Hundreds of thousands of Egyptians watch fireworks set off to celebrate the military’s ouster of President Mohamed Morsi on July 7, 2013. The military coup came two and a half years after a political revolution that started a process of democratization. The tortuous route and uncertain outcome of Egypt’s regime change is not unusual.

REUTERS/Amr Abdallah Dalsh
Regime change is the high drama of comparative politics. Many of our most iconic political images are of regime change, from the “shot heard ‘round the world” signaling the start of the American Revolution in 1776, to Nelson Mandela taking the oath of office in South Africa in 1994, to protesters in Tahrir Square in Egypt in 2011. They are often images of popular and charismatic leaders backed by the mobilized masses demanding a better world. But other images are less positive, like that of a general seizing power as tanks roll into the capital, as happened in Egypt in 2013, or the slow erosion of democracy under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey. Comparativists analyze all of these events, whether positive or negative, as regime change, the process through which one regime is transformed into another. The specific focus of our inquiry has always been influenced by the political context. During the Cold war, we focused on military coups d’état and revolutions; in the early post–Cold War years, we concentrated primarily on what Samuel Huntington (1991) called the third wave of democratization; and most recently, we have looked more closely at how democracies break down. All types of regime change remain important, however, as the Country and Concept table on page 396 illustrates. Although the Arab Spring produced a democracy in Tunisia, coups have taken place in recent years in Guinea and Mali, and Turkey saw a failed coup attempt in in July 2016. In 2019, some analysts began talking about a “new Arab Spring,” as massive protests in Algeria and Sudan forced long-reigning dictators out of power; they were removed by their own militaries, however, and it remained unclear what kind of regime would replace them. Often we can only distinguish the outcome of a regime process in retrospect.

The study of regime change raises several fundamental questions in comparative politics: Why do revolutions or military coups happen in some countries and not in others? Why are some countries able to found and sustain democracies while others aren’t? Why do authoritarian regimes take power, and why do they end quickly in some places but last much longer in others?
# Regime Change and Outcome

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COUNTRY</th>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>MECHANISM OF REGIME CHANGE (20TH CENTURY)</th>
<th>OUTCOME: RESULTING REGIME TYPE</th>
<th>LENGTH OF NEW REGIME (YEARS)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>1930</td>
<td>Military coup</td>
<td>Neofascist</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1945</td>
<td>Democratization</td>
<td>Democracy</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1964</td>
<td>Military coup</td>
<td>Modernizing authoritarian</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Democratization</td>
<td>Democracy</td>
<td>34+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>1911</td>
<td>Political revolution</td>
<td>State collapse/warlord rule</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1949</td>
<td>Social revolution</td>
<td>Communist</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1979</td>
<td>Succession of personalist leader</td>
<td>Modernizing authoritarian</td>
<td>40+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>1918</td>
<td>Democratization</td>
<td>Democracy</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1933</td>
<td>Fascist putsch</td>
<td>Fascist</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1950</td>
<td>Democratization</td>
<td>Democracy</td>
<td>69+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Democratization (end of East German state)</td>
<td>Democracy (expanded)</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>1947</td>
<td>Democratization (end of colonial rule)</td>
<td>Democracy</td>
<td>72+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>1921</td>
<td>Military coup</td>
<td>Modernizing authoritarian</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1979</td>
<td>Social revolution</td>
<td>Theocratic</td>
<td>40+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>1950</td>
<td>Democratization</td>
<td>Democracy</td>
<td>69+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>1920</td>
<td>Social revolution</td>
<td>Electoral authoritarian</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Democratization</td>
<td>Democracy</td>
<td>25+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>1960</td>
<td>Democratization (end of colonial rule)</td>
<td>Democracy</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1966</td>
<td>Military coup</td>
<td>Modernizing authoritarian</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1979</td>
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<td>Democracy</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>Military coup</td>
<td>Personalist</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Democratization</td>
<td>Democracy</td>
<td>20+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>1917</td>
<td>Social revolution</td>
<td>Communist</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Democratization</td>
<td>Democracy</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Authoritarianization</td>
<td>Electoral authoritarian</td>
<td>19+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
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<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Trends in Regime Change

Logically, any type of regime we have discussed earlier in this book could be changed into any other, giving many possibilities. Some changes, however, are more common than others. Regime change can occur via a number of mechanisms: military coup d’état, revolution, military insurgency, negotiated transition to a democracy, slow erosion of democratic institutions ultimately producing an authoritarian regime, or foreign invasion. These mechanisms can produce various outcomes. Military coups, for instance, often result in military regimes but can produce new democracies. Revolutions, especially social revolutions, and insurgencies typically produce some type of authoritarian regime, but there are exceptions to that as well. In examining regime change, then, we need to distinguish between and analyze both mechanisms and outcomes.

The regime changes to which we will give most of our attention are changes from democratic to authoritarian regimes and vice versa. These are the dramatic beginnings of new democracies, mass uprisings to overthrow dictators, or the rolling of tanks down the streets of a nation’s capital. But regimes can change from one authoritarian regime to another as well, such as when a faction of a military dictatorship decides to replace an incumbent military regime with a new, but equally authoritarian one or when a social revolution overthrows a monarchy to install a communist regime.

The rarest type of regime change is from one democratic regime to another. Once democracies are established, they may weaken and ultimately be overthrown by the military, as in Brazil in 1964, or be transformed into authoritarian regimes as elected leaders amass nearly unlimited power, as Vladimir Putin did in Russia. Very rarely, however, does a nation decide to shift from one type of democratic regime to another. A rare exception was the transition from the Fourth to the Fifth Republics in France in 1958. In the midst of the Algerian war for independence from France, part of the French army rebelled against the democratic government by demanding that France continue to fight to preserve Algeria as part of France. World War II general and war hero Charles de Gaulle called for the dissolution of the government and a constitutional convention, to which parliament agreed. The parliamentary Fourth Republic was dissolved and the semipresidential system, a new type of democratic regime that we outlined in chapter 5, was established, ending the crisis.

Both the mechanisms and outcomes of regime change shifted with the end of the Cold War in 1990. As the Berlin Wall fell and the Soviet Union collapsed, one superpower was gone and the other (the United States) became much less concerned about propping up friendly dictators. Communism as an ideology was seen as largely bankrupt and liberal democracy the near-universal norm—with the major exception being defenders of monarchy or theocracy in the Middle East. We saw in chapter 8 that the post–Cold War era produced a shift from more closed to more open, electoral authoritarian regimes. Figure 9.1 shows a parallel trend toward democracy. The number of closed authoritarian regimes peaked in the late 1970s and shrank dramatically in the 1990s, while the number of democracies increased, then leveled off in the new millennium. During the Cold War, two-thirds of regime changes that ended authoritarian regimes ultimately created new authoritarian regimes; since the end of the Cold War, the ratio has flipped, with two-thirds of those regime changes creating democracies (Conroy-Krutz and Frantz 2017, 11). Figure 9.2 shows a change in the mechanisms of regime change as well, looking specifically at the fall of authoritarian regimes. Coups have become a far less common mechanism for ending authoritarian regimes while elections, military insurgencies, and popular uprisings increased.
FIGURE 9.1
Regime Types, 1946–2017

Source: Data are from the Polity Project’s Polity IV data set, Center for Systemic Peace (http://www.systemicpeace.org/polityproject.html).

Note: Electoral authoritarian regimes are regimes with scores between −5 and 5. Authoritarian regimes score between -10 and -6, and democracies rate between 6 and 10. The labels shown above have been modified from the original by the authors to conform to terminology used in this book. Polity IV’s label of “anocracy” we referred to as “electoral authoritarian,” and Polity IV’s label of “autocracy” is labeled here as “authoritarian.”

FIGURE 9.2
How Authoritarian Regimes Fall

Source: Adapted from Erica Frantz, Authoritarianism: What Everyone Needs to Know (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 125.
Clearly, the international context affects both the mechanisms and outcomes of regime change, but it doesn’t determine them. Military coups still happen since the Cold War, and some democracies were created during the Cold War. As comparativists, we need to examine the internal dynamics of regime change. We will do that first by looking at regime changes that replace authoritarian rule with democracy and then at changes that create authoritarian regimes, including those that end democracies.

**Regime Change: Transitions to Democracy**

In 1972 Freedom House, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) that analyzes the level of political and civil rights in countries around the world, classified forty-four countries as “free,” meaning that they were fully functioning liberal democracies. In 1990 the number of “free” countries rose to sixty-one, and in 2019 it had grown to eighty-six. In the new millennium, though, progress has slowed and even reversed. Freedom House reported that 2019 was the thirteenth straight year in which the number of countries that became less free was greater than the number that became more free. A recent review of the third wave of democratization found that of ninety-one transitions to democracy since 1974, thirty-four had reverted to authoritarian rule and thirty remained democracies but “low-quality” ones in terms of fair elections, protections of rights, and the rule of law. Only twenty-seven countries were “high-quality” liberal democracies as of 2017 (Mainwaring and Bizzarro 2019). Democracy has clearly advanced, but reversal is possible, and the 1990s image of global mass rebellion overwhelming dictators and establishing lasting democracy was, alas, overly simplistic.

As discussed in chapter 7, political revolutions in which popular uprisings overwhelm a dictator happen but are rare. The fall of Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines in 1986 and Nicolae Ceauşescu in Romania three years later are classic examples that captured the world’s imagination. Much more common, though, are negotiated changes from an authoritarian to a democratic regime, like the four-year process in South Africa from anti-apartheid leader Nelson Mandela’s release from prison in 1990 to his election as president in 1994. One study found the average length of a transition to democracy was 6.1 years (Conroy-Krutz and Frantz 2017, 6). Regime changes that create democracies are typically long, complicated affairs involving significant bargaining among major political actors, all set in a particular economic, cultural, and international context. Comparativists have tried to understand the expansion of democracy and its more recent stagnation by asking why and how countries become democratic, what obstacles they face, how democratic they are, how likely they are to stay democratic, and how they can become more democratic.

**Transitions to Democracy, Democratic Consolidation, and Democratic Backsliding**

A **transition to democracy** is a regime change that results in a democracy, typically involving a negotiated process among major political actors in an authoritarian regime and their opponents who demand democracy. Transitions are often triggered by some particular event, such as a natural disaster, economic crisis, major change in the international context or international support of the old regime, massive civilian protests, or death of a personalist dictator. Reaction to the triggering event can come from within the regime or from society at large. Some of the elite supporting the existing authoritarian regime may decide to split...
from it if they see the costs of loyalty to the regime increase while the costs and risk of rebellion decrease. If a regime's inadequate response to a natural disaster, for instance, leads to massive protests in the streets, or if an economic crisis starves the regime of the resources it needs to co-opt key elites, a regime split may occur, and this is often the first step in a transition process. If opposition in society, motivated by some triggering event, coalesces into a large and well-organized social movement for democracy, the regime may split or may conclude that staying in power is no longer viable and attempt to negotiate a peaceful and safe exit for themselves.

In what many theorists consider the ideal model, reaction to the triggering event leads to a process of negotiation that results in a **pact**, an explicit agreement among the most important political actors in the regime and civil society to establish a new form of government. Whether this occurs depends in part on the relative strength of the key actors. If, for instance, a military regime does not split, it can often dictate the terms of its own exit; in Chile, for instance, General Augusto Pinochet agreed to return the country to democracy in 1989 but wrote a constitution that gave the military continued control over its own budget, the central bank, and 20 percent of the national Senate. A pact or imposed democratic system like in Chile ideally produces a new democratic constitution and founding election, the first democratic election in many years (or ever) that marks the completion of the transition process.

Creating a democracy is one thing; sustaining it over the long term is another. Political history is littered with democracies that reverted to authoritarian rule, from the Nazi takeover of Germany in 1932 to the military coup in Egypt in 2013 or President Viktor Orbán’s slow undermining of democracy in Hungary in the early years of the twenty-first century. Transition theorists developed the concept of **democratic consolidation** to help analyze the sustainability of democracy, but there has been much dispute over the definition and utility of the concept. Intuitively, democratic consolidation is simply the idea that democracy has become widely accepted as the permanent form of political activity in a particular country. It has become “the only game in town,” and all significant political elites and their followers accept democratic rules and are confident everyone else does as well. This is important, because democracy requires faith that, in the future, any significant party or group might gain power via an election. If some major political actors do not believe that, they might be tempted to use nondemocratic means to gain power, fearing that their opponents will not give them a chance to win via free and fair elections in the future.

Knowing when a country has reached the point of democratic consolidation, however, is quite difficult. How can we know whether all the actors in the country have accepted democracy unquestionably? Huntington (1991) argued that a country must pass the “two-turnover test” before we can consider it a consolidated democracy: one party must win the founding election, and then a different party must win a later election and replace the first party. By this strict standard, West Germany did not become a consolidated democracy until 1969, India until 1980, Japan until 1993, Mexico until 2012, and South Africa still does not qualify. Other scholars rely on surveys to demonstrate that the elite and population as a whole express support for democratic values and democracy in their country in particular. Whatever measure is used, it’s clear that many new democracies have not fully consolidated, and doing so can take not just years but decades.

Transition theorists look for evidence of democratic consolidation because they fear **democratic backsliding**: a decline in the quality of democracy, including the extent of participation, the rule of law, and vertical and horizontal accountability.
accountability. This can ultimately result in democratic breakdown: the rise of a new authoritarian regime. During the third wave of democratization and since, few countries that have completed a transition to democracy have reverted to closed authoritarian regimes that allow no opposition. Some hold reasonably free and fair elections but do not abide by the full array of liberal rights and the rule of law, while others become electoral authoritarian regimes in which a ruling party rigs elections and manipulates institutions as necessary to stay in power, like Putin’s regime in Russia. Questions about the quality of democracy, of course, apply to all democracies, not just recent ones. Two major NGOs, using distinct measures, both found in 2019 that democratic quality was actually declining most in long-established democracies in Europe and North America (Freedom House 2019; Lührmann et al. 2018).

Explaining Democratization, Consolidation, and Backsliding

Political scientists have used the full array of theories outlined in chapter 1 to try to explain democratic transitions and consolidation. As is so often the case, we can usefully divide the theoretical debate into approaches based on structures, culture and beliefs, and individual action. Structural arguments have focused on economic factors, political institutions, and international context.

Structures: Economic

Prior to the third wave, all but a handful of democracies were wealthy, Western countries. In the 1950s and 1960s, political scientists understandably followed the ideas of modernization theory, arguing that democracy could be sustained only in certain types of societies. Seymour Martin Lipset (1959) saw economic structure as the most important element, arguing that democracies arise only in countries with reasonably wealthy economies and a large middle class that is educated and has its basic needs securely met. In these societies, political competition is not too intense and therefore compromise, an essential component of democracy, is easier. Other scholars argued that political developments must occur in a particular sequence; for instance, a strong state and sense of national identity must emerge before a democracy can succeed.

During the third wave, democracy began breaking out in unexpected places. First southern European and then Latin American military dictatorships gave way to democracy. Then the end of the Cold War unleashed a new round of democracy creation, first in the former Communist countries of Eastern Europe and then in Africa and parts of Asia. According to modernization theories, these countries were far too poor, still faced questions about the strength of their state and national identity, and seemed not to have democratic cultures, yet here they were writing constitutions, holding elections, and establishing democracies. The limited success of many of these new democracies, however, led comparativists in the new millennium to revisit some of the ideas of modernization theory, using new and much more sophisticated research methods, as well as examining other economic variables such as economic crises and inequality.

Adam Przeworski and colleagues (2000) created a data set of 141 countries from 1950 to 1990, revisiting the key structural arguments: did socioeconomic development predict whether countries have transitions to democracy and how long those new democracies survive? They found a strong statistical relationship between development and the sustainability of democracy, arguing that
“democracy is almost certain to survive in countries with per capita incomes above $4,000” (Przeworski et al. 2000, 273) but a very weak relationship between development and the likelihood that a country would have a transition to democracy. They concluded that in terms of predicting transitions, “modernization theory appears to have little, if any, explanatory power” (Przeworski et al. 2000, 137). Carles Boix and Susan Stokes (2003) challenged these findings, however. They used the same data but removed states that, during the Cold War, were tightly controlled by the Soviet Union and countries that were heavily dependent on oil wealth. They argued that both of these factors would prevent democracy from occurring and therefore should not be included in a test of modernization theory overall. Removing these countries from the data, they concluded that, for the countries on which the theory focuses—poor and middle-income countries—development does indeed make transitions to democracy more likely.

Many postcolonial countries going through transitions to democracy simultaneously went through market-oriented economic reform (see chapter 11), which, in the short term, often causes economic decline before it brings benefits. Theorists feared that negative economic effects might undermine popular support for democracy after a transition. Nancy Bermeo (2003) examined this hypothesis, looking at the breakdown of democracy in Europe before World War II and in Latin America in the 1960s. She found that the populace as a whole did not reject democracy in times of economic crisis but, instead, key elites did. The military in Latin America, for instance, feared economic instability and put an end to democracy despite a lack of public support for their actions. A global quantitative analysis of third-wave democratization efforts found that poor economic performance of the incumbent regime was associated with both democratization and reversions of democracy to authoritarian rule—economic crisis produced regime change in either direction as the incumbent regime lost support (Haggard and Kaufman 2016). Crises can lead to regime change, but popular pressure is very rarely in favor of authoritarian rule. Rather, elites sometimes create authoritarian rule in the midst of a crisis.

Other theorists debated the effects of economic inequality on democratization. One school of thought argued that relatively unequal societies are unlikely to democratize because elites fear that if the impoverished majority gains the vote, they will use it to redistribute income, so the elites will fight to maintain authoritarian rule. In more equal societies, the elite will fear redistribution less, so they will be more willing to allow democratization (Acemoglu and Robinson 2006; Boix 2003). Stephan Haggard and Robert Kaufman (2016) examined this question in detail using a quantitative analysis of third wave democracies and found that inequality had no effect on the likelihood of successful democratization or democratic backsliding. Instead, institutional factors, such as the old regime’s repressiveness, the capacity of social movements to protest, a history of military coups, and the strength of political institutions, explain when protests demanding democracy arise and when democratization succeeds.

Structures: Political Institutions

Political institutions, then, in both the old regime and the new democracy, can affect both the transition to democracy and consolidation. Since World War II, military regimes have been shorter lived than other types of authoritarian regimes, increasing the possibility of democratic transition in those countries. They have been twice as likely to collapse as personalist regimes and three times as likely to collapse as dominant-party regimes (whether single-party or electoral authoritarian). Figure 9.3 shows what has happened when these different types of authoritarian regimes collapse.
collapse of military regimes is far more likely to result in democracy than the collapse of other types of authoritarian regimes. The explanation for these patterns rests in the domestic support the differing regimes typically have, their coercive ability, and the likely result they face if they leave office. Personalist leaders, for instance, are far more likely to face death, jail, or exile after a transition and therefore cling to power as long as possible, but they often have genuine support among particular sections of the country, sometimes due to ethnic or religious ties, that helps them stay in office. Ruling parties, in both one-party and electoral authoritarian regimes, often foster some institutionalized or ideological legitimacy that allows them to resist opposition longer. Military regimes are more likely to lack domestic support to help them stay in power but also are more likely to control effective repressive power and use it to negotiate a safe retirement for themselves and, as the Chilean example preceding showed, perhaps even a role in the new democracy (Escriba-Folch and Wright 2015, 42–64). Many more authoritarian regimes were military led during the Cold War than since, when electoral authoritarian regimes became the most common. This may help explain the dramatic success of the transitions to democracy in the 1990s as the Cold War ended. It may also explain the more meager gains in the new millennium since the remaining electoral authoritarian regimes seem less likely to fall and less likely to become democratic if they do.

Weak political institutions in the old regime can also make a transition to democracy difficult. In the neopatrimonial regimes with exceptionally weak institutions in much of sub-Saharan Africa (see chapter 3), political competition was primarily about securing access to government resources for patronage. Pacts almost never happened because parties were little more than temporary vehicles for shifting coalitions of patrons trying to gain power, so parties had neither sufficient ideological disagreements nor enough stability to provide the credible commitments that pacts require. In the absence of pacts, incumbents typically did not liberalize their regimes completely, instead holding elections that were only partially free and fair. More often than not, they won those elections. Even when the opposition won, it was
likely to create an electoral authoritarian regime in order to maintain its access to key resources (Bratton and van de Walle 1997). While almost all African countries experienced at least an attempted transition in the 1990s, only eight were “free” in 2019, while twenty-one were “partly free” and eighteen were “not free” (Freedom House 2019).

The type of political institutions that are adopted during the transition can also affect success of democratization. Juan Linz (1990) argued that the “perils of presidentialism” (see chapter 5) are particularly important in new democracies. Because new democracies are often deeply divided and competing elites do not fully trust one another or the new democratic institutions, consensus democracies with power-sharing mechanisms, such as coalition governments in parliamentary systems, are likely to help preserve democracy. In Africa, Jaimie Bleck and Nicholas van de Walle (2019) pointed to continued presidentialism as a key explanation for why multiparty elections have not produced improved democracy: incumbent presidents, many in power before competitive elections began, have used the resources of the executive branch to maintain power in ways that would be less likely in parliamentary systems. In other regions, though, presidential systems have succeeded, and differences among them may be important in explaining successful democratic consolidation. Latin American countries that adopted a two-round majoritarian system for electing the president in the early 1990s had stronger democracies twenty years later than neighboring countries with plurality elections for president. Cynthia McClintock (2018) argued this was because having a majority gave the president greater legitimacy and the system encouraged ideological moderation among candidates.

Chapter 6 demonstrated the importance of political parties to any democracy. In new democracies, strong parties can form the basis of coherent and powerful opposition to the ruling party, before and after an initial transition. In Africa (Lebas 2011) and Eastern Europe (Gherghina 2015; Tavits 2013), historical legacies and conscious choices party leaders made to build their organizations made a difference to how strong parties were during and after a transition. Ironically, in Africa, stronger authoritarian leaders who were able to control the democratization process more fully provided incentives for opponents to form more institutionalized parties. The result was greater accountability and stability in the post-transition era (Reidl 2014). In Latin America, the most successful parties were forged in deep and sometimes violent conflict during the transition or had strong historical legacies from earlier eras in the country (Levitsky et al. 2016).

After the initial transition, elections themselves may promote further democratization. Staffan Lindberg (2009) showed how elections in Africa can shift the balance of power between the ruling party and its opposition. Even limited elections allow the opposition to win some share of power. This gives dissidents within the ruling party a viable alternative and thus an incentive to defect to the opposition. When political leaders think an opposition coalition has a real chance to win, they become even more likely to join it, further strengthening its chances until a tipping point is reached at which a large opposition coalition emerges to win an election despite the incumbent’s manipulation of the system (van de Walle 2006). But systematic analyses both in Africa and globally have found that more elections, even high-quality ones, do not improve the overall quality of democracy (Bleck and van de Walle 2019; Flores and Nooruddin 2016). Flores and Nooruddin argued that not just holding elections but the quality of the elections is important to democratic consolidation. As elections took place in poorer countries with less revenue, more ethnic heterogeneity, and less history of democracy, they were of lower quality and did not improve democracy.

Providing an overall assessment, Grigore Pop-Eleches and Graeme Robertson (2015) looked at structural factors in electoral authoritarian regimes—income level,
ethnic and religious cleavages, and state capacity—and found that those with structural advantages on these key dimensions (more wealth, ethnic and religious homogeneity, and state capacity) are more likely to transition to democracy while those with structural disadvantages will more typically oscillate between democracy and some type of authoritarian rule over time.

Structures: International Context

The international context of any democratization process can be a structural factor helping or hindering a particular country’s transition. As noted previously, the end of the Cold War resulted in a burst of democratization, in part because it removed the incentive for the superpowers to support “friendly” dictators. Some dictators, such as Mobutu Sese Seko in Zaire, lost power in part due to a dramatic decline of U.S. support. Others, such as the self-proclaimed Marxist regime in Ethiopia, lost power after their Soviet patrons literally disappeared.

Other, less direct international factors also affected democratization. Regimes more closely linked to the West tended to have more successful transitions (Levitsky and Way 2010), and a process of diffusion from one country to another also occurred. Democracy activists in one country would see and copy the successful practices in others, especially other countries with which they had a connection. Barbara Wejnert (2014) used a statistical modeling approach to demonstrate that diffusion was more important than any characteristics of individual countries in predicting democratization. Particularly in poorer countries, proximity to other democracies and interactions with neighboring countries significantly increased the likelihood of countries becoming democratic. International structure matters more, she argued, than domestic structures or culture.

Cultures and Beliefs

In *The Civic Culture* (1963, 1989), Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba presented a culturalist version of modernization: democracy thrives only in countries that have “civic” (or democratic) political cultures. Citizens must value participation but defer to elected leaders enough to let them govern (see chapter 1). Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel (2005) used data from a global survey of citizen beliefs and concluded that culture, specifically “emancipative values” that emphasize freedom of expression and equality of opportunities, helped sustain democracy. Even controlling for earlier experience with democracy and prior economic development, countries with higher emancipative values in the early 1990s were much more likely to have stronger democracies after 2002. Hadenius and Teorell (2005), however, using a different measure of democracy and different data set, found no relationship between emancipative values and levels of democracy. Clearly, the debate over modernization theory in both its structural and cultural forms remains unresolved.

As noted before, many scholars argued that another aspect of culture, ethnic division, produces a weaker sense of national unity and often bitter political intergroup competition that threatens to undermine democratic norms and institutions. These theorists predicted the third wave democracies were unlikely to last due to their ethnic diversity. A study by Steven Fish and Robin Brooks (2004) across approximately 160 countries, though, found no correlation between ethnic diversity and the strength of democracy. Christian Houle (2015), however, found that economic inequality among ethnic groups, not just the existence of ethnic diversity, harms democratic consolidation.
Individual Action

A long-established theory of which countries successfully established democracies focused on great democratic leaders who, especially at their outset, had the foresight to create democratic norms and processes. The American founding fathers, especially George Washington, and South Africa’s Nelson Mandela are examples these theorists point to. Today, most political scientists reject these “great man” theories of democracy. Some, though, continue to point to the importance of leaders’ attitudes and actions. Scott Mainwaring and Aníbal Pérez-Liñán, in a quantitative study of Latin America (2013), found that leaders’ preferences for radical (of either the left or right) or moderate policies and normative commitment to democratic values predicted whether a democracy would survive better than measures of economic modernization did. Countries with leaders who had moderate policy preferences and strong commitments to democratic values had democracies that survived longer.

Rational choice theorists also argued that individual preferences and actions best explain how democracies emerge and survive. Well-institutionalized democracy provides all major political actors with a degree of participation, protection from the worst forms of repression, and the possibility that they can gain power at some point. Based on the experiences of the third wave, rational choice theorists argued that major political elites might choose democratization regardless of whether they really believed in democracy, so long as it served their interests. Even in the most recalcitrant authoritarian regime, some elites might see democratic transition as a viable choice if the stakes were high enough.

As we noted, transitions often begin with a triggering crisis of some kind that produces a surge of activity by civil society groups demanding fundamental political reforms. In response, regime elites often split internally, with hardliners wanting to repress any opposition and preserve the status quo, while softliners are willing to consider compromising with civil society groups to survive the crisis. Civil society itself often divides between radicals, demanding immediate and complete democratization, and moderates, who are willing to compromise with the authoritarian government to make some gains. Rational choice models suggest that the calculus of a successful transition to democracy requires the softliners in the regime and the moderates in civil society to each gain the upper hand over their internal opponents and then negotiate with one another to establish new rules of the game. If regime hardliners or civil society radicals are too strong, democratization will fail.

Most theorists argue that the regime and civil society have to be of roughly equal strength for the transition process to produce a full democracy as well. Softliners and moderates need to be real partners, or the transition may be merely superficial or weak. Sujian Guo and Gary Stradiotto (2014) examined the effects of the type of transition a country went through on the quality and durability of the subsequent democracy over its first ten years. Undertaking a quantitative analysis of all transitions since 1900, they found that those that they term “cooperative”—those that involved pacts and in which the opposition had enough power to influence the outcome of the pact—were of significantly higher quality and more likely to survive, as the rational choice approach would suggest.

South Africa’s transition to democratic rule in 1994 is a classic case of the transition process unfolding in a way these theorists saw as ideal (as is our case study country, Brazil). In the 1980s, the apartheid regime faced both widespread international sanctions and an increasingly violent and radical uprising on the streets of the black townships. It had tried modest liberalizations, such as allowing mixed-race people some minimal political participation, but this was met with more resistance. In 1990, newly elected President F. W. de Klerk shocked the nation and the world by announcing he was freeing Nelson Mandela from prison and lifting the
African National Congress (ANC) supporters await the start of a campaign rally in 2016. South Africa’s transition to democracy from 1990 to 1994 is seen as a model of the transition paradigm. Nelson Mandela’s party, the ANC, has remained in power ever since, though, raising concerns about limited democracy in a dominant-party system. Opponents criticize the ANC for placing limits on political competition and for allowing corruption, but Freedom House still rates the country as “free.” South African voters’ allegiance to the party credited with ending apartheid is being tested, but the ANC won in the 2019 general election, albeit with a diminished majority.

John Wessels/AFP/Getty Images

ban on Mandela’s party, the African National Congress (ANC). Faced with a crisis his government could not contain, de Klerk became a softliner who, after secret negotiations before the public announcement, came to see Mandela as a moderate with whom he could negotiate. Three years of negotiations for a new constitution ensued, with white hardliners and black radicals frequently and sometimes violently attacking the process and both political parties involved. Ultimately, though, Mandela and de Klerk held majority support of their respective communities and agreed on a pact, a new constitution that was then ratified by the population. On April 27, 1994, Nelson Mandela was elected president, ending the world’s last bastion of legal racial segregation. The ANC has ruled ever since, though, which has raised questions about how fully democratic the society has really become. Nonetheless, Freedom House has continuously rated it as “free.”

Modernization theorists might say that South Africa’s successful transition was not surprising: as a middle-income country, its level of socioeconomic development made democracy plausible. A much more surprising African success story was Ghana, a country with a history of military coups and a gross national income of only $1,590 per capita in 2016. As the third wave of democratization washed over Africa, Ghanaian military ruler Jerry Rawlings agreed to allow multiparty competition based on a new constitution that he and his aides wrote. Its presidential system concentrated power in the hands of the president. Rawlings won the subsequent election, which involved significant electoral fraud, and many feared Ghana’s transition was following the typical path of a neopatrimonial regime toward electoral authoritarianism, not democracy. After that founding election, however, the electoral commission brought the major political leaders together to discuss rules for future elections. With
the support of external aid, the leaders strengthened the national election commission itself. Ghana did not have a full pact, but working together to create electoral rules helped opposing leaders build trust in each other and in the political process in general. The next election in 1996 was fairer, reinforcing this trust. In 2000 Rawlings was constitutionally barred from running for a third term. He left office without resisting, and without Rawlings on the ticket, his party lost the election. Power changed hands from one elected leader to the next for the first time in Ghana’s history. It passed the two-turnover test when power changed hands again via razor-thin election victories in 2008 and 2016. In contrast to our case study of Nigeria and many other African countries, Ghana’s democracy, though imperfect, is functioning well; Freedom House has long rated it as fully “free.”
The 1980s and 1990s were the halcyon days of democratization, when it seemed that democracy was spreading to nearly every corner of the globe. Most Latin American countries and some Asian and African countries made apparently long-term transformations toward consolidated democracy. In many other cases, though, initial transitions have produced electoral authoritarian regimes, so the debates about democratic transitions, consolidation, and backsliding are far from settled, and comparativists have used our full array of theoretical approaches to try to understand these processes. Our case studies of Mexico and Nigeria demonstrate the diverging processes and outcomes of the “transition era.”

**CASE STUDY**

**Mexico: Transition From an Electoral Authoritarian Regime**

Mexico completed a transition to democracy in 2000. Consolidation, in the sense of all major political actors (save the drug cartels) accepting the electoral process as “the only game in town,” seems well established, at least at the national level; the country passed the “two-turnover test” in 2012. Modernization may have provided the backdrop that helped this democracy come into being, but economic crisis, loss of the ruling party’s legitimacy, and elite divisions were necessary to make it happen when it did. This young democracy, though, is plagued by the problems of a still-weak state, the most important of which are endemic corruption, continued clientelism, and drug-related violence that seem beyond the state’s ability (or desire) to stop. The long-ruling PRI returned to power in 2012. Its subsequent actions raised questions about its commitment to abide by the rule of law and ensure political rights for all. In 2018, voters elected Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who had narrowly lost in 2006 and again in 2012. He ran an anticorruption campaign at the head of a new, left-leaning party, MORENA.
On July 1, 2018, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (usually called AMLO), the candidate of the relatively new left-leaning National Regeneration Movement (MORENA), was elected president with 53 percent of the vote in what was widely seen as a strong rebuke to the historically dominant Party of the Institutionalized Revolution (PRI). Twelve years earlier, AMLO (running then for the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD)) had lost to Felipe Calderón of the center-right National Action Party (PAN) by a margin of just one-half of 1 percent. The contention that followed the close election prompted the legislature to pass electoral reforms that leveled the playing field between the incumbent party and challengers. In 2012 the PRI regained the presidency (with AMLO coming in second for the PRD) in an election that was not nearly as controversial. In terms of credible national elections and the two-turnover test, Mexico had become a consolidated democracy. MORENA’s ability to emerge as a new party and elect not only the president but also majorities in both houses of congress could be another democratic success. Yet serious challenges remain, and by early 2019, many observers wondered if AMLO’s presidency would reduce corruption and enhance social welfare as promised or return Mexico to something similar to the bad old days of electoral authoritarianism.

### Background

The PRI’s electoral authoritarian regime (see chapter 3) ruled from 1929 to 2000, when for the first time in seventy years another party (the perennial conservative opposition, PAN) was allowed to win a national election and take the reins of government. Modernization theorists might have expected Mexico to democratize as early as the 1950s, but, according to Sebastián Garrido de Sierra (2011), three factors combined to delay democratization until the 1990s. First, prior to electoral reforms in the 1990s, Mexican elites did not have viable avenues to form an opposition. Second, by the 1990s, urbanization finally moved enough Mexicans away from the reach of the PRI’s rural clientelist networks and into areas where they could be politically mobilized in different ways and by parties or organizations besides the PRI. Last but not least, a historic split in the leadership of the PRI created the necessary impetus for opposition.

The seeds of change, though, were sown much earlier. The PRI had maintained its authoritarian rule via large-scale clientelism, using state resources as patronage; repression when needed; and some legitimacy, mostly based on the relative success of the economy and the party’s efforts to distribute wealth more widely than many governments do. A series of economic crises in the 1970s and 1980s undermined the PRI’s main claims to legitimacy. The crises forced the PRI to shift toward more market-oriented economic policies (see chapter 11) that undermined their sources of patronage and hurt the incomes of poor and rural people, two of their key constituencies. The shift in economic policies created divisions between PRI leaders loyal to the party’s traditional claims to egalitarianism and newer leaders who favored the reforms. When one of the latter was chosen as the presidential candidate in 1988, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, a PRI insider, revolted and ran as an opposition candidate. Son of the legendary president Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–1940), Cuauhtémoc was heir to his father’s political reputation and thus was able to galvanize leftist segments in the PRI to join his cause.

The 1988 election was hotly contested, with PRI candidate Carlos Salinas de Gortari officially garnering just over 50 percent of the vote. Cárdenas gained 31 percent of the vote, and...
the conservative PAN candidate received 17 percent. Cárdenas pronounced the election a fraud and claimed to be the legitimate victor, a claim many analysts and Mexican citizens believed. Whether true or not, the PRI’s legitimacy suffered a significant blow. Following the election, the PRI tried to reform the system to restore some legitimacy, and opposition forces took advantage of the ruling party’s weakness. First, constitutional changes created newly independent agencies to administer future elections and adjudicate electoral disputes. Second, the media shed many of their self-imposed limits on expression. Newspapers and television stations began taking an increasingly fair and often critical approach to political coverage. Third, Cárdenas formed the PRD in 1989 as a permanent home for disaffected PRI activists who sought both further democracy and a greater commitment to the PRI’s radical heritage. The PRD helped turn Mexico into a three-party system, and the long-time opposition, PAN, also became an increasingly powerful force. The PAN began to attract a larger following, and for the first time since its founding in 1939, it won a governorship in 1989. The PRI allowed the PAN victories as part of an implicit pact between the two parties. The pro-business PAN agreed with the PRI’s economic policies, and both wanted to limit the success of the more anti-market PRD (Hamilton 2011, 146–149). Softliners within the ruling PRI compromised with the moderate PAN in an effort to keep the more radical PRD out of power, following the logic of the transition paradigm.

The 1994 election was free and fair enough that the winner, the PRI’s Ernesto Zedillo, is generally considered to be the first democratically elected president of Mexico. But Zedillo’s government still faced serious questions of legitimacy. The government reacted harshly to the January 1994 Zapatista uprising in the southern state of Chiapas (see chapter 7) and never overcame the economic crisis it inherited. Even though it pursued further electoral reforms to try to rebuild its legitimacy, in 1997 the PRI lost control of the National Congress for the first time in its history.

Transition

The final act of the long transition came with the election of conservative Vicente Fox Quesada of the PAN as president in 2000. His victory brought wild, unrealistic hopes about what democracy would mean for Mexico, and Fox himself did little to tamp down expectations. Many of his election promises fell short, as Mexico experienced increasing inequality, greater criminal violence, and general political gridlock, making Fox one of the least popular presidents in recent history. Ironically, one of Fox’s biggest difficulties was negotiating with members of congress to pass legislation, a necessity because congress was no longer subservient to the president but instead represented a wider array of Mexican political forces. Indeed, coalitions of parties were required to pass legislation because no party had a majority of seats in congress from 1997 to 2018, when MORENA and its allied parties became the first non-PRI alliance to back a single presidential candidate and win majorities in both houses of congress.

Congress’s ability to limit the president’s power and the existence of three, ideologically distinct parties became the defining elements of Mexico’s young democracy. Members of congress successfully initiated legislation, regularly amended the president’s legislative initiatives, and were able to form coalitions of at least two parties to pass legislation (Casar 2016). By 2016, though, the stability of Mexico’s three-party system seemed shakier.
Independent congressional candidates with no party affiliation were allowed to stand for election starting in 2012, and they and several smaller parties also significantly increased their share of congressional seats. More importantly, in 2016 the leftist PRD split into two parties, when AMLO created MORENA. MORENA’s electoral dominance in 2018, along with the weak showing of the PAN (22 percent) and spectacular fall of the PRI (16 percent) in the presidential race and similar losses in congress (where the PRI lost 158 seats in the Chamber of Deputies), made the future of Mexico’s emergent three-party system much less certain.

**Consolidation?**

Other aspects of Mexico’s democracy remain fragile. Claudio Holzner (2011) pointed to weak institutions as the core problem that in turn produces weak rule of law, continuing clientelism, continuing corruption, local-level authoritarianism, and near loss of sovereignty to drug lords in some states. Clientelism and corruption allow the wealthy to continue to enjoy disproportionate political power. Drug gangs became so powerful in some states that the police were entirely corrupted and drug lords financed their own candidates for governor, mayor, and other offices. Both PAN and PRI governments tried to battle the drug lords with increased military action, which produced tens of thousands of deaths and six thousand detentions but failed to abate drug-related violence.

Institutional weakness was infamously demonstrated by the 2014 Iguala massacre, when forty-three students from a teachers’ college, who were on their way to a political protest, disappeared and were later proven to have been killed. The case remained unsolved as late as 2019, leading AMLO to create a truth commission to investigate the massacre as one of his first acts as president. Insecurity became so great that in one state, residents formed illegal self-defense groups to try to protect themselves (Magaloni and Razu 2016). Despite judicial reform attempts, Gladys McCormick and Matthew Cleary argued that

> the single most pressing issue for the future of Mexico’s fragile democracy is the renovation of the judiciary. The combination of rampant impunity, the lack of accountability, and the failure of law enforcement, including the judicial branches, to counter the security crisis afflicting large swaths of the country renders this the most difficult issue to tackle. (McCormick and Cleary 2018)

Even in states without significant drug gangs, some local leaders were able to use control of state resources as patronage to preserve subnational authoritarian rule, and Mexican presidents supported those efforts when it provided them political advantages (Giraudy 2015). Since 2011, however, a series of public scandals and judicial charges involving former governors, usually after they lose an election to an opposing party, have allowed opposition parties to use the electoral system to overcome entrenched rulers. Thus, the quality of democracy in Mexico, especially at the local level, is far from ideal.

Unabated drug violence, corruption, and economic woes helped make the PRI’s Enrique Peña, elected in 2012, one of the least popular presidents in Mexican history. Although he implemented some reforms, they were too little and too late. In this context, AMLO’s candidacy, which stressed taking on the “mafia of power” to crack down on corruption and improve social services, found great resonance among Mexican voters in 2018.

With congressional majorities and little organized opposition, AMLO was able to issue decrees and pass reforms quickly. Yet the direction of these changes caused concern in many quarters. His anticorruption campaign cut the federal budget and public funds for NGOs, and he questioned the need for government transparency and human rights commissions. He declared he will govern “without intermediaries” and appointed friends and allies to handle local delivery of promised social programs, bypassing local government institutions and stating that new social programs “would link recipients to him personally” (Dresser 2019). No corruption prosecutions were initiated in his first few months in office,
and as many as 70 percent of government contracts were being awarded without a bidding process. His frequent press conferences, while a welcome change from his predecessor, have led to public complaints against the media by him and his supporters, creating tension in a country notably dangerous for journalists (Ahmed and Semple 2019).

While supporters adore AMLO and see his direct approach and intervention as a means of circumventing entrenched political elites and institutions to solve problems, critics worry that his actions are undoing checks and balances created through the transition to curb the PRI’s power. They fear that he may concentrate power in the presidency and a single party, essentially creating a new electoral authoritarian regime. Such speculation in 2019 was premature, but at least as concerning as AMLO’s actions is the erosion of Mexican voters’ confidence in democracy since 2000, when the first non-PRI president was elected. From a high of 63 percent support for democracy in 2002, it fell to 38 percent in 2018. Although only 11 percent of people surveyed agreed that “an authoritarian government could be preferable,” 38 percent agreed that democratic and nondemocratic regimes “come to the same thing” (Latinobarometro 2018).

Case Questions

1. Can we say that Mexico has truly become a consolidated democracy? What evidence is most important in answering this question?

2. Does Mexico suggest that structural, cultural, or individual arguments best explain where and when democratization is likely to occur?

CASE STUDY

Nigeria: Neopatrimonial Transition

The Nigerian case demonstrates the potential to establish democracy in a poor country, as well as the severe problems that can arise when politics is based on neopatrimonialism. The competition for office becomes all-consuming and often violent, undermining democratic norms of the “free and fair” choice of candidates. Corruption continues throughout the country, with only slight improvement, weakening all state institutions and popular faith in democracy. Yet the fragile democratic regime in Nigeria seems to have brought the military under control. A few other key institutions—term limits and judicial independence—have been strengthened as well. In 2015 even the much-criticized electoral process seemed to improve, and power changed hands from one party to another via an election for the first time in the country’s history. Advocates of democracy in countries like Nigeria hope that these institutional gains will be the basis for further improvement and the slow establishment of a consolidated and relatively high-quality democracy, though the latter seems quite far off in Nigeria.

- TRANSITION Led by civil society; electoral democracy but with dominant-party system until 2015
- CONSOLIDATION Tension over regional, ethnic, and religious political rivalries; civilian control of the military; power turnover via election for first time
- QUALITY Electoral fraud and corruption but strengthened judiciary and limits on presidential power
- FREEDOM HOUSE RATING in 2019: 4.0 = “partly free”
On April 1, 2015, Nigeria’s incumbent president, Goodluck Jonathan of the long-ruling People’s Democratic Party (PDP), did something no Nigerian president had ever done before: he publicly congratulated his opponent, Muhammadu Buhari of the All Progressives Congress (APC) for winning the election and conceded defeat. This occurrence, a regular event in well-established democracies, was a milestone for Nigeria. Just eight years earlier, the country changed presidents via an election for the first time in its history, though both presidents were from the PDP, which had won every election since the democratic transition in 1999. Domestic and international observers saw each of three successive national elections, in 1999, 2003, and 2007, as further from democratic norms than the one that preceded it. Though the 2011 election was improved, it seemed that a dominant-party system that limited democratic competition had emerged. A split in the ruling party led to the 2015 electoral turnover and the hope that Nigeria was a little closer to a consolidated democracy, even though a violent Islamist movement threatened sovereignty in the north, ethnic and regional voting remained the norm, and corruption was still a serious problem.

**Background**

The election of 1999 marked Nigeria’s second return to democratic rule. The first transition created the Second Republic in 1979, which ended in a military coup in 1983. A transition attempt failed in 1993 when the military dictator annulled the presidential election because his candidate did not win. This gave rise to a vociferous democracy movement which, as in much of Africa, started with grassroots protests. The annulment of the long-awaited election in 1993 motivated many new groups to join the democracy effort. In 1994, democracy advocates formed the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO), which included former politicians, union members, students, and human rights campaigners. NADECO’s breadth allowed it to put greater pressure on Nigeria’s military government. In its first campaign, “Babangida Must Go,” NADECO demanded that military dictator Ibrahim Babangida be replaced by the rightful winner of the election. Babangida did go, but he was replaced by the even more repressive and corrupt dictator, Sani Abacha (see chapter 3). The real transition began only after Abacha’s death in 1998. His successor recognized how discredited the military had become under Abacha’s personalist rule and immediately agreed to a transition. The subsequent elections in 1999 were far from perfect, but most observers deemed them minimally adequate to start Nigeria’s new democracy. The military elite put together what became the ruling party, the PDP, and chose the military dictator who had shepherded the 1979 transition, retired general Olusegun Obasanjo, as its presidential candidate.

**Transition**

The long dominance of northerners under military rule led most Nigerians to recognize that it was time that the ethnically and religiously divided society have a president from the country’s southern region. So the “Kaduna mafia”—a group of Muslim military leaders from the north that has controlled most of Nigeria’s governments—picked as their candidate Obasanjo, a Yoruba from the southwest and a retired general whom they trusted. This was part of what Carl LeVan (2019) argued was a broader elite pact between the outgoing military and the newly created PDP. It included regional/ethnic rotation of all major political offices, protection of the military from prosecution, promotions and improved budgets for the military, and economic opportunities for former military leaders. Ironically, Obasanjo won the election handily in most of the country but not in his home area among the Yoruba, who saw him as having sold out to northern military interests. By the 2003 election, Obasanjo and his party won more easily than in 1999, and his handpicked successor, Umaru Yar’Adua (a northerner), won 72 percent of the vote in 2007. Throughout, the PDP also maintained control of the legislature. It seemed the country had established a dominant-party system, to the detriment of real democratic competition and turnover.
Often, one of the most democratizing events possible in a dominant-party system is a split in the ruling party. In regionally, ethnically, and religiously divided Nigeria, the PDP became dominant in part by agreeing that political offices would alternate among regions. Most importantly, the presidency would alternate between a northerner and a southerner—hence from Obasanjo to Yar’Adua. President Yar’Adua, however, became gravely ill shortly after taking power and died in March 2010. He was succeeded by his vice president, Jonathan, who was from the southeast. This inadvertently violated the principle of north–south alternation. Initially, northern party leaders resisted Jonathan’s desire to run for a full presidential term in 2011, arguing the north deserved the office after Yar’Adua’s death. After extensive behind-the-scenes campaigning, which allegedly included funneling oil money to key governors to gain their support, the ruling party allowed Jonathan to stand for office, effectively ending the policy of alternating the presidency between north and south. Muhammadu Buhari, the major opposition candidate and also a northerner, gained support because of this, but the PDP held together and won the 2011 election, albeit with a reduced majority in the legislature.

In 2013, however, the PDP split when a former vice president and seven state governors stormed out of the party convention, objecting that their candidates were not given key party positions. Most who left were from the north and opposed President Jonathan’s planned reelection bid in 2015. They believed he was moving to gain greater control of the party to ensure another term as president. Ambitious politicians, some of whom had not been part of the original elite pact, chafed at the restrictions the rigid regional rotation of offices placed on them. The original elite pact that ushered in the democracy in 1999 began to crumble (LeVan 2019). Ultimately, the PDP defectors helped craft an opposition coalition with several smaller parties that nominated Buhari as its presidential candidate, setting up the 2015 election as the most competitive in the country’s history.

The newly united opposition party, the All Progressives Congress (APC), took advantage of President Jonathan’s increasing unpopularity, largely a result of his inability or unwillingness (as some northerners alleged) to defeat Boko Haram in the north (see chapter 7). They also opposed the government’s continuing massive corruption and the declining economy suffering from the dramatic drop in world oil prices. The APC campaigned on improving the economy, reducing corruption, and improving the quality of elections. Buhari won 54 percent of the popular vote nationwide, sweeping all northern and most southwestern states, leaving Jonathan with only his native southeast and a few other states. The APC also won secure majorities in both houses of the National Assembly. International and domestic observers deemed the election credible. While some PDP leaders wanted to resist handing over power, international governments and civil society demanded the results be respected, and Jonathan ultimately made his historic concession (Lewis and Kew 2015).

In 2019, the sixth election of the democratic transition was problematic. Issues included Buhari’s delay and eventual veto of legislation to improve electoral transparency; his suspension weeks before the election of the chief justice, who would have played a role in an electoral dispute; conditions that prevented some voters from going to the polls, including threats from a Boko Haram offshoot in the north and droughts elsewhere; and a weeklong delay in voting. Election observers concluded, however, that these irregularities were not significant enough to undermine the vote, and the independent electoral commission declared Buhari the winner with 56 percent of the vote to the PDP’s Atiku Abubakar’s 41 percent. The delay and suspension of the chief justice created suspicions of
unfairness, however. Abubakar called the election a sham, but there was no popular outcry. Buhari appeared set for a second term with an APC majority, albeit somewhat reduced, in the legislature (Mbaku 2019).

Consolidation?

Twenty years into the transition, the 2015 and 2019 elections give some cause for optimism, yet Nigeria’s democracy faces several enduring problems. Political parties in Nigeria are not strong institutions with loyal supporters based on party ideology and symbols. Instead, they are based mainly on the support of key “big men” and their use of patronage. The neopatrimonialism that characterized military rule has continued under the new democracy. While the two leading parties captured 97 percent of the 2019 presidential vote, dozens of parties were legally registered, and 78 fielded presidential candidates. As in the past, it seems clear that “most parties consisted primarily of the office staff at the national headquarters . . . and were typically centered on a Big Man who was funding the operations and running for president” (Kew 2004, 147). Some hopeful outcomes in 2019 include the defeat of a number of incumbent senators who had long dominated politics in their constituencies, the election of the first female senator ever from the most Muslim north, and an increase in the numbers of younger candidates and women at all levels (National Democratic Institute/International Republican Institute 2019).

Elections have been institutionally weak as well but may be improving. In the earlier years of the transition, elections were deemed free and fair in only about one-third of Nigeria’s states (Kew 2004). In many others, “the elections were marred by extraordinary displays of rigging and the intimidation of voters” (Rawlence and Albin-Lackey 2007, 497). In quite a few states, no elections took place at all: officials simply made up results in favor of the ruling party, and observers saw officials openly stuffing ballot boxes in a number of cases. President Jonathan appointed a well-known democracy advocate and scholar to head an electoral commission that took steps to substantially improve the credibility of the 2011 and 2015 elections. In 2015, especially where the PDP won, fraud still occurred but was reduced enough to allow the opposition victory (Lewis and Kew 2015). In 2019, as noted above, observers also considered the election valid despite some irregularities.

Besides the electoral commission, Nigeria’s experiment with democracy has produced other examples of institutionalization that have strengthened democracy. Civilian control of the military has been key. Military leaders of the “Kaduna mafia” backed Obasanjo for president in 1999 because they assumed they could control him after he took office. After becoming president, however, he quickly removed the most politically active northern generals and replaced them with less politically active and more southern officers. Several years later, when Yar’Adua’s prolonged illness left him incapacitated and the country’s government precarious for nearly three months, rumors of military intervention were rife, but the armed forces remained in their barracks. Some observers believe the reason why elections have become so hotly contested is because the stakes are so high. No one expects military intervention; thus, election is the sole means for gaining political power.

A second institution that has been strengthened is the judiciary. The new constitution created a National Judicial Council that has helped insulate the judiciary from pressures from elected officials. The Supreme Court has made several important rulings that demonstrated its autonomy. In the area of federal versus state control over oil revenues, the court ruled in some key cases in favor of the oil-producing states and in others in favor of the federal government, indicating a certain degree of autonomy from political pressure from either side. After the faulty 2007 election, the courts also ruled several gubernatorial victories invalid and required new elections. In 2017, the judiciary set up a series of special courts designed to hear complaints of corruption within its own ranks, one of its greatest weaknesses that limits its independence and legitimacy. Buhari’s suspension of the chief
The second major institutional challenge began in 2009, when President Obasanjo launched a campaign to revoke the two-term limit for the presidency. Amending the constitution to allow Obasanjo a third term required senate approval. Reportedly, he and his supporters tried to bribe senators, with inducements as high as $750,000, to vote in favor of the amendment. It became clear that the population overwhelmingly opposed the move, and the senate voted down the extension of term limits, despite the pressure and bribes. Some observers also argued that many of the elite quietly opposed Obasanjo. In a patronage-based system with oil revenue available, the presidency is very powerful and lucrative. The political elite do not want one individual to remain in office too long so that other leaders and groups have a chance to gain its benefits.

The second major institutional challenge began in 2009, when President Yar'Adua became gravely ill and left the country for treatment in Saudi Arabia. An incapacitated president is supposed to turn over his powers to his vice president, but Yar'Adua refused. His wife and closest aides did not let any Nigerians see him and released no information about his health. For two months, the country was without even an acting president. Amid growing domestic and international pressure to clarify the situation, Yar'Adua gave a radio interview in which he said in a weak voice that he hoped to return to work soon. The National Assembly took that as a public statement that he was incapacitated and appointed Vice President Jonathan as acting president. Once again, the sitting president and his closest aides were rebuffed in an illegitimate attempt to retain power.

The country also remains deeply divided along regional, ethnic, and religious lines. In the northeast, of course, Boko Haram has wreaked havoc since 2013, though President Buhari reorganized the military and, working with neighboring countries, had greatly reduced Boko Haram's territory by 2016 (see chapter 7). In the southeast, the battle over control of oil revenues has been both violent and tied to ethnic demands. As we discussed in chapter 4, violent and nonviolent groups continue to seek independence for the oil-rich but impoverished Niger Delta region known as Biafra. Recently, communal conflict has also broken out between nomadic groups and farmers in the country’s Middle Belt. Addressing the security issues arising from all these conflicts will be crucial to Nigeria’s democratization (Mbaku 2019).

A controversy over the role of Sharia in the Muslim north has also raised regional and religious tensions. The 1999 constitution allows states to set their own legal codes within national law, and Nigeria has long allowed dual civil law codes based on religion. Immediately after the transition to democracy, twelve northern states adopted Sharia for both civil and criminal law, setting off confrontations with Christian minorities in several of these states and opposition from the south in general. Long-standing northern and Muslim control of national politics has left southerners and Christians fearful of any further Islamic movements. Because of federalism, each state’s version of Sharia is slightly different; some states apply some Muslim laws to non-Muslims, and other states don’t, while some include the harshest penalties such as stoning and others don’t. So far, national courts have neither revoked states’ rights to implement Sharia nor insisted on a uniform version across all states.

All of these institutional problems are related to the overall weakness of the state. Not surprisingly in a country where neopatrimonial authority continues to be important, corruption is rampant. Transparency International’s 1999 Corruption Perception Index ranked Nigeria as the second most corrupt country in the world, with a score of 1.6/10. In 2018 it ranked 144 of 168 countries, with a score of 27/100, showing modest but noticeable improvement. This is due in part to an anticorruption drive Obasanjo launched that received great praise in its early years. Jonathan appointed a new head of the Central Bank, who won praise for removing some corrupt officials, and he appointed the successful new head of

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the electoral commission. The greatest corruption is in the oil sector, however. Government reports found that approximately $1.5 billion of oil revenue failed to reach the treasury in 2012–2013, and as much as $16 billion has been missing since. President Buhari, who initiated a harsh anticorruption campaign when he ruled as a military dictator in the 1980s, made some strides in prosecuting corruption. Critics, however, contend that he is only targeting opponents, though most agree he does not seem to be amassing personal wealth (Mbaku 2019). He has proposed plans to break up the national oil company into smaller companies that, he hopes, will be easier to control. Continued corruption has made all state institutions weak, harmed the ability of the electoral commission to conduct proper elections (though this is the area of greatest improvement, it seems), prevented people in the oil-producing states from benefiting from their oil, and led northerners to turn to sharia in the hope that it will be less corrupt and more just than secular courts.

Case Questions

1. Comparing both of our case studies of democratization, what effects do weak institutions have on the democratization process?

2. Nigeria’s transition juxtaposes some very serious problems against some notable successes in creating democratic limits on the executive. Given this, what do you think are the most important changes that would likely improve the quality of its democracy?

Regime Change: Transitions to Authoritarian Rule

In the new millennium, China has defied predictions by surviving and getting stronger as a fully authoritarian regime. Vladimir Putin has turned Russia’s democracy into an electoral authoritarian regime, and Turkey, Hungary, and Venezuela have followed a similar path to varying degrees. A recent quantitative analysis of increasing democratic backsliding, in fact, declared that a “third wave of autocratization” began shortly after the third wave of democratization did and has expanded notably in the last decade (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). Just as the third wave of democratization focused attention on democratic transitions, the third wave of authoritarianization has heightened attention to transitions back to authoritarianism. We noted earlier that democratic regimes virtually never directly replace prior democratic regimes. The same cannot be said for authoritarian regimes; new ones regularly replace prior ones. In fact, regime changes that replace one authoritarian regime with a new one are more common than changes in which an authoritarian regime replaces a democracy. In the post–Cold War era, though, the latter is becoming more common. Figure 9.4 shows us the mechanisms by which authoritarian regimes gain power. Coup is most common, but their frequency has declined in the post–Cold War era. Armed insurgencies, popular uprisings, and authoritarianization, the creation of an authoritarian regime via the undermining of democratic institutions by elected incumbents, have all become more common.

Many of the theories that try to explain democratization may also explain the rise of authoritarian regimes. For modernization theorists, if income above a certain level makes democracy more likely, income below that level makes authoritarian rule more likely. Political culture theorists argue that a lack of democratic
culture would make it more likely that elites would want to overthrow a democracy and more likely that they would succeed because the bulk of the citizenry might not care. Rational choice theorists argue that if a balance of power doesn’t exist and a successful bargain is not struck between an old regime and civil society groups demanding democracy, a new authoritarian regime is a likely outcome. All these theories, though, have also been applied in more specific ways to the main mechanisms that produce authoritarian rule: military coups, revolution (which can encompass both military insurgencies and popular uprising in Figure 9.4), and authoritarianization—the potential end result of democratic backsliding.

**Military Coups**

All modern states must have a military and maintain effective control over it to maintain sovereignty. Americans generally view the military as an apolitical organization firmly under civilian control. In reality, no military is completely apolitical. When President Barack Obama decided that he wanted to get the U.S. military out of Iraq and reduce its presence in Afghanistan, various military leaders made it clear they disagreed with those decisions. When congressional committees consider the U.S. defense budget, they hold hearings and listen to the advice of top military leaders, among others. These are both examples of the military engaging in political activity. The key is that a regime with effective control over the military, whether democratic or authoritarian, keeps such activities within institutionalized limits: the military does not go beyond the bounds set by the civilian leadership. When it does, a constitutional or political crisis can arise. We now examine the most flagrant military intervention in politics, the coup d’état, in which the military forcibly removes the existing regime and establishes a new one.
When American students are asked why the military does not stage a coup in the United States, the first answer is usually that the Constitution prevents it. The elected president is commander in chief, and the military must obey him. But given that the Constitution is a piece of paper and the president is one unarmed person whereas the U.S. military is arguably the most powerful force on the planet, there must be more to it. In fact, civilian regimes, whether democratic or authoritarian, go to great lengths to ensure that their militaries are loyal to the regime's ideals and institutions. Civilian leaders try to inculcate the appropriate values in the military leadership, either professional values specific to the military or more general values that are supportive of the regime and that reflect the broader political culture. Well-established democracies train military leaders carefully in military academies, such as West Point in the United States or Sandhurst in Britain, to instill professional values that portray the military as prestigious and apolitical. Since military personnel come out of society as a whole, a strong system of political socialization throughout the society that ingrains respect for the major political institutions also helps to ensure that military leaders have those same values. Communist systems attempted to achieve the same ends via direct Communist Party involvement in the military, mandatory party membership for the military leadership, and, like democracies, political socialization in the broader society.

Less-institutionalized authoritarian regimes often lack these types of generally effective and systematic mechanisms. As we saw in chapter 8, military leaders often control what are in effect armed factions. They represent the threat of a regime change from the existing authoritarian regime to a new one, with a new supreme leader. Supreme leaders therefore must engage in what is known as “coup-proofing”: co-opting major armed factions, counterbalancing them by creating multiple military institutions, or relying on informal ties of loyalty within the military, such as ethnic affiliations. Many African personalist rulers created a well-equipped and well-paid presidential guard from the same ethnic group or region as the president, which was personally loyal to the president as an individual patron. The job of this presidential guard was mainly to protect the president from his own army.

Military coups occur when all efforts to keep the military loyal to (or at least under the control of) the regime fail. When coups first became common in postcolonial countries in the 1960s, the dominant explanation followed modernization theory, focusing not on the military itself but instead on the societies and political systems in which the coups occurred. Samuel Huntington contended that “the most important causes of military intervention in politics are not military . . . but the political and institutional structure of the society” (1968, 194). The military, these theorists argued, intervened to restore order when civilian leaders had weakened the civilian regime via corrupt and incompetent rule. They saw the military, with its training and hierarchical organization, as one of the few modern institutions in postcolonial societies and believed it could rule in the national interest, reestablishing order and restarting development, as modernizing authoritarianism regimes promised (see chapter 3).

A second school of thought looked not at society but within the military as an institution. These theorists argued that a military engages in a coup to advance its own institutional interests, such as getting larger budgets, higher pay, or better equipment (Huntington 1964; Janowitz 1964). Military leaders may also instigate a coup in response to what they perceive as unjustified civilian intervention in military matters, such as the appointment of top officers without the military’s approval. Military leaders may see a coup in these situations as a defense of their professional status vis-à-vis civilian leaders. In effect, the military in this theory is just another interest group clamoring for power and position within the government, but one with guns.
A third major explanation for coups, originally focusing on Africa, sees coups as coming from factional divisions not only between civilian and military leaders but within the military itself. Samuel Decalo (1976, 14-15) described the typical African military as “a coterie of distinct armed camps owing primary clientelist allegiance to a handful of mutually competitive officers of different ranks seething with a variety of corporate, ethnic and personal grievances.” Decalo argued that most coups occurred because particular military leaders wanted to gain power for their own interests, those of their ethnic group or region, or those of their faction within the military. Coups were about gaining a greater share of power and resources for the coup leaders and their clients, not about the interests of society as a whole or even “the military” as an institution. Barbara Geddes and colleagues (2018), using a quantitative analysis of a new data set on authoritarian rule and how it arises, also concluded that coups arise from military officers’ own interests, whether institutional or based on factions. Regimes, whether democratic or authoritarian, in which the top leadership shared “experiences, values, ideas, or friendship” (57) with key military leaders were less likely to suffer coups. Ethnic heterogeneity in the military, on the other hand, produced more coups, reflecting likely divisions and factions within the military.

All of these theories provide motives for why coups are attempted. Naunihal Singh (2014) pointed out that only about half of all coups succeed. Coups require a high-risk conspiracy to overthrow a regime. Singh argued they are “coordination games”; military leaders are most likely to support a coup if they think it will be successful, regardless of their personal opinions. He showed that coups led by the top of the military hierarchy succeeded about two-thirds of the time, those led from the middle ranks succeeded 42 percent of the time, and those from the lower ranks only 28 percent of the time (Singh 2014, 71). He argued that this is because top leaders can control communications and convince the rest of the military they will succeed. Similarly, past successful attempts, especially recent ones, will lead them to believe the new attempt will succeed. Lower-level military leaders are rebelling against not just the government but the military hierarchy itself, making it more difficult for them to convince their fellow members of the armed forces that they will be successful, so they have less support and therefore fail more often. Similarly, coup-proofing by creating multiple and rival military groups makes coups less likely to succeed (DeBruin 2017).

The coup attempt in Turkey in 2016 illustrates this dynamic. Prior to that attempt, Turkey had seen numerous coups over the years, most recently in 1997. Typically, the military has seen itself as defender of the secular tradition established by the country’s founder, Kemal Atatürk, after World War I. Whenever an Islamist-oriented group gained too much power, the military would step in to remove it and restore democracy relatively quickly, after suppressing Islamist groups. The top of the military hierarchy led most of the coups, so they were both successful and bloodless; little opposition was possible. The Islamist party in power since 2003, however, managed to avoid military intervention, initially by being more moderate than past Islamists and then by a successful purge of much of the military leadership, replacing secularist officers with those more willing at least to tolerate the moderate Islamist government. As the party’s leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, became more autocratic, secularists became increasingly concerned.

While the exact leadership and intent of the coup attempt in July 2016 is unclear, the top military leadership did not take part. Middle- and lower-level officers were leading the rebellion and were met with armed opposition from other military forces loyal to the president. The government reportedly knew in advance...
Naunihal Singh (2014) argued that coups are more likely to succeed when they are led by top military leaders and in countries that have had successful coups in the past. Map 9.1 shows coups and coup attempts around the world since World War II.

The maps use categorized data, but the detailed data show Iraq leading the world with sixteen coup attempts but only one success; Sudan is second with eleven attempts and four successes. Other countries, such as Colombia, have had only

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**MAP 9.2**

**Coups and Coup Attempts, 1946–2015**

**Total coup attempts (successful and unsuccessful)**

1. 6 or more coups
2. 3-5 coups
3. 2 coups
4. 1 coup
5. No coup attempts

**Successful coups**

1. 6 or more coups
2. 3-5 coups
3. 2 coups
4. 1 coup
5. No coups

one attempt, but it was successful. Also note the countries that are gray in both maps, meaning they have had no attempts or no successes. Compare the two maps for specific countries, especially those that have had more attempts than successes. What trends do you see in terms of where and when coups have happened and their success rates? Can you formulate hypotheses other than Singh’s to explain these trends? How would you try to determine which hypothesis best explains why coups occurred and when, where, and why they succeeded or failed?

of the coup plot, so the rebels were forced to launch the coup earlier than planned. They failed to capture Erdoğan or all of the media outlets, allowing Erdoğan to speak with the media initially via FaceTime on his cell phone. He urged his civilian supporters to pour into the streets to oppose the coup and was able to communicate with top generals as well. In less than twenty-four hours, the coup was defeated. Within a week, at least fifty thousand government employees—in the military, judicial system, and education system—were arrested, with an estimated eighty thousand eventually losing their jobs. Erdoğan blamed supporters of a former ally who were known to hold positions throughout the government, including the military. Indeed, some of the rebellious military leaders rose in the ranks after Erdoğan’s earlier removal of more secular officers he didn’t trust (Arango and Yeginsu 2016). Whatever the motives for the coup, though, the rebels conspicuously failed at the “coordination game”: Erdoğan was able to communicate strength rather than the rebels doing so, and most of the military and civilians (including opposition parties) supported the government against the coup.

As Turkey and our case studies below demonstrate, it is often difficult to discern which theory best explains a particular coup. Military leaders invariably claim that they intervened to save the nation from corruption and incompetence and to provide unity to pursue development. Their subsequent rule often betrays them as having other motives. Once again, the distinction between mechanisms and outcomes of regime change matters. A coup by an institutionalized military, as in our case study of Brazil, is likely to produce an institutionalized and relatively united military regime. A coup coming from a more factionalized military is likely to produce a more personalist regime. In some of these cases, as we argued in chapter 8, the new supreme leader may ultimately create a ruling party to co-opt potential rival elites, leading to a one-party or electoral authoritarian regime.

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The Arab Spring: Revolution, Democratization, or None of the Above?

In chapter 7, we briefly discussed the Arab Spring as a case of contentious politics, trying to explain why and how protests suddenly exploded across the region. Here we look at the outcomes of those protests: what regime changes did they produce, and why? By 2019, Tunisia was seen as the “success story” in that it had an elected government; Freedom House rated it as “free,” and Polity IV scored it as a democracy, though barely. Egypt initially appeared to be following a similar, though less certain, path until the military coup of 2013 created a new authoritarian regime that Freedom House rated as “not free” and Policy IV as an electoral authoritarian regime (though just one point from fully authoritarian). Syria, Libya, and Yemen descended into civil wars. Protests broke out in other Arab countries as well, but as the table shows, none saw a regime change or war; instead, the old regime successfully repressed the protests. How can we explain the different trajectories regime change took in these countries?

Outcomes Since 2011

A key element was the role of negotiations and the ability of opposing political forces to create a pact. Key actors in most of the countries of the Arab Spring included the military, secular opposition forces, and Islamist groups who, to varying degrees, seemed willing to participate in a democratic process. The transition in Tunisia came to be known as the Jasmine revolution and could certainly be considered a political revolution, in that a movement from within society forced fundamental regime change. But in fact, negotiations were crucial to establishing a democracy. While the process had tense moments, it ultimately produced a new constitution and democracy in which elections have been free and fair, though not all individual rights are fully respected and the rule of law remains weak.

In Egypt, military leaders initially took full control after the dictator was forced out. The military pushed through enough constitutional changes to hold elections but preserved significant control for themselves. The secular and Islamist forces (the Muslim Brotherhood) had not worked together at all and did not trust one another or the military. The single-member district (SMD) elections gave the Muslim Brotherhood dominant power in the elected bodies, but the military still retained great autonomy, and the judiciary—still full of the appointees from the old regime—ruled important elements of the new constitution illegal. Crucially, the Supreme Constitutional Court annulled the initial parliamentary election and forced the parliament to disband. In response, President Mohamed Morsi, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, declared in November 2012 that he would rule by decree until the new constitution was fully implemented and new elections held. The Brotherhood’s opponents ultimately walked out of the negotiations for a permanent constitution, which the Morsi government nonetheless completed and the citizenry ratified via a referendum.

At this point, the legitimacy of all political institutions was seriously questioned by at least some major political actor, and a deep chasm had clearly developed between the Muslim Brotherhood and more secular political forces. In response to Morsi’s pushing through a new constitution, the military intervened in July 2013, ousting Morsi from power and severely constricting civil and political rights, including banning the Muslim Brotherhood and arresting most of its leaders. The secular forces that initiated the original uprising in 2011 at least initially supported the coup, fearing the Muslim Brotherhood more than they did the military.

Clearly, the military was a crucial player in both countries. Both Egypt’s and Tunisia’s authoritarian regimes were relatively institutionalized, with coherent militaries. The Mubarak regime gave top
military elites significant business opportunities so they initially wanted to defend him, but lower-ranking officers were not benefiting, and the top military leaders realized they could not completely control their troops if they tried to defend the regime against the mobilized populace. The Tunisian military had not benefited nearly as much from Ben Ali’s rule so were more willing to move against him (Nassif 2015). In both cases, the old rulers gave up power, not when the protesters went into the streets but when the military decided to support the protesters to protect its own interests vis-à-vis the regimes’ top leaders. The willingness or ability of the military to negotiate a pact with opposition forces ultimately determined the different outcomes in the two cases.

The regimes in Libya and Syria were both much more personalist and divided. When protests broke out in Libya, the regime responded with repression, but in the eastern region, which had never supported the dictator Muammar el-Qaddafi, protesters took over the major city and essentially declared themselves free of the regime. The military, like society at large, was divided by regional and kinship loyalties. Qaddafi responded

(Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>FREEDOM HOUSE SCORE, 2019</th>
<th>POLITY IV DEMOCRACY SCORE, 2017*</th>
<th>REGIME TRANSITION SINCE 2011</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Algeria</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Coup to stop uprising (2019)</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0</td>
<td>Electoral democracy (2011–2013)</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Electoral authoritarian (2013–)</td>
</tr>
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<td>None</td>
</tr>
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<td>None</td>
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<td>Partly free</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libya</td>
<td>Not free</td>
<td>Interregnum</td>
<td>Civil war</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yemen</td>
<td>Not free</td>
<td>Interregnum</td>
<td>Civil war</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Higher number means more democratic.
Revolution

In chapter 7, we defined a political revolution as a fundamental transformation of an existing regime, instigated and primarily carried out by a social movement or armed group. Social revolutions go even further, transforming not just a regime but the entire social order. Both are regime changes, often but not always violent. Revolutions are a rare mechanism of regime change; on the continent of Africa alone, there have been more than eighty military coups since 1960, whereas only a small number of revolutions have occurred anywhere in the world. We examined the explanations for why revolutions occur in chapter 7; here, we discuss their outcomes.

Aside from some of the former Communist countries of eastern Europe, the general outcome of social revolutions has been fairly consistent: authoritarian rule and the creation of stronger states. Postrevolutionary governments have taken various forms, based in part on the ideological beliefs of their revolutionary leaders, but few have become enduring democracies directly after the revolution. This was true even in countries such as France, where many of the revolution’s leaders were liberals. Political revolutions’ outcomes vary a little more; some lead to democracy, though that is by no means certain, even though it is often the stated goal of the key revolutionary groups.

Scholars account for these outcomes by pointing out the extremely difficult political circumstances facing postrevolutionary governments. The entire regime and sometimes the social structure have been overthrown, so new ones must be created. Many revolutions are at least partly violent, and the new regime must re-create the state’s monopoly on the use of force. Postrevolutionary societies are almost by definition deeply divided along ideological lines; the new leadership is committed to a particular ideological blueprint of what the new regime should look like, while many followers do not fully share this commitment. All of these factors lead postrevolutionary leaders to brook little dissent and to view any opposition...
as a threat to the revolution. As revolutionary leaders consolidate their power and eliminate their enemies, they create stronger states as well, at least in the short to medium term.

Political revolutions have more mixed results than do social revolutions. The former do not overthrow the entire social order and are often less violent, so many postrevolutionary divisions are not as difficult to overcome. One key question is the military's response to popular uprisings. If the military remains united and favors or opposes the revolutionary forces, they are likely to determine the success of the revolution. In the Arab Spring of 2011, the militaries of both Egypt and Tunisia remained united and turned against the old dictators, but the Egyptian military had long had a much stronger political role than the Tunisian one. Egypt's military overthrew its nascent democracy in 2013, while Tunisia's military allowed its democracy to survive. Militaries that are more unified help prevent civil war; those that have benefited from the old regime are less likely to side with a potential revolution; and those that view the old regime as increasingly illegitimate, especially in the face of large-scale protest, are more likely to side with protesters and help remove the dictator (Barany 2016). As Egypt and Tunisia show, however, the ultimate outcome remains uncertain. In 2019, military leaders forced long-standing dictators in Algeria and Sudan out of office in the face of massive popular uprisings, but it remained unclear what new regimes would ultimately replace them.

When the military does support a revolution, new political institutions have to be put in place quickly, making regime outcomes uncertain. The “color revolutions” that peacefully replaced several sitting governments between 2000 and 2005, most famously in Ukraine and Georgia, are good examples. In Ukraine, the “Orange Revolution” averted what appeared to be a deterioration of a minimally democratic regime and installed a more popular leader. It also eventually resulted, however, in a Russian annexation of the disputed region of Crimea and “soft invasion” of a larger section of the eastern part of the country, instigating a war of secession that crippled the state in that region. The “Rose Revolution” in Georgia seemed more successful, helping to move Georgia from what had become an electoral authoritarian regime to a flawed but nonetheless democratic one, including making significant constitutional changes. It also, however, lost effective sovereignty in part of its territory to Russian-backed separatists.

**Authoritarianization**

Authoritarianization of an existing democracy is a more common mechanism of regime change than revolution but less common than coups; it is also becoming more frequent as the third wave of democratization ebbs. It involves a typically slow erosion of democratic institutions by an elected leader or party. It begins with democratic backsliding, under which initial changes in democratic institutions or norms lower the quality of democracy but do not destroy it. Democratic backsliding does not always result in authoritarianization. It can, however, as the undermining of key elements of democracy accumulates, resulting in increasing power in the hands of the incumbent executive and his key allies. While the distinction between a very weak democracy and an electoral authoritarian regime is not always clear, at some point, often after the fact, it becomes clear that the supreme leader and ruling party cannot be removed from office; the process of authoritarianization is complete.

Authoritarianization can take various paths but almost always includes institutional changes such as (1) undermining institutions, especially the judiciary, by placing individuals personally loyal to the chief executive in key positions; (2) controlling the media either directly via regime suppression of free expression...
or, more typically, manipulating laws to ensure the leader’s allies gain control of major media outlets; (3) manipulating electoral rules to favor the leader and ruling party; (4) changing the constitution to give the leader more power, such as the ability to declare emergency decrees or a lengthened term in office; and (5) harassing civil society and opposition parties via lawsuits to undermine them and deplete their resources (Frantz 2018, 94–97).

Authoritarianization, though, can also begin with the undermining of informal norms of democracy, not just formal institutions. In How Democracies Die, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt defined norms as “shared codes of conduct that become common knowledge within a particular community or society—accepted, respected, and enforced by its members” (2018, 101). They argued that written rules and formal institutions can never regulate every situation or ensure that all elements of democracy remain strong. The acceptance of key norms, especially among the political elite, is essential to the prevention of democratic backsliding that can ultimately become authoritarianization. In the case of the United States, for instance, they saw two norms as key: (1) mutual toleration, “the understanding that competing parties accept one another as legitimate rivals,” and (2) forbearance, “the idea that politicians should exercise restraint in deploying their institutional prerogatives” (2018, 8). Without these, they suggested, partisan rivalry will become more extreme and efforts to use institutions for partisan purposes will undermine democratic legitimacy. They pointed to examples such as the use of the filibuster in the Senate, when the minority party seeks to prevent almost all majority legislation from passing; the removal of the filibuster when doing so favors the majority party; and presidential executive orders to enact policies when Congress is unwilling to do so.

As part of their examination of political culture and norms, Levitsky and Ziblatt’s argued increasing polarization undermines the norm of mutual toleration, weakening democracy. Milan Svolik (2018) showed that a rational choice approach can help explain why polarization undermines democracy, using data from Venezuela, a country that went through the process fully in the new millennium. He argued that as voters become more polarized, their preference for their preferred candidate increases. When those candidates undermine democratic institutions—for example, by manipulating the electoral system in their favor, their voters face a dilemma: supporting their preferred candidates or their professed democratic norms. Greater polarization means greater preference and loyalty to their candidates and opposition to their opponents, which Svolik found leads even those with strongly stated democratic values to support their candidates even when the candidates have undermined democratic institutions.

These processes of polarization, democratic backsliding, and ultimately authoritarianization typically start with a particular leader, often a populist. Populism (see chapter 7) propagates the beliefs that traditional political elites are unpatriotic and corrupt, that the country therefore faces a crisis, that the media and experts cannot be trusted, and that therefore only a strong leader can save the country (Frantz 2018, 99–101). Recep Erdoğan of Turkey and Viktor Orbán of Hungary are two such leaders.

In 2019, Freedom House lowered Turkey’s rating from “partly free” to “not free” and Hungary’s from “free” to “partly free.” The two countries are at different places on what seems to be a similar path of authoritarianization. Both of their leaders, Erdoğan in Turkey and Orbán in Hungary, were elected prime minister when their parties won “landslide” victories during economic crises that destroyed the political support of the previous governments. While Turkey had a proportional representation electoral system and Hungary had a mixed system similar to Japan’s (see chapter 6), both were designed in ways that made them significantly
disproportional, producing their “landsides.” Erdoğan’s party won about 34 percent of the votes in 2002, and Orbán’s party won just over half the votes in 2010, but both garnered about two-thirds of the parliamentary seats. Both rode to power on the basis of local versions of populist ideology. Erdoğan championed a moderate Islamism popular with many lower-income and less-educated Turks against the secularism of the country’s elite. Orbán championed an anti-EU, anti-Semitic, and anti-immigrant Christian nationalism.

Once in power, both leaders set out to reduce the power of possible opponents, who were divided among many small parties. Many initially saw Erdoğan as improving democracy because he expanded devout Muslims’ ability to express their faith publicly and reduced the power of Turkey’s military, which had carried out several coups in the name of preserving secularism. His success in removing military leaders, however, allowed him to put his own loyalists in their place, which would help him survive the 2016 coup attempt we discussed earlier. The first signs of democratic backsliding came in 2009 but accelerated after large demonstrations against Erdoğan’s government in 2013. In 2014, his parliamentary majority successfully silenced a corruption inquiry that threatened the government, effectively eliminating the parliament’s role in holding the executive accountable; Erdoğan was then able to remove dozens of police officers and prosecutors who had pursued the inquiry.

Having served as prime minister since 2002, Erdoğan passed a referendum through parliament and a popular vote in 2010 that created a directly elected president, a position that he won in 2014. His party lost an outright majority in parliament in 2015, indicating the possibility of continued democracy, but a divided opposition could not form a government, so Erdoğan continued to rule. After the 2016 coup attempt, he again succeeded in amending the constitution, this time more fundamentally, creating a presidential system with very strong presidential powers. The 2016 coup attempt, which was widely unpopular, enhanced his power, allowing him to declare a state of emergency and remove tens of thousands of perceived opponents from government positions, replace them with his loyalists, and shut down numerous media outlets. By the 2017 referendum on the new presidential system, his opponents had little media access; Erdoğan won both that and the 2018 presidential election. While his margins of victory were not large, divided opposition and his control over most media assured his victories. In 2019, his party lost an election for mayor of Istanbul, one of the most important offices in the country and a base of Erdoğan’s support. Rather than accept the results, he challenged it with the electoral commission, run by his supporters, and won; the election was to be held anew. For the first time, Erdoğan did not win by manipulating an election in advance, so he simply had it reversed. While he still faces an active opposition protesting the decline of democracy, he now has the tools needed to stay in power for a long time.

Viktor Orbán wasted little time in moving to change the Hungarian constitution the year after he gained power. His two-thirds majority in parliament wrote an entirely new constitution in 2011 that expanded the Constitutional Court so Orbán could appoint his loyalists to it and strengthened the executive’s power over the judiciary, the Central Bank, and the media. Orbán has since been able to replace many retired judges with new ones loyal to him. His allies and government pressure via a new media regulatory body purchased or forced the closing of many independent media outlets, leaving most of the press supporting the ruling party. A law restricting foreign-funded NGOs reduced the power of major groups in civil society, and a similar one closed the country’s most prestigious university, founded by émigré George Soros. The government also revised the electoral system to make it more majoritarian, enhancing the electoral prospects
of Orbán’s party, the biggest in the country. By the time of the 2014 and 2018 elections, in which Orbán preserved his two-thirds parliamentary majority, the media landscape heavily favored the ruling party and the party used government resources in its campaign. Both Orbán and Erdoğan were elected into power and have been reelected. Both clearly have popular support in significant parts of society. But both used that support to undermine democratic institutions and weaken opposition to their continued rule.

Our case studies show how authoritarian regimes were created the old-fashioned way, via coup, in Brazil and Nigeria, and also how the world’s best-known electoral authoritarian regime arose in Russia.

CASE STUDY
Comparing Coups: Brazil and Nigeria

In both Brazil and Nigeria, understanding the precise motives for coups is difficult because, while all coup leaders claim to intervene in the national interest, the subsequent governments, especially in the case of Nigeria, belie those intentions. Therefore, motives other than protecting the national interest seem at least equally plausible. The biggest difference between the two countries is probably the level of institutionalization of their militaries. Brazil’s more institutionalized military entered politics with a clear ideology and was a strong enough institution to implement its vision, for better or worse, and it preserved some very limited civilian political participation in the process. Nigeria’s far less-institutionalized military reflected the country’s ethnic and class conflicts, and it ruled in a far less-institutionalized manner that ultimately undermined Nigeria’s political institutions. It also engaged in at least as much corruption as the civilian officials it overthrew.

- REGIME CHANGE Military coups creating military regime; ultimately personalist in Nigeria
- INSTITUTIONALIZATION Brazil’s military more institutionalized; Nigeria’s less so
- CAUSES Societal versus military for Brazil; societal versus personal for Nigeria

Coup in Brazil

Political scientists have used both societal and institutional (within the military) arguments to explain Brazil’s 1964 coup, which ushered in a modernizing authoritarian state, a crucial milestone in the country’s political and economic development. The Brazilian military was involved in politics since the founding of the republic in 1889. It was instrumental in the governments of the first decade and emerged again as central under the neofascist Estado Novo in the 1930s. Even during the country’s democratic periods, the military has been politically influential. Elected officials regularly consulted with military leaders on a variety of policy issues, and the military leaders were quite willing to get involved in politics when they thought necessary, at least until the consolidation of Brazil’s new democracy in the 1990s.

The origins of Brazil’s 1964 coup can be traced to the creation of an elite military academy after World War II, the Escola Superior de Guerra (ESG), or Superior War College, which came to play an influential role in the Brazilian military and elite politics in general. Its faculty developed what came to be known as the National Security Doctrine in the 1950s. This doctrine was then taught to ESG students, who were not only high-ranking military officers but also selected senior civilian officials. Essentially, it envisioned national security as including not just protection from foreign aggression but also economic development and...
prevention of domestic insurrection. At the height of the Cold War, the ESG military intellectuals saw domestic communist insurrection as a primary threat and strong economic development as essential to national security. The ESG's National Security Doctrine laid the intellectual roots for the 1964 coup and subsequent military regime.

In 1961 leftist vice president João Goulart became president when his elected predecessor abruptly resigned. Goulart seemed intent on reforming Brazil’s very unequal society: strengthening labor unions, redistributing land, and providing greater benefits to the urban working classes. He clashed with the military elite and the conservative majority in the National Congress, both of whom saw him as trying to move the country in the direction of socialism and perhaps even communism. As Goulart failed to get his policies passed through the National Congress and faced growing opposition within the military, he became more populist. To try to gain greater military loyalty, he replaced several senior military officers who opposed him with others who were more supportive, thus dividing the military itself. Finally, in March 1964, he dramatically called for fundamental reforms that the conservative elite, both civilian and military, opposed. When junior navy officers revolted against their superiors, demanding the right to unionize, Goulart supported them.

The night after Goulart proclaimed his support for the naval officers, the military moved to take over the reins of government in a largely bloodless coup it dubbed the “Revolution.” The coup clearly was led from the top as a united effort and with quiet U.S. support, meaning coordination of its efforts was easy. The regime it subsequently created was strongly institutionalized and based heavily on the National Security Doctrine. It attempted to keep a veneer of civilian rule by preserving most of the prior constitution, but it also issued Institutional Acts, which gave the military president the power to overrule the legislature and revoked many basic rights. Eventually, the system was restricted to two tightly controlled parties: one that supported the regime and one that was allowed to oppose it within strict limits. When popular opposition from students, workers, and the rural poor arose, the military leadership did not hesitate to use force against them. Brazil’s military government was far less brutal than many in Latin America at the time, but it nonetheless jailed and killed opponents when necessary.

### Explanations for the Brazilian Coup

Several explanations for the 1964 coup have been put forward. The best known is Guillermo O’Donnell’s (1979) argument that the coup came about because of economic contradictions that the democratic government could not resolve. Although not a modernization theorist, O’Donnell saw the origins of the coup in the society as a whole. If capitalist industrialization was to continue, it required a repressive government to force it on an increasingly restless population. Industrialization and populism, the dominant way of mobilizing support in Brazil’s democracy, had produced a growing working class that demanded a greater share of the benefits of economic growth. The elite realized that this would reduce the resources available for further investment. Additional industrialization would require investment in
heavier industry, and that in turn would require lower wages. An elected government could not do this politically, so the military stepped in, under the auspices of its National Security Doctrine, to take the necessary steps.

Other analysts, however, have noted that the coup itself was caused just as much by Goulart’s direct threat to the military hierarchy. By removing military officers who opposed him and especially by supporting junior officers who wanted to unionize, Goulart was interfering with the autonomy of the military itself. Riordan Roett (1978) contended that the military remained divided over Goulart’s economic policies but united in opposition to him because it saw him as undermining the autonomy of both the military and Congress. It is entirely possible, of course, that these two sets of factors (economic pressures plus threats to the autonomy of the military) dovetailed, coming together to give the military the incentive and justification to intervene and set Brazilian politics on a fundamentally different course.

**Coups in Nigeria**

Nigeria’s military is very different from Brazil’s because it is far weaker as an institution. Nevertheless, Nigeria’s history of regime changes once again demonstrates the difficulty of understanding the motives for military coups. The country has had six successful coups (see the timeline in chapter 8) and at least two failed coup attempts. Without exception, each of the military leaders came to power promising to serve only in a “corrective” capacity to end corruption, restore order, and revive the economy before handing power back to elected civilians. In reality, the military ruled for two very long periods (1966–1979 and 1983–1999) under multiple leaders and returned the country to democratic rule only after much domestic and international pressure. Analysts have identified both societal and individual motives behind the actions of Nigeria’s military. We focus here primarily on two of the six coups: those that overthrew democratic governments.

The first two military interventions happened six months apart in 1966. Nigeria’s First Republic, its initial postcolonial democracy, had very weak institutions and grew increasingly

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**Military Coups in Latin America by Decade**

Brazil’s military coups and regimes (1930–1945 and 1964–1985) were part of a broader trend of coups and military rule in the region that has declined over time.

![Graph](source: Data are from Political Handbook of the World 2015 (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2015).)
chaotic from independence in 1960. The democratic government and subsequent military governments were riven by increasingly intense ethnic rivalries. Numerical advantage gave the northern region control of the government at independence. After the government manipulated two elections, citizens in the western region, who felt the northern-dominated government had stolen control of the country, turned violent. By late 1965, the national government had lost effective control of the western region, and general lawlessness was spreading throughout the country.

In January 1966, five army majors led a rebellion in an attempt to overthrow what they saw as an illegitimate national government. Most of the leaders, including Gen. Johnson T. U. Aguiyi-Ironsi, who ultimately took over as the military ruler, were ethnic Igbo from the eastern region. This ethnic homogeneity may have made coordination of the coup easier because the leaders trusted one another. In carrying out the coup, they killed several important northern and western political and military figures but no eastern ones. Ironsi abolished all parties and ethnic associations, and soon declared the end of Nigeria’s fractured federalism, creating a unitary state instead. Many analysts viewed Ironsi as genuinely interested in national well-being, but northerners saw the coup and Ironsi’s elimination of federalism as an attempt by the eastern, Igbo military elite to centralize all power for themselves. Six months later, the northerners responded with a countercoup that brought army chief of staff Yakubu Gowon to power. Gowon was backed by northern military leaders, and the coup clearly came primarily from the top of the military. They were intent on removing what they saw as an “Igbo” government. Gowon immediately re-created a federal system, with twelve states replacing the former three regions. Eastern military leaders rebelled, proclaiming themselves the leaders of the independent Republic of Biafra. A three-year civil war ensued. Gowon received much credit for winning the war and helping reconcile the nation afterward. As all of Nigeria’s military leaders would do, he had from the start promised a return to democracy. By the mid-1970s, however, he and the military governors of the states were seen as increasingly corrupt, stealing from Nigeria’s rapidly growing oil revenues and continually delaying the promised return to democracy. Ultimately, other northern military leaders overthrew him and returned the country to democracy in 1979.

That democracy would last until 1983—in many ways, the events of that year can be seen as a repeat of those of 1966—though without the same ethnic conflict. The Second Republic government that was elected in 1979 and reelected in 1983 was again dominated by the northern region. By 1983 it was both corrupt and malefiant. Nigeria’s economy was declining as the level of corruption seemed to be skyrocketing and world oil prices were plummeting. Consequently, the 1983 election in which incumbent president Shehu Shagari was reelected was widely seen as fraudulent.

**Explanation of Coups in Nigeria**

The coup weeks later came with little opposition. At first glance, one could say that the coup leaders were motivated by the weakness and chaos of the civilian regime. William Graf, a leading scholar of the era, argued differently (1988). In contrast to the first coup in 1966, the coup leaders were not junior officers but rather the top military officials in the country, primarily from the north. This means that the coup was not ethnically motivated, in that both the perpetrators and the main victims were northerners. Graf went on to say that, instead, the main motivation for the coup was the desire of top officers to maintain their access to government resources and preserve the social status quo. He suggested that the top military officers took control because they saw the corruption of the civilian elite as excessive. The officers believed that corruption threatened to provoke an uprising within the military and perhaps within the broader society. Indeed, rumors abounded that junior officers, with a more radical interest in fundamentally changing the Nigerian regime, were about to stage a coup. As described above, the subsequent regime (1983–1999), dominated by the northern military’s “Kaduna mafia,” became increasingly corrupt and brutal, culminating in the rule of Sani Abacha, whose sudden death led to a return to democracy.
Nigeria's two coups that directly overthrew democratic rule can be explained by societal factors, including the weakness of prior political institutions and increasing political and economic chaos. In both cases, the argument goes that the military stepped in to restore order in a situation in which stable democracy no longer existed. However, the leaders of the coups may have had other motives, and both faced subsequent countercoups. These brought to power northern military leaders who ruled for extended periods during which corruption grew and institutions weakened. Personal, ethnic, and regional interests in gaining power and resources seem at least as likely an explanation for the coups as the political problems the military allegedly stepped in to resolve.

Case Questions

1. What does the comparison of military coups in Brazil and Nigeria teach us about the utility of the theories of why coups occur? Is one particular theory more convincing than the others in explaining coups in both countries? If not, why not?

2. What are the connections between why the coups happened in the two countries and the characteristics of the subsequent military regimes? (You might want to look back on the case studies of Nigeria and Brazil in chapter 3 to help you answer this question.)
CASE STUDY

Russia: Transition to an Electoral Authoritarian Regime

Initially, newly independent Russia seemed to be on a path to democracy, though a chaotic one. The first president, Boris Yeltsin, chose to establish a weak legislature to enable a strong presidency; the result was extremely weak parties and a weak democracy. When Vladimir Putin succeeded Yeltsin in 2000, he was able to use the executive’s powers to transform Russia from a weak democracy to an electoral authoritarian regime in a few short years. He achieved this by placing key allies in control of state agencies, co-opting or repressing major opponents, creating a dominant party as a means of patronage and support, manipulating electoral rules, and then repressing civil society and the media.

- REGIME CHANGE Authoritarianization creating an electoral authoritarian regime
- INSTITUTIONALIZATION Stronger since transition
- CAUSES Weakly institutionalized democracy and resource curse

As Russian president Boris Yeltsin climbed atop a tank in Moscow to stop a coup attempt in August 1991, it seemed that freedom was on the rise in Russia. The coup was the last-gasp effort of hardliners in the old Communist regime of the Soviet Union. The reforms of softliner Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev in the late 1980s had significantly opened the Soviet political system and economy, but demands for far greater reforms were in the air. With Gorbachev on vacation, elements in the military tried to roll the tanks into Moscow to restore the old system and prevent the reconfiguration of the Soviet Union as a smaller, more decentralized federation. It was a classic case of hardliners within the regime trying to repress political liberalization. Popular and international opposition, led by Yeltsin, forced the military to back down. By December, the Soviet Union was dissolved. Fifteen new countries emerged, with Russia being by far the biggest and most important, and each was expected to transition to democracy. The world’s number-two superpower appeared to be starting an unprecedented transition from a Communist regime to one that was democratic and capitalist. Russia’s transition, however, has not been to democracy but instead to electoral authoritarian rule.

Background

The 1990s in Russia were chaotic, both politically and economically. The first president, Yeltsin, presided over a rapid but painful transition to a market economy that harmed his popular support. He also lacked support because he refused to join a political party, trying instead to appear “above” partisan politics. His refusal to participate, in addition to the very weak powers of the parliament, resulted in the creation of weak parties. Most parties were of limited consequence, rising and falling with the popularity and shifting allegiances of major politicians. Across four elections from 1993 to 2005, anywhere from...
twelve to seventeen parties were in parliament, and fewer than half of them in one parliament continued to hold seats in the next one. By the late 1990s, Yeltsin had very little support and chose to resign a year before the 2000 election, hand-picking his replacement, Vladimir Putin, who could then run as the incumbent president. Putin, a war hero for his role in keeping the breakaway region of Chechnya as part of Russia, promised to strengthen the state and create order; he won the election handily.

**Authoritarianization**

Putin rapidly put in place an electoral authoritarian regime, though he referred to it as “managed democracy,” saying he supported democracy but only as long as it did not produce disorder and weakness. He put the new regime in place by (1) relying on his tight control of the security apparatus; (2) an initial agreement with the “oligarchs” to minimize their political influence, followed by stripping them of their assets; (3) the creation of a dominant, ruling party; (4) greater centralization of Russian federalism (discussed in chapter 6); and (5) an ideology of order and strength that became increasingly nationalist. The economic boom gave Putin vast resources to expend in co-opting support to make all this happen.

Putin replaced Yeltsin’s “family” of oligarchs who had wielded informal influence in the 1990s with a group of former agents of the Federal Security Bureau (FSB), the successor to the KGB where he had spent most of his career. Over several years, he placed members of this group in key ministries and agencies throughout the executive branch, appointed them governors of regions, and gave them control of many important companies (Hesli 2007). They were his closest, most reliable allies. As they gained power and positions at the expense of the oligarchs of the 1990s, their loyalty was also cemented via the opportunities for corruption they received, with many becoming very wealthy.

While Putin began with loyal support within the security apparatus, he faced powerful potential enemies in the oligarchs, the wealthiest and most influential of whom were in the energy and media sectors. In his first year in office, Putin met with the most important oligarchs and made a frank bargain with them: he would not question or investigate the way in which they gained their wealth or their current economic activities, as long as they did not oppose him politically. They readily agreed. Some, however, later resisted. Most famous was Mikhail Khodorkovski, head of the giant Yukos oil firm. By 2003, he was courting Western investment in his company and becoming increasingly open about his plans to enter politics against Putin. Putin used selective enforcement of anticorruption laws to eliminate Khodorkovski, who was charged with corruption and ultimately jailed by a compliant judiciary whose judges Putin mostly appointed. The government was able to buy Yukos stock and take control of it, placing it firmly in the hands of the state oil company, led by loyal Putin supporters from the security apparatus. After the “Yukos affair,” Putin turned against other oligarchs, primarily in the energy sector, so that the state could regain direct control of the most important sector of the economy, and in the media, to eliminate any critical voices. Many other oligarchs fled the country to avoid Khodorkovski’s fate.

Another element Putin used to build support was creating a dominant party, a classic effort to build a new institutional basis of support that he could fully control. Shortly after becoming president, Putin got a couple of smaller parties in the Duma to merge to create United Russia. He then brokered a deal with the Communist Party to achieve a working majority. Once he was able to use patronage to co-opt a couple of other small parties, he jettisoned the alliance with the Communists. The key task in creating a dominant ruling party was overcoming the independent strength of regional elites. Ora Reuter (2017) argued that rising oil prices, economic growth, and Putin’s popularity early in his presidency counterbalanced the power of regional elites. This balance of power gave both sides incentives to form a party. By threatening regional elites’ continued control of their regions, Putin convinced them to join the party. By joining, the regional elites received some institutionalized assurances that they could maintain access to the state’s resources for
patronage. Those with the fewest local resources and weakest networks joined first, but as more and more did, others had to as well. By the late 2000s, the party controlled most seats not only in the Duma but in legislatures in virtually all eighty-nine regional governments, as well as virtually all governorships. As in other electoral authoritarian regimes, elections allowed a rotation of elites in office, rewarding newly loyal supporters and punishing those who prove disloyal or ineffective.

Putin also manipulated the electoral system. Under the mixed electoral system he inherited, his most significant opposition came from independent MPs elected in the single-member districts, so he changed the electoral system to a purely closed-list PR system to eliminate independent candidates. This reduced the number of parties from forty in 2003 to fourteen in 2008. If real electoral competition existed, this could be seen as enhancing democracy, since fewer and larger parties give voters clearer and more credible options. But in the context of Putin building his ruling party, repressing civil society and the media, and using oil wealth as patronage to buy off opponents, the drop in the number of parties was simply part of a broader process of centralizing control. In 2014 Putin reversed course, re-creating the mixed system, though with a 5 percent threshold to keep out smaller parties. Because United Russia was the only party capable of running candidates in all SMD constituencies in the 2016 Duma election, the new system allowed it to win a record 343 of 450 seats without resorting to the blatant electoral fraud that set off protests in 2011–2012 (see chapter 8). It won 54 percent of the PR vote but virtually all the SMD seats.

With his allies in control of key state agencies, the oligarchs tamed, and the ruling party established, Putin could centralize power in the executive and eliminate almost all vestiges of real democracy. In addition to increasing the powers of the presidency vis-à-vis the regions, he harassed and closed down most independent media and undermined independent civil society groups with new regulations (see chapter 8). He has remained in power since 2000, and revisions to the constitution that he pushed through the legislature will allow him to rule until at least 2024, when the current constitution says he must resign because he will have completed two consecutive terms as president. Many analysts expect him to retain power after that formally or informally. With a supermajority in the Duma at least until the 2021 legislative election, he could perhaps amend the constitution again or take a different position, as he did from 2008 to 2012, when he was prime minister.

Case Questions

1. What are the key problems in Russia’s transition to democracy that ultimately produced an electoral authoritarian regime?

2. What lessons does Russia’s history of authoritarianization have for other democracies?

Conclusion

Regime change is a difficult process to understand and predict. By definition, it lies outside the realm of “normal” politics. Instead, it is a period of intense politicization and rapidly unfolding events. This makes it an exceptionally fascinating area of comparative politics to study, and many comparativists have done so. Many questions remain, however.

Regime change affects who rules, but not only in the ways that might be expected. At least in theory, democratization produces regimes in which citizens rule. How true that is, of course, depends on the quality of the democracy that emerges. Sometimes, though, a democracy does not emerge at all. Similarly, a
seemingly united revolutionary front in the interests of the people can result in leaders imposing their own vision on society and demobilizing popular participation in the new regime. In politics, those who fight for change do not necessarily get what they seek. The military holds the guns on which the state and regime rely and therefore can intervene directly if it chooses, putting itself in power. But militaries, even highly institutionalized ones, are not designed to rule. Every military regime relies on civilian support to some extent, especially within the state itself.

The often chaotic process of regime change continues to limit comparativists' predictive powers. Some cases, such as Ghana, defy the odds, producing democracy where theorists would least expect it. Consolidating a new democracy is an extremely challenging process. Partly for this reason, comparativists for years believed that democracy would only survive in very specific kinds of countries. That position was challenged by the “transition paradigm,” which argued that democracy could survive anywhere. More careful recent scholarship suggests that while democracy can arise anywhere, its chances of survival are definitely higher in favorable cultural and economic contexts. The process can be easily undermined by institutional breakdowns of all sorts. An increasingly common result of these breakdowns, especially in the former Soviet Union and much of Africa, seems to be electoral authoritarian regimes, whose future will have a major impact on the future of democracy around the world.

In the last decade, growing concern has arisen that democracy is declining or at least threatened. This has led to renewed interest in regime changes that create authoritarian regimes rather than end them. The traditional and most common form of this was the military coup, which certainly still happens but less often than it used to. More frequent and receiving greater scholarly attention has been authoritarianization, the slow erosion of democratic norms and institutions by elected leaders. In places like Turkey and Venezuela, this has clearly produced electoral authoritarian regimes, but in other countries, including many long-established democracies, the erosion of norms and institutions has weakened democracy but not eliminated it—or at least not yet. Studying authoritarianization is important not only to understand the countries that have gone through it but others that might be threatened by it.

Regime change is such a large and important topic that virtually all major theories of comparative politics have been used to explain it. Political-culture theorists long argued that attributes of particular cultures set the stage for particular kinds of regimes. Some analysts of democratic transition argued as well that individual actors' belief in democracy matters. Influenced by rational choice theory, the transition paradigm argued that neither culture nor ideology is particularly important in understanding when a transition will occur; transitions take place when political elites see the acceptance of democratic institutions to be in their rational self-interest. Modernization theorists have responded, with growing evidence, that even if transition is possible, either culture or a structural condition—such as economic development—is necessary to preserve democracy in the long run.●
CHAPTER 9 REGIME CHANGE

**KEY CONCEPTS**

- authoritarianization (p. 418)
- coup d'état (p. 397)
- democratic backsliding (p. 400)
- democratic consolidation (p. 400)
- pact (p. 400)
- regime change (p. 395)
- transition to democracy (p. 399)

**WORKS CITED**


RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY


**WEB RESOURCES**

**Freedom House, Freedom in the World, 2019**

**Global Integrity**
(http://www.globalintegrity.org/)

**Polity IV Project, 2019, ”Global Trends in Governance, 1800–2017”**
(http://www.systemicpeace.org/polityproject.html)

**Transparency International, Corruption Perceptions Index**
(http://www.transparency.org/research/cpi/overview)

**Unified Democracy Scores**
(http://www.unified-democracy-scores.org)