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THE END OF THE TRANSITION PARADIGM

Thomas Carothers

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In the last quarter of the twentieth century, trends in seven different regions converged to change the political landscape of the world: 1) the fall of right-wing authoritarian regimes in Southern Europe in the mid-1970s; 2) the replacement of military dictatorships by elected civilian governments across Latin America from the late 1970s through the late 1980s; 3) the decline of authoritarian rule in parts of East and South Asia starting in the mid-1980s; 4) the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe at the end of the 1980s; 5) the breakup of the Soviet Union and the establishment of 15 post-Soviet republics in 1991; 6) the decline of one-party regimes in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa in the first half of the 1990s; and 7) a weak but recognizable liberalizing trend in some Middle Eastern countries in the 1990s.

The causes, shape, and pace of these different trends varied considerably. But they shared a dominant characteristic—simultaneous movement in at least several countries in each region away from dictatorial rule toward more liberal and often more democratic governance. And though differing in many ways, these trends influenced and to some extent built on one another. As a result, they were considered by many observers, especially in the West, as component parts of a larger whole, a global democratic trend that thanks to Samuel Huntington has widely come to be known as the “third wave” of democracy.¹

This striking tide of political change was seized upon with enthusiasm by the U.S. government and the broader U.S. foreign policy community. As early as the mid-1980s, President Ronald Reagan, Secretary of State

George Shultz, and other high-level U.S. officials were referring regularly to “the worldwide democratic revolution.” During the 1980s, an active array of governmental, quasi-governmental, and nongovernmental organizations devoted to promoting democracy abroad sprang into being. This new democracy-promotion community had a pressing need for an analytic framework to conceptualize and respond to the ongoing political events. Confronted with the initial parts of the third wave—democratization in Southern Europe, Latin America, and a few countries in Asia (especially the Philippines)—the U.S. democracy community rapidly embraced an analytic model of democratic transition. It was derived principally from their own interpretation of the patterns of democratic change taking place, but also to a lesser extent from the early works of the emergent academic field of “transitology,” above all the seminal work of Guillermo O’Donnell and Philippe Schmitter.²

As the third wave spread to Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, sub-Saharan Africa, and elsewhere in the 1990s, democracy promoters extended this model as a universal paradigm for understanding democratization. It became ubiquitous in U.S. policy circles as a way of talking about, thinking about, and designing interventions in processes of political change around the world. And it stayed remarkably constant despite many variations in those patterns of political change and a stream of increasingly diverse scholarly views about the course and nature of democratic transitions.³

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. Many countries that policy makers and aid practitioners persist in calling “transitional” are not in transition to democracy, and of the democratic transitions that are under way, more than a few are not following the model. Sticking with the paradigm beyond its useful life is retarding evolution in the field of democratic assistance and is leading policy makers astray in other ways. It is time to recognize that the transition paradigm has outlived its usefulness and to look for a better lens.

Core Assumptions

Five core assumptions define the transition paradigm. The first, which is an umbrella for all the others, is that any country moving *away* from dictatorial rule can be considered a country in transition *toward* democracy. Especially in the first half of the 1990s, when political change accelerated in many regions, numerous policy makers and aid practitioners reflexively labeled any formerly authoritarian country that was attempting some political liberalization as a “transitional country.” The set of “transitional countries” swelled dramatically, and nearly 100 countries (approximately 20 in Latin America, 25 in Eastern Europe

and the former Soviet Union, 30 in sub-Saharan Africa, 10 in Asia, and 5 in the Middle East) were thrown into the conceptual pot of the transition paradigm. Once so labeled, their political life was automatically analyzed in terms of their movement toward or away from democracy, and they were held up to the implicit expectations of the paradigm, as detailed below. To cite just one especially astonishing example, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) continues to describe the Democratic Republic of Congo (Kinshasa), a strife-wracked country undergoing a turgid, often opaque, and rarely very democratic process of political change, as a country in “transition to a democratic, free market society.”⁴

The second assumption is that democratization tends to unfold in a set sequence of stages. First there occurs the *opening*, a period of democratic ferment and political liberalization in which cracks appear in the ruling dictatorial regime, with the most prominent fault line being that between hardliners and softliners. There follows the *breakthrough*—the collapse of the regime and the rapid emergence of a new, democratic system, with the coming to power of a new government through national elections and the establishment of a democratic institutional structure, often through the promulgation of a new constitution. After the transition comes *consolidation*, a slow but purposeful process in which democratic forms are transformed into democratic substance through the reform of state institutions, the regularization of elections, the strengthening of civil society, and the overall habituation of the society to the new democratic “rules of the game.”⁵

Democracy activists admit that it is not inevitable that transitional countries will move steadily on this assumed path from opening and breakthrough to consolidation. Transitional countries, they say, can and do go backward or stagnate as well as move forward along the path. Yet even the deviations from the assumed sequence that they are willing to acknowledge are defined in terms of the path itself. The options are all cast in terms of the speed and direction with which countries move on the path, not in terms of movement that does not conform with the path at all. And at least in the peak years of the third wave, many democracy enthusiasts clearly believed that, while the success of the dozens of new transitions was not assured, democratization was in some important sense a natural process, one that was likely to flourish once the initial breakthrough occurred. No small amount of democratic teleology is implicit in the transition paradigm, no matter how much its adherents have denied it.⁶

Related to the idea of a core sequence of democratization is the third assumption—the belief in the determinative importance of elections. Democracy promoters have not been guilty—as critics often charge—of believing that elections equal democracy. For years they have advocated and pursued a much broader range of assistance programs

than just elections-focused efforts. Nevertheless, they have tended to hold very high expectations for what the establishment of regular, genuine elections will do for democratization. Not only will elections give new postdictatorial governments democratic legitimacy, they believe, but the elections will serve to broaden and deepen political participation and the democratic accountability of the state to its citizens. In other words, it has been assumed that in attempted transitions to democracy, elections will be not just a foundation stone but a key generator over time of further democratic reforms.

A fourth assumption is that the underlying conditions in transitional countries—their economic level, political history, institutional legacies, ethnic make-up, sociocultural traditions, or other “structural” features—will not be major factors in either the onset or the outcome of the transition process. A remarkable characteristic of the early period of the third wave was that democracy seemed to be breaking out in the most unlikely and unexpected places, whether Mongolia, Albania, or Mauritania. All that seemed to be necessary for democratization was a decision by a country’s political elites to move toward democracy and an ability on the part of those elites to fend off the contrary actions of remaining antidemocratic forces.

The dynamism and remarkable scope of the third wave buried old, deterministic, and often culturally noxious assumptions about democracy, such as that only countries with an American-style middle class or a heritage of Protestant individualism could become democratic. For policy makers and aid practitioners this new outlook was a break from the long-standing Cold War mindset that most countries in the developing world were “not ready for democracy,” a mindset that dovetailed with U.S. policies of propping up anticommunist dictators around the world. Some of the early works in transitology also reflected the “no preconditions” view of democratization, a shift within the academic literature that had begun in 1970 with Dankwart Rustow’s seminal article, “Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model.”⁷ For both the scholarly and policy communities, the new “no preconditions” outlook was a gratifyingly optimistic, even liberating view that translated easily across borders as the encouraging message that, when it comes to democracy, “anyone can do it.”

Fifth, the transition paradigm rests on the assumption that the democratic transitions making up the third wave are being built on coherent, functioning states. The process of democratization is assumed to include some redesign of state institutions—such as the creation of new electoral institutions, parliamentary reform, and judicial reform—but as a modification of already functioning states.⁸ As they arrived at their frameworks for understanding democratization, democracy aid practitioners did not give significant attention to the challenge of a society trying to democratize while it is grappling with the reality of building a

state from scratch or coping with an existent but largely nonfunctional state. This did not appear to be an issue in Southern Europe or Latin America, the two regions that served as the experiential basis for the formation of the transition paradigm. To the extent that democracy promoters did consider the possibility of state-building as part of the transition process, they assumed that democracy-building and state-building would be mutually reinforcing endeavors or even two sides of the same coin.

Into the Gray Zone

We turn then from the underlying assumptions of the paradigm to the record of experience. Efforts to assess the progress of the third wave are sometimes rejected as premature. Democracy is not built in a day, democracy activists assert, and it is too early to reach judgments about the results of the dozens of democratic transitions launched in the last two decades. Although it is certainly true that the current political situations of the “transitional countries” are not set in stone, enough time has elapsed to shed significant light on how the transition paradigm is holding up.

Of the nearly 100 countries considered as “transitional” in recent years, only a relatively small number—probably fewer than 20—are clearly en route to becoming successful, well-functioning democracies or at least have made some democratic progress and still enjoy a positive dynamic of democratization.⁹ The leaders of the group are found primarily in Central Europe and the Baltic region—Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Estonia, and Slovenia—though there are a few in South America and East Asia, notably Chile, Uruguay, and Taiwan. Those that have made somewhat less progress but appear to be still advancing include Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, Mexico, Brazil, Ghana, the Philippines, and South Korea.

By far the majority of third-wave countries have not achieved relatively well-functioning democracy or do not seem to be deepening or advancing whatever democratic progress they have made. In a small number of countries, initial political openings have clearly failed and authoritarian regimes have resolidified, as in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Belarus, and Togo. Most of the “transitional countries,” however, are neither dictatorial nor clearly headed toward democracy. They have entered a political gray zone.¹⁰ They have some attributes of democratic political life, including at least limited political space for opposition parties and independent civil society, as well as regular elections and democratic constitutions. Yet they suffer from serious democratic deficits, often including poor representation of citizens’ interests, low levels of political participation beyond voting, frequent abuse of the law by government officials, elections of uncertain legitimacy, very low

levels of public confidence in state institutions, and persistently poor institutional performance by the state.

As the number of countries falling in between outright dictatorship and well-established liberal democracy has swollen, political analysts have proffered an array of “qualified democracy” terms to characterize them, including semi-democracy, formal democracy, electoral democracy, façade democracy, pseudo-democracy, weak democracy, partial democracy, illiberal democracy, and virtual democracy.¹¹ Some of these terms, such as “façade democracy” and “pseudo-democracy,” apply only to a fairly specific subset of gray-zone cases. Other terms, such as “weak democracy” and “partial democracy,” are intended to have much broader applicability. Useful though these terms can be, especially when rooted in probing analysis such as O’Donnell’s work on “delegative democracy,” they share a significant liability: By describing countries in the gray zone as types of democracies, analysts are in effect trying to apply the transition paradigm to the very countries whose political evolution is calling that paradigm into question.¹² Most of the “qualified democracy” terms are used to characterize countries as being stuck somewhere on the assumed democratization sequence, usually at the start of the consolidation phase.

The diversity of political patterns within the gray zone is vast. Many possible subtypes or subcategories could potentially be posited, and much work remains to be done to assess the nature of gray-zone politics. As a first analytic step, two broad political syndromes can be seen to be common in the gray zone. They are not rigidly delineated political-system types but rather political patterns that have become regular and somewhat entrenched. Though they have some characteristics in common, they differ in crucial ways and basically are mutually exclusive.

The first syndrome is feckless pluralism. Countries whose political life is marked by feckless pluralism tend to have significant amounts of political freedom, regular elections, and alternation of power between genuinely different political groupings. Despite these positive features, however, democracy remains shallow and troubled. Political participation, though broad at election time, extends little beyond voting. Political elites from all the major parties or groupings are widely perceived as corrupt, self-interested, and ineffective. The alternation of power seems only to trade the country’s problems back and forth from one hapless side to the other. Political elites from all the major parties are widely perceived as corrupt, self-interested, dishonest, and not serious about working for their country. The public is seriously disaffected from politics, and while it may still cling to a belief in the ideal of democracy, it is extremely unhappy about the political life of the country. Overall, politics is widely seen as a stale, corrupt, elite-dominated domain that delivers little good to the country and commands equally little respect. And the state remains persistently weak. Economic policy is often poorly

conceived and executed, and economic performance is frequently bad or even calamitous. Social and political reforms are similarly tenuous, and successive governments are unable to make headway on most of the major problems facing the country, from crime and corruption to health, education, and public welfare generally.

Feckless pluralism is most common in Latin America, a region where most countries entered their attempted democratic transitions with diverse political parties already in place yet also with a deep legacy of persistently poor performance of state institutions. Nicaragua, Ecuador, Guatemala, Panama, Honduras, and Bolivia all fall into this category, as did Venezuela in the decade prior to the election of Hugo Chávez. Argentina and Brazil hover uneasily at its edge. In the postcommunist world, Moldova, Bosnia, Albania, and Ukraine have at least some significant signs of the syndrome, with Romania and Bulgaria teetering on its edge. Nepal is a clear example in Asia; Bangladesh, Mongolia, and Thailand may also qualify. In sub-Saharan Africa, a few states, such as Madagascar, Guinea-Bissau, and Sierra Leone, may be cases of feckless pluralism, though alternation of power remains rare generally in that region.

There are many variations of feckless pluralism. In some cases, the parties that alternate power between them are divided by paralyzing acrimony and devote their time out of power to preventing the other party from accomplishing anything at all, as in Bangladesh. In other cases, the main competing groups end up colluding, formally or informally, rendering the alternation of power unhelpful in a different manner, as happened in Nicaragua in the late 1990s. In some countries afflicted with feckless pluralism, the political competition is between deeply entrenched parties that essentially operate as patronage networks and seem never to renovate themselves, as in Argentina or Nepal. In others, the alternation of power occurs between constantly shifting political groupings, short-lived parties led by charismatic individuals or temporary alliances in search of a political identity, as in Guatemala or Ukraine. These varied cases nonetheless share a common condition that seems at the root of feckless pluralism—the whole class of political elites, though plural and competitive, are profoundly cut off from the citizenry, rendering political life an ultimately hollow, unproductive exercise.

Dominant-Power Politics

The most common other political syndrome in the gray zone is dominant-power politics. Countries with this syndrome have limited but still real political space, some political contestation by opposition groups, and at least most of the basic institutional forms of democracy. Yet one political grouping—whether it is a movement, a party, an extended

family, or a single leader—dominates the system in such a way that there appears to be little prospect of alternation of power in the foreseeable future.

Unlike in countries beset with feckless pluralism, a key political problem in dominant-power countries is the blurring of the line between the state and the ruling party (or ruling political forces). The state's main assets—that is to say, the state as a source of money, jobs, public information (via state media), and police power—are gradually put in the direct service of the ruling party. Whereas in feckless pluralism judiciaries are often somewhat independent, the judiciary in dominant-power countries is typically cowed, as part of the one-sided grip on power. And while elections in feckless-pluralist countries are often quite free and fair, the typical pattern in dominant-power countries is one of dubious but not outright fraudulent elections in which the ruling group tries to put on a good-enough electoral show to gain the approval of the international community while quietly tilting the electoral playing field far enough in its own favor to ensure victory.

As in feckless-pluralist systems, the citizens of dominant-power systems tend to be disaffected from politics and cut off from significant political participation beyond voting. Since there is no alternation of power, however, they are less apt to evince the “a pox on all your houses” political outlook pervasive in feckless-pluralist systems. Yet those opposition political parties that do exist generally are hard put to gain much public credibility due to their perennial status as outsiders to the main halls of power. Whatever energies and hopes for effective opposition to the regime remain often reside in civil society groups, usually a loose collection of advocacy NGOs and independent media (often funded by Western donors) that skirmish with the government on human rights, the environment, corruption, and other issues of public interest.

The state tends to be as weak and poorly performing in dominant-power countries as in feckless-pluralist countries, though the problem is often a bureaucracy decaying under the stagnancy of de facto one-party rule rather than the disorganized, unstable nature of state management (such as the constant turnover of ministers) typical of feckless pluralism. The long hold on power by one political group usually produces large-scale corruption and crony capitalism. Due to the existence of some political openness in these systems, the leaders do often feel some pressure from the public about corruption and other abuses of state power. They even may periodically declare their intention to root out corruption and strengthen the rule of law. But their deep-seated intolerance for anything more than limited opposition and the basic political configuration over which they preside breed the very problems they publicly commit themselves to tackling.

Dominant-power systems are prevalent in three regions. In sub-

Saharan Africa, the widely hailed wave of democratization that washed over the region in the early 1990s has ended up producing many dominant-power systems. In some cases, one-party states liberalized yet ended up permitting only very limited processes of political opening, as in Cameroon, Burkina Faso, Equatorial Guinea, Tanzania, Gabon, Kenya, and Mauritania. In a few cases, old regimes were defeated or collapsed, yet the new regimes have ended up in dominant-party structures, as in Zambia in the 1990s, or the forces previously shunted aside have reclaimed power, as in Congo (Brazzaville).

Dominant-power systems are found in the former Soviet Union as well. Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan fall in this category. The other Central Asian republics and Belarus are better understood as out-and-out authoritarian systems. The liberalization trend that arose in the Middle East in the mid-1980s and has unfolded in fits and starts ever since has moved some countries out of the authoritarian camp into the dominant-power category. These include Morocco, Jordan, Algeria, Egypt, Iran, and Yemen. Dominant-power systems are scarce outside of these three regions. In Asia, Malaysia and Cambodia count as examples. In Latin America, Paraguay may be one case, and Venezuela is likely headed toward becoming a second.

Dominant-power systems vary in their degree of freedom and their political direction. Some have very limited political space and are close to being dictatorships. Others allow much more freedom, albeit still with limits. A few “transitional countries,” including the important cases of South Africa and Russia, fall just to the side of this syndrome. They have a fair amount of political freedom and have held competitive elections of some legitimacy (though sharp debate on that issue exists with regard to Russia). Yet they are ruled by political forces that appear to have a long-term hold on power (if one considers the shift from Yeltsin to Putin more as a political transfer than an alternation of power), and it is hard to imagine any of the existing opposition parties coming to power for many years to come. If they maintain real political freedom and open competition for power, they may join the ranks of cases, such as Italy and Japan (prior to the 1990s) and Botswana, of longtime democratic rule by one party. Yet due to the tenuousness of their new democratic institutions, they face the danger of slippage toward the dominant-power syndrome.

As political syndromes, both feckless pluralism and dominant-power politics have some stability. Once in them, countries do not move out of them easily. Feckless pluralism achieves its own dysfunctional equilibrium—the passing of power back and forth between competing elites who are largely isolated from the citizenry but willing to play by widely accepted rules. Dominant-power politics also often achieves a kind of stasis, with the ruling group able to keep political opposition on the ropes while permitting enough political openness to alleviate pressure

from the public. They are by no means permanent political configurations; no political configuration lasts forever. Countries can and do move out of them—either from one to the other or out of either toward liberal democracy or dictatorship. For a time in the 1990s, Ukraine seemed stuck in dominant-power politics but may be shifting to something more like feckless pluralism. Senegal was previously a clear case of dominant-power politics but, with the opposition victory in the 2000 elections, may be moving toward either liberal democracy or feckless pluralism.

Although many countries in the gray zone have ended up as examples of either feckless pluralism or dominant-power politics, not all have. A small number of “transitional countries” have moved away from authoritarian rule only in the last several years, and their political trajectory is as yet unclear. Indonesia, Nigeria, Serbia, and Croatia are four prominent examples of this type. Some countries that experienced political openings in the 1980s or 1990s have been so wracked by civil conflict that their political systems are too unstable or incoherent to pin down easily, though they are definitely not on a path of democratization. The Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Somalia all represent this situation.

The Crash of Assumptions

Taken together, the political trajectories of most third-wave countries call into serious doubt the transition paradigm. This is apparent if we revisit the major assumptions underlying the paradigm in light of the above analysis.

First, the almost automatic assumption of democracy promoters during the peak years of the third wave that any country moving away from dictatorship was “in transition to democracy” has often been inaccurate and misleading. Some of those countries have hardly democratized at all. Many have taken on a smattering of democratic features but show few signs of democratizing much further and are certainly not following any predictable democratization script. The most common political patterns to date among the “transitional countries”—feckless pluralism and dominant-power politics—include elements of democracy but should be understood as alternative directions, not way stations to liberal democracy. The persistence in official U.S. democracy-promotion circles of using transitional language to characterize countries that in no way conform to any democratization paradigm borders in some case on the surreal—including not just the case of Congo cited above but many others, such as Moldova (“Moldova’s democratic transition continues to progress steadily”), Zambia (“Zambia is . . . moving steadily toward . . . the creation of a viable multiparty democracy”), Cambodia (“policy successes in Cambodia towards democracy and improved governance

within the past 18 months are numerous”), and Guinea (“Guinea has made significant strides toward building a democratic society”).¹³ The continued use of the transition paradigm constitutes a dangerous habit of trying to impose a simplistic and often incorrect conceptual order on an empirical tableau of considerable complexity.

Second, not only is the general label and concept of “transitional country” unhelpful, but the assumed sequence of stages of democratization is defied by the record of experience. Some of the most encouraging cases of democratization in recent years—such as Taiwan, South Korea, and Mexico—did not go through the paradigmatic process of democratic breakthrough followed rapidly by national elections and a new democratic institutional framework. Their political evolutions were defined by an almost opposite phenomenon—extremely gradual, incremental processes of liberalization with an organized political opposition (not softliners in the regime) pushing for change across successive elections and finally winning. And in many of the countries that did go through some version of what appeared to be a democratic breakthrough, the assumed sequence of changes—first settling constitutive issues then working through second-order reforms—has not held. Constitutive issues have reemerged at unpredictable times, upending what are supposed to be later stages of transition, as in the recent political crises in Ecuador, the Central African Republic, and Chad.

Moreover, the various assumed component processes of consolidation—political party development, civil society strengthening, judicial reform, and media development—almost never conform to the technocratic ideal of rational sequences on which the indicator frameworks and strategic objectives of democracy promoters are built. Instead they are chaotic processes of change that go backwards and sideways as much as forward, and do not do so in any regular manner.

The third assumption of the transition paradigm—the notion that achieving regular, genuine elections will not only confer democratic legitimacy on new governments but continuously deepen political participation and democratic accountability—has often come up short. In many “transitional countries,” reasonably regular, genuine elections are held but political participation beyond voting remains shallow and governmental accountability is weak. The wide gulf between political elites and citizens in many of these countries turns out to be rooted in structural conditions, such as the concentration of wealth or certain sociocultural traditions, that elections themselves do not overcome. It is also striking how often electoral competition does little to stimulate the renovation or development of political parties in many gray-zone countries. Such profound pathologies as highly personalistic parties, transient and shifting parties, or stagnant patronage-based politics appear to be able to coexist for sustained periods with at least somewhat legitimate processes of political pluralism and competition.

These disappointments certainly do not mean that elections are pointless in such countries or that the international community should not continue to push for free and fair elections. But greatly reduced expectations are in order as to what elections will accomplish as generators of deep-reaching democratic change. Nepal is a telling example in this regard. Since 1990, Nepal has held many multiparty elections and experienced frequent alternation of power. Yet the Nepalese public remains highly disaffected from the political system and there is little real sense of democratic accountability.

Fourth, ever since “preconditions for democracy” were enthusiastically banished in the heady early days of the third wave, a contrary reality—the fact that various structural conditions clearly weigh heavily in shaping political outcomes—has been working its way back in. Looking at the more successful recent cases of democratization, for example, which tend to be found in Central Europe, the Southern Cone, or East Asia, it is clear that relative economic wealth, as well as past experience with political pluralism, contributes to the chances for democratic success. And looking comparatively within regions, whether in the former communist world or sub-Saharan Africa, it is evident that the specific institutional legacies from predecessor regimes strongly affect the outcomes of attempted transitions.

During the 1990s, a number of scholars began challenging the “no preconditions” line, with analyses of the roles that economic wealth, institutional legacies, social class, and other structural factors play in attempted democratic transitions.¹⁴ Yet it has been hard for the democracy-promotion community to take this work on board. Democracy promoters are strongly wedded to their focus on political processes and institutions. They have been concerned that trying to blend that focus with economic or sociocultural perspectives might lead to the dilution or reduction of democracy assistance. And having set up as organizations with an exclusively political perspective, it is hard for democracy-promotion groups to include other kinds of expertise or approaches.

Fifth, state-building has been a much larger and more problematic issue than originally envisaged in the transition paradigm. Contrary to the early assumptions of democracy-aid practitioners, many third-wave countries have faced fundamental state-building challenges. Approximately 20 countries in the former Soviet Union and former Yugoslavia have had to build national state institutions where none existed before. Throughout much of sub-Saharan Africa, the liberalizing political wave of the 1990s ran squarely into the sobering reality of devastatingly weak states. In many parts of Latin America, the Middle East, and Asia, political change was carried out in the context of stable state structures, but the erratic performance of those states complicated every step.

Where state-building from scratch had to be carried out, the core impulses and interests of powerholders—such as locking in access to

power and resources as quickly as possible—ran directly contrary to what democracy-building would have required. In countries with existing but extremely weak states, the democracy-building efforts funded by donors usually neglected the issue of state-building. With their frequent emphasis on diffusing power and weakening the relative power of the executive branch—by strengthening the legislative and judicial branches of government, encouraging decentralization, and building civil society—they were more about the redistribution of state power than about state-building. The programs that democracy promoters have directed at governance have tended to be minor technocratic efforts, such as training ministerial staff or aiding cabinet offices, rather than major efforts at bolstering state capacity.

Letting Go

It is time for the democracy-promotion community to discard the transition paradigm. Analyzing the record of experience in the many countries that democracy activists have been labeling “transitional countries,” it is evident that it is no longer appropriate to assume:

- that most of these countries are actually in a transition to democracy;
- that countries moving away from authoritarianism tend to follow a three-part process of democratization consisting of opening, break-through, and consolidation;
- that the establishment of regular, genuine elections will not only give new governments democratic legitimacy but foster a longer term deepening of democratic participation and accountability;
- that a country’s chances for successfully democratizing depend primarily on the political intentions and actions of its political elites without significant influence from underlying economic, social, and institutional conditions and legacies;
- that state-building is a secondary challenge to democracy-building and largely compatible with it.

It is hard to let go of the transitional paradigm, both for the conceptual order and for the hopeful vision it provides. Giving it up constitutes a major break, but not a total one. It does not mean denying that important democratic reforms have occurred in many countries in the past two decades. It does not mean that countries in the gray zone are doomed never to achieve well-functioning liberal democracy. It does not mean that free and fair elections in “transitional countries” are futile or not worth supporting. It does not mean that the United States and other international actors should abandon efforts to promote democracy in the world (if anything, it implies that, given how difficult democratization is, efforts to promote it should be redoubled).

It does mean, however, that democracy promoters should approach their work with some very different assumptions. They should start by

assuming that what is often thought of as an uneasy, precarious middle ground between full-fledged democracy and outright dictatorship is actually the most common political condition today of countries in the

What is often thought of as an uneasy, precarious middle ground between full-fledged democracy and outright dictatorship is actually the most common political condition today of countries in the developing world and the postcommunist world.

developing world and the postcommunist world. It is not an exceptional category to be defined only in terms of its not being one thing or the other; it is a state of normality for many societies, for better or worse. The seemingly continual surprise and disappointment that Western political analysts express over the very frequent falling short of democracy in “transitional countries” should be replaced with realistic expectations about the likely patterns of political life in these countries.

Aid practitioners and policy makers looking at politics in a country that has recently moved away from authoritarianism should not start by asking, “How is its democratic transition going?” They should instead formulate a more open-ended query, “What is happening politically?” Insisting on the former approach leads to optimistic assumptions that often shunt the analysis down a blind alley. To take one example, during the 1990s, Western policy makers habitually analyzed Georgia’s post-1991 political evolution as a democratic transition, highlighting the many formal achievements, and holding up a basically positive image of the country. Then suddenly, at the end of the decade, the essential hollowness of Georgia’s “democratic transition” became too apparent to ignore, and Georgia is now suddenly talked about as a country in serious risk of state failure or deep socio-political crisis.¹⁵

A whole generation of democracy aid is based on the transition paradigm, above all the typical emphasis on an institutional “checklist” as a basis for creating programs, and the creation of nearly standard portfolios of aid projects consisting of the same diffuse set of efforts all over—some judicial reform, parliamentary strengthening, civil society assistance, media work, political party development, civic education, and electoral programs. Much of the democracy aid based on this paradigm is exhausted. Where the paradigm fits well—in the small number of clearly successful transitions—the aid is not much needed. Where democracy aid is needed most, in many of the gray-zone countries, the paradigm fits poorly.

Democracy promoters need to focus in on the key political patterns of each country in which they intervene, rather than trying to do a little

of everything according to a template of ideal institutional forms. Where feckless pluralism reigns, this means giving concentrated attention to two interrelated issues: how to improve the variety and quality of the main political actors in the society and how to begin to bridge the gulf between the citizenry and the formal political system. Much greater attention to political party development should be a major part of the response, with special attention to encouraging new entrants into the political party scene, changing the rules and incentive systems that shape the current party structures, and fostering strong connections between parties and civil society groups (rather than encouraging civil society groups to stay away from partisan politics).

In dominant-power systems, democracy promoters should devote significant attention to the challenge of helping to encourage the growth of alternative centers of power. Merely helping finance the proliferation of nongovernmental organizations is an inadequate approach to this challenge. Again, political party development must be a top agenda item, especially through measures aimed at changing the way political parties are financed. It should include efforts to examine how the over-concentration of economic power (a standard feature of dominant-power systems) can be reduced as well as measures that call attention to and work against the blurring of the line between the ruling party and the state.

In other types of gray-zone countries, democracy promoters will need to settle on other approaches. The message for all gray-zone countries, however, is the same—falling back on a smorgasbord of democracy programs based on the vague assumption that they all contribute to some assumed process of consolidation is not good enough. Democracy aid must proceed from a penetrating analysis of the particular core syndrome that defines the political life of the country in question, and how aid interventions can change that syndrome.

Moving beyond the transition paradigm also means getting serious about bridging the longstanding divide between aid programs directed at democracy-building and those focused on social and economic development. USAID has initiated some work on this topic but has only scratched the surface of what could become a major synthesis of disparate domains in the aid world. One example of a topic that merits the combined attention of economic aid providers and democracy promoters is privatization programs. These programs have major implications for how power is distributed in a society, how ruling political forces can entrench themselves, and how the public participates in major policy decisions. Democracy promoters need to take a serious interest in these reform efforts and learn to make a credible case to economists that they should have a place at the table when such programs are being planned. The same is true for any number of areas of socioeconomic reform that tend to be a major focus of economic aid providers and that have

potentially significant effects on the underlying sociopolitical domain, including pension reform, labor law reform, antitrust policy, banking reform, and tax reform. The onus is on democracy-aid providers to develop a broader conception of democracy work and to show that they have something to contribute on the main stage of the development-assistance world.

These are only provisional ideas. Many other “next generation” challenges remain to be identified. The core point, however, is plain: The transition paradigm was a product of a certain time—the heady early days of the third wave—and that time has now passed. It is necessary for democracy activists to move on to new frameworks, new debates, and perhaps eventually a new paradigm of political change—one suited to the landscape of today, not the lingering hopes of an earlier era.

NOTES

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1. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

2. Guillermo O’Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions About Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

3. Ruth Collier argues that a similar transition paradigm has prevailed in the scholarly writing on democratization. “The ‘transitions literature,’ as this current work has come to be known, has as its best representative the founding essay by O’Donnell and Schmitter (1986), which established a framework that is implicitly or explicitly followed in most other contributions.” Ruth Berins Collier, *Paths Toward Democracy: The Working Class and Elites in Western Europe and South America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 5.

4. “Building Democracy in the Democratic Republic of Congo,” www.usaid.gov/democracy/afr/congo.html. Here and elsewhere in this article, I cite USAID documents because they are the most readily available practitioners’ statements of guidelines and political assessments, but I believe that my analysis applies equally well to most other democracy-promotion organizations in the United States and abroad.

5. The conception of democratization as a predictable, sequential process of incremental steps is vividly exemplified in USAID’s “managing for results” assessment system. See *Handbook of Democracy and Governance Program Indicators* (Washington, D.C.: USAID, August 1998).

6. Guillermo O’Donnell argues that the concept of democratic consolidation has teleological qualities, in “Illusions About Consolidation,” *Journal of Democracy* 7 (April 1996): 34–51. A response to O’Donnell’s charge is found in Richard Gunther, P. Niki-foros Diamandouros, and Hans-Jürgen Puhle, “O’Donnell’s ‘Illusions’: A Rejoinder,” *Journal of Democracy* 7 (October 1996): 151–59.

7. See, for example, Giuseppe Di Palma, *To Craft Democracies: An Essay on Democratic Transitions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991). Dankwart

Rustow's article "Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Comparative Model," originally appeared in *Comparative Politics* 2 (April 1970): 337–63.

8. USAID's current listing of the types of governance programs in its democracy-assistance portfolio, for example, contains no examples of work on fundamental state-building. See "Agency Objectives: Governance," www.usaid.gov/democracy/gov.html.

9. An insightful account of the state of the third wave is found in Larry Diamond, "Is the Third Wave Over?" *Journal of Democracy* 7 (July 1996): 20–37.

10. Larry Diamond uses the term "twilight zone" to refer to a sizeable but smaller set of countries—electoral democracies that are in a zone of "persistence without legitimation or institutionalization," in *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 22.

11. David Collier and Steven Levitsky, "Democracy with Adjectives: Conceptual Innovation in Comparative Research," *World Politics* 49 (April 1997): 430–51.

12. Guillermo O'Donnell, "Delegative Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 5 (January 1994): 55–69.

13. These quotes are all taken from the country descriptions in the democracy-building section of the USAID website, www.usaid.gov/democracy.html.

14. See, for example, Michael Bratton and Nicolas van de Walle, *Democratic Experiments in Africa: Regime Transitions in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Valerie Bunce, *Subversive Institutions: The Design and Destruction of Socialism and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Ruth Collier, *Paths Toward Democracy*; Dietrich Rueschmeyer, Evelyne Huber Stephens, and John D. Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992); Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Latin America and Eastern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); and Adam Przeworski and Fernando Limongi, "Political Regimes and Economic Growth," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 7 (Summer 1993): 51–69.

15. See Charles King, "Potemkin Democracy," *The National Interest* 64 (Summer 2001): 93–104.