Review of When Democracies Collapse: Assessing Transitions to Non-Democratic Regimes in the Contemporary World

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Democracy is a delicate sociopolitical institution, hard to build but easy to tear down. Today, the future of this delicate institution looks increasingly bleak as authoritarian forces are gaining traction not only in struggling democracies or hybrid regimes but also in well-established democratic countries. Indeed, according to the latest Freedom in the World report by Freedom House (2021, p.1), 2020 marked “the 15th consecutive year of decline in global freedom,” with nearly 75 percent of the world’s population experiencing deterioration of their political rights and/or civil liberties. It is, thus, more urgent than ever to understand why and how democracies fail, and Luca Tomini’s book contributes to that task by offering an insightful analysis of the causes and modalities of transition from democratic rule.

In its brief Introduction and Chapter 1, the book makes three central arguments that provide a foundation for the empirical analyses presented later. First of all, it argues that the processes of democratization and autocratization are asymmetric in terms of their causes and modalities. In other words, we cannot assume that autocratization, i.e., the “reverse process,” is explained simply by the absence of factors driving democratization. Nor can we assume that autocratization merely involves moving backwards along the various paths that lead nations to democracy. Hence, for Tomini, the reverse process should constitute “an autonomous research agenda within the field of democratization studies” (p.3).

Second, the book maintains that the reverse process is a complex phenomenon that may take different forms and therefore have different causes. Here Tomini builds on the tripartite conception of the reverse process proposed by Erdmann (2011): (i) negative changes within a democratic regime such as the weakening of the system of checks and balances (“loss of quality”); (ii) transition from democracy to a hybrid regime combining democratic and autocratic elements (“hybridization”); and (iii) transition from democracy to an authoritarian regime (“democratic breakdown”). The book mainly deals with the latter two forms of the reverse process as it seeks to shed light on transition from democratic rule.

Third, the book contends that advancing the study of the reverse process requires a multi-level and multi-causal analysis conducted within a cross-national comparative framework. According to Tomini, a multi-level analysis is needed in order to overcome the unproductive divide between “structural” approaches that focus on long-term socioeconomic, institutional, and cultural factors facilitating autocratization and “strategic” approaches that focus on the role of political, military, and social actors whose interactions produce the outcome. On the other hand, a multi-causal analysis is needed because complex phenomena such as transition to or from democracy can rarely be explained by a single factor alone. Therefore, scholars need to consider how a plurality of factors may operate in conjunction with one another to render a country more or less susceptible to de-democratization. Moreover, Tomini posits that this multi-level and multi-causal analysis
should be carried out within a comparative framework so that we can account for the variability in the forms, contexts, and causes of autocratization in the contemporary world.

Having thus laid the groundwork, in Chapter 2 Tomini provides an overview of the reverse process and its forms since the beginning of the 1970s. To do so, the author relies on three democracy indices: (i) the Freedom in the World index by Freedom House, (ii) the Autocracy-Democracy (Polity2) index by the Polity IV project of the Center for Systemic Peace, and (iii) the Electoral Democracy index by the Varieties of Democracy (V-DEM) project. While these indices differ in their conceptions and operationalizations of democracy, Tomini shows they present a comparable global picture: stability in cases of transition to authoritarianism over the past five decades but a “progressive growth” in cases of negative changes within democracy and transition to hybrid regimes since the late 1990s (p.47). Despite the overall increase in the number of autocratizing countries, however, Tomini argues that we cannot speak of a clear “reverse wave” of democratization with common underlying causes because there are significant within- and between-region differences in contemporary autocratization processes.

In Chapter 3, Tomini implements a two-step fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA) technique to investigate the conditions that enable transition from democratic rule. The cases are selected using the Freedom in the World index by Freedom House and include 59 instances of democratic decline (loss of quality, hybridization, and breakdown) from 1973 to 2014.1 The fsQCA method allows the author to capture the causal complexity of autocratization processes, whereas the two-step approach allows them to distinguish between “structural” and “proximate” conditions. By structural conditions, the author refers to long- or medium-term factors that define national contexts. The analysis takes into account six such conditions: (i) economic development, (ii) economic inequality, (iii) competitiveness of the party system, (iv) duration of democracy, (v) ethnolinguistic fragmentation, and (vi) the external context, i.e., the diffusion of democracy in neighboring countries. By proximate conditions, the author refers to “short-term changes in the institutional, political, and social dimensions, for which the actors’ roles are included in the analysis” (p.52). Three such conditions are considered in the analysis: (i) concentration of executive power, (ii) volatility of the party system, and (iii) social instability.

The first step of the analysis includes only structural conditions and aims to identify the enabling contexts within which transition from democracy may occur. In the subsequent step, the particular contexts identified in the first step are analyzed together with the three proximate conditions. The results point to four main causal configurations, or QCA paths, that lead to democratic decline. Three of these configurations involve a structural context characterized by economic underdevelopment and ethnolinguistic fragmentation. In such a context, “the three proximate conditions (volatility, concentration of executive power, and social instability), if combined in pairs, all imply a transition from democracy” (p.69). The last causal configuration consists of a context marked by high levels of economic inequality and two proximate conditions: concentration of the executive power and social instability.

The book gets more interesting after the presentation of its fsQCA results. Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 each provide a process-tracing analysis of two cases to examine more closely how transition from democracy unfolds, placing particular emphasis on the role of political and military actors. The cases are thus selected on the basis of an analytical framework directly related to agency, a
framework with two dimensions of variation: a “civil-military” dimension indicating whether the military plays a key role in the transition, and a “democratic loyalty” dimension indicating whether the incumbent political actors are loyal to democracy. Together, these two dimensions yield four models of transition from democratic rule: (i) the “incumbent entrenchment” model, where the ruling government turns authoritarian in response to growing socioeconomic and political pressures (Dominican Republic and Bolivia), (ii) the “opposition takeover” model, where a radicalized civilian opposition endorses anti-democratic means to take power or breaks up with democratic norms and institutions once in power (Venezuela and Gambia); (iii) the “democratic coup” model, where the military overthrows an authoritarian incumbent perceived as a threat to the democratic regime (Nigeria and Thailand); and (iv) the “stabilizing coup” model, where the military overthrows a democratic incumbent perceived as incapable of restoring order and stability in the country (Mali and Turkey).

The in-depth qualitative analysis of the eight selected cases follows a “detective novel” approach (p.76). In each case, the analysis starts with a brief summary of the relevant facts (called “the Event”) and then presents the structural context within which transition from democracy occurred (called “the Scene”). The next section introduces the proximate conditions that accelerated the transition (called “the Turn”), followed by a discussion of the main actors and their roles in that process (called “the Suspect”). The final section (called “the Reveal”) puts all pieces together, “exposing the complete causal mechanism responsible for the outcome” (p.77). This creative approach to case analysis proves quite useful: Not only does it allow the author to achieve explanatory richness within each case study, but it also facilitates systematic comparison across the cases, thereby facilitating the generation of theoretical insights applicable to a wide range of settings.

Indeed, despite the different national contexts, the case studies reveal a number of recurring elements in the causal pathways of transition from democratic rule. As further elaborated in the Conclusion, one of these is the existence of “mutually reinforcing inequalities” in all countries affected by the reverse process (p.162). Accordingly, contexts where economic and political disparities are intertwined with ethnonlinguistic, religious, or regional differences provide a fragile basis for democratic legitimacy, creating favorable circumstances for transition from democracy (p.163). These structural conditions, however, do not produce the transition on their own. Here Tomini emphasizes two additional factors that must be taken into account in any investigation of the reverse process. The first is the catalytic role of crises, such as economic downturns, financial shocks, and political violence, in destabilizing fragile democracies and setting in motion the reverse process. The second is the decisive role of the actors in the process of regime change. In particular, the analysis highlights the importance of political culture, arguing that commitment to democracy by all main actors—the government, the leaders of major opposition groups, and military elites—is “a key factor in determining the fate of the democratic system” (p.166).

The book, of course, is not without limitations. For one, the high degree of overlap among the cases covered by the four QCA paths, as well as the unexplained cases, suggests that there are omitted variables/conditions which need to be incorporated into the analysis. For another, the post-QCA process-tracing analysis of the eight selected cases mainly focus on actors’ motivations, i.e., their democratic preferences, offering a rather superficial account of their coalition-building strategies. These limitations notwithstanding, Tomini’s book makes a timely and significant
contribution to our understanding of contemporary autocratization processes by integrating different levels of analysis and multiple causal factors in a coherent analytical framework. Empirically rich and methodologically rigorous, the book is a must-read for anyone interested in why and how democracies decline and collapse.

Endnotes

1 Since the book focuses on negative changes from democracy, all cases of autocratization in non-democratic (hybrid or authoritarian) regimes are excluded from the analysis.

2 Bolivia 2, Brazil, and Dominican Republic 1 are covered by all of the four QCA paths; Peru is covered by three QCA paths; and Colombia 2, Malawi, and Papua New Guinea 2 are covered by two QCA paths. Chile, Gambia 2, Lebanon, Sri Lanka, and Ukraine remain unexplained.

References
