
Democracy. Research on democracy has long been a staple of WZB scholarship. Attention focuses on the parliamentary system, elections, political parties, the interaction of democracy and the rule of law, the social basis of political participation, and the democratically legitimated control of economic power. This inquiry into democracy is designed as international comparative research that also addresses forms of autocracy and dictatorship. WZB topics related to democracy are explored primarily in the Research Area on the Dynamics of Political Systems.

After the Arab Uprising A Conflict-ridden Region in the Grip of Autocrats

Wolfgang Merkel

When unrest broke out in Tunisia in 2010 and spread like wildfire to Cairo, the Maghreb, and the Middle East, optimism in the media knew no limits. Arabellion, Arab Spring, Twilight of the Dictators, or once again: “The End of History” (Fukuyama). The Arab world, the last coherent autocratic region of the world, it was claimed, would now also be overwhelmed by the global wave of democratization. Buoyed by unbounded euphoria and illusions, political observers imagined that the democratization process would take only a few years. A glance at Romania and Bulgaria, which, under incomparably better conditions, have after more than two decades managed to produce only highly “defective democracies”, should have made commentators more sceptical.

Three years after the outbreak of the Arab revolts disillusionment has set in. There is now talking of an Arab Autumn. Egypt has transformed itself from an intolerant Islamist majority tyranny into a military dictatorship. In Libya the abyss of a “failing state” is yawning. Bahrain’s autocratic sheikhdom has once again stabilized, Syria is in the throes of a civil war aggravated by the West. Afghanistan will soon be left to its own devices, while in Iraq there is no end in sight to the politico-religious massacres between the two major Islamic denominations. Only in Tunisia does there still seem to be any prospect of consolidating a fragile democracy.

Revolts and the overthrow of dictatorships are to be strictly distinguished from the establishment of democratic systems. Whereas a short, massive mobilization of protest in conjunction with restraint by the military can suffice to bring down a dictatorship, building democracy requires more staying power. The success of democratic transformation depends on economic conditions, the legal system, civil society, education, historical heritage, and culture; and also on whether strong democratic actors manage to impose themselves in the political power game against non-democratic veto players such as the military, militias, religious fundamentalists, and despots from neighbouring countries.

Knowledge about how and why individual cases of democratic transformation fail or succeed is indispensable. But it is not enough. If we want to gain insight into the survival and failure of political regimes, a great many cases have to be

looked at and statistical evidence taken into consideration. Just such a double analysis is currently under way at the WZB Berlin Social Science Center in the research unit Democracy and Democratization, a project financed by the German Research Foundation (DFG). The aim is to elucidate the conditions that determine when and why dictatorships fall, survive, are replaced by democracy, or simply alter their mode of autocratic rule.

Three Pillars on Which Regimes Build Their Power

Egypt, for example, has in scarcely three years experienced the personal dictatorship of Mubarak, an Islamist majority tyranny, and a military dictatorship. Most of the successor states of the Soviet Union have transformed themselves from communist party regimes into predatory, bizarre personal dictatorships, as in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan.

The WZB research project is far-reaching, investigating dictatorships throughout the world. The period under study is from 1978 to 2010 and covers hundreds of cases. And it is becoming clear that dictatorial regimes base their rule on three pillars: legitimation, repression, and cooptation. They draw their legitimation from two sources: normative-ideological and performance-related. Anti-liberalism, anti-parliamentarianism, racism, nationalism, anachronistic religious orders of salvation, as well as Marxist concepts of the future can at least for a time generate normative acceptance among the subjects of the regime.

At the beginning of the 21st century, fascist and communist ideologies have, however, largely lost their normative powers of persuasion. If at all, it is the various forms of politico-fundamentalist Islam that have been able to develop an ideological binding force over the people under their power. But since they, too, have added the restriction of basic human rights to the canon of their pretensions to power, repressive reality threatens to cut off alluring promises of salvation at their source. For this reason, too, dictatorial regimes have to rely particularly strongly on their performance record in the economic field and in security and order.

Autocracies Rely on Soft and Hard Repression

Secondly, autocracies rely on repression. Repression can vary in form and intensity. Although the boundaries are far from clear-cut, we distinguish between “soft” and “hard” repression. While soft repression entails above all the restriction of political rights such as the freedom of assembly, opinion, and the press, hard repression primarily attacks core human rights such as physical integrity and the freedom of the individual. Although empirical proof is lacking, the evidence is that authoritarian ruling elites react to threats to the status quo by increasing repression. But repression alone cannot stabilize a political regime in the long run. For a great deal of legitimation is lost: if repression increases, legitimation declines along with popular acceptance of the regime.

Fissures in the Apparatus Let in Protest That Can Topple the Regime

The third pillar of power is cooptation. By means of cooptation, autocratic ruling elites can manage to bind important actors outside the core of the regime to a dictatorship. Such strategically important people usually come from the economic elites, the security apparatus, and the military. Offices, political privileges, and economic resources are the most frequent bargaining chips; corruption, cronyism, and patrimonial networks are the tools. However, the availability of resources limits the duration and extent of “bought” collaboration with the regime.

Fissures in one of the three pillars of power can temporarily be compensated for by reinforcing the others. In some cases, however, cracks in one pillar can put too much strain on the others. Then spaces for protest open up, which, if mas-



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sive advantage is taken of them, can bring the whole regime toppling down. By contrast, a high degree of ideological or performance-related legitimation, as little “hard” repression as possible, and well-developed “soft” repression together with medium-range cooptation prove, on statistical average, to provide an ideal equilibrium to ensure the survival of dictatorships. Singapore comes closest to this average, and the People’s Republic of China seems to be on the way there. But even hybrid regimes, like Putin’s Russia, are not far from such an equilibrium.

Most Dictatorships Have Appropriated the Insignia of Democracy

There are currently 47 open dictatorships in the world. Most of them have meanwhile appropriated the institutional insignia of democracies: elections, parties, parliaments. But, unlike in democracies, participation, competition, and pluralism are no more than ploys in the pursuit of legitimation. The three pillars are not stable in all autocratic regimes. But even if they shatter, we can expect only modest progress towards democracy. The conditions that led to successful democratization in parts of Eastern Europe or Latin America, in countries like Chile, Brazil, Argentina, or Uruguay, are usually lacking. With the soft, prosperous dictatorship of Singapore or the capitalist party regime of China, new alternatives to the concept of representative democracy have developed, not only in Asia. The competition between systems is far from over.

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