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Exchange

THE SEQUENCING “FALLACY”

Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder

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Trenchant articles in the January 2007 issue of the *Journal of Democracy* by two of the most astute observers of democratization and political development, Thomas Carothers and Sheri Berman, acknowledge the now widely recognized fact that countries taking early steps on the journey from dictatorship toward electoral politics are especially prone to civil and international war, violent revolution, and ethnic and sectarian bloodshed. Indeed, they accept our argument about turbulent democratization—advanced in a series of articles and two books published since 1995—and then go us one better, charging us with being too optimistic about sequencing democratic change in ways that might reduce its risks.¹

We have pointed out that not all countries experience significant violence during democratic transitions. Brazil, Chile, Hungary, Poland, South Korea, and Taiwan are recent examples of peaceful transitions. Using both statistical and case-study analyses in our book *Electing to Fight*, we showed that transitional countries that were comparatively well-endowed with the prerequisites for democratic politics, such as relatively competent and impartial state institutions, were unlikely to detour into violence. This is a story as old as democracy itself: Great Britain’s nineteenth-century path toward mass electoral politics was smoothed by the preexisting strength of its legal system, representative institutions, and free press. Based on these findings, we argued that it is dangerous to push states to democratize before the necessary preconditions are in place and that prudent democracy-promotion efforts should pay special attention to fostering those preconditions.

In response, Berman and Carothers express doubts that getting the sequence right—building effective state institutions before holding unfettered elections—is the key to reducing the risk of violence during a democratic transition. Berman argues that even the European states that supposedly democratized in the right sequence experienced horrible conflicts. Even England had its seventeenth-century Civil War, which she considers the initial phase in the rise of mass participation in British politics.

Carothers admits that certain conditions facilitate democratic transitions: a fairly high level of economic development, an economy that is not based on oil production, the absence of deep identity-based divisions within society, prior experience with democracy, and democratic neighbors. He resists calling these factors preconditions, however, because they do not have to be fully achieved before democratization can usefully begin. He also rejects the idea of sequencing because mass political pressure on the dictator may be needed to spur progress in building democratic institutions.

It is a commentary on how far this debate has moved since our first articles in 1995 that we can now be charged with being optimists. In fact, we are not much more optimistic about sequencing than either Carothers or Berman. Our position is not that building the institutional or other preconditions of democracy is easy or that dictators are readily convinced to take these steps. We call for “humility about the ability of any outsider to re-engineer a country’s political institutions.”² Our book is a disquisition on the tactics that authoritarian leaders use to dodge pressures to build effective democratic institutions.

We also anticipate Carothers in recognizing that the creation of preconditions will sometimes have barely begun when electoral competition gets under way: “[O]ur most general rule is to start the process by building the institutions that democracy requires, and then encouraging mass political participation and unfettered electoral competition only after these institutions have *begun to take root*.”³ Like Robert A. Dahl and Samuel P. Huntington nearly four decades ago, we acknowledge that the British-style sequence of forging effective state institutions prior to starting a democratic transition has become increasingly rare, though it does still occur.⁴ South Africa successfully followed such a sequence in the 1990s, adapting apartheid-era institutions to the needs of postapartheid democracy. The likelihood that this favorable sequence will be rare among future transitions is precisely why we think democratization often may go awry, as occurred in recent elections in the Middle East.

There is, however, one key issue on which we may disagree with Berman and Carothers. We suggest not only that democratization is often violent (Berman’s main point), but also that premature, out-of-sequence attempts to democratize may make subsequent efforts to dem-

ocratize more difficult and more violent than they would otherwise be. When elections are held in an institutional wasteland like Iraq, for example, political competition typically coalesces around and reinforces the ethnic and sectarian divisions in traditional society. To forge liberal,

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secular coalitions that cut across cultural divisions, it is necessary to have impartial state institutions that provide a framework for civic action and a focal point for civic loyalty. Without reasonably effective civic institutions, the outcome in culturally diverse societies is likely to resemble Iraq and Lebanon. Once a country starts on an illiberal trajectory, ideas are unleashed and institutions are established that tend to continue propelling it along that trajectory. A key danger is that premature democratization

will push a country down this path. We highlight the importance of sequencing not because we are so optimistic about the prospects of engineering a properly ordered democratization, but because we are so concerned about the consequences of transitions occurring under other conditions.

Our findings are consistent with the conjecture that out-of-sequence transition attempts delay the eventual achievement of stable democracy, although this issue was not a central focus of our research. Many troubled partial democracies have long retained the institutional deformities born of an initial transition from autocracy that failed to produce a coherent democracy. For example, the connection between Serbian ethnic nationalism and political demagoguery began with early experiments with mass electoral politics in the nineteenth century, a pattern that persisted in the face of communist and liberal attempts to break this connection. Likewise, the foundational role of the military in Argentine, Pakistani, and Turkish mass-nationalist politics established a recurrent pattern of oscillations between semidemocracy and military rule. Similarly, Colombia's pattern of urban semidemocracy and violent rural anarchy, established during the "La Violencia" bloodletting that followed the disastrous opening to mass politics in the late 1940s, has become entrenched in subsequent decades.

Berman and Carothers are less concerned about the lasting birth defects of untimely democratic transitions. Berman's main point is that sequence is largely inconsequential: The price of democratization is constant, high, and unavoidable. Countries just have to pay it. Carothers suggests that an "historical experience with political pluralism," even a failed one, gives a country a leg up in subsequent attempts.⁵ This is not completely implausible. In Latin America, for example, the accretion of

quasi-democratic institutions—parties, labor unions, courts, and the press—left a legacy of some outward institutional forms that could be reanimated in later bursts of political reform. Nonetheless, there are other cases where failed attempts at mass electoral politics left a legacy of ethnic nationalism, military populism, and few useable democratic institutions. President George W. Bush has asserted that “it is the practice of democracy that makes a nation ready for democracy,” but all too often the reverse is true.⁶

Carothers claims to oppose sequencing, but to favor gradualism, although he admits that there are only subtle differences between these two strategies. In contrast, we favor efforts at sequencing, but not always those aimed at gradualism. As Carothers acknowledges, when countries like Czechoslovakia (or for that matter Singapore) have the necessary preconditions in place, there is no need for gradualism. When conditions are not auspicious, however, some preliminary steps—call them gradualism if you like—are a prudent precursor to unconstrained electoral competition.

When will gradual or partial steps be helpful, and when will claims to be sequencing the transition simply serve as excuses for authoritarians who seek to subvert progress toward democracy? We agree that dictators in countries like Tunisia have often used reforms tactically to coopt, divide, and weaken resistance to autocracy.⁷ Yet dictators in Chile, South Korea, Taiwan, and arguably Malaysia have presided over economic and administrative reforms that have had the unintended consequence of improving the country’s subsequent chances for a successful democratic transition.

That said, we do not see dictators as the most likely implementers of well-sequenced reforms leading to democracy. This role is more commonly played by moderate groups that seek to curtail the power of the old authoritarian elite, but that also fear a rapid descent into the chaos of mass politics. Historically, a constructive role has sometimes been played by partial reforms that are designed to protect a liberalizing coalition like the British Whigs and liberals (or the ANC of Nelson Mandela) from a backlash by threatened traditional elites like the Tories (or apartheid elites), and from radical mass groups like the working-class Chartists (or advocates of racial or tribal confrontation).

Controlled reforms create a breathing space in which the reformers can put in place rule-of-law guarantees that reassure all constituencies while the reformers negotiate golden parachutes with old elites to induce them to relinquish power. As for the precise mechanisms of sequencing or gradualism, a variety of tactics might be useful in the right hands: amnesties, elite-protecting pacts on property rights, professionalized but not unregulated news media, rule-of-law reform that starts with the bureaucracy and the economy, and the internal democratization of elite institutions such as the ruling party. Such

expedients have effectively facilitated peaceful democratic transitions in Brazil, Chile, El Salvador, Mozambique, Poland, South Africa, South Korea, Taiwan, and elsewhere.

Carothers is right that outsiders can rarely have a huge effect on the choice of trajectory, but upon occasion they can provide a decisive impetus for good or for ill. The astute tactics of the European Union in conditioning Romanian and Slovak accession on the adoption of policies to guarantee the rights of minorities (backed by strengthened rule of law) helped support the efforts of democratic coalitions to create favorable conditions for transition. Conversely, the decision of international donors to compel the ethnic-minority Tutsi military dictatorship of underinstitutionalized Burundi to hold free and fair elections in 1993 contributed heavily to the more than 200,000 subsequent deaths from ethnic violence. At the margins, realistic knowledge about the sequencing of transitions may help to promote a few successes and avert a few Burundi- and Iraq-style disasters.

NOTES

1. Thomas Carothers, "How Democracies Emerge: The 'Sequencing' Fallacy," *Journal of Democracy* 18 (January 2007): 12–27; Sheri Berman, "How Democracies Emerge: Lessons from Europe," *Journal of Democracy* 18 (January 2007): 28–41; Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, "Democratization and the Danger of War," *International Security* 20 (Summer 1995): 5–38; Jack Snyder, *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict* (New York: Norton, 2000); and Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, *Electing to Fight: Why Emerging Democracies Go to War* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005).

2. Mansfield and Snyder, *Electing to Fight*, 280.

3. Mansfield and Snyder, *Electing to Fight*, 17, emphasis added.

4. Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971); and Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968).

5. Carothers, "How Democracies Emerge," 24.

6. George W. Bush, "Remarks by the President at the 20th Anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy," 6 November 2003, www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/11/20031106-3.html.

7. Eva Bellin, *Stalled Democracy: Capital, Labor and the Paradox of State-sponsored Development* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002).