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Is There a Proper Sequence in Democratic Transitions?

FRANCIS FUKUYAMA

Development is a complex process that takes place across multiple dimensions of human life. One dimension is economic growth, which involves increasing output per person, based on steadily growing productivity. Political development, meanwhile, involves changes in three types of institutions: the state itself, which concentrates and deploys power to enforce rules across a territory; the rule of law, which limits governments' ability to make arbitrary decisions; and mechanisms of democratic accountability, which ensure that governments reflect the will and interests of the people.

While it would be nice if positive change occurred across all four dimensions simultaneously (that is, economic growth, state capacity, rule of law, and democracy), it rarely does. One reason for this is that causal connections exist among the dimensions of development. For example, establishing a rule of law that protects entrepreneurs from arbitrary expropriation by the government facilitates economic growth; economic development that fosters a middle class promotes democracy.

THE EVIDENCE

In Europe, the development of law preceded the emergence of a modern state; in England and France, the appearance of coherent nation-states preceded the industrial revolution and democracy. Far from occurring simultaneously, these events were separated by hundreds of years.

In the contemporary world, evidence suggests that economic development and a society's ability to sustain a stable democracy correlate reasonably

well. The transition point comes at a per capita income level of approximately \$10,000. Above this level a large number of stable democracies exist; by contrast, very poor countries have a hard time sustaining democratic institutions. A number of causal connections have been posited to explain this: Higher incomes support a larger middle class, more property ownership (which gives citizens a stake in government), and better levels of education and openness to the outside world.

There is, if anything, an even stronger relationship between the rule of law and economic development. Polities that have inherited Western rule of law from their former colonial masters, like Singapore and Hong Kong, have done particularly well as rapid developers.

A causal relationship between democracy and development is harder to demonstrate empirically. While many poor democracies, beginning with the United States in the late eighteenth century, have successfully industrialized, others (like India in the first 30 years of its existence as a national state) have not.

Democracies often engage in policies or exhibit characteristics that are hostile to economic growth, such as populist redistribution or rent-seeking by interest groups. Conversely, many authoritarian systems boast impressive economic track records. These include Turkey and the former Soviet Union in the early twentieth century, and more recently South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the People's Republic of China. Authoritarian governments can be ruthless in allocating scarce capital to new investment and thereby generating growth.

POST-MODERNIZATION?

These facts have suggested to many observers that the different dimensions of development should be sequenced. Samuel Huntington in the

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1960s developed the idea of “authoritarian modernization,” according to which an authoritarian state establishes basic political order and facilitates economic development.

A transition to democracy should come only later, Huntington argued, after industrialization has created a middle class and other institutions and habits necessary to support democratic governance. This was the actual sequence followed, for example, by South Korea and Taiwan, which did not transition to democracy until the late 1980s, when they had already undergone substantial economic growth.

The journalist and author Fareed Zakaria updated the Huntington hypothesis by suggesting that not just a strong state but also the rule of law should precede democratization, given the close connection between law and economic growth. For him, Prussia/Germany in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and Singapore and Hong Kong more recently represent models of proper sequencing, where a competent state and rule of law were put in place before any opening up to democratic contestation.

The concept of authoritarian modernization has engendered fierce debate. One basic criticism

of the Huntington-Zakaria sequence is that it is not generalizable: It depends on benevolent dictators—leaders like Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew—who use their powers to focus on national development rather than personal gain.

While in theory benevolent dictators might perform better than democratically elected leaders who are constrained by interest groups and the need to build consensus, they can also do a lot worse because they are fundamentally unaccountable. For every Lee Kuan Yew there are probably half a dozen authoritarians like North Korea’s Kim Jong-il, Zaire’s Mobutu Sese Seko, or Zimbabwe’s Robert Mugabe, who drive their economies into the ground while enriching themselves and their followers. And since many successful authoritarian modernizers have clustered in East Asia, there is reason to think this more benign form of authoritarian government may have historical or cultural roots.

A second critique focuses on the idea that the rule of law should precede a democratic opening. This was in fact the sequence followed in most European countries. Prussia from the late eighteenth century had a *Rechtsstaat*, that is, an authoritarian political system that was nonetheless governed by law, and which permitted its citizens considerable

DEMOCRACY AND SECURITY

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The journal seeks to analyze the relationship between various national and internal security policies, concerns and needs on the one hand, and the central values, institutions, and processes of democratic societies on the other.

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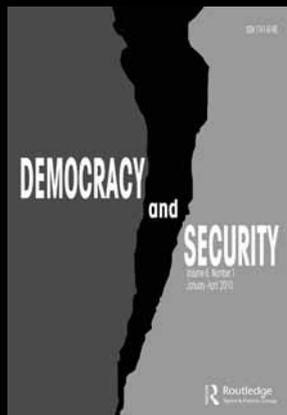
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personal if not political freedom. Needless to say, Germany industrialized very rapidly in the nineteenth century under such a system.

The problem with this particular sequence, as a number of observers have pointed out, is that it is virtually impossible to separate rule of law and democracy in the twenty-first century. Very few dictators are willing to subject themselves to the constraints of law if they are not also willing to permit political participation by citizens.

Nineteenth-century liberals like John Stuart Mill were willing to accept a franchise limited only to people who had attained certain levels of education or property, but this position has become normatively unacceptable today. Hence around the world we find that exactly the same groups push for both strong rule of law and democratic participation, and that authoritarian governments oppose both.

MEANS AND ENDS

A final critique of sequencing is normative. The economist Amartya Sen among many others has argued that democracy is an end in itself, and not just a means toward economic growth or social stability. Development as freedom means the flourishing of human capacities, including the ability to participate in the collective decision making that constitutes democratic politics. Hence democracy is desirable even if it limits prospects for economic growth—and democratic transitions should not have to wait on authoritarian-led economic development or the emergence of the rule of law.

Nonetheless, where the social and economic conditions exist for a South Korea- or Taiwan-type sequenced transition, the quality of democracy

that emerges at the end may actually be better. Stable democracy does not depend on a rigid set of preconditions, and has emerged in many surprising circumstances. On the other hand, liberal democracy is based on an interlocking set of institutions that no society has ever put into place overnight.

Any sequencing strategy needs to be tailored to the specific society in question. The opening up of a state bureaucracy to democratic participation may in some cases injure the quality of governance, as it arguably did when Andrew Jackson's victory in the 1828 presidential election created the spoils system in the United States. On the other hand, in the case of a highly corrupt authoritarian government, it may only be democratic contestation that has a chance of bringing about improved performance. It is a pitfall to think of strategies like authoritarian modernization or "do everything at once" as universal templates.

Nevertheless, theories of sequencing have had a notable impact on foreign policy. American policy makers have reconciled themselves to working with authoritarian countries like China on the grounds that, in the long run, economic growth will foster the conditions for a democratic transition. Whether that final transition will ever come, however, remains an open question.

It is an illusion in any event to think that an outside actor like the United States can actually plan the sequence of another nation's political and economic development. Sequencing theory serves rather as a salve for the guilty consciences of American officials who have few options in the short run but to work with authoritarian allies and partners. ■