

Problematizing the Democratic Imperative The Challenge of Transition and Consolidation in Weak States

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ABSTRACT

Democratisation should produce equitable developmental transitions, but often fails when power is heavily contested, state and economic capacity is too weak and societies are divided by antagonistic sectarian, ethnic or class conflicts. Mature authoritarian regimes have made rapid democratic transitions, but weak predatory states confront a difficult choice between contested autocracy and contested democracy. We emphasise the role of social conflict and political organisation and agency in blocking or facilitating shifts from weak to strong autocracies, and examine their role in revolutionary China, and in the contested political transitions going on in African states.

KEYWORDS

Democratisation
Authoritarianism
State Formation
Patrimonialism
Political Agency
Africa

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I PROBLEMATISING THE DEMOCRATIC IMPERATIVE

Many weak African states are now trying to consolidate long-term transitions from authoritarian structuralism to liberal democracy that have been driven by popular movements and donors involved in peace-making and state-building programmes in weak and post-conflict states. These processes have overthrown most authoritarian regimes and produced a democratic wave based on the assumption that competitive elections are the only effective and equitable way to manage political power and create societies that 'limit access to violence while ensuring open access to political and economic activities'. (North, Wallis & Weingast, [NWW] 2009: 120)

We understand the costs of predatory authoritarianism and benefits of free elections, but also the fact that democratic processes have often been subverted by regressive elites, or reversed because weak economies and social conflict made it impossible for new regimes to resolve their problems through consultation rather than violence. Thus Geddes' analysed 163 authoritarian regimes and found that:

Since 1974 ... 85 authoritarian regimes have ended [producing] ... 30 surviving and mostly quite stable democracies; ... 9 democracies that lasted only a very short time before being overthrown; 8 cases in which there have been elections and leadership changes but in which either democracy appears very unstable or important groups are excluded from competition; 4 descents into warlordism; and 34 new authoritarian regimes.

Four regime changes led directly to the break-up of states, and 3 to the reunion of previously divided nations. Of the 21 new states created in the wake of regime changes, 5 seem at this point to be full democracies and 8 have held competitive elections but remain in important respects undemocratic. In 8, either elections have not been held or competition has been severely constrained. Six have been ravaged by civil war or impoverished by war with neighbors. (Geddes, 1999: 115/6)

These failures were created by late development, since 'the probability of democracy is close to 100%' in developed countries, but the 'probability of authoritarianism is similarly close to 100% below some [economic] threshold', so 'the most important predictor of transitions to authoritarianism, whether from democracy or from other forms of authoritarianism, is poverty'. (pp. 116/7) And Clague et. al. (1997) looked at several studies of the relationships between democracy, autocracy and growth and only found nine 'long-lasting democracies in the Third World', eight of which were former British colonies 'that acquired practice in democratic electoral and judicial institutions during the colonial period'.¹ They also found 'that democracy had either no influence or a negative influence on subsequent growth. (p. 96)

These results are not surprising since open democratic processes depend on strong states, cohesive societies, and liberal capitalist economies, as we will see. These hardly exist in weak states, creating the 'start-up' problems that have confronted every society attempting to introduce democratic institutions, because they can only operate effectively where people have 'already acquired the necessary knowledge and endowments, and they can only do this in societies where these skills and endowments already exist. (Brett, 2009: 195) Thus earlier democratic waves failed because new rulers had to use violence to impose order on societies characterised by intense scarcity and zero-sum conflicts of interest,² and mass democracy was only consolidated in the west after 'many decades of agitation and organisation' and 'came as a late addition to the competitive market society and the liberal state'. (Macpherson, 1972: 9)

Further, we also need to question the assumed relationship between autocracy and bad governance, because strong autocrats have sometimes built the economic and state capacity needed for subsequent democratic transitions by adopting 'political strategies based on material rewards, coercion, and emotive appeal' to silence opposition and 'keep new demands off the political agenda'. (Kohli, 2004: 381) Clague et. al, (1997) also claim that 'a durable autocracy with a leader who is rationally maximising his long-term tax extraction may be, among the available political arrangements, the one most favourable to property rights' in countries where 'stable democracy is not a feasible option.' (114)³ Thus

premature democratisation in fragmented and fragile states can have counter-productive results as NWW (2009) argue:

The transplanting of institutions from open access orders to natural states cannot, in and of itself, produce political and economic development. Indeed, to the extent that these institutions are forced onto societies by international or domestic pressure but do not conform to existing beliefs about economic, political and social systems, the new institutions are likely to work less well than the ones they replace. *Worse, if these institutions undermine the political arrangements maintaining political stability, the new institutions may unleash disorder, making the society significantly worse off.* (264/5 Emphasis added)

They also claim that natural states are not dysfunctional but 'have their own logic', and can only maintain stability and order by utilising rents in ways that contravene 'the norms and values of open access orders'. (269) These claims confirm Kohli's analysis of the role of coercive state power in managing the successful East Asian developmental transitions and his claim that we need to distance ourselves 'from the fantasy that all good things can go together, that democracy, equality, free markets and rapid economic growth can all be achieved simultaneously in the contemporary developing world.' (Kohli, 2004: 421/2)

The fragility of many new democracies and success of many strong autocracies problematize the unconditional belief in democracy that dominate the current governance agenda, but the failure of weak authoritarian states raises equally serious questions about their functionality and stability. Some East Asian autocracies succeeded, but most Africa rulers undermined state capacity and suppressed opposition in order to extract and transfer unproductive rents, or encouraged and exploited ethnic and sectarian conflicts to manipulate elections in pseudo-democracies. (Mann, 2005) These failures meant that they were not able to 'meet the demands of 'empirical' statehood, (Clapham (1996: 15)⁴ and produced irresistible demands for democracy from donors, and from excluded elites and subordinate classes manifested in social unrest, passive resistance, or civil war.

These cases problematize claims about both democracy and authoritarianism in weak states and have led theorists and activists to support premature democratisation or unaccountable autocracies. This article will address these difficulties by recognising the key role of structural and contextual variables in institutional performance at different stages of development, and of political agency and social conflict in facilitating or blocking transitions from one stage to the next. We believe that changes in the formal rules that specify the terms on which rulers should relate to subjects or citizens will only produce real democracy where what NWW (2009) call the 'doorstep conditions' needed to create 'open access social orders' already exist or can be created by a political movement with a strong interest in their presence.⁵ These pre-conditions cannot be taken for granted, but are a function of many contingent variables, notably cultural values, knowledge systems and political and economic endowments that facilitate equal consultation rather than elite domination.⁶

Thus, the context in which reforms 'are pursued matters at least as much' as the reforms themselves', (Kohli, 2004: 418) so consolidating democracy imposes far more challenging demands on latecomers where these conditions are still being created, than in first-comers. Hence the conflicts and reversals that disrupt democratic transitions in most weak states stem from the gap between the substantive capacities they already have and those needed to support a more complex system. These capacities must initially emerge in pre-democratic societies, but they will only do so in those governed by effective leaders, while bad ones can easily destroy them. Thus democratisation does not simply involve the introduction of elections alone, as many liberal theorists assume, but must begin in authoritarian states, and continue until subordinate classes as well as competing elites have acquired the skills and organisational resources needed to understand their own situations and needs, and make their voices heard. Orthodox liberal theorists in developed societies that have already solved these problems do not address these issues, but a growing list of seminal contributions to this debate from leading development theorists are now transforming the way we understand these problems, and provides the theoretical framework for this study.⁷

The next section will therefore identify some of the limitations of current liberal interpretations of democratic transitions; Section three will address the theoretical and practical challenges involved in creating the pre-conditions for democratic consolidation; Section four will look at the relationship between state capacity and political agency in revolutionary China and post-colonial Africa; and Section five will look at the political and policy challenges confronting weak African states.

2 THE LIMITATIONS OF LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC THEORY

Liberal theorists who see the introduction and management of competitive elections as the key to successful democratisation dominate the current governance agenda, but they virtually ignore the crucial role of socio-economic contexts and substantive democratic capacities. We will therefore use Acemoglu & Robinson's (A&R) (2006) influential study of democratic transitions to identify some of these weaknesses.

The advance 'a simple theory of democratization' (23) that treats it as the outcome of zero-sum competition between an elite that uses its power 'to obtain [their] favourite policies' by resisting attempts by 'other groups' to challenge them. (2006: 21) Here:

the citizens want democracy and the elites want nondemocracy, and the balance of political power between the two groups determines whether the society transits from nondemocracy to democracy (and perhaps also whether democracy, once created, becomes consolidated or reverts back to nondemocracy later.) (p. 23)

They can then use a 'game theoretic approach' to model this process by looking at how an authoritarian elite with state power can be forced to respond to challenges from a citizenry using 'strikes, demonstrations, riots' and revolutions to 'force them to concede' some of their power by introducing competitive elections. (p. xii) Hence democratisation is only conceded by elites by the threat of 'social unrest', or when the costs of democratisation are relatively low. (p. xiii/xiv)

This model does identify many key variables that influence the outcome of short-term democratic transitions. These include the conflictual and dynamic nature of the interactions between autocrats and subjects, the fact that despots have a vested interest in resisting democracy; the role of differences in income, wealth and other variables in influencing 'individual preferences over regime types', (p. 87) and the 'fundamental importance of conflict' in producing institutional change. (p. xii) They recognise that democratic processes are not only a mechanism for building consensus, but also exist to manage and legitimate the ability of 'particular groups to capture power and use it to transfer resources from winners to losers'. (Brett, 2010: 69) Thus their work does provide us with a more realistic approach to the problem than that of many earlier theorists, as they claim, (pp. 81ff) and also challenges the technocratic assumptions of the donor community that ignore the political conflicts involved in all democratic transitions. (Brett, 2010: 66-70)

Their use of 'a Schumpeterian definition of democracy', that includes 'free and fair elections, the accountability of politicians to the electorate and free entry into politics', (p. 48) and 'the strength of the mechanisms needed to guarantee these processes', (p. 50/1) has serious limitations. It underestimates the difficulties involved in long-term change by over-emphasising the procedural aspects of democratic processes and neglecting the structural and agency issues we identified earlier that have always disrupted democratic transitions and subverted electoral processes in weak states. They acknowledge that they ignore Linz & Stepan's (L&S) (1996) emphasis 'on the way that the nondemocratic legacy influences the difficulty of creating the different components of consolidation'. (p. 85) They therefore commit what L&S call the "'electoralist fallacy'" by treating 'free elections ... as a sufficient condition of democracy', when in fact dominant elites like the military retain 'such extensive prerogatives that the ... government is not even *de jure* sovereign.' (4)

These omissions have fundamental theoretical and political implications for democratisation in weak states that we will address in the rest of this paper.

3 THE CHALLENGE OF DEMOCRATIC TRANSITIONS

Liberal theory treats democratic institutions as a system of markets that enable preference-maximising individuals to choose between competing leaders and parties and assumes that the skills, values, representative organisations and state capacity needed to sustain them already exist. They already exist in developed societies, but only in an embryonic form in weak authoritarian or democratising states, confronting them with demanding challenges that pure liberal theory fails to address. We therefore need to address these weaknesses by developing a more comprehensive definition of democracy, and a more complex understanding of the structures that need to be created, the conflicts that need to be managed, and the tasks that need to be performed at different stages of development than we find in mainstream liberal political theory.

(a) Structures and Processes

Tilly argues that *'a regime is democratic to the degree that political relations between the state and its citizens [are based on] broad, equal, protected and mutually binding consultation.'* This does not limit democratisation to the introduction of elections, but treats it as *all* of the processes that generate changes in social, economic and political structures and value systems that ensure that the 'state behaves in conformity to the expressed demands of its citizens.' (2007: 13/14) These processes begin with any change in authoritarian societies that enable at least some citizens to assert some of their rights, and culminate in states where rulers are subject to real elections and the rule of law, and citizens make autonomous choices between parties and causes, but also accept binding obligations to participate in and accept the results of competitive political processes whether they win or lose.

Authoritarian regimes promote values, understandings and organisations that suppress the demands of excluded elites and subordinate classes and contradict those that sustain open access orders. Excluded groups in autocracies used many strategies to first strengthen their rights, and then produce elite followed by mass democracy in the west. Their achievements then provided models that excluded groups used to demand comparable rights in latecomers that threatened the distributions of power and wealth and the 'start-up problems' identified earlier. Their ability to initiate and consolidate these changes then depended on the strength of the rights that had been created in the pre-democratic period, and the ability of once dominant and excluded groups to create the organisations needed to defend or challenge the power.

A continuous struggle for democratic rights goes on in autocracies and partial democracies whose outcome is never certain, but heavily influenced by their ability to meet two major challenges. First, to *build* the new institutions and organisations needed to close the gap between the conditions that exist in pre-democratic societies and those needed to sustain real democracies. And, second, to manage the competition for scarce resources that confront all governments that they can only resolve by monopolising violence and sustaining the hierarchical organisations and inter-dependent systems needed to sustain the global capitalist order. *Thus democratisation depends on complex institutional reforms that enable societies to reconcile equal consultation and freedom with the need for order and hierarchy, and not just on free elections.*

We will look at 'the problem of order' in the next section, and its implications for problems of transition in the rest of the paper.

(b) State Power, Structured Inequality and Institutional Transitions

Viable democracies need strong states, since rulers can only negotiate freely with citizens, and citizens with each other, *after* they have solved what Parsons (1951/1964) calls 'the "Hobbesian" problem of order' by ensuring that people cannot simply follow their own 'instrumental interests' but agree or are obliged to act in 'conformity with a shared system of value-orientation standards'.⁸ (36-8) Thus rulers need to create a monopoly over violence that guarantees social order that has four implications for the relationship between state-building and democratic accountability,

First, it enables despots to disempower subject, but also to protect them from invasion, civil war or anomic violence by creating the empires and states needed to facilitate large-scale cooperation. This is why rebels that defeated their rulers usually replaced them with new autocracies, and why NWW treat autocracy as the 'natural state' in pre-modern societies, since democracy can only be consolidated *after* a ruling elite has induced or forced its opponents to accept its authority. Only then can a two stage process begin 'where first the relations within the dominant coalition transform from personal to impersonal, and then those arrangements are extended to the larger population', by creating institutions that 'transform elite privileges into rights'. These changes must start in autocracies and therefore 'be consistent with the logic of the natural state' until they take the society to the 'doorstep' of a democratic transition, when the same rights can be extended to 'a larger segment of the population'. (2009: 148)

Second, autocrats create socio-economic systems that stop subordinate classes from acquiring the resources that would enable them to challenge their ability to maintain their wealth and power, and finance their states. They do this by locking people into subordinate occupations and statuses that produce social orders based on what Tilly calls 'categorical inequality', or the 'organization of social life around boundaries separating whole sets of people who differ collectively in their life chances'.⁹ (2007: 75) These include differences based on 'nobility, religious status, gender, race, and property ownership' as well as 'kinship and ethnicity', (118) and give monopoly power to dominant elites like slave owners, feudal lords, landlords, or command planners. They destroy individual freedom, but also guarantee everyone's survival and are hard to challenge because they incorporate subordinates directly into authoritarian systems of rule by building in:

the everyday inequalities around which people organise social life. Such a regime exercises power through the very people who have both the means and the interest to block the populations they rule from resisting tyranny. It builds in obstacles to broad, equal, protective, mutually binding consultation'. (Tilly, 2007: 116)

These inequalities sustain the clientalistic networks that enable dominant elites to suppress dissent in autocracies and buy political support in patrimonial democracies.

Further, oppression and exclusion encourage subordinate classes to create what Tilly calls 'segregated trust networks' to insulate themselves from these controls and provide themselves with services that their rulers fail to provide. These:

are ramified interpersonal connections consisting mainly of strong ties, in which people set valued, consequential, long-term resources and enterprises at risk to the malfeasance, mistakes, or failures of others. Trading diasporas, kinship groups, religious sects, revolutionary conspiracies, and credit circles often comprise trust networks. (2007: 74)

These networks constitute the 'informal sector' in weak states. They help members to survive in hostile environments, but their insulation from public politics also 'blocks members' commitment to democratic collective enterprises'. (Tilly: 74; also see also Meagher, 2011, Scott, 1996)

Categorical inequalities deny economic freedom to the poor and therefore their ability to exercise political rights. This creates a direct link between the exercise of political and economic power that plays a key role in maintaining order in natural states. However they are incompatible with full democratisation that therefore depends on a transition from 'traditional' institutions based on enforced ties to 'liberal' ones based on free competition. These changes cannot simply be legislated into existence by giving subordinate classes formal political and economic rights, because they involve radical transfers of resources between elites, elites and subordinates, and subordinates themselves. Instead, they have depended on the uneven and contested extension of capitalism into traditional societies that has sometimes undermined these inequalities and networks and sometimes restructured them in contradictory ways.¹⁰

Thus, third, the unavoidable tension between the need for hierarchy and demand for freedom forced all earlier civilizations to prioritise the former until the liberal capitalist revolution gradually turned market competition and science-based knowledge rather than coercion and 'unequal categories' became the primary mechanisms for the allocation and legitimation of power, status and wealth. This then 'made it much easier and attractive for rulers to maintain a rough balance between the mass of consumers and the mass of citizens' and still 'acquire enough capital to pay for their state's major activities', as Tilly shows. (2007: 116/7)

This transition also produced new business and professional classes that coexisted but also competed with the feudal, patrimonial or bureaucratic elites that controlled existing institutions. Their demands for more autonomy and rights eventually universalised liberal capitalism, and the eventual triumph of these new classes led to subsequent political transitions to elite democracy. Thus the emergence of an autonomous bourgeois class was 'an indispensable element in the growth of parliamentary democracy', (Barrington Moore, 1967: 418) because it was not directly dependent on the state, and could barter taxation for political representation. The maturation of capitalism then produced a working class with common interests and increasingly complex skills that liberated it from categorical inequalities and segregated trust networks which was able to demand political rights and create the popular organisations that managed the shift from elite to mass democracy.

Fourth, the technical and organisational superiority of first-comers enabled them to colonise latecomers by imposing authoritarian state and capitalist institutions onto them. This disrupted local authority systems and produced a sequence of complex socio-economic changes that transformed local social systems. First, foreign elites initially dominated these new institutions, but also had to use local elites to help to run them. These elites acquired new skills and built new political organisations that eventually enabled them to end the colonial era. Second, independence precipitated adversarial conflicts between foreign and local elites, and local elites themselves, for political and economic resources. These conflicts took different forms in different contexts that produced differing institutional legacies almost all of which took authoritarian forms.¹¹ Third, these struggles led to intense conflict and large resource transfers between competing elites and subordinate classes, and eventually to the shift from state-dominated development of the first post-colonial era to the attempt to create liberal democratic capitalism that we turn to now.

(c) Pre-Conditions, Tasks and Stages

These propositions enable us to formulate a comparative conceptual framework to address the problems that confront all weak states as they consolidate their democratic transitions. Their problems differ because the characteristics of 'previous nondemocratic regimes ... have profound implications for the transition *paths* available to societies at different levels of development, and the *tasks* they face when they begin their struggles to develop consolidated democracies'. (L&S: 54) However, their shifts from autocracy to democracy depend on similar objectives and confront similar challenges, that we can address by identifying the *pre-conditions* they need to meet, the *tasks* that they need to perform, and the *stages* that they need to complete if they are to succeed.

Democratic pre-conditions include:

- Strong states that monopolise violence, insulate the military from political processes, enforce the rule of law, provide essential public goods and guarantee freedom of action to representative organisations.
- Civil societies that have reduced or de-politicised categorical inequalities and trust networks and built the representative organisations needed to sustain equal consultation.
- Market-based economies that sustain strong business, professional and working classes and generate the surpluses needed to finance the state and provide welfare services..

Creating these structures generates a set of necessary tasks and a three stage process:

- First, strengthen the institutions and organisations that enable rulers to maintain order, businesses to flourish and excluded elites to assert more rights. This will generate intra-elite conflicts, but need not involve the extension of full democratic rights.
- Second, enable excluded elites to create permanent organisations that enable them to oblige their rulers to extend these rights and then to introduce competitive elections.
- Third, enable both elites and subordinate classes to influence policy, contest elections, and monitor state performance by strengthening all of the organisations, media outlets and research systems needed to operate open access systems.

These tasks confront societies at different stages of development with different challenges. We can identify these by using a typology based on their regime type, the extent of the gap between existing and necessary conditions, and the tasks they still need to complete to close it as the key theorists we follow all do:

- L&S refer to authoritarian, totalitarian, post-totalitarian, and sultanistic regimes, focussing on their ability to tolerate pluralism, support appropriate ideologies, mobilise political support, and on patterns of leadership and leadership recruitment. (Ch. 3)
- Kohli refers to 'cohesive capitalist', 'fragmented multi-class', and 'patrimonial' states. The former have created a stable relationship between state power and capitalist development, intermediate states have only partially done so and patrimonial states have far to go.¹² (9/10)
- Tilly distinguishes between states with strong, medium and weak capacity, recognising that state capacity and democracy vary independently of each other. He contrasts high-capacity undemocratic and democratic, with low capacity undemocratic and democratic regimes. (17ff., 161ff)
- NWW refer to fragile, basic and mature 'natural' states based on 'the structure of their state and the sophistication of the permanent organizations they can support'. (41-48)

This framework provides us with a comprehensive comparative approach to democratisation in societies at different stages of development. It accepts that they will follow different paths and that some may never succeed. However, it also enables us to produce a causal analysis of these processes by treating them as a function of the interaction between two variables - state capacity and regime type on the one hand, and political agency and organisation on the other. Democratisation can be relatively easy in 'mature' authoritarian states that have created the necessary conditions, but heavily contested in fragile states that have not. However, such outcomes are always contingent, because strong autocrats can suppress opposition for long periods, and new regimes can sometimes turn weak autocracies into strong ones as we will see.

4 PROCESSES AND AGENCY

ALTERNATIVE PATHS TO DEMOCRATISATION AND DE-DEMOCRATISATION

This framework therefore treats real democracy as the end-point rather than starting-point of long-term evolutionary processes fuelled by struggles for more rights by excluded groups whose outcomes differ in strong and weak autocracies, and strong and weak democracies; are constrained by the nature of prevailing economic policy regimes and social structures; and shaped by the ability of particular groups to compete for power or influence by building viable political organisations.

We will now use this framework to understand the processes that have transformed post-colonial Africa, but will begin with a brief examination of those that transformed China from a weak to a strong state.

(a) Building Strong Authoritarian States: Political Conflict in Revolutionary China

Western European 'first-comers', fascist dictatorships in Portugal and Spain, 'cohesive capitalist states' in South Korea and Taiwan, and post-Apartheid South Africa all made relatively peaceful democratic transitions because it was relatively easy to create 'the autonomous authority, power and legit-

imacy of democratic institutions', (L&S 54) needed to complete the process *after* they had created the necessary doorstep conditions. This suggests that weak states should prioritise state building and economic development rather than premature democratisation, but their ability to do so depends on their ability to make the initial transition from weak to strong authoritarianism in the first instance. These shifts usually generate violent conflict and often fail; raising serious questions about the role of political agency that are clearly evident in early modern Chinese history.

At the end the First World War, foreign interventions, civil war and economic decline had turned the once dominant Chinese empire into a failed state. The collapse of the empire in 1912 was followed by an attempt to create a democratic republic, but state power was quickly appropriated by competing warlords. The major ports were controlled by foreign powers and the countryside by an exploitative landlord class that used landlessness and debt servitude to force the majority of the peasantry into poverty and insecurity.

The Kuomintang (KMT) and Communist Party (CCP) emerged to address this problem. The former used nationalist appeals to build a broad coalition against foreign control and warlordism, but it depended directly on the landlord class, and succeeded by creating a vanguard party and army that enabled it to challenge the foreign powers, defeat the warlords, capture the state in 1928 and suppress open opposition. The CCP was a socialist movement that also built a vanguard party and army. However it initially collaborated with the KMT and helped it to win power. However, the KMT then attacked it and forced it to retreat into the countryside where it used peasant opposition to landlordism and Japanese occupation to create the mass party and army that fought the Japanese and defeated the KMT in 1949. This conflict between a landlord dominated party and one with a socialist ideology and peasant-base had fundamental structural consequences.

First, the KMT's landlord base limited its ability to generate mass support, and turned it into a patrimonial party dependent on military force and a predatory state with disastrous consequences::

Inflation, uncontrolled, fantastic and calamitous ... destroyed the value of the national currency, forced the population to rely on clandestine holding of silver dollars, American currency and gold bars, ruined trade, corrupted the civil service, discontented and disheartened the soldiers. ... a small handful of the top leaders of the [KMT] ... had grown rich beyond the wildest fables of a fairy tale. Private enterprise was at the mercy of these combines, foreign trade was milked by the exchange control, every sort of corrupt practice flourished, and the middle class, the intellectuals and the officials – unless corrupt – were ground down into poverty equal to that of a coolie. (Fitzgerald, 1964: 105)

These failures produced declines in state capacity similar to those many African failed states, but they also intensified the hostility of marginalised elites and subordinate classes who joined the CCP and enabled it to capture power.

Second, the CCP's socialist ideology enabled it to mobilise the peasantry and disaffected members of the intelligentsia, but its hierarchical structure enabled it to adopt policies with little reference to popular support. It needed peasant support in opposition and obtained it by enforcing rent and interest rate reductions, and consolidated their support when it came to power by expropriating landlords and distributed their land to individual families. However, it then suppressed dissent and introduced programmes that were not driven by peasant demands or the intelligentsia. It collectivised agriculture, nationalised the private sector and used command planning to build heavy industry, and introduced the Cultural Revolution that marginalised the intellectual class. This produced a major economic and social crisis and threatened the viability of the state in the 1970s.

The CCP monopoly meant that these decisions could only be dealt with through factional struggles inside the party, and not by civil society. They were supported by Mao Zedong until his death, and if the groups that had supported him had prevailed, China could have continued down the same path like North Korea. However the power struggle after his death was won by the liberalising faction that

then turned China into the 'cohesive capitalist state' that is both restructuring social and economic relationships inside China and the global economy as well.

This history speaks directly to theoretical and policy challenges confronting modern weak states.

First, it confirms our reservations about democratisation in early transitions in weak states struggling to monopolise violence. The attempt to create a democratic republic in 1912 was repeated in 1946 under American auspices, but both were derailed by the collapse of social order and the intensity of the struggle for power between warlords, parties and the Japanese. Here, as Fitzgerald says, 'political power... was identical with military power: [so] a party without an army could not exist'. (1964: 95) Thus the ability of the CCP to capture and reshape the state depended on its ability to suppress dissent by monopolising power.

Second, it highlights the causal relationship between the socioeconomic base of the key political agents and structural change. The KMT's dependence on an exploitative landlord class made it impossible for it to increase their economic or political rights. However, while exploitation and insecurity created intense resentment, this alone was not enough to stimulate a social revolution, since 'numerous accounts of village life' produced 'no indication that the peasants were about to organise effectively or do anything about their problems on their own accord'. (Barrington Moore, 1968: 221) Thus the destruction of landlordism depended on the organisational skills of the CCP, which mobilised their support by providing them with real benefits, but did so on its own terms.

Third, the CCP's socialist agenda was central to the structural changes that first destroyed the categorical inequalities and segregated networks that existed under the KMT and provided the poor with security and effective services. Paradoxically, these shifts also enabled the regime to manage the most successful capitalist transition in history.

These changes are clearly creating many of the pre-conditions for democratisation that we identified earlier, but we cannot speculate on the future given our primary focus on the very different problems that confront weak African states.

(b) From Contested Autocracy to Contested Democracy in Post-Colonial Africa

Strong authoritarian regimes can create the pre-conditions for democratisation, but their ability to do so depends on many fortuitous local variables that are rare and cannot be guaranteed. Thus even 'intermediate' states like Colombia, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, with well-established states, political organisations, and economies have oscillated between contested democracy and authoritarianism in response to the conflicts generated by the need to combine social and economic order with broad-based political support. These tensions are far more pronounced in weak African states whose disrupted post-colonial histories have produced more extreme oscillations between democracy and autocracy, and from state led development to liberalisation. We review these historical processes here their political and policy implications in the next section.

(i) The First Post-Colonial Era: The Crisis of Authoritarian Structuralism

The weaknesses and conflicts that destabilised post-colonial states were created by the asymmetrical nature of their long-term encounters with the external world. The slave trade disrupted already isolated societies, and colonisation then drew small-scale and fragmented societies with limited technological capacity into larger territorial units run by external elites. They used a few local elites to fill intermediate positions in modern institutions, but confined the rest to segregated 'traditional' institutions, that reinforced categorical inequalities and segregated networks and blocked equal consultation. They under-invested in higher education, and gave monopolies to expatriate firms, inhibiting the growth of an indigenous capitalist class. European settlers were given political and economic rights in a few countries where they built stronger states and economies, but also legalised racial segregation that was only breached after violent liberation struggles.¹³

Colonial rulers believed that they would eventually prepare these societies for independence, but failed to take active steps to do so before the ideological challenges and political threats posed by the colonial movements in the late 1940s forced them to transfer power in the 1950s and 1960s. They did so on the basis of democratic constitutions, but none of these countries had created the necessary political or economic capacity so democracy soon gave way to weak autocracy that undermined state capacity even further. Rulers suppressed opposition movements; undermined bureaucracies by replacing expatriate staff with inexperienced party loyalists; and expanded and politicised their armies and police. Civilian leaders depended on weak, vertically integrated clientelistic parties and associations based on ethnic or sectarian identities, while the military took over many states. State controls, taxes and aid were used to subsidise inefficient state and private firms, transferring resources to officials and crony capitalists. Inequality and social exclusion increased, growth and state capacity declined. Donors supported sympathetic regimes and inappropriate projects that benefitted their own firms.

Important differences existed between radical and conservative regimes; military dictatorships and one party states and resource-rich and resource-poor countries. However, these differences were less important than the failures that precipitated the economic and political crises that forced most of them to liberalise their economies in the 1980s, and democratise in the 1990s.

(ii) The Challenge of Liberalisation and Democratisation

These transitions have produced a new democratic wave and a shift to market-led capitalism that raises serious questions about the viability of the political and economic institutions and organisations that sustain them. These failed to meet the challenge in the 1960s. Can we believe that the political struggles and socio-economic changes induced by crises of authoritarian statism during that period have increased rather than undermined to sustain them now?

The collapse of authoritarian statism was driven by resistance from a variety of groups that we will examine in the concluding section. They include excluded professional, capitalist and ethnic and sectarian elites, the marginalised rural and urban poor, and the donor community that used a wide variety of stratagems to defend their rights. Dominant elites used kinship, ethnic or sectarian networks to build clientelistic relationships with politicians or officials, excluded elites and subordinates evaded rules and taxes and used ethnic, religious, kinship or economic networks to resist predatory regimes, and to organise violent rebellions in extreme cases. This political and economic crisis gave donors a critical political role, enabling them to by exchanging financial support for the market reforms in the 1980s, democratisation in the 1990s, and poverty alleviation in the 2000s.

These processes, and the market based institutions that they produced have transformed the formal rules that govern African societies, and the socio economic conditions that determine the way they operate. Their results are varied, and controversial. Afro-pessimism is now giving way to optimism in the face of real improvements in governance, economic growth and some social indicators. These improvements challenge our emphasis on the fragility of liberal reforms in weak states, but we also believe that they conceal many political and economic weaknesses that must be addressed if they are to be sustained and lead to redistribution as well as growth. These limitations are clearly identified in a recent survey by the Africa Progress Panel (2011).

First, 'improvements in economic governance,' coexist with "disconcerting deteriorations in political participation, human rights, physical security and the rule of law;" in two thirds of the countries surveyed, a 'trend [that] compounds the continent's chronic governance problems, including state fragility, endemic corruption and widespread lack of basic freedoms.' (20) Further, 'parliaments, opposition parties and civil society organizations are still too weak in many African countries to provide effective checks and balances to entrenched political elites'. (21) As a result 'the disconnect between rulers and their citizens as well as between elites and the broader population remains an unfortunate characteristic of many African countries'. (20)

Second, inequality and exclusion is rising, not falling:

Some countries are on track to achieve most of their [MDG] targets, [but] overall progress ... is hampered by ... inadequate policies, unmet commitments, lack of focus and accountability and insufficient dedication to sustainable development by both African states and their international partners. A particularly worrying development is the increase in inequality – both within and across African societies. ... As a result, economic contraction and price volatility continue to have a disproportionate effect on the poor'. (28)

Third, economic regulation is still unacceptably weak:

... corruption also remains widespread, costing the continent billions of dollars a year. ... the fight against “quiet corruption” – the failure of public servants to deliver goods and services paid for by governments – remains an uphill struggle. Accelerating population growth, organized crime, drug trafficking and illicit trade, as well as climate change, are adding new pressures on local and national governance systems, particularly in fast-growing cities and remote rural areas. (21)

Finally ‘narrow, commodity-driven’ growth is producing ‘limited social benefits’, so:

... little of the continent’s high GDP growth translates into social development and tangible improvements to people’s lives. Driven by capital-intensive extractive sectors, ... growth has little positive impact on employment and income levels and virtually no effect on employment-intensive sectors such as agriculture. [Thus], despite a decade of strong economic growth, poverty remains pervasive throughout the continent. (11)

And foreign investment has a limited impact, being ‘concentrated in the extractive sectors of a limited group of resource-rich countries’, and ‘most Africans have very limited access to finance.’ (18) And Van der Walle’s (2001) important study confirms our reservations about the limited impact of democratisation in these states:

... democratization has not altered long-standing political patterns in African politics. In time, democratization may profoundly change these patterns, but by itself, the onset of multi-party electoral politics left unchanged many of the defining characteristics of African politics, notably presidential dominance and low participation. Much the same could be said about other features of these neopatrimonial rulers. Whatever the initial intentions of the new regimes, they were susceptible to the same pull and push factors that have long favoured neopatrimonial practices in the region. On the one hand, the transition did little to change the enduring weaknesses of vertical and horizontal accountability mechanisms confronting executives. On the other hand, clientelism and rent-seeking have continued to be attractive to poorly integrated political systems, with weak aggregation institutions, ethnic divisions, and underperforming economies. (p. 264)

These problems have complex and ambiguous political and policy implications.

5 CONCLUSIONS

FACILITATING DMEOCRATIC TRANSITIONS IN FRAGILE STATES

(a) Institutional Reform and Democratic Accountability

This article has challenged excessively optimistic claims about democratisation in Africa but also argued that even weak democracy is preferable to predatory autocracy. Thus the problem that these societies confront now is to strengthen the conditions needed to consolidate their democratic transitions. We will address this challenge now by focussing on three key issues - sequencing, policy frameworks, and political agency.

(b) Stages and Sequencing

We argued that democratisation involves a three stage process – the emergence of new groups in autocracies that begin to challenge the elites that control the existing order; an increase in their ability to do this as they strengthen their organisational capacity that turns stable into contested autocracies and culminate in the introduction of competitive elections; and, third, a period of contested democracy as competing groups have to build state, economic and civic institutions needed to consolidate their democratic transitions. Protagonists use competing normative and theoretical models like liberalism, socialism, fascism to mobilise support and justify their actions, but outcomes depend in the last analysis on the ability of different social groups to create the organisational systems needed to promote or resist institutional changes that might enhance or threaten their rights.

Elections do not guarantee good governance, but they do alter the terms on which rulers relate to citizens, so introducing them is always a key demand and *focus for political struggle and organisational evolution* in contested autocracies and in contested democracies thereafter. The ability of dominant elites to capture state apparatuses and representative organisations enables them to appropriate the rents and maintain the structural inequalities needed to maintain state power and social order by creating a monopoly of violence as NWW argue. However, this is an inherently adversarial and unstable process in societies with weak states and economies, as our Chinese and African cases show.

Thus weak African states are now operating in a contested border zone between autocracy and democracy. Rulers can no longer simply rely on military force and donor support to suppress the demands of excluded elites and subordinate classes, but the latter confront equally serious challenges generated by their need to resolve their own conflicting interests, build unified organisations able to represent their real interests, and formulate and implementing policy regimes that do not simply replicate past failures when they take power. This latter challenge confronts liberal regimes with very different problems from their authoritarian predecessors.

(c) Economic Liberalisation and Democratisation

The shift from authoritarian statism to market based economic systems has crucial implications for democratic transitions because it has changed the incentives and policy options available to key socio-economic groups, and thus their political agendas and organisational strategies. Liberalisation reduces the ability of rulers to use state power to access the resources they need to buy political support, to enhance the ability of local capitalists and workers to promote and protect industries, wages and jobs, and to redistribute resources to subordinate classes.

These changes were pushed through by the donor community and are embedded in the treaties that govern the global economy. They rule out the corporatist, socialist and social democratic options that transformed the world economy and Asian NICs during the post-war boom, (Chang, 2003; Brett, 1983, 2009 Chapters 13 & 14) and therefore political space available to radical (and reactionary) political movements. However, the current economic crisis has destabilised global markets and the financial and regulatory systems that sustain them. This has forced global institutions, local states and political movements, to look for new (or old) ways to implement redistributive policies that will protect societies 'from the weaknesses and perils inherent in a self-regulating market system.' (Polanyi, 1944/2001: 152).

(d) Political Agency, Representative Organisations and State Capacity

Democracy allows all social groups to compete for power in order to maximise their own interests, but should then govern on behalf of the whole society and not just their own supporters. This tension between the need to maximise particular as opposed to encompassing interests produces bad governance unless three conditions apply – that rulers cannot ignore the needs of excluded groups with impunity; that winning parties in elite democracies represent the interests of dominant groups whose needs do coincide with those of society as a whole; or, that they can build a broad-based coalition between groups whose interests encompass most of society in mass democracies.

These conditions were not met in early post-colonial Africa when ruling coalitions were made up of emerging political, bureaucratic and business classes that needed to use state power to exclude established foreign competitors, extract unproductive rents, suppress democratic rights and therefore undermine state and economic capacity. Their current democratic transitions will also fail unless new and formerly excluded social groups can increase their political leverage by developing the economic resources and organisational capacities needed to challenge these regressive elites. Five key variables influence this process:

- the introduction of at least partially free political markets,
- the ability of formerly dominant elites to manipulate electoral processes and retain power,
- the influence of the donor community.
- the role of an increasingly autonomous domestic capitalist and professional class,
- the weaknesses and strengths of subordinate classes,

First, democratisation has enabled formerly excluded groups to challenge dominant elites by setting up new parties and associations and media outlets, organising protests and even winning elections and taking power. However, their ability to do this and create viable transitions is heavily constrained by the own demands and capacities, and their relationships with other political players.

Second, the rent-seeking elites that dominated the early post-colonial era still exist and can capture parties and associations, extract rents and manipulate electoral processes. This enables them to perpetuate the perverse incentives that derailed the post-colonial project and explains the perpetuation of bad governance and political and economic exclusion described in Section four.

Third, donors continue to play a key political and policy making role, especially in resource poor states, but national sovereignty limits their right to influence partisan political struggles, or to ensure that governments actually implement promised reforms. Their need to spend their budgets and retain political influence forces them to support all but the very worst regimes, so their resources can be appropriated by rulers and used to subvert democratic processes and perpetuate patrimonial policies. Their commitment to democracy and poverty reduction could strengthen the economic and political capacities of progressive elites and subordinate classes, but only by increasing their capacity to compete in democratic and economic markets on their own behalf.¹⁴

Fourth, current democratic reforms are strengthening elite democracy because electoral competition takes place between vertically integrated parties that pay little direct attention to the needs of the poor. Rent-seeking elites dominated the parties that took power at independence as we know; but their ability to use the state to build new businesses and take over senior bureaucratic and professional roles. This means that the most successful of them now depend on profits and fees rather than rents, and respond to market forces rather than political commands and should play a progressive political role because they need better services and a reduction in corrupt rents.

However, this new class has yet to become a 'national bourgeoisie' in Barrington Moore's sense. It is economically weak and threatened by competitive pressures from each other, from rent-seeking colleagues, and from foreign firms, so few can escape the rent-seeking culture. Further, the global crisis is intensifying these competitive pressures, while liberalisation¹⁵ stops their governments from giving them the protection and subsidies that enabled their European and Asian predecessors to overcome their infant industry problems. Thus these emergent groups are playing a key role in the reform process but need more support if they are to facilitate a rapid transition from weak to strong elite democracy.

Fifth, political competition between vertically integrated parties based on ethnic or sectarian identities now dominates politics, and is pressuring governments to introduce progressive reforms. However, leaders will only need to pay serious attention to popular demands after the poor are able to build autonomous organisations that enable them to represent their own interests. How can this be done?

The poor are able to punish rulers by building segregated networks that enable them to provide their own services, evade oppressive exactions, or threaten property rights through anomie criminality or social disturbances. This undermines inefficient regimes and explains why 'rational' autocrats should take some account of their needs, (See fn. 3) but these are blunt and counter-productive weapons because they help the poor to survive, but trap them in unproductive economic activities, deny them access to state services, intensify social antagonisms, and destabilise formal institutions without enabling them to demand better treatment from the state.

Hence transitions to mass democracy only occur when the poor can transcend their segregated networks and participate in public politics by create or join political movements and associations parties that enable them to participate in public politics, as Tilly argues.

These transitions began in the west with the emergence of class-based parties, trade unions and civic agencies based on anti-capitalist and socialist agendas, and culminated in the social democratic reforms that dominated the post war era. African nationalists also used socialist theory to mobilise mass support in the anti-colonial struggle, and justify the nationalisation of foreign assets and state controls. However, the fact that these parties were captured by regressive elites and used for 'primitive accumulation' discredited authoritarian statism and class-based political movements, forcing the poor to choose between competing elite dominated parties.

Hence transitions to poverty-focussed development now depends on their ability, and that of their domestic and foreign supporters, to strengthen their ability to use their formal democratic rights to oblige regimes to implement policies that facilitate transitions to good governance and economic growth comparable to those that transformed East Asia in the late 20th century. Parties make promises and use patronage to win elections but ignore the poor until they can overcome the weaknesses that still exclude them from public politics. These include political isolation and atomisation, limited access to education and information, economic and social dependence, and incorporation into patrimonial networks and associations based on exclusive and adversarial sectarian or ethnic identities. These conditions destroy trust and intensify conflicts amongst the poor themselves – between individuals for jobs and services, women and men, the rural and urban poor, between different regions, or ethnic or sectarian groups. All of this reduces their ability to cooperate and forces them to exchange their votes and compliance support for personal favours rather than better policies and services.

These weaknesses differ in different societies, but disrupt transitions in all weak states, justifying the pessimistic assumptions that dominate this paper. However, our ability to acknowledge rather than ignore these weaknesses is a necessary step towards confronting and overcoming them. Mainstream participatory theorists have asserted the need to 'put the last first,' (Chambers, 1983; Brett, 2003) without addressing the structural and organisational challenges that this involves. The theoretical tradition we follow here is fully committed to democratisation, but recognises that this ultimately depends on the ability of the poor and their supporters to acquire the substantive capacities needed to turn their formal rights into effective political action.

Much is being done, but there is far to go. Better education and new technologies like mobile phones, are improving access to information and skills, but the ability of the poor to exploit them depends on policies that address the structural and organisational challenges we have identified in this paper. These include support for:

- the state apparatuses needed to provide pro-poor services;
- small and micro enterprises, as well as 'infant industry' policies to encourage large-scale enterprises that increase the demand for labour;
- civic organisations that provide local services like community based, and grass roots organisations, as well as local and international NGOs;
- representative associations like social movements, trade unions, peasant organisations, advocacy groups, religions, ethnic associations, women's organisations, and political parties; that enable groups with shared interests to identify their needs, understand their relationships with

the wider world, and create leaderships that enable them to influence electoral processes, monitor regime performance and negotiate compromises with governments and competing groups.

Millions of these organisations already exist. They are created by local individuals, communities and local and international NGOs, and play a key role in service-delivery and political representation. Governments and donors use them to build 'social capital' and provide better services. Radicals see them as a substitute for socialist parties and the basis for anti-capitalist programmes, or as mechanisms that enable poor people to take control of their own agendas. Elitists believe that they depend on external intellectuals and activists if they are to transcend the limits of their existing situations. Realists recognise that they can promote racist, sectarian and authoritarian, as well as progressive agendas.

We cannot address these debates here, merely assert their crucial importance for everyone committed to the consolidation of mass democracies in weak states.

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¹ These were Barbados, Botswana, Costa Rica, India, Jamaica, Mauritius, Singapore, Sri Lanka. (p. 112) All but two are also very small states.

² On the ebb and flow of democratic waves see Huntington 1991; McFaul, 2002; Tilly, 2007.

³ Their analysis depends on Olson's 'stationary bandit theory'. He claims that the ability of secure autocrats to benefit from long-term growth-promoting policies, has produced 'innumerable periods of economic progress,' (1997: 50) but that those with short time-horizons tend to maximise rent extraction. They confirm Buchanan and Tullock's claim that despotism is indeed the best form of government, provided that 'some means can be taken to insure that the dictator will, in fact, remain "benevolent." (1962: 99/100) For a more extended analysis of the relationship between authoritarianism and democratisation, see Brett, 2009, Chapters 10 & 13.

⁴ See Brett (2009) Ch. 13 for a fuller development of this argument.

⁵ These are the conditions that need to be created in pre-democratic societies that bring them to the 'doorstep' of a sustainable democratic transition. (p. 26/7, 148ff.

⁶ See in particular, Bourdieu, 1992; Douglas, 1986; Brett, 2009: Chapter 3.

⁷ Notably, Linz & Stepan, 1996; Kohli, 2004; Tilly, 2007; NWW, 2009. I have also addressed many of these issues in Brett, 2009..

⁸ For Parsons, 'The problem of control of political power is above all the problem of *integration*, of building the power of individuals and sub-collectivities into a coherent system of legitimized authority where power is fused with collective responsibility.' (1951/1964: 127)

⁹ For a detailed analysis see Tilly 2007: 110-120.

¹⁰ For a fuller exposition see Brett, 2009, Chapters. 3, 11 & 12.

¹¹ They included command economies in China and Vietnam, right-wing corporatism in Latin America and East Asia, contested elite democracy in South Asia, and patrimonial authoritarianism in tropical Africa.

¹² His work is heavily influenced by theorists working on 'developmental states' in East Asia. See Evans et. al, (1985).

¹³ This analysis is based on Brett, 1973.

¹⁴ I address these issues in more detail in Brett, 2010.