a body of literature that has comparatively and through case-study analysis examined common patterns, sequences, crises and outcomes of transitional periods) has been largely eschewed. The combined effect of the emphasis on regional narratives and immediate political dynamics has stripped the understanding of a new generation of political transitions of a deeper background of transitology which carries much relevance, albeit one in need of updating in light of recent experiences.

This essay argues that it is time to bring transitology back in. That is, to re-assert, review and revise, and develop further theories, concepts and approaches to understanding turbulent transitions in countries seeking to emerge from autocracy. Policy analysis to assess the nature and lasting consequences of several current waves of social and political upheavals is lacking firm framework guidance. As a result, the understanding of momentous transformations is impressionistic, formulaic, short term and unscientific. It is much too early to conclude that the Arab Spring has ‘failed’; indeed, we maintain that in the course of transition from the autocratic regimes of the past, new attributes of democratic politics are slowly emerging: citizenship, open debate and public demands for accountability. Yet democratisation processes can be studied regardless of whether they actually arrive in a consolidated democracy as an outcome.

Focusing on the common attributes of the democratisation process across a wide variety of experience, the transitology perspective emerged from analysis of the transitions since 1974 and broadened more extensively into the post-Cold War period. The literature addresses the pathways of transition, including likely triggering events, collective action in social movements and patterns of revolt, regime repression and escalating political violence. 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 often accompanied by violent conflict as the old order collapses and the new order has not yet fully emerged.

The often ambiguous outcome of so many cases has led critics to suggest that the transition paradigm was too teleological and that it is unable to account well for countries that start celebrated transitions, but end up in a political limbo or the 'grey zone' of partial democracies or 'soft' authoritarianism. Another limitation is that there has not been enough demarcation in the study of the establishment of democracy when it was altogether absent as distinguished from situations which prior experiences of democracy and where the norm needs to be formally adopted. Yet another limitation is that transitology has also, to some extent, taken for granted the inevitability of transitions. It may well be that some post-revolutionary situations do not actually initiate a transition process, lingering for an extended period in the conflict-ridden aftermath of the uprising. 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 international security dimension in transitions beyond existing general consideration of disorder, strife or conflict.

The current wave of transition has introduced new and important qualitative aspects to the transition cycle, in particular the transnational dimension, which must be accounted for more fully in the next phase of conceptual development in transitology studies. The coincidence of three successive moments — post-Cold War, post-9/11 and post-Arab Spring — taking place importantly at the time of the information and technology revolution has resulted in global turbulence in the grammar of international relations, which can be charted through a resort to a framework deciphering the process underwriting the passage from one condition to another.

Bringing transitology back in to the debates on the Arab Spring, and more broadly in other contexts, focuses attention on fostering more peaceful and enduring transitions to democracy. This ultimately relativises the exceptionalism or unique nature of change erroneously associated with the new transformations, and it offers the possibility of articulating more historically informed analyses of socio-political and security change. In turn, this may lend some insights into formulating improved policy at international, regional and local levels as transitions are about a founding moment for the new order and forward movement toward more inclusive, responsive and peaceful politics.

# Introduction:

## Why should Transitology be “Brought Back In”?

The turbulence that followed the Arab Spring of late 2010 and early 2011 marked a new phase of socioeconomic and political transformation in the Middle East and North Africa. The notion of an ‘Arab Spring’<sup>1</sup> harkened back both to the 1848 People’s Spring and to the Prague Spring reform movement of 1968, the latter an ultimately ill-fated attempt to use social movement protests to topple an authoritarian regime. The Prague Spring, it should be recalled, was indeed a period of short-lived liberalisation and not full democratisation. Soviet forces invaded to halt the reforms in August 1968, and democracy, now seemingly consolidated, did not fully come to the Czech Republic until the early 1990s.<sup>2</sup>

The collapse in 2011 of longstanding authoritarian regimes in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, together with social movements, protest and rebellion in Yemen, Bahrain and Syria further reflected a *zeitgeist* of actual or prospective transitions to democracy in the region; these rapid and largely unanticipated transitions reflected a ‘punctuated equilibrium’ from the decades of ‘neo-patrimonial authoritarianism’ that had long characterised regime type in the Middle East and North Africa region. Further from the epicentre of the new transitions in the area, countries such as Guinea, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal and Zimbabwe have all seen troubled transitions in recent years as autocracies collapse, teeter or endure in the face of uprisings aimed at ending decades of military, traditional or Sultanistic rule.

This essay argues that it is time to bring ‘transitology’ back in; that is, to re-assert, review and revise, and develop further theories, concepts and approaches to understanding turbulent transitions in countries seeking to emerge from autocracy. The Arab Spring cases are of course each unique, as are the pathways countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya or Syria followed in the last few years. These and other contemporary transitions, nonetheless, reflect

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1 Several phrases have been used to refer to the series of regional uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa that followed the popular movement initiated against President Zine Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia in December 2010 in the wake of the self-immolation of street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi: “Arab Spring”, “Arab Awakening”, “Arab Uprisings”, “Arab Renaissance” and “Arab Revolutions” notably. Each term is imperfect and carries limits to its analogy or imagery. Avoiding this semantic discussion, this essay will use the common phrase of “Arab Spring” while taking note of important reservations to it.

2 David M. Olson, “Democratisation and Political Participation: The Experience of the Czech Republic”, in Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrott, eds., *The Consolidation of Democracy in East-Central Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 150-196.

four enduring aspects of transitology, or the study of transitions from one regime to the next, and in particular from authoritarian rule to inclusive democracy. Transitology focuses on the common attributes of the democratisation process across a wide variety of experience, including:

- *Insights gleaned from generalisable findings about the conditions under which authoritarian regimes are vulnerable to popular challenge*, patterns of mass mobilisation and elite pact making, pivotal or choice moments, such as electoral processes, and experiences rewriting the rules of the political game through constitution-making;
- *Understandings about the uncertainty, turbulence and volatility of regime-to-regime transitions*, often raising trade-offs between conflict management, transitional justice and democratisation as such;
- *Grappling with the centrality of the transnational aspects of these changes*, or the strong effects of international-domestic interactions; and
- *Identifying new directions in transitology*, such as the changing role of communication and participation, largely through social media.

The overall objective of this Geneva Paper is to (i) re-introduce and restate findings from comparative politics on political regime transformation, (ii) relate this prior work to the contemporary cases, (iii) describe how today’s transitions differ from previous experiences and explore the new challenges they present and (iv) offer policy-related recommendations from the glimpse into transitology.

Policy analysis to assess the nature and lasting consequences of several current waves of social and political upheavals is lacking firm framework guidance. As a result, the understanding of momentous transformations is impressionistic, formulaic, short-term and unscientific. Moreover, there are — in our view — premature claims that the Arab Spring has ‘failed’. While area-studies scholars have provided insights into the dynamics of these cases, such analysis has been typically devoid of efforts to build broader generalisations that are useful to policymakers seeking to see beyond the day-to-day headlines. Often, improvised analogies or political jargon categories, such as ‘regime change’, are resorted to unhelpfully to analyse complex and usually long-term exit strategies from authoritarianism.

Analyses of the Arab Spring have tended to be minimally historical and they have often lacked a comparative dimension. In examining political liberalisation attempts taking place in the early twenty-first century, notably those leading up

to and in the wake of the Arab Spring, dominant perspectives have featured a conspicuous absence of the literature on transitions to democracy of the past forty or so years. For all its insights and shortcomings, the language of transatology — our term for a body of literature that has comparatively and through case-study analysis examined common patterns, sequences, crises and outcomes of transitional periods — has been largely eschewed.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, the uprisings, revolts and revolutions that emanate from the Middle East and North Africa region seem now in some ways unrelated to the initial efforts aimed at bringing to an end an authoritarian system of rule and re-negotiating a new, democratic social contract.

Similarly, when explicitly referred to in this current debate, the notion of ‘transition’ has been used in relation to short-term political developments, often on-going<sup>4</sup> or collapsed into larger development-oriented roadmaps.<sup>5</sup> Publics and external policy makers, fearing instability and uncertainty, seek quick solutions and simple outcomes in the form of quick outcomes... what some have termed ‘instant democracy’.<sup>6</sup> Whereas the process of transition is a lengthy one, in contemporary policy parlance, ‘transition’ is, in this context, in effect being increasingly misleadingly equated with that period between the fall of the dictator and a free (or merely trouble-free) election. For example, in seeking to reformulate U.S. policy in the wake of the Egyptian mostly endogenous social uprising against the longstanding U.S.-allied regime of President Hosni Mubarak, United States President Barack Obama indicated its acknowledgement with a rather shorted-sighted perspective on the transition: “It is my belief that an orderly transition must be meaningful, it must be peaceful, and it must begin now.”<sup>7</sup> The combined effect of the emphasis on regional narratives and immediate political dynamics has stripped the understanding of a new generation of political transitions of a deeper background of transatology which carries much relevance to the contemporary cases.

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3 Exceptions include Brookings Doha Centre, *The Beginnings of Transition Politics and Polarisation in Egypt and Tunisia*, Doha, April 2012; Ted Liu, *Transition Challenges in the Arab World – Lessons from the Past*, Madrid: Fride, 144, January 2013; Abdel Monem Said Aly and Karim Elkady, *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly of Egypt’s Political Transition*, Crown Centre for Middle East Studies, 70, March 2013; Mohammed Hachemaoui, *La Tunisie à la Croisée des Chemins: Quelles Règles pour quelle Transition*, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, August 2013; and Lucia Najšlová, *Foreign Democracy Assistance in the Czech and Slovak Transitions – What Lessons for the Arab World*, Madrid: Fride, 2013.

4 See, for instance, UNDP, “Arab States Transitions must be locally led and driven, says UNDP Chief”, 22 June 2011.

5 For example, UNESCO, “Feuille de Route: Démocratie et Renouveau dans le Monde Arabe – L’UNESCO accompagne les Transitions vers la Démocratie”, report on a roundtable, 21 June 2011.

6 See W. Pal Sidhu, “The Perils of Instant Democracy”, *Mint* (Delhi), 30 July 2013.

7 Barack H. Obama, “Remarks by the President on the Situation in Egypt”, White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 1 February 2011.

The neglect of reference to the broader global experiences of transition in the Arab Spring contexts is arresting. Above and beyond the question of whether there exists a universal or even common pattern to the process of transition to democracy, the challenges facing societies undergoing transition have undeniably some commonalities — across time, space and cultures. To be certain, the *process* to (the transition) must be distinguished from the *pursued aim*, namely democracy which is a value that can be everywhere desired, resisted, contested, redefined, possibly achieved and then secured, consolidated, hijacked, broken down and indeed reconstructed. Democracy is ultimately elusive and subject to various definitions (and assessments of its ‘quality’<sup>8</sup>), a debate with which this essay is not directly focused. Democratisation processes can be studied regardless of whether they actually arrive in a consolidated democracy as an outcome, especially given the difficulty of the consolidation concept in terms of its empirical validity and the reality that ‘consolidation’ itself is more of a spectrum than a condition as such.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, much can be learned about the conditions for successful transitions from aborted or hijacked ones.

Notably absent in the analysis of these new transitions has been a close and systematic look at whether the concepts and findings from earlier studies of regime-type transition, ostensibly in the direction of democracy as today’s modal form of regime type, can be usefully applied to understanding the often wrenching, convoluted and in some instances violent dynamics of the Middle Eastern and North African early twenty-first century transitions. Can then political and socioeconomic transitions be systematised beyond their own contexts and specificities?

We argue that the literature on prior waves of democratisation can indeed shed light on contemporary contexts, and that a close look at how prior research has addressed key questions is essential. In the balance of this essay, we address the following questions:

- Under what conditions do longstanding autocracies collapse, and survive, in light of massive social movements aimed at toppling their rule?
- What are the conditions under which transitions may be ‘hijacked’ by capable and wily incumbent elites through suppression of social movements and the stifling of political opposition?

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8 See Larry Diamond and Leonardo Morlino, *Assessing the Quality of Democracy*, Baltimore, Maryland: John Hopkins University, 2005; and the “State of Democracy” approach employed by International IDEA, [www.idea.int/sod](http://www.idea.int/sod).

9 Andreas Schedler, “What is Democratic Consolidation?”, *Journal of Democracy* 9, 2, April 1998, pp. 91-107.

- When and why do incumbent and opposition elites agree to ‘pacted transitions’, by which the vital interests of these regimes and their challengers are addressed in tacit or explicit negotiation of the new rules of the political road?
- What do we know of the efficacy, and weaknesses, of interim governments and transitional power-sharing outcomes to smooth the turbulence of transitions?
- Do transitions stimulate, enable or exacerbate ethnic and religious mobilisation and conflict?
- What role do various turning points play on the transition road, such as electoral moments, constitutional crises and violent incidents?
- When, if ever, can new democracies be said to be ‘consolidated’?
- What findings from transatology can help provide the basis of a broader global policy framework to address the long-term challenges of contemporary democratisation in the Middle East and North Africa region and beyond?

This paper presents three principal arguments:

(i) there is arguably a common and now standard pattern of democratic transition, i.e., a sequence that transcends the local set of values beyond cultural idiosyncrasies, contrary to the arguments of some that have portended the ‘end’ of the transition paradigm;

(ii) common patterns, crises and sequences across cases are identifiable but are in need of updating as recent waves of transitions are expanding the field of study and policy practice; and

(iii) the challenges facing the societies, institutions and individuals during these phases can admittedly be addressed successfully as the difficulties of a transition process rest to a large extent on internal leadership, coalition-making and negotiation and external assistance through reference to global norms, through technical assistance and by way of broader capacity-development engagements in countries experiencing transition. In many cases, there is also a role for much greater involvement by

international actors (to both progressive and ill effect), which then must engage in constructive dialogue with national actors about the nature, sequencing, timing and process of decisions related to the management of transitions.

Transitology as a subfield has long wrestled with the fact that democracy as such is a highly contingent outcome in such processes — as the Prague Spring metaphor evidences — and that there may well be contextualised transition outcomes without significant or lasting democratic advance. Contemporary research also sees this as essentially a separate, yet equally engaging, problem.<sup>10</sup> We argue, subsequently, that bringing transitology back in to the debates on fostering more peaceful and enduring transitions to democracy ultimately relativises the exceptionalism erroneously associated with the new transformations, and it offers the possibility of articulating more historically-informed analyses of socio-political and security change. In turn, this may lend some insights into formulating improved policy at international, regional and local levels.

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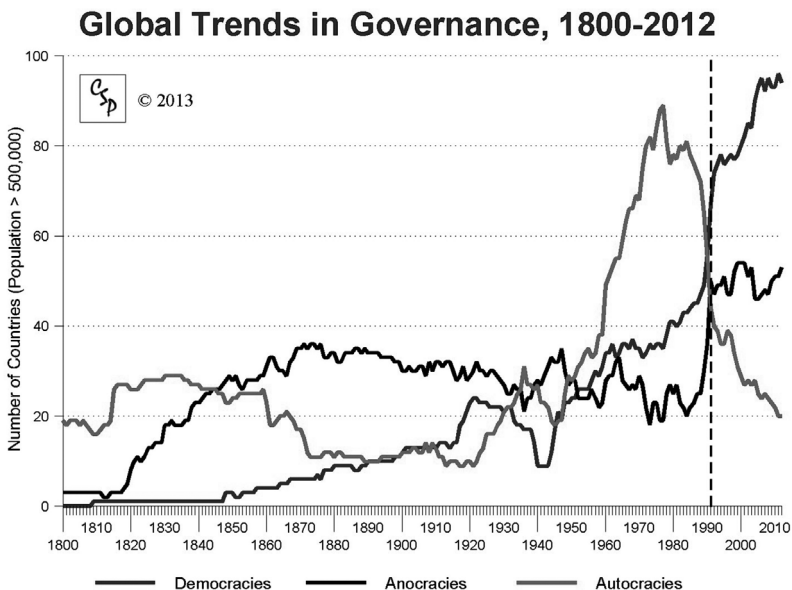
10 Stoner, Diamond, Girod and McFaul in their recent analysis of international-domestic transitions to democracy also argue that “the domestic and international causes of successful [of democracy]... are often different than those of the initial time of transition.” See Kathryn Stoner, Larry Diamond, Desha Girod and Michael McFaul, “Transitional Successes and Failures: The International-Domestic Nexus”, in Kathryn Stoner and Michael McFaul, eds., *Transitions to Democracy – A Comparative Perspective*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013, p. 5.



# I. Transitions toward Democracy: Taking the Long View

Since the Carnation Revolution 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 (in Angola and Mozambique, notably), a pattern of generally increasing democratisation globally seems well supported in comparative analysis. The Polity IV data project, now 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 direct bearing on our argument that the transitions literature has high salience to contemporary cases. Figure 1 below 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 after somewhat steady growth in democratisation since the mid-1970. As well, the number of partial ‘semi-democratic’ or ‘semi-authoritarian regimes’ — ‘anocracies’ in the Polity IV nomenclature — has risen as the number of fully autocratic regimes has declined.

Figure 1: The Global Rise of Democracies and ‘Partial’ Democracies



Source: With permission Monty G. Marshall and Keith Jaggers, Polity IV Country Reports, [www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity06.htm](http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity06.htm)

It is in the nature of transitional times 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 taking place importantly at the time of the information and technology revolution. This transition and globalisation context has resulted in a number of fluid<sup>11</sup> and on-going global turbulence in the grammar of international relations, which, it is submitted, can be charted through a resort to a framework deciphering the process underwriting the passage from one condition to another.

Earlier contemporary eras were dominated by colonialism (the late nineteenth and early twenty 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 as it is difficult to discern one wave to the next. Is there a contagion effect that spreads ideas across borders? For example, the Arab Spring had been preceded regionally in the collapse of the regime of Saddam Hussein by force in Iraq in 2003 (again, to better or ill effect<sup>12</sup>), and major countries like Indonesia witnessed transitions from authoritarian to democratic regime type in the late 1990s following the collapse of the Suharto 'New Order' regime in 1998.

Over the past twenty-five years, the world has been experiencing one large and extended moment of global transition unpacked in three different, yet equally consequential, moments generating transitions: the post-Cold War in the 1990s, the post-September 11 in the 2000s and the post-Arab Spring in the 2010s. Indeed, these three phases were preceded by the '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 precedent in early cases, notably in post-World War II Germany and Japan), particularly, 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 to topple 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.

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11 On the value of 'fluidity' as a focus to understand the 'how' of transitions, see Richard Banegas, "Les Transitions Démocratiques: Mobilisations Collectives et Fluidité Politique", *Cultures & Conflits*, 12, Winter 1993, pp. 2-20.

12 See Claire Spencer, Jane Kinninmont and Omar Sirri, eds., *Iraq: Ten Years On*, London: Chatham House, May 2013.

As well, some of the most engaging elements of these early transitions were the strong role played by ‘founding elections’... those first held in the course of democratisation (or in some of these cases, re-democratisation as there had been earlier, failed attempts of democracy in Argentina and Brazil especially). Finally, the celebrated case of ‘people power’ in The Philippines, which saw the ouster of General Ferdinand Marcos in 1996, 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 one-party 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 re-arranged 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 against state sovereignty, much like 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 moments topple communist-party dictatorships; South Africa emerged 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.

The 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.<sup>13</sup> In such analysis, there is support for the original thesis of Seymour Martin Lipset from 1960 that modernisation, or increasing incomes, education and diversity of economies is closely associated with popular demands for democracy.<sup>14</sup> In some ways, the modernisation thesis was seen in the most recent cases of the Arab Spring, as the Arab Human Development reports 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 overall level of socio-economic development — especially levels of education — would predict.<sup>15</sup>

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13 For an overview of this literature, see Barbara Geddes, “What Causes Democratisation?”, in Susan C. Stokes and Charles Boix, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 317-399.

14 Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man – The Social Bases of Politics*, New York: Doubleday, 1960.

15 See Randall Kuhn, “On the Role of Human Development in the Arab Spring”, Institute for Behavioural Science, University of Colorado, Working Paper, September 2011.

The advent of the middle class in developing countries has also arguably been an underlying driver of many transitions in the contemporary period.

In sum, the transitology perspective emerged from analysis of the transitions since 1974 and broadened more extensively into 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 society — and thus human development is critical to setting the conditions for popular challenges to authoritarian regimes. 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 spectrum of society.

The literature also addresses the pathways of transition, including likely triggering events, collective action in social movements, and patterns of revolt, regime repression and escalating political violence. Studies on South Africa's transition, for example, showed that over time the regime became unable to repress a massive and internationally supported social movement; instead, the apartheid regime negotiated its way out of power in a series of pacts or elite agreements over time, followed by a more fully inclusive constitutional assembly to draft a new social contract.<sup>16</sup> 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 often accompanied by violent conflict as the old order collapses and the new order has not yet fully emerged.

In the late 1990s and into the early 2000s, the cases of 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 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 across cases. The often ambiguous outcome of so many colour-revolution transitions has led critics to suggest that the transition paradigm was too teleological and that it is unable to account well for countries that start celebrated transitions, but end up in a political limbo... much like the cases of the contemporary Arab Spring.

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<sup>16</sup> Timothy D. Sisk, *Democratisation in South Africa - The Elusive Social Contract*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.

## II. 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.<sup>17</sup> 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 with 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. As well, neo-conservatives in the Bush administration abused the democratisation concept as justification for regime change by force in Iraq in 2003, leading to an unfortunate association of the concept as a codeword for realist pursuit of power by an ideologically driven global hegemonic pursuit by the United States.

The main critique levelled against transitology is that it is excessively teleological. Thomas Carothers argued that “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.”<sup>18</sup> 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 forth, 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., when it was altogether absent as distinguished from 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’ was at times used interchangeably with ‘transitology’). Recent experiences have indicated that the rupture moment — the momentous events associated with a break with the past — can be extended substantially highlighting the need to devote more attention to the break moment rather than the more elusive

17 Thomas Carothers, “The End of the Transition Paradigm”, *The Journal of Democracy*, 13, 2, 2002, pp. 5-21. See, similarly, the special issue of the periodical *Esprit*: “Transition Démocratique: La Fin d’un Modèle”, *Esprit*, January 2008.

18 Carothers, “End of Transition Paradigm”, p. 6.

phase of consolidation (e.g., Robert D. Putnam *et al.*'s 1993 *Making Democracy Work*; Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan's 1996 *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. Whereas, 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 non-transition state may well be what Libya is in today in the aftermath of the NATO intervention and the fall of Mouammar Gaddafi, or what Algeria is experiencing in terms of socio-political stasis running parallel to the Arab Spring. Witnessing the debate on the uprisings that shook the Arab world since December 2010, 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 as the region's political culture as the main sheet anchor.<sup>19</sup> Yet the experiences of Western Europe from the post-Medieval state formation period to World War II,<sup>20</sup> of Latin America's social movements and pacted ruptures (*ruptura pactada*), of Eastern Europe's civil society activism and of Sub-Saharan Africa's national conferences<sup>21</sup> are all directly related to the efforts currently underway in the Middle East and North Africa. Indeed, the strife which, for instance, rapidly took over Yugoslavia after the optimism of 1990 helps put in perspective the post-Arab Spring evolution of Libya or Syria. The recent and ongoing transformations do not take place in a vacuum, and comparative thinking and practice learning from other settings has value and merit in that regard.

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19 Barrington Moore notes that "to explain behaviour in terms of cultural values is to engage in circular reasoning." See Barrington Moore, Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy – Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1966, p. 486. Moore 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."

20 See Keith Lowe, *Savage Continent – Europe in the Aftermath of World War I*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 2012.

21 See, for instance, Jean-Pascal Daloz, *Transitions Démocratiques Africaines – Dynamiques et Contraintes (1990-1994)*, Paris: Karthala, 1994.

As noted, until now few Arab Spring studies have been concerned with transition per se. Some attempts are made to go beyond the specifics of the region, but remain concerned with the revolutionary phase<sup>22</sup> or with rear-view approaches on the impact of authoritarianism<sup>23</sup>. 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 experts. 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 December 2010 in Tunisia 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 takeover and international influence or 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 there comes to materialise a prolonged period — more than ten years in post-Saddam Hussein Iraq — where violence dominates the daily lives of the citizens?

The contemporary resistance to analogies within the Arab world with previous transitions is reminiscent of the earlier similar rejection of parallels between Eastern Europe and Latin America, or from Latin America to the 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 comparatively<sup>24</sup> 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.

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22 See, notably, Mounia Bennani-Chraïbi and Olivier Fillieule, "Pour Une Sociologie des Situations Révolutionnaires: Retour sur les Révoltes Arabes", *Revue Française de Sciences Politiques* 62, 5-6, 2012, pp. 767-796.

23 See, for instance, Aref Ali Nayef, "Beyond Fascism: New Libya Actualised", Dubai: Kalam Research and Media, January 2013.

24 Mehran Kamrava and Frank O. Mora, "Civil Society and Democratisation in Comparative Perspective: Latin America and the Middle East", *Third World Quarterly*, 19, 5, 1998, pp. 893-915.

Such eschewal of transatology — as the well as the complex empirical challenges its introduction or reactivation has been generating in large parts of the Global South<sup>25</sup> — was also a sign of the times with the combined post-9/11 neo-authoritarian dynamics in many parts round the world<sup>26</sup> merging with an excessive association with the transition framework with the recent experience of post-Soviet Union countries.<sup>27</sup> 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’, ‘semidemocratic regimes’, ‘competitive authoritarianism’, ‘facade democracy’ or ‘illiberal democracies’.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, it is clear from research that such 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, whereas semi-democratic or semi-authoritarian regimes tend to generate their own violent challengers to the state. In such contexts, electoral moments especially 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’<sup>29</sup> and such ‘pessimism’<sup>30</sup> 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).

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25 Amongst 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 Jochen Hippler, ed., *The Democratisation of Disempowerment – The Problem of Democracy in the Third World*, London: Pluto, 1995, pp. 24-25.

26 Notably in the Middle East and North Africa. See, for instance, Oliver Schlumberger, ed., *Debating Arab Authoritarianism – Dynamics and Durability in Nondemocratic Regimes*, Palo Alto, California: Stanford University Press, 2007; and Stephen J. King, *The New Authoritarianism in the Middle East and North Africa*, Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2009.

27 See, for example, Jordan Gans-Morse, “Searching for Transatologists: Contemporary Theories of Post-Communist Transitions and the Myth of a Dominant Paradigm”, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 20, 4, 2004, pp. 320-349; and Jan Holzer, “The End of the Transatological Paradigm? Debate on Non-Democratic Regimes and Post-Communist Experience”, paper presented at the Twentieth International Political Science Association (IPSA) World Congress, Fukuoka, 9-13 July 2009.

28 See Larry Diamond, “Thinking about Hybrid Regimes”, *Journal of Democracy*, 13, 2, 2002, pp. 21-35; Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism – International Linkage, Organisational Power and the Fate of Hybrid Regimes*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010; and Fareed Zakaria, “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy”, *Foreign Affairs*, 76, 6, November-December 1997, pp. 22-43.

29 Robert Kaplan, “Was Democracy Just a Moment?” *The Atlantic Monthly*, December 1997. 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.”

30 Thomas Carothers, “Stepping Back from Democratic Pessimism”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Carnegie Paper No. 99, February 2009; and Bruce Gilley, “Democratic Triumph, Scholarly Pessimism”, *Journal of Democracy*, 21, 1, January 2010, pp. 160-167.



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 of cumulative attempts at approximating 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 the democratic transition theory and uncover what it has to offer to the understanding and management of contemporary transitions. In so doing, it is understood that :

- (i) 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;
- (ii) democracy is a complex concept with no consensus on any particular set of institutional manifestations; and
- (iii) the multiplicity of experiences seeking to break away from authoritarianism render the attempt at systematising those journeys arduous but not altogether impossible.

Many of the 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 incentives 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 the 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’.<sup>31</sup>

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 jeopardise 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 elections are perceived by the protagonists as a zero-sum game

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31 Jack Snyder, *From Voting to Violence – Democratisation and Nationalist Conflict*, New York: W.W. Norton, 2000.

with a winner-take-all outcome. Similarly, in Iraq, insurgents who expect, with good reason in this context, to be systematically excluded from power mobilised to disrupt governorate or provincial elections in 2013; indeed sectarian violence is increasing in Iraq as the process of democratisation has not been sufficiently inclusive of social segments related to the *ancien régime*.

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 Afghanistan in 2005 and again in 2010 in parliamentary elections, insurgents targeted election workers (both international and Afghan) and sought to disrupt balloting as a way to undermine 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 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 a doubt that the ruling National Congress Party (NCP) would stay in power and indeed retain access to the oil revenue derived from exports of crude 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 legitimate governments who have won militarily on the battlefield and can 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 of those who view parliamentary elections in Rwanda in 2013 as legitimating the rule of the Rwandan Patriotic Front and President Paul Kagamé in an electoral process in which opposition forces had been imprisoned or otherwise suppressed for fostering ethnic 'divisionism'.<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup>

With these important caveats — and noting that the question of the pertinence or lack thereof of the transition paradigm was asked before<sup>34</sup> —, transi-

32 "Rwandan Elections: Safe and Sorry", *The Economist*, 21 September 2013.

33 See, for example, Dorina Bekoe, ed., *Voting in Fear – Electoral Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2013.

34 See, notably, Terry Lynn Karl, "From Democracy to Democratisation and Back: Before *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*", CDDRL Working Paper, 45, Centre on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law, Stanford university, California: September 2005; and Algimantas Jankauskas and Liutauras Gudžinskas, "Reconceptualising Transitology: Lessons from Post-Communism", *Lithuanian Annual Strategic Review 2007*, Vilnius: Military Academy of Lithuania, 2008, pp. 181-199.

tology is therefore not 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 were 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 maintain that (i) the literature features already a measure of consensus on a few key elements of the method of transitioning as relates in particular to the sequence of the transition and its requirements, and that (ii) 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.

### III. Democratic Transition: Founding Moment and Forward Movement

What, ultimately, is ‘transition’? The shift from a system built on coercion, fear and imposition 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 transition in the underlying rules of the politics implies a set of transformative tasks towards a form of government where leaders are selected through competitive elections. This was 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.”<sup>35</sup> 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 giving representation and political voice. As Klaus Müller and Andreas Pickel note:

A transformation paradigm has three distinct dimensions. In a first dimension, *it informs social scientific work* by demarcating fundamental problems and problem contexts for research. In a second dimension, *it informs policy-making*, especially in terms of fundamental reform approaches and programs. In a third dimension, *it informs ideology and political action* by embodying fundamental values and visions of social order. A paradigm change is therefore a cognitive as well as a political process.<sup>36</sup>

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 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

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35 Phillip C. Schmitter, “Some Propositions about Civil Society and the Consolidation of Democracy”, Reihe Politikwissenschaft, Institut für Höhere Studien, Vienna, September 1993, p. 4.

36 Klaus Müller and Andreas Pickel, “Transition, Transformation and the Social Sciences: Towards a New Paradigm”, *TIPEC Working Paper*, 1/11, Trent International Political Economy Centre, Peterborough, Ontario: November 2001, p. 29, emphasis added.

commonly used to refer to the latter. Democratisation can therefore be defined as (i) a political and socioeconomic 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 definition implies a process away from an earlier system — the *ancien régime* — which generally took the form of authoritarianism or dictatorship. Democratisation thus involves a key moment in that sequence of rupture, i.e., of 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 generalisation 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 contributions,<sup>37</sup> which do not represent a single, overarching body but rather several strands meeting at key points constitutive of the markers of transition theory. Dankwart Rustow’s April 1970 “Transitions to Democracy”<sup>38</sup> is arguably the founding text of contemporary democratic transition theory. Writing in *Comparative Politics*, Rustow insightfully argued that transitions emerge less from levels of modernisation and development to more contingent choices and specific local factors. That said, there are typically background conditions to successful transitions, first among which is shared understanding of national

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37 Of particular note, amongst numerous others, is the work of Lisa Anderson, Richard Banegas, Sheri Berman, Valerie Bunce, Thomas Carothers, Ruth Berins Collier, Carles Boix, John Entelis, Steven M. Fish, Barbara Geddes, David Held, Ken Jowitt, Robert Dahl, Giuseppe Di Palma, Larry Diamond, Stephen Haggard, Guy Hermet, Samuel P. Huntington, Robert Kaufman, Bahgat Korany, Steven Levitsky, Juan J. Linz, Arend Lijphart, Seymour Martin Lipset, Michael McFaul, Cynthia McClintock, Barrington 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, Amartya Sen, Andreas Schedler, Philippe C. Schmitter, Alfred Stepan, Susan Stokes, Crawford Young, Richard Youngs, Lucan A. Way, Laurence Whitehead and Howard J. Wiarda.

38 Dankwart A. Rustow, “Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model”, *Comparative Politics* 2, 3, April 1970, pp. 337-363.

unity: absent some sense of who constitutes ‘the people,’ transitions can devolve into competing claims for separation and sovereignty. Rustow also argued that transition can be conceptualised into two distinct phases, the ‘preparatory phase’ which involves a long struggle over the state between political factions, 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, and other cases, also argued for a close focus on the contingent choices of elites within democratisation processes.<sup>39</sup>

Importantly, Rustow argued that the development of democracy depends on the presence of one key requirement, namely national unity. This dimension was, secondly, 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 on 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, Philip Schmitter and Lawrence Whitehead who produced in 1986 a four-volume work on *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies*. They, too, emphasised the critical role of elite contingency and choice within transition processes as the critical factor in democratisation, arguing that democratisation 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.

The 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. Central among the questions that are left open are the territorial basis of the state and the degree of federal or decentralised rule (a key question in Nepal, for example, which is also undergoing a protracted transition away from

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39 John Higley and Michael G. Burton, “The Elite Variable in Democratic Transitions and Breakdowns”, *American Sociological Review* 54, February 1989, pp. 17-32.

a traditional monarchy) 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). Particularly in societies divided by deep ethnic, sectarian or religious social cleavages, many of which are emerging from civil war or widespread political violence, 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.<sup>40</sup>

What does then transitology tell us? We suggest the following eleven 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 decisive sector of a political community to demand and mobilise for a transition towards 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 occur 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 forth by Samuel Huntington in his 1993 book, *The Third Wave*. Implied in this construct is that democracy follows a 'global advance'<sup>41</sup> 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."<sup>42</sup> 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). From a disorderly (violent) system to a rule-bounded (peaceful) one is the common project.
4. *There is no single path to democracy* but there are requirements and there are needed dynamics, notably inclusion and redistribution. The values of democracy are similar but their expression can differ in specific

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40 Philip Roeder and Donald Rothchild, eds., *Sustainable Peace – Power and Democracy after Civil War*, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2005.

41 Ted Liu, *Transition Challenges in the Arab World*, p. 2.

42 Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule – Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies*, Baltimore, Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 1986, p. 3.

contexts. Some struggles to achieve democracy have been motivated by the pursuit of *'justice'*, others in the name of *'égalité'* (equality) or *'libertad'* (freedom), and yet again others with a view to secure *'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 complex process and authoritarian regression can occur. Regimes can aim at pre-empting crises by appearing to democratise or can seek to maintain a system through a controlled transition that gives the appearance of opening. Cosmetic, façade or virtual processes 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, rising undemocratic behaviour in an already democratic setting can lead to a retreat of democracy.<sup>43</sup>
  
7. *Transitions are inherently conflictual,* and they 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 expression space 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. Violence can emerge because transitions are inherently disorderly and multifaceted. Specifically, the 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.

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43 See Tzvetan Todorov, *Les Ennemis Intimes de la Démocratie*, Paris: Robert Laffont, 2012.



8. *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 a reality of a dual process which can yield ‘transitional incompatibility’<sup>44</sup> bringing back the crucial question of sequencing to the fore.
9. *Transitions are a comprehensive process* with ramifications onto 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.
10. *Transition occurs in a sequence of stages.* There exists much ‘uncertainty’<sup>45</sup> as to the temporal delimitation of the phases, notably as regards the consolidation phase. Sequencing is crucial, particularly as regards 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.<sup>46</sup>
11. *Actors are key to the process of transition.* Amongst 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.

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44 Leslie Elliott Armijo, Thomas J. Biersteker and Abraham F. Lowenthal, “The Problems of Simultaneous Transitions”, *The Journal of Democracy* 5, 4, October 1994, pp. 161-175. Also see Stephan Haggard and Robert R. Kaufman, *The Political Economy of Democratic Transitions*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.

45 Andreas Schedler, “Taking Uncertainty Seriously: The Blurred Boundaries of Democratic Transition and Consolidation”, *Democratisation* 8, 4, Winter 2001, pp. 1-22.

46 Liu, *Transition Challenges in the Arab World*, p. 2.

## IV. Conclusion: Promises and Limits of Transitology

This Geneva Paper has argued that early twenty-first century processes of political transition towards democracy can be best analysed through systematic resort to a comparative and historical perspective informed by the insights gathered by transitology over the past decades. To the extent that there is a certain imprecision as regards the term ‘transition’ and that there is no shared understanding of transitology, what is the value of the insights gathered in this young body of theory? Admittedly, the stripped-down statement of transitology is fourfold: (i) an aim to create a generalizable 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 settlement or ‘pact’ by the political elite, and not structural features; and (iv) the normative belief of neoliberal nature, that the consolidation of the institute of democratic elections and other reforms of its own accord establish effectively functioning states.<sup>47</sup>

Against this, the primary usefulness of transitology is that it points out the vulnerability of the phase(s) during which the construction of a democratic ethos and the establishment of democratic institutions are pursued, and that this process carries a measure of universality. In spite of the diversity of authoritarian situations, 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 regenerate<sup>48</sup> democracy.

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

- Understanding better the conditions under which autocratic regimes are vulnerable to challenge and collapse;
- Understanding the conditions under which elites choose to negotiate and negotiate rather than to ceaselessly contend;

47 Jankauskas and Gudžinskas, “Reconceptualising Transitology”, p. 181.

48 Dan Slater, “The Architecture of Authoritarianism: Southeast Asia and the Regeneration of Democratisation Theory”, *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* 2, 2, December 2006, pp. 1-22.

- Contributing to assessment instruments that seek to discern vulnerability to election-related violence and associated conflict-prevention activities;
- Understanding 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 from international imposition; and
- Seeing contexts in a long-term, appreciative perspective on the nature, pace, scope and end-state of change.

Ultimately, however, the absence of an 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 that it introduces universal categories 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*, *La Bastille*, etc.) towards the institutionalisation of systemic processes.

Ultimately, however in the wake of the Arab Spring, three aspects are emerging as key dimensions of the latter-day transitions: the role of social media, the question of transnationalism, and the international security dimension. The long-time impact of the widely-acclaimed social media that contributed to the downfall of the autocratic Middle Eastern 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.<sup>49</sup> 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 direct. Here again, to be certain, the transnational dimension of transitions had been noted before<sup>50</sup>. Yet in the early twenty-first century this dimension has overtaken the grammar of international

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49 Reda Benkirane, "The Alchemy of Revolution: The Role of Social Networks and New Media in the Arab Spring", *GCSP Policy Paper*, 7, Geneva: Geneva Centre for Security Policy, 2012.

50 See, for instance, Mark Cichok, "Transitionalism vs. Transnationalism: Conflicting Trends in Independent Latvia", *East European Politics and Societies*, 16, 2, Spring 2002, pp. 446-464.

relations. The post-Arab Spring has illustrated further the dynamic taking it into new uncharted territories both of transition and of conflict. The overflow of the impact of the Libyan revolution onto the Sahel and the engulfing of the Syrian civil war of regional actors, notably from Lebanon and Iraq as well as fighters coming from Europe and from Asia and proxy support for the protagonists from global powers such as Russia and the United States, indicate how important this new international security dimension has become.

Finally, the 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 recently made by Ray Salvatore Jennings in a 2012 report issued by the United States Institute of Peace. Calling for the need to identify a breakthrough paradigm, Jennings identifies 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.<sup>51</sup>

Transitology is especially useful in looking beyond the immediacy and intricacy of the moment toward a longer-term view of identifying the markers of progress on the roadmap of democratisation. The road to democracy is indeed arduous. Change is engineered with difficulty beyond the battle cries (*ruptura, solidarnosc, perestroika, irbal*) and political transformation generates uncertainty. Transitions involve struggles for ‘power’ and the pacification of the political process is no easy task. Transitology’s remit is then undeniably ambitious. It seeks to elucidate a path which is also a moment. Societies in flux and states in mutation awaken from the fairest dawn to transform 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 explicitation, which is still an investigation, of the resulting passage. Ultimately, transitology offers the promise of a historically and comparatively informed theory of political transformation.

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51 Ray Salvatore Jennings, “Democratic Breakthroughs – The Ingredients of Successful Revolts”, United States Institute of Peace, 2012, p. 34.

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