

Democratic Transition in Southern Mediterranean Countries: A Theoretical - Practical Approach



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Abstract

The article seeks to clarify the diverse theoretical frameworks and perspectives that underpin the dynamics of democratic transition. It examines the structure of this transition, considering its inputs, catalysts, and outcomes, with a particular focus on the consolidation of democracy during the post-transition period. The aim is to forge a relational synthesis, integrating theoretical constructs with their practical applications in the restoration of state legitimacy and its institutions. This synthesis prioritizes the upholding of rights and freedoms, their active practice, and the pursuit of social justice.

Keywords

Democratic Transition;
Southern Mediterranean;
Approaches;
Practices;
Processes.

الكلمات المفتاحية

الإنقلال الديمقراطي في دول جنوب المتوسط: مقاربة نظرية - تطبيقية

ملخص

الإنقلال الديمقراطي ؛
جنوب المتوسط ؛
المقاربات ؛
الممارسات ؛
العمليات.

يهدف المقال إلى تسليط الضوء على مختلف المداخل والمقاربات النظرية التي توصل لعملية الإنقلال الديمقراطي من خلال البحث في هندسة هذا الإنقلال بتناول مدخلاته، مسبباته، ومخرجهاته خاصة فيما يتعلق بترسيخ الديمقراطية في مرحلة ما بعد الإنقلال. لنصل في الأخير إلى إعطاء توليفة علانقية تشمل على ما هو نظري وما يقابلها في الجانب الممارساتي من إعادة بناء شرعية الدولة ومؤسساتها، وتأكيد على الحقوق والحريات وضمان ممارستها، والحرص على تحقيق العدالة الاجتماعية.

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I- Introduction:

In the 1990s, the global landscape underwent a critical transformation as numerous countries began to embrace democracy not only as a governance system but also as a way of life permeating various domains. This shift was a continuation of the democratic fervor that had started in the mid-1970s, promoting democratic values and principles of governance. The Arab region, too, was part of this worldwide change, albeit with limited experiments in implementing this model, replete with its novelties and challenges. Notably, these trials were often restricted to their initiators and did not achieve the same efficacy or pace observed in Western democracies, where the model had proven exceptionally successful.

Significantly, the Arab region, particularly the Southern Mediterranean, was revisited by this democratic wave in 2011, which set off profound disturbances. These disturbances uncovered a common reality among most Arab nations, despite varying in specific details and nuances. They brought to light the degradation of various forms of regime legitimacy and the failure of elites to adjust to unfolding events and to regenerate themselves.

Given the substantial conceptual and theoretical development surrounding the process of democratic transition in the Southern Mediterranean, and the intricate mesh of methodological and analytical approaches employed to examine this phenomenon, a multitude of academic inquiries have concentrated on dissecting this transition and mapping its intellectual underpinnings. These studies aim to link it to diverse theoretical frameworks that elucidate the nature of democratic transition, its instigators, and its driving factors. Hence, the core issue of this article is encapsulated in the following pivotal inquiry:

"What frameworks and theoretical approaches inform the Southern Mediterranean region's adoption of the democratic transition process, and to what extent has it succeeded in aligning theoretical models with practical realities?".

I. The Conceptual Debate around the Content of the Democratic Transition Process:

Exploring the content of the democratic transition process entails a thorough examination of the concept itself, discerning the distinctions and commonalities often found with terms frequently regarded as analogous. It is crucial to pinpoint its underpinnings and the catalysts for its emergence.

I. 1. The Concept of Democratic Transition and its Relation to Other Concepts:

The term "Democratic Transition" presents a terminological challenge in its definition. Many scholarly works treat 'Democratic Transition,' 'Democratic Transformation,' and 'Democratization' as interchangeable, reflecting a linguistic conundrum rooted in the translation from Western texts. This issue is compounded by the nuanced overlaps among these terms.

This study proposes a reconciliatory approach, based on the premise that democratic transition and democratic transformation essentially convey the same idea when assessed against the backdrop of various academic discourses that use these terms interchangeably, yet it also acknowledges the subtle distinctions between them.

The word 'transition' implies the act of moving from one state or place to another (Mansour, 2004). Therefore, at its most expansive, the concept of "democratic transition" encompasses the processes and interactions involved in shifting from a non-democratic to a democratic governance system. This encompasses various forms of non-democratic regimes, which may be totalitarian or authoritarian, civil or military, and dominated by an individual or a minority.

Additionally, the spectrum of democratic regimes one might transition into is broad; an authoritarian regime may shift towards a semi-democratic state characterized by electoral democracy, or a semi-democratic regime may progress into a liberal democratic system or an approximation thereof.

Samuel Huntington characterizes the wave of democratic transformation as a sequence of transitions from non-democratic to democratic systems, occurring within a specific timeframe and outnumbering the transitions in the reverse direction during the same period (El-Alawi, 1993).

Huntington's analysis brings to light two principal conceptualizations of democratic transition:

-Normative Conceptualization: This viewpoint emphasizes the formal dynamics of transition, characterized by a movement from a non-democratic to a democratic state. This transition is marked by the shift from a closed political system to an open one, facilitating the alternation of power.

-Procedural Conceptualization: Inspired by Schmitter's definition, this conceptualization views democracy as a series of institutional actions designed to make political decisions where individuals secure decision-making authority through a competitive electoral process. It suggests that democratic transition involves moving from an autocratic, individualistic system to a political framework where leaders are collectively selected through free, competitive, and fair elections. The elites emerging from these elections are expected to govern through robust constitutional institutions.

Democratic transition thus represents an interactive process occurring over a designated period between the non-democratic frameworks inherited from an antiquated political system and the emergent democratic structures. Successful transition is marked by the dominance of new democratic structures over the old, culminating in the establishment of democracy.

The distinction between democratic transformation and transition is notable. Democratic transformation refers to the initiation of change, which may be partial, such as the acceptance of pluralism, as witnessed in Algeria in the late 1980s.

Conversely, democratic transition is characterized by revolutionary change, though it presupposes a departure from revolution as a method of transformation, rendering it a critical phase in the broader scope of democratic transformation. During this phase, the political system exhibits a dual nature, wherein elements of both the former authoritarian regime and the nascent democratic regime coexist, as observed in the early stages of democratic transitions in Egypt and Tunisia (Usul, 2004).

It is pertinent to mention that some scholarly works use the term democratization interchangeably with democratic transition. Democratization is described as the process leading to the establishment of a democratic regime, with transition serving as a crucial phase that terminates authoritarian rule and establishes a consensus that popular choice is the sole legitimate method of forming a government. This phase is typically preceded by a comprehensive liberalization process encompassing the media and opposition rights, ultimately leading to democratic consolidation.

Moreover, the influence of external factors on the transition process cannot be overstated, exemplified by the global campaign spearheaded by the United States and international economic institutions promoting the liberal democratic model through conditional policies and coercive interventions in nations that have breached international peace and security standards, failed to protect their citizens, or committed severe human rights violations. A prime example of such intervention is the American incursion into Iraq in 2003, purportedly aimed at laying the foundations of democracy.

I. 2. Factors of Democratic Transition:

The factors defining the process of democratic transition vary and differentiate according to each transitional experience. Each experience has its specificities and inducing factors, and, on the other hand, the diversity of perspectives among thinkers and the angle from which researchers approach the subject of democratic transition are primary reasons for the variety and multiplicity of factors. Despite this diversity, it is possible to distinguish between groups of factors as follows:

I. 2. 1. External Factors:

External factors play an important role in the emergence and development of the idea of democratic transition. Often, they provide the strong impetus that has a significant impact on adopting the democratic path. These can be summarized in:

-Role of External Forces:

It is important to note the countries that control others by exercising soft power over them, manifested in loans and economic aid allocated by major countries and global economic institutions. These typically take the form of conditional policies, primarily aimed at increasing freedoms and expanding the base of political participation and public accountability, thereby playing the role of pressuring toward democratization (Kandil). The United States and Britain are among the most pressing countries in this area.

-Effect of Contagion and Spread:

This refers to a country emulating another that has successfully undergone a democratic transition, encouraging Country A to imitate Country B in the same manner. Here, 'imitation' refers to the principle of transition itself and the factors stimulating transition, such as geographical proximity and similar deteriorating political and economic situations, without delving into the specificity of each experience (Gleditsh & Ward, 2006).

For example, the countries of the Soviet Union provide a good example where similar circumstances and conditions led to a wave of transition. In addition to geographical determinants and similarities in cultural and political structures, various forms of communications systems and media, both visual and auditory, play a role in spreading the contagion of democratic transition despite serious attempts by governments to curtail and block access to information for their citizens. The Arab Spring is an actual embodiment of this proposition; as soon as the fuse of democratic transition was ignited in Tunisia and succeeded, calls for democracy escalated in Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, and other Arab countries, which the authoritarian governments confronted by cutting off wireless communications, especially the internet, due to the interactions on social media networks. These networks had a significant impact in tipping the scales and overthrowing Arab regimes.

I. 2. 2. Internal Factors:

Internal factors comprise a variety of elements that emerge from societal contexts, signaling a systemic dysfunction and a deteriorating state that necessitates the implementation of extraordinary and decisive measures to amend. These factors pertain to aspects of political, economic, or socio-cultural dimensions. Noteworthy among these factors are:

-Legitimacy crisis in the regimes of these nations, stemming from their failure to reflect the popular will, compounded by these regimes' infringements upon civil liberties and human rights.

-Increasing role of opposition elites in championing democratic ideals, coupled with internal divisions within the regime itself, as delineated by scholars such as O'Donnell and Schmitter.

-Escalation of opposition voices calling for enhanced democratic governance and political engagement, the suppression of which exacerbates international scrutiny and tarnishes the regime's reputation both domestically and globally.

-Strength of local civil society and its burgeoning ties with the global civil society, which grapple with intricate issues that impinge on the stability and legitimacy of the regime.

- Rising values and ethics that advocate for the adoption of democracy not only as a form of governance but also as a methodology and a way of life, profoundly influencing societies afflicted by authoritarianism and the curtailment of civil liberties.
- Economic deterioration and the decline in living standards, marked by reduced income and widespread unemployment, particularly among the youth.

Hence, the interplay of both external and internal factors is pivotal in catalyzing the democratic transition process and facilitating societal advancement towards embracing democratic norms.

II. Approaches and Perspectives Explaining the Democratic Transition Process:

The academic discourse on transitionology, or the study of political transitions, presents a diverse array of approaches and perspectives that elucidate successful models of transition characterized by stability, consolidation, and sustainability within societies. It is important to note that the theoretical exploration of transitions is enriched by insights from various other disciplines within social sciences, including systems theory, modernization theory, decision theory, and functional structuralism.

II. 1. Approaches to Democratic Transition:

Prominent scholars such as Samuel Huntington, Juan J. Linz, and Donald Share have significantly contributed to the theoretical frameworks that describe the dynamics of democratic transitions. Huntington's analysis of transition modalities offers distinct theoretical perspectives wherein both the governing elites and opposition forces play varying roles across different scenarios of transition, detailed as follows (Huntington, 1991):

- Transformational Model: Predicated on the initiative of the ruling elites to embrace democratic principles and restructure the totalitarian political system into an institutional framework where power is contested openly and equitably.
- Replacement Model: Characterized by the opposition's successful overthrow of the ruling elites, leading to the dismantling of the authoritarian regime and the establishment of a democratic governance structure.
- Transplacement Model: This approach involves a negotiated engagement between the ruling government and the opposition, aimed at collaboratively facilitating the transformation towards democracy.

In addition to Huntington's approaches, scholars have identified several other methodologies for democratic transition:

- Transition from Above: This approach is characterized by initiatives originating from within the system, spearheaded by the political leadership. It typically commences when objective factors undermine the legitimacy of governance, instilling in the ruling elite a perception that the benefits of transitioning to a democratic framework outweigh the costs associated with maintaining authoritarian regimes. This model is exemplified by the transitions in Spain and, more recently, by Algeria, which implemented a series of reforms in response to the potential threats posed by the Arab Spring.
- Transition from Below: This form of transition manifests in two distinct methods. The first involves mounting pressures exerted on the ruling regime through public demonstrations and protests, orchestrated and participated in by democratic opposition groups. This culminates in forcing the regime to concede to democratic reforms, as observed in the Philippines, South Korea, and Mexico. The second method emerges from the opposition leading the charge following the collapse or overthrow of an authoritarian regime, often through a popular uprising or revolution, examples of which include Portugal and Argentina.
- Negotiated Transition: This model encapsulates a formal agreement between two factions, represented by the ruling authorities and the opposition. It materializes when a relative equilibrium in power exists between the two, leading the ruling elite to acknowledge the unsustainability of its repressive policies and the opposition realizing its inability to overthrow the regime solely through confrontational means (Madi, 2009). This mutual recognition often propels both parties towards negotiation, a strategy epitomized by the South African transition.
- Transition through Foreign Military Intervention: This model is initiated through external military intervention, ostensibly to foster democracy and protect human rights (Beetham, 2009). However, this approach is marked by its notable lack of success, as evidenced by the majority of such interventions, including the American engagements in Iraq in 2003 and Afghanistan in 2001, which largely failed to achieve their stated democratic objectives.

II. 2. Perspectives Explaining the Democratic Transition Process:

The academic discourse on democratic transitions typically underscores three predominant frameworks that delineate this process: the Modernization Approach, the Transition Approach, and the Structural Approach. These perspectives collectively explore the conditions and mechanisms through which societies embark on the journey towards democratic governance, focusing on the interplay between socio-economic development, political structures, and international influences.

Modernization Approach:

The Modernization Approach correlates the prevalence of democratic systems with economic development levels, positing that nations with advanced economic metrics are more predisposed to democratic governance, and conversely, lesser developed nations tend to have non-democratic regimes.

This hypothesis was pioneered by S.M. Lipset in his seminal work, "The Political Man," published in 1960, where he analyzed political structures in relation to economic conditions. Lipset differentiated between two groups of countries, those from North America, Europe, and Australia forming the first group, and Latin American countries constituting the second. He evaluated these groups based on wealth, industrialization and urbanization levels, and educational attainment, using these criteria as barometers of economic and social progress.

Lipset's analysis led him to categorize the political systems of the first group into stable democracies, unstable democracies, and dictatorships, while the second group was segmented into stable democracies (Merkel, 2008), stable dictatorships, and unstable regimes, associating higher development levels with democratic governance.

The approach has been further refined by scholars such as Bollen & Jakman, who incorporated statistical methodologies to evaluate economic development's impact on democracy, following critiques from analysts like Diamond, who challenged the theory's assumption that wealth and high income are definitive indicators of democratic maturity, citing examples like Saudi Arabia, where significant wealth has not translated into democratic governance (Guo, 1999).

Transition Approach:

This approach emphasizes the critical role of political elites and the human element in facilitating the transition towards democracy, focusing on decision-making processes and the strategic choices available. Dankwart Rustow, in his influential 1970 article "Transition to Democracy," critiqued the existing paradigms that concentrated primarily on the conditions necessary for the maintenance and strengthening of democracy.

Instead, Rustow introduced a dynamic model that outlines a generalized pathway to democratic transition through four pivotal stages (Rustow, 1970):

-Stage of Achieving National Unity: Essential to Rustow's framework, this stage involves forging a consensus on the political entity of the state and establishing a unified political identity among all constituents, which he views as indispensable for democracy, which necessitates defined boundaries and a cohesive citizenry.

-Preparatory Stage: Characterized by conflicts that emerge with the rise of new elites challenging the established order, demanding significant roles in governance. This stage also entails navigating through the ensuing conflicts to either resolve them or recalibrate the social equilibrium.

-Decision Stage: This phase is marked by the adoption of democratic norms as a conciliatory framework that accommodates all parties within the political system.

-Habituation Stage: This final stage addresses the entrenchment of democratic norms, questioning whether these are embraced out of coercion or genuine societal conviction. Over time, the various factions are expected to acclimate to democratic principles, thereby solidifying its foundation.

Rustow's model, however, is critiqued for lacking specific mechanisms to address potential failures in the democratic transition, particularly when there is an absence of consensus among new and traditional elites or between these elites and the opposition. Moreover, it does not account for the unique characteristics of each society in the transition process, thereby applying a universal model irrespective of local particularities.

The Structural Approach:

This perspective delves into a constellation of variables linked to historical shifts in the structures of power and authority within societies. These shifts create opportunities and barriers that influence the trajectory towards democracy. Early contributions by B. Moore in his seminal work, "Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy," published in 1999, highlight a variety of power and authority structures that elucidate the divergent paths toward liberal democracy in nations like France, Britain, and the United States, in contrast to the communist routes of China and Russia, and the erstwhile fascist regimes of Japan and East Germany. Key indicators in these analyses include factors such as land ownership, the roles of aristocracy, the bourgeoisie, and state structures (Moore, 1996).

D. Rueschemeyer's pivotal study, "Capitalist Development and Democracy," which appeared in 1992, underscores the significance of international relations and the expansion of the working class in shaping democratic transitions. His approach is distinctly rooted in a class conflict perspective, arguing that the dynamics among different social classes are crucial determinants of democracy.

Further exploring the multifaceted influences on democratization, D. Potter emphasized the form and robustness of state institutions as critical in fostering democratic environments. Complementary studies by R. Snyder have investigated the impact of political institutions on democratization, focusing on constitutional frameworks, electoral systems, and party structures. While additional insights have considered the role of political culture, the overarching emphasis remains on the power and authority structures as the primary influencers of the democratic transition process.

III. The Relationship Between Theoretical Frameworks and Actual Practices After the Democratic Transition Phase:

Upon reviewing various theoretical models pertinent to the democratic transition, it is imperative to examine the interface between these academic frameworks and the tangible outcomes observed in societies post-transition. This examination particularly targets the Southern Mediterranean region, which has been a hotbed of political and social upheaval following the Arab Spring movement that commenced in 2011.

The focus is on identifying the critical elements and determinants necessary in the post-revolutionary context, with a particular emphasis on the phase of democratic consolidation. This stage is crucial, as it involves extensive efforts to ascertain the success or failure of the democratic transitions undertaken. The analysis aims to distill the essential requirements that must be addressed during this consolidation phase to ensure a stable and effective democratic regime.

III. 1. Democratic Consolidation and Democratic Transition Duality:

The process of democratic transition is intrinsically linked to a robust consolidation phase, which is underpinned by comprehensive constitutional and legal frameworks, alongside influential political and social forces committed to the democratic ethos through various nonviolent methods.

This consolidation phase is characterized by several key indicators, among which the most critical is a substantive consensus among both elites and the general populace regarding the foundational principles of democracy and the universal acceptance of democratic procedures as the sole legitimate means for resolving political disputes and vying for power.

This phase also involves widespread civic engagement in electoral processes. Furthermore, the extent of political culture, as articulated by scholars such as Larry Diamond and David Bentham, plays a pivotal role (Metiks, 1999).

The establishment and reinforcement of a democratic political culture are essential for the sustenance of democratic institutions. Larry Diamond posits that cultivating a democratic political culture is vital for the consolidation phase, serving as the psychological bedrock of the political system. This culture comprises a set of values and beliefs that endorse the efficacy of robust institutions, transparent electoral processes, and a free press.

Often referred to as the strategy of institutional engineering, this aspect is highlighted by researcher T. Vanhanen. It involves the creation of legal and constitutional frameworks that embody democratic values, the establishment of a diverse party system, and the execution of regular and fair elections.

Diamond's research into bolstering democracies in Asia, Latin America, and Africa underscores the vulnerability of these systems to collapse if they fail to tackle the socio-economic issues they face. Similarly, Samuel Huntington has argued that poverty is a significant impediment to democratic development.

III. 2. Pillars of Democratic Consolidation Engineering in the Southern Mediterranean Region:

Addressing the pillars of democratic consolidation engineering in this region necessitates a focus on institutional engineering. This approach is crucial for establishing what is often termed constitutional technology, which encompasses the adoption of a democratic constitution that enforces both horizontal (among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches) and vertical (between state powers and civil society) separations of power, alongside safeguarding both collective and individual rights and responsibilities.

III. 2.1. Rebuilding State Legitimacy and Establishing a Democratic Constitution:

The reconstruction of state legitimacy is paramount in the new social contract, with power redistribution being a central strategy for reinvigorating the significance of legislative and judicial powers. However, this objective is not attained through mere technical or formal reforms but through the establishment of a new constitutional framework that eliminates the personalistic characteristics prevalent in many Arab regimes.

The approaches taken by different nations vary; some have completely overhauled their previous constitutions, while others have instituted amendments that reflect the demands of the new era, contingent on whether the transition marked a complete departure from the past or was achieved through a negotiated process. For instance, in Tunisia, the political system was historically dominated by authoritarianism, centralized in the hands of an individual and a single party, reducing the opposition to a nominal role for external portrayal.

The dismantling of this system entailed two critical actions: the abolition of the existing constitution and the establishment of a supreme national council tasked with electing a constituent assembly to draft a new constitution and dissolve the ruling party, thereby opening the political arena to a multiplicity of parties (Binda & Al, 2005).

III. 2.2.The Electoral Process:

Nations exhibit varied frameworks in their electoral systems, participation rates, and the role of political parties in either aligning with or opposing the old regime's forces. For instance, Brazil emphasized procedural aspects of its electoral system during its transition to democracy, focusing on mechanisms to ensure electoral integrity. Conversely, Tunisia took more radical steps by dissolving the ruling party, barring its former members from engaging in political activities, and implementing a gender parity rule by allocating 50 percent of the parliamentary seats to women.

III. 2.3.Relations with Anti-Democratic Forces:

The interaction with entities resistant to democratization, such as the military, police, and business elites, plays a pivotal role during the transition phase. In Tunisia, a commission was established to address past human rights abuses and to redefine the role of security forces in a democratic society. Meanwhile, Chile approached the economic sector by setting forth explicit regulations to govern business practices, opting to hold individuals accountable rather than stigmatizing the business community as a whole.

This approach mirrored actions taken in Egypt, where several high-profile businessmen faced legal challenges. Regarding police reform, Chile pursued a gradual modification strategy, focusing on educational curricula and the professional ethos of its law enforcement officers.

In addition to these elements, other critical factors in consolidating democracy include safeguarding human rights and freedoms, ensuring the practice of full citizenship, promoting social justice, and enhancing the role of civil society through its various unions and organizational associations (Boose, 2012).

IV- Conclusion:

The efficacy of the democratic transition process relies heavily on both subjective and objective prerequisites. This includes a genuine commitment to democratization among political stakeholders, both rulers and opposition, and the cultivation of enlightened elites who embrace and promote democratic values. The absence of these conditions, transitions may falter or yield systems that resist transformative efforts.

Despite the myriad experiences across different transitions, it is not uncommon to find the emergence of hybrid regimes, which blend democratic and autocratic elements, rather than the establishment of fully democratic systems. Such outcomes highlight the complexity of democratic transitions, which remain susceptible to various trajectories, as evidenced in the Southern Mediterranean region.

For example, while Tunisia has made relative progress towards democratic consolidation, Egypt and Libya are navigating their own unique paths towards re-founding their political landscapes. Conversely, Yemen represents a stark case where the transition process has regressed, plunging the country into a vortex of internal conflicts that reflect political, ethnic, and socio-cultural strife.

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