

Are dictatorships returning? Revisiting the ‘democratic rollback’ hypothesis

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Since 2007 an increasing number of articles have diagnosed ‘freedom in retreat’ and predicted a ‘return to the authoritarian great powers’. Highly distinguished scholars warn against the ‘democratic rollback’, and articles on the resilience of authoritarian regimes have appeared in the best journals of political science. Is the tide of democratization turning, and do we have to expect a new reverse wave of autocratization? This article argues that there is no hard empirical evidence that we are witnessing a trend towards re-autocratization on a global scale. The optimism of the early 1990s of a seemingly irresistible trend towards democracy is partially due to an empirical artefact caused by inappropriate underlying theoretical concepts. The overestimation of human agency and political crafting on the one side and underestimation of structural impediments for democracy on the other side contributed to this optimism, as did the thin concept of ‘electoral democracy’ or teleological speculation about the end of history. Democratic rollback does not seem to be as widespread as is sometimes claimed.

Keywords: theories of regime change; path dependency; democratic rollback; defective democracy; prerequisites of regime change

In 1989, Eastern Europeans began to revolt against their oppressive socialist regimes which collapsed with nothing more than a whimper; Fukuyama (1992) proclaimed the ‘end of history’. Fukuyama’s idea was that the western values of capitalism and democracy had won a final victory against the forces of communism, thereby eliminating the only alternative to western-style liberalism. For Fukuyama, it was therefore only a matter of time until liberalism would manifest itself as free-market democracies around the world. His vision – dazzlingly clear and simple – began as a worldwide triumphal march in publications everywhere; even the political leaders of the OECD world allowed themselves be infected by this ‘democracy optimism’ and, riding on the dynamism of this wave, emphasized their worldwide call for democratization and launched financially extensive programs of promoting democracy.

Hardly two decades later, however, that optimism has evaporated, and a growing miasma of pessimism pervades both diagnoses and forecasts of further democratization. The historian Azar Gat not only sees the ‘end of the end of history’, but also ‘the return to the authoritarian Great Powers’ (Gat 2007). Freedom House entitled their 2008 annual report *Freedom in retreat: is the tide turning?* (Puddington 2008). Larry Diamond seconded this conclusion in an article for

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Foreign Affairs in which he unabashedly left out the question mark. Under the title ‘The democratic rollback’ (Diamond 2008), he diagnosed a worldwide abatement in the democratic quality of political regimes. In the academic sphere, emphasis has swung from research on processes of democratization to those of autocracy. Articles such as ‘The end of the transition paradigm?’ (Carothers 2002), ‘Democracy challenged’ (Ottaway 2003), ‘The rise of competitive authoritarianism’ (Levitsky and Way 2002), ‘Authoritarian reversals’ (Nathan 2003), ‘Defective democracies’ (Merkel 2004), ‘Electoral authoritarianism’ (Schedler 2006) and ‘Power sharing and leadership dynamics in authoritarian regimes’ (Svolik 2008) are indicative not only of the change in focus of such research, but also of the sea of change from optimism to pessimism which has been spreading continuously since 2000.

Is this pessimistic diagnosis tenable? Are we indeed standing once more at the beginning of a ‘reverse wave’ (Huntington 1991) like those which invariably succeeded waves of democratization in the twentieth century? The outlook presented in this contribution is an attempt to provide an initial answer to this question; in order to prevent this look-into-the-future from dissipating in a fog of alarmed speculation, a theoretical and empirical basis shall be laid down by asking and then answering three preliminary questions:

1. Analysis of the past – is the ‘retreat of democracy’ foreseen by Freedom House and Diamond *et al.* a well-grounded analysis, or is it only a statistical artefact generated by a change in the theoretical paradigms used for political regime research?
2. Diagnosis of the present – what trends can be discerned in the development of three types of regimes: democracy, hybrid regimes and autocracies?
3. Prognosis for the future – what theoretical insights into the reproductive mechanisms of political regimes have the potential to transform the empirical diagnosis of the present into a prognosis for the future?

Theoretical paradigms and empirical artefacts

A retrospective look at the past two decades in democratization research shows anew how the spirit of the times has influenced theoretical paradigms, how these, in turn, have put their stamp on the results of research in the social sciences and how these results for their part have affected both the formation of theories and cycles of theoretical paradigms. Since the 1980s, three such theoretical cycles can be found in regime change research; each owes its particular character to a chronological sequence of optimism, realism, and pessimism.

Phase 1: action theory and the phase of optimism

The first phase of optimism bore the stamp of two opposite strands of theory: action theory and historical teleology. The two became cumulatively condensed, in spite of their cardinal theoretical discrepancies, into an optimistic view of global regime development.

In the 1980s, transition research was inspired by an actor-centred theoretical paradigm like the one presented and propagated particularly in the writings of O’Donnell and Schmitter (1986) and, above all, Przeworski (1986, 1991). Elites on the political and civil society levels were elevated to the position of relevant ‘movers and shakers’, i.e. those who, in effect, were the deciding factors in the success or failure of *Transitions from authoritarian rule* (O’Donnell and Schmitter 1986). The socioeconomic preconditions (‘requisites’) of democracy, which had still been constitutive during the 1950s and 1960s in shaping the theoretical core of modernization theory, disappeared from transition research. Although O’Donnell and Schmitter do not deny the importance of structures on regime outcomes, they focus their own theoretical reasoning primarily on agency. The conceptual ‘agent-structure problem’ is unilaterally solved

in favour of agency: democratization, it was believed, was possible during regime transformations if only the relevant elites could come to an agreement or if the ‘democratizers’ in both oppositional parties and regimes could maintain the upper hand against the hardliners of the authoritarian ‘bunkers’. Though O’Donnell and Schmitter always emphasized the contingency of regime outcomes, the further empirical transition research almost primarily dealt with (successful) cases of ‘transition to democracy’. However, the implicit optimism inherent in this voluntaristic approach to regime change was not based on a teleological understanding of history, as Carothers (2002) erroneously assumed,¹ but rather on a neglect of economic, social and politico-structural ‘requisites of democracy’ (Lipset 1959), born in turn from the ‘anything is possible’ view of the voluntaristic action theory. Human action was no longer seen as seriously influenced by economic conditions, class relation, and historical legacies. Voluntarism, as Mahoney and Snyder label the actor-centred transition research, pursues an ‘undersocialized conception of agency’ (Mahoney and Snyder 1999).

The philosophy of history too made its contribution to the democracy optimism that followed in the wake of 1989. The radical changes which followed the *annus mirabilis* of the collapse of communist regimes in 1989 appeared in the eyes of Fukuyama above all to confirm Hegelian historical teleology. In both capitalism and democracy, he felt, history had now found its way to reason and thus to itself. Basic alternatives to economic and political liberalism were things of the past. A possible revenge of authoritarian *List der Geschichte* (historical deception) could no longer have any place in this deterministic-linear view of history. In spite of the many criticisms of Fukuyama’s Hegelian speculations, his theses had a greater influence on the optimistic spirit of the times than both his proponents and critics in either the scientific or political worlds could have hoped or feared.

During the course of the 1990s, promotion of democracy and rule of law became a growth industry in the area of international economic cooperation and development. Overestimation in the social sciences of the power of political elites to shape events was now complemented by the optimistic conviction that democracy could be promoted, supported, or even imposed from the outside (Merkel 2010, p. 436 ff.).

Most transition researchers adopted Schumpeter’s ‘lean’ view of democracy and swallowed it hook, line and sinker. In this minimalistic view, the establishment of free, general, secret and ‘fairly fair’ elections alone provided a guarantee of vertical lines of responsibility on the part of those elected, who in turn constituted the basis of democracy itself,² since the former were seen as the adequate substance of the latter. That democratic minimalism led directly to an inflationary application of the concept of democracy to a wide range of different political regimes.

Against this political background, Larry Diamond classified no fewer than 117 of 191 countries in the year 1995 as ‘electoral democracies’ (Diamond 1999, p. 279 f.). The list included Yeltsin’s oligarchic kleptocracy, the corrupt regime in Georgia at the beginning of the 1990s, the by no means transformed Belarus, the crony system in the Philippines, the anarchy of Bangladesh, and Sierra Leone shaken as it was by the throes of civil war, along with Finland, Sweden, Switzerland, and Great Britain. Even a mildly critical glance suffices to show that there was a substantial difference between the logic of political rule in the first group of countries and the regime logic in the second group of established democracies. It is the classical fallacy which Sartori (1970) criticized as conceptual stretching.

The large number of electoral democracies and the optimistic expectations for the future in the last decade of the twentieth century were thus based on analyses which not only relied on a minimalistic concept of democracy, but also theoretically exaggerated the power of political elites to shape events while underestimating structural impediments to a sustainable establishment of democracy. The optimism of transition analyses in the political science activities of these years was also, and above all, an artefact of the conceptual minimalization of democracy,

the neglect of structural impediments, and a voluntarization of the political agency to shape historical events and trajectories.

Phase 2: structuralism and the phase of realism

The subsequent phase was moulded by a form of analysis which was all the more historically rooted and less voluntaristic. Human agency was now conceived as being severely constrained by economic or other structural legacies and social relations were supposed to ‘socialize’ the preferences of decision-making actors on a collective and individual level. Structuralists also tended less often to follow the conceptual reductionism of Schumpeterian definitions of democracy while also, and once again, taking socioeconomic prerequisites more seriously.

Action theory’s reductionist approach had shown itself to be deficient as regards the analysis of political system transformation. Structural factors such as the degree of development of national economies, the power of social classes, the autonomy of the state and the efficiency of its bureaucracy once again became central to research on system transformation. Pye (1990) and Lipset *et al.* (1993) proclaimed the renaissance of modernization theory; Rueschemeyer *et al.* (1992) re-discovered the class analysis techniques of Barrington Moore; finally, Linz and Stepan (1996) emphasized the importance of the state as the indispensable prerequisite for successful democratic consolidation: ‘Without state there can be no citizenship; without citizenship, there can be no democracy’ (*ibid.*, p. 28).

The minimalist concept of democracy came to be viewed more and more as too undifferentiated to include the different variants of the emerging new democracies whose governments were actually chosen in free elections. The discussion about democracy with adjectives proved to be theoretically fruitful on the one hand, while leading – in empirical discussions as well – to a more precise recognition of ‘diminished subtypes’ in the boundless archipelago of electoral democracies on the other (Collier and Levitsky 1997). Concepts like ‘illiberal’ (Zakaria 1997), ‘delegative’ (O’Donnell 1998), or ‘defective’ (Merkel 2004) democracies revealed forms of the logic of political rule which were no longer open to adequate conceptualization with the term ‘democracy’. Levitsky and Way (2002) and Schedler (2006) then expanded this conceptual gray zone towards the autocratic end of the regime continuum by speaking of ‘competitive authoritarianism’ (Levitsky and Way 2002) or ‘electoral authoritarianism’ (Schedler 2006).

These theoretical concepts were, in most cases, well founded and proved to be analytically more fruitful; they were also capable of demonstrating with sound theoretical arguments that neither Georgia, Russia nor Venezuela can simply be clustered within the same regime type as that of France, Finland or Switzerland. This applies both to the internal structure of the organization of political rule and to the development perspectives of semi-authoritarian regimes. Thus Russia’s autocratic ‘backslide’ that presumably took place after 2000 was less of an ‘autocratic backslide’ than it was a change from an anarchistic kleptocracy during the Yeltsin era to an authoritarian recentralization of the state under Putin. The consequent application of more sophisticated regime concepts led automatically to a drop in both the number of ‘democracies’ and in the excessive optimism with respect to global democratization.

Phase 3: path dependency and the phase of pessimism

Ever since the beginning of the new century, a growing scepticism has become apparent in political science, journalism and politics with regard to the continuing successes of ‘democratization’. Different factors led to this development.

With the creeping loss in importance of formalized rational-choice approaches, the ‘historical institutionalism’ (e.g. Thelen *et al.* 1992, Mahoney and Snyder 1999, Pierson 2000, 2004,

Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003) grew in importance in the area of regime research as well (see Mahoney 2001, Stefes 2006, Ziblatt 2006, Capoccia and Kelemen 2007). Structural factors, critical junctures and path dependency were taken more seriously, and in the face of the depth of their impact and long-term effect (see e.g. Putnam 1993) the voluntarism of action theory receded into the background, particularly as regards intractable authoritarian legacies as well. History mattered again in constraining or binding, less often in enabling, the options of political and social actors. Even if the relevant political actors had pro-democratic preferences at the beginning of regime change, they may have altered these preferences when they were confronted with the structural legacies of the past. Elected presidents may then resort to semi-democratic decision-making when faced with strong parliamentary opposition for their reforms and policies. Under these conditions, young democracies fail to consolidate and degenerate into rather stable defective democracies (Merkel 2004).

Parallel to the theoretical revision, there occurred a growing disenchantment with promoting democracy. After two decades of a steadily more vociferous promotion of democratization, the latter's potential impact is now being assessed with greater scepticism. Numerous studies have questioned whether it has any positive effect at all (Carothers 1999, Knack 2004, Burnell 2007). In addition, the call for democratization at the end of the 1990s suddenly faced competition from the diffusion or even active promotion of authoritarian practices in actual regimes. Together with the many years of authoritarian example set by Singapore or the resource-rich countries of Russia and Venezuela along with the up-and-coming regional power Iran, economically successful autocracies like China and Vietnam climbed – if with varying degrees of impact – to a position of being able to offer globally or regionally effective alternatives to constitutional democracy. Some of them are even actively supporting autocratic regimes, such as China with regard to North Korea or Burma and Russia at its Central Asian rim (see the articles by Bader *et al.* and by Jackson in this issue).

The challenge by the paradigms of structuralism and historical institutionalism struck a heavy blow at the 'mover-and-shaker' optimism of agency theory and its proponents. Increasing doubts concerning the success of imposing or promoting democracy from the outside, along with the rise of countries (such as China) to positions of key autocratic or semi-authoritarian role models, only combined to intensify the new pessimism.

Diagnosis of the present

Do the pessimists' arguments hold water? Can they be empirically grounded or even serve for extrapolation to a clearly autocratic counter-movement, a counter-movement that will now follow the third, most intensive wave of democratization in the twentieth century (Table 1)?

Initially, events appeared to side with the optimists. The number of countries with 'electoral democracies' increased steadily: from 39 in 1974 to 76 in 1990, to a startling 99 in 1992, and, in 1996, Freedom House counted a new record of 118 states which met the minimum conditions for an electoral democracy. Although followed by a period of relative stagnation and slight fluctuations, the number – at least as recorded in the optimistic calculations by Freedom House – had risen to an absolute high-water mark of 123 formally democratic countries by the year 2006. However, this does not obscure the fact that the phase from 1996 to 2006 is to be described as a period of stagnation. By the mid-1990s, the twentieth century's third wave of democratization had definitively spent itself. The calculations of Freedom House in three successive years, 2006–2009, arrived at a slight abatement of electoral-democratic regimes. In addition, Freedom House, in the sub-scores underlying its index, also finds a mild deterioration in the democratic quality of the political regimes studied. However, this abatement is neither long nor distinct enough to allow us to speak of a trend on the basis of these figures³ (Table 2).

Table 1. Number of electoral democracies (1974, 1990–2008).

Year	No. of electoral democracies	No. of national states	No. of democracies among all states (in %)	Annual growth rate of democracies (in %)
1974	39	142	27.5	(?)
1990	76	165	46.1	(?)
1991	91	183	49.7	+19.7
1992	99	186	53.2	+8.1
1993	108	190	56.8	+8.3
1994	114	191	59.7	+5.3
1995	117	191	61.3	+2.6
1996	118	191	61.8	+0.9
1997	117	191	61.3	-0.01
1998	117	191	61.3	±0.0
1999	120	192	62.5	+2.6
2000	120	192	62.5	±0.0
2001	121	192	62.5	+0.01
2002	121	192	62.5	±0.0
2003	117	192	60.9	-3.3
2004	119	192	62.0	+1.7
2005	123	192	64.1	+3.4
2006	123	193	64.0	±0.0
2007	121	193	62.7	-1.6
2008	119	193	61.7	-1.7

Source: Diamond (1997, p. 22); calculations by the author.

Table 2. Number of liberal democracies (1990–2008).

Year	No. of liberal democracies	No. of all states (in %)	No. of liberal democracies among formal democracies (in %)	Total no. of states
1990	65	39.4	85.5	165
1991	76	41.5	83.5	183
1992	75	40.3	75.8	186
1993	72	37.9	66.7	190
1994	76	39.8	66.7	191
1995	76	39.8	65.0	191
1996	79	41.4	67.0	191
1997	81	42.4	69.2	191
1998	87	45.5	74.4	191
1999	85	44.3	70.8	192
2000	86	44.8	71.7	192
2001	85	44.3	70.2	192
2002	89	46.4	73.6	192
2003	88	45.8	75.2	192
2004	89	46.4	74.8	192
2005	89	46.4	72.4	192
2006	91	46.9	74.0	193
2007	90	46.6	74.4	193
2008	89	46.1	74.8	193

Source: Diamond (1996, p. 28; 1997, p. 22); Freedom House (2009).

‘Minimum abatement’ also cannot be extrapolated to a trend, much less a counter-movement, by analysing the development not only of electoral but also of liberal democracies. Here too, the changes are only minimal and do not by any means constitute an authoritarian trend.

Table 3. Political regimes over time.

	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2009
Free	40 (25%)	51 (31%)	57 (34%)	65 (40%)	76 (40%)	86 (45%)	89 (46%)	89 (46%)
Partly free	53 (34%)	51 (31%)	57 (34%)	50 (30%)	62 (32%)	58 (30%)	58 (30%)	62 (32%)
Not free	65 (41%)	60 (37%)	53 (32%)	50 (30%)	53 (28%)	48 (25%)	45 (24%)	42 (22%)

Source: Freedom House (2009).

A study of political regimes according to Freedom House's threefold division of 'free', 'partly free' and 'not free' contradicts Freedom House's own claim on the basis of its figures: not even a minimal trend toward autocratization can be found. The number of free countries continued to increase in 2000 and, after 2005, remained at a historic high-water mark. 'Partly free' regimes continued to proliferate above the 2000 and 2005 levels and are now at their highest level since 1975. Furthermore, 'non-free' countries alone have continuously diminished in number since 1975, reaching their lowest number in history with 42 autocratic ('not free') regimes in the year 2009. The thesis that democracy is on the wane worldwide or even that an autocratic counter-movement is gaining momentum is untenable in view of these numbers, which are used by Diamond, Puddington, and their colleagues (Table 3).

However, can a diagnosis of the present be adequate on the basis of such crude figures? Is it not the case that behind the veil of such descriptive statistics, deeper-lying structural changes are to be seen which only can justify an anyway risky view of democracy's future?

Prognosis for the future

'Forecasts are difficult, especially when they involve the future.'⁴ Comedians and natural scientists are not the only ones evincing scepticism. The social sciences, too, failed miserably to predict the collapse of the communist empire in 1989. During the financial markets' crisis, and after the sobering experience of their own Black Friday of forecasting accuracy, leading Western economic forecast institutions have gone so far as to refuse to even attempt annual forecasts about future economic development. Should this not be warning enough for the empirical social sciences? Is it feasible even to attempt an outlook on the global development of political regimes? As already shown, this is possible only to a limited degree in the form of extrapolating currently existent trends into the future. However, a recourse to the theories of political transformation which have proven useful in the past can help to increase the probability level of prognostic views. These theories should also keep us from over-speculation as we look into the future. In order for a forecast of the comeback of autocratic regimes to be valid, the following hypotheses should be able to withstand tests of falsification:

1. The camp of liberal 'free' democracies includes a relevant number of countries in which democracy is imperiled and which could well slide into the group of hybrid regimes or even autocracies.
2. The 'partly free' regimes of the present tend in most cases to lean more to the autocratic than the democratic pole of the regime continuum.
3. The present autocratic regimes are relatively stable and thus immune to democratization tendencies.

If all three hypotheses would stand the test of falsification then we could cautiously speak of a trend towards autocratization of political regimes on an aggregated global scale.

To ensure the accuracy of my own look into the future, I wish to look through the lens of modernization theory, structuralism and culturalist theory and to obtain substantive conclusions by means of indicators or indices. Action theories, important as they are for the *ex post* analysis of case studies or for small-n comparative studies, will be ignored here. For even in their reductionist variants, e.g. those involving *rational choice*, they have certainly shown an analytical capacity to explain certain decisions during critical junctures of regime change (e.g. Przeworski 1991), but they prove to be largely inappropriate for a prospective view of the stability resources of countries in large N-analyses.

How stable are liberal democracies?

The core community of liberal democracies is relatively safe from regressing into the camp of hybrid or even autocratic regimes. This core can be considered to consist mainly of the OECD member states, with the exceptions of Mexico and Turkey. In this group of countries, political regime changes are unlikely in the short term. South Korea faces the strongest potential danger of this sort but even here many indicators speak against the possibility of an open autocratization (cf. Bertelsmann 2008, 2010). The situation is similar in Latin America’s relatively consolidated democracies (Costa Rica, Uruguay, Chile, and increasingly Brazil as well). Instable countries, such as Venezuela, Bolivia, Paraguay, Ecuador or the Central American States, are, according to our categorization, not listed as liberal, but as electoral democracies.

The core of liberal *consolidated* democracies – *grosso modo* those 62 countries that are rated (1)–(1.5) by Freedom House (2009) – face no immediate danger of autocratization. Their high level of consolidation will likely render their polities immune against the external challenges posed by the financial crisis that emerged on the horizon in late 2008, even for longer periods of time. The group of incompletely consolidated or slightly defective democracies that Freedom House rates (2)–(2.5) with respect to civil liberties and political rights certainly faces more substantial threats.⁵ Freedom House groups 30 countries in this category, but they have to be contrasted against another 26 countries that are rated (3) or (3.5). The reason is that just like the ‘threatened’ liberal states, ‘free’ states may slide into the zone of partially free regimes, while countries of the ‘partially free’ group may also evolve in the opposite direction and join the group of ‘free’ countries.

This very general assessment of the potential for political instability has to be underpinned, both theoretically and empirically. Against the backdrop of theories of political transformation, selected indicators are at hand that enable us to picture the level of modernization (modernization theory), the degree of statehood (structuralism), and the degree of ethnic heterogeneity (culturalism) of individual countries and thereby allow for tentative conclusions on the size of the ‘autocratization threat’ (Table 4).

Table 4. Unfavourable conditions for democracy/democratization.

	Real GDP/ capita < \$6000 (2004)	HDI < 0.7 (2003)	Ethnic fractionalization > 0.5 (2003)	Political stability < 0 (2005)	Government effectiveness < 0 (2005)
Free	24.7	15.8	30.7	16.9	32.6
Partly free	81.5	58.2	61.8	79.3	87.9
Not free	67.4	54.6	59.2	70.5	84.1

Notes: The Human Development Index (HDI) measures three basic dimensions of human development: life expectancy, level of education, and *per capita* GDP. Ethnic fractionalization (Alesina *et al.* 2003) measures the probability that two randomly selected persons do not belong to the same ethnolinguistic group. The higher the number, the higher is the ethnolinguistic heterogeneity of a society. Political stability (Kaufman *et al.* 2008) combines various indicators which aim at measuring the likelihood of unconstitutional coups.

Source: Freedom House (2009).

A first glance at the ‘threat indicators’ listed in the above table demonstrates a strong robustness of the 62 countries rated ‘free’: roughly 75% of them enjoy a GDP *per capita* of US\$6000 or above, i.e. the threshold that is believed, by scholars such as Przeworski,⁶ to protect democracies once they have been established, ‘come hell or high water’ (Przeworski *et al.* 2000). This impression is supported by the slightly more complex HDI in which only ca. 16% of the 62 cases figure below the relatively high value of 0.7. The level of modernization of ‘free’ countries indicates a rather robust democratic stability, if one follows modernization theory. Less than a third of this group (30.7%) ranges above the average value of 0.5 for ethnic heterogeneity, which in turn is regarded as a destabilizer both by theorists such as John Stuart Mill or Robert Dahl, and in modern empirical research on democracy. The World Bank’s 2008 value for political stability is extremely high: only 16.9% of the countries figure below the average of zero. The index for government effectiveness that has also been established by the World Bank’s team led by Daniel Kaufman produces equally high results for democracies. All the thresholds mentioned here are set extremely high. With these as a yardstick, between 15 and 33% of the countries are in areas that are not associated with high levels of stability. Yet, the inverse conclusion – namely that these countries faced an acute danger of destabilization – is not automatically true. It is just that from the perspective of modernization theory, of structuralism, and from a culturalist perspective, their ‘consolidation reservoir’ must be assumed to be lesser than in the other ‘free’ countries. On the whole, the indicators discussed above support the hypothesis that most democracies within the category of ‘free’ states are relatively stable. A trend towards autocratic regimes can barely be expected.

How stable are hybrid regimes?

Hybrid regimes are defined along Freedom House’s category ‘partly not free’. There can be a discussion whether some of the countries scoring between 5 and 5.5 are not already fully autocratic. For the sake of clarity I subsume all countries labelled ‘partly free’ by Freedom House as ‘hybrid regimes’. They are neither exclusively diminished subtypes of democracy nor autocracy, but comprising both in a single category. They vary considerably among each other; they range from ‘defective democracies’ (diminished subtype of democracy) through ‘competitive authoritarian regimes’ (Levitsky and Way 2002) or simply electorally camouflaged autocracies (diminished subtypes of autocracy). While the former are closer to ‘liberal’ democracies (or a Freedom House value of 2.5 and less), the latter are neighbouring fully autocratic regimes, i.e. regimes with a Freedom House value of 5.5 or higher. But this proximity to the respective proto-types of political regimes does not mean that hybrid regimes necessarily tend towards one of these poles on the continuum of political regimes. Under certain conditions and in certain environments, hybrid regimes, too, can reach an equilibrium. However, hybrid regimes that closely border one of the two pure or basic regime types (democracy, autocracy) are more likely candidates for a shift into one of the two camps than those that are placed in the middle of the spectrum of hybrid regimes. More than full blown autocratic regimes, hybrids combine conflicting norms and institutions that form an incoherent political order. Such normative contradictions consist of, for example, inclusion and exclusion, pluralism and monism, or freedom and repression. The most apparent contradictory institutionalizations are: where there are free elections but with little vertical accountability; where parliaments and the executive compete for norm-setting; where the executive influences the judiciary; and where non-elected actors claim their own policy domains vis-à-vis the elected government.

Hybrid regimes usually give institutionalized normative promises, such as the implementation of the rule of law and democracy that are, in practice, continuously disavowed: elections are *de facto* limited in their competitiveness because of manifold manipulations by incumbent rulers; the government controls a large share of the (public) media, (ab-)uses state coffers for

partisan purposes, favours or hinders certain groups of the electorate; parliaments may be freely elected, but the government interferes through the instruments of ‘decrees’ and ‘emergency rule’ into the legislative process; courts may *de jure* be independent, but are *de facto* controlled, and colonized by the executive in the setting and examination of norms; governments are elected, but non-legitimized actors such as the military, religious leaders or social oligarchies such as economic interest groups claim control over certain policy areas (domains) for themselves (e.g. in the fields of security, gender, economic and taxation policies). Undoubtedly, similar ambitions and tendencies can be found among actors in democracies that are based on the rule of law as well. Yet, they differ from hybrid regimes in that the former have established not only formal, but effective controls against such claims. On the other hand, defective democracies and electoral-authoritarian regimes differ from fully authoritarian regimes in that hybrid regimes are more subject to uncontrollable contingencies that are related, in various degrees of intensity, to the outcomes of elections or political decisions. While the functioning contingency of electoral results and policy decisions generates ‘diffuse support’ (Easton 1965) through *a priori* determined and ascertained processes in democracies, this is not possible to the same extent in hybrid regimes because citizens experience a difference between the formal standards of norms on the one hand and a contradictory reality of politics on the other, which results in a delegitimization of the entire polity.

Hybrid regimes are in fact less stable than both democracies and dictatorships. The difference is considerable in comparison with democracies, and it is still visible vis-à-vis autocracies. A comparison of the percentage of ‘free’, ‘partly free’, and ‘not free’ regimes that have changed from one type to another between 1995 and 2006 results in the following graph (Figure 1).

Only 1.58% of the ‘free’ countries have left their group to join the camp of ‘partly free’ and ‘not free’ countries. 5.23% of autocratic regimes have transgressed the threshold of 5.5 (Freedom House value) in the direction of more democracy. By contrast, 7.49% of hybrid regimes have changed their respective ‘zone of regime’. However, clear trends are not discernable. During the decade following the third wave, roughly the same amount of hybrid regimes have moved into the zone of ‘free’ countries as have moved toward the category of countries rated ‘not free’. The claim of a ‘democratic rollback’ (Diamond 2008) or of ‘freedom in retreat’ (Puddington 2008) is not supported by these figures. Quite the contrary: These figures demonstrate that even partly free regimes as the

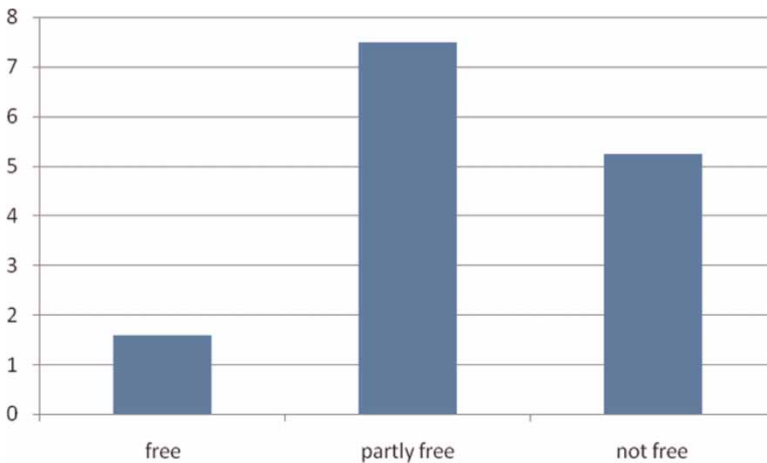


Figure 1. Regime changes (in %; 1995–2006).
 Source: Own calculations based on Freedom House (2009).

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least durable and most fragile of the three types of regimes have in fact enjoyed relative stability after the third wave of democratization had come to a halt in the mid-1990s.

Authoritarian regimes

If the hypothesis of the ‘return of autocratic rule’ was correct, we would not only expect a significant number of democracies and hybrid regimes to tend to move towards the authoritarian pole of the continuum of regimes, but we would also expect autocracies to sustain a sufficient level of stability. In 2008, Freedom House classified 43 countries as ‘not free’. These countries can be termed autocracies. Apart from a common authoritarian mode of governance, however, they take on very different forms that display quite different logics. Geddes (1999) develops a threefold typology that she then uses to accord different degrees of stability and respective life expectancies to autocracies. Military regimes have the shortest life expectancy (nine years), followed by ‘personalistic regimes’ (15 years) and, finally, one-party regimes (23 years). More interesting than the seeming statistic precision of certain numbers of years,⁷ however, is the respective logic of political rule and its consequences for the ability of these dictatorships to survive. In general, it is plausible that military regimes are the least hermetic. Often, it is not only the internal factionalization of the military and the rivalries between putschists and non-putschists; hardliners and softliners; army, marine and air force that contributes to the short life expectancy of military regimes. As Geddes stresses, it is mainly a lack of institutionalization, the lack of a legitimizing ideology and legitimacy-eating high degrees of repression that make military regimes especially vulnerable.⁸ Personalistic regimes, according to Geddes, have a medium life expectancy. They often break down with the death of the ruler and are particularly vulnerable as soon as succession looms. One-party regimes are correctly assessed as the most stable autocracies (Geddes 1999, Gandhi and Przeworski 2006). First, they draw some stability from their relatively strong institutionalization, the systemic control over resources and over the means of repression, but also from an ideology that, through whatever plausibility, can generate diffuse support. This holds true even for Stalinist North Korea and capitalist-communist China where (per-) versions of a Marxist–Leninist–Maoist ideology are kept alive in order to not let this ideological source of legitimacy run entirely dry. But while cautiously liberalizing China today depends to a large measure on the performance of its economy (*specific support*), North Korea, as the world’s only truly totalitarian regime in 2010, survives largely through isolation, repression, and some economic help from China.

A recent discussion particularly emphasizes the stabilizing role of institutions in autocratic regimes (i.e. Levitsky and Way 2002, Way 2005, Gandhi and Przeworski 2006, Schedler 2006, Gandhi 2008, Svobik 2008). The possibility of controlling the distribution of power within the ruling bloc and thereby reducing the *moral-hazard* problem among autocratic elites is found to diminish the danger of coups from within the regime. Moreover, it opened possibilities for an arranged cooptation of semi-loyal opposition into the ruling autocratic block (Gandhi and Przeworski 2006) and proved helpful in handling the higher legitimacy pressure the international donor community, with its demands for *good governance*, established over the past two decades. Yet, institutions such as parliaments, parties, and seemingly pluralist elections are also potential destabilizing forces in autocratic regimes. They not only stabilize them, but can also provide resources and fora for forces critical of the regimes in their oppositional activities. Formally democratic institutions in autocratic regimes are ambivalent and therefore produce contingent effects. Under certain circumstances, they may serve to stabilize the regime just as, under different conditions, they may also serve to destabilize it. Yet, even destabilization will only lead to promising efforts at democratization in very few cases. Structural factors, such as the ambitions of an often-undemocratic opposition, lend support to this rather sceptical outlook.

Geddes' threefold typology of the stability of autocratic regimes is only partially convincing. She misses at least two variants of autocratic systems that, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, numerically and politically play a more important role than the almost extinct model of communist one-party regimes, namely (Islamic) rentier states and failing states. Both types follow a logic of political rule that cannot be grasped by the simple threefold logic Geddes proposes. The latter are probably among the least stable non-democratic regimes. This holds true for the Arab petro-dictatorships that are often challenged by fundamentalist Islamist opposition movements, and yet even more for the collapsing African and Asian states. For the latter, instability is a downright defining trait of the anarchic fragmentation of their political rule. Instability, of course, does not mean that these countries are likely candidates for democratic regime changes. More likely is the change from one form of anarcho-autocratic rule to another. The (Arabic-Islamic) rentier states are interesting cases (Albrecht 2006, Schlumberger 2008). On the one side they turned out to be quite stable in the past. The petro-revenues helped to finance the cooptation of additional groups and sectors of the society into the ruling coalition and 'pacified' the masses by material 'spoils', preventing their transformation from subjects to citizens, from passive consumers to active protesters. However, challenged by the re-fundamentalization of Islam in the wake of the 1979 Iranian revolution, those states had increasingly to complement their stabilizing cooptation strategy by a theological form of legitimation, namely Islam. Nevertheless, the amalgamation of regime opposition and radical Islamist movements may challenge the autocratic, corrupt, and in the eyes of the radical opposition 'insufficient Islamic rule' of the rentier rulers. This will possibly destabilize the base of rentier regimes, but will probably not lead to democracy, but to a different form of autocratic rule, namely some sort of Islamic autocratic rule. So we should not expect that many of the post-rentier regimes will be democratic.

Whatever typology of autocratic rule may be constructed, indicators of modernization and conditions related to culture, society and the state suggest that a relatively stable autocratic camp has emerged. There may be oscillations between different forms of autocratic rule, but there are no theoretical or empirical hints that signal notable changes towards sustainable democratization.

The third wave of democratization coasted to a standstill during the mid-1990s, and so did the overwhelming optimism that had hypothesized a world-wide victory of democracy. As has been shown, this optimism had been partly produced 'artificially' by both political factors and the prevalence of the action-theoretical paradigm in transition studies. The group of liberal democracies is relatively stable. External shocks such as economic and financial crises are unlikely to threaten the democratic character of liberal democracy, as could be seen in the wake of the crisis of banks and the financial markets after 2008. Defective democracies, however, may come under greater stress. They might drift further towards the authoritarian camp of regimes if the financial crisis has negative long-term impacts on the real economy and eats up the fragile specific legitimacy nourished by the social and economic performance of governments. This might be true for some of the defective democracies in Latin America, where, after more than 20 years of democratic rule, the extreme economic inequality has barely changed.⁹ Combined with the failure of the state to guarantee the physical integrity of its citizens and to solve the Hobbesian problem of internal security, the weak performance could lead to a further hollowing out of the political regimes. Left-wing populist regime alternatives could spread from Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia and Nicaragua, right-wing populism in Colombia or the class rule of the rich in some Central American countries could challenge the consolidation or even survival of democracy.

However, an analysis of the period between 1995 and 2006 demonstrates that roughly similar numbers of cases from the relatively unstable camp of partly free regimes have moved towards democracy as have tended towards greater autocracy. At least this was true in economically

normal times. The number of autocratic regimes is thus unlikely to decrease significantly over the coming years; the ‘rollback-hypothesis’ put forth by Diamond and Freedom House, however, can neither be supported by figures nor by arguments. A ‘reverse wave’ is currently not to be expected, even though a fourth-wave-of-democratization scenario seems even more unlikely. In most countries, the type of political regime will hardly change over the medium term. Many factors support the proportions of the *status quo* as regards the relations between different regime types. The global systemic competition is, for the time being, frozen – though not ended.

Notes

1. O’Donnell and Schmitter (1986, p. 3) explicitly spoke about ‘transition to something else’, which is all, but not a teleological language.
2. Particularly ardent proponents of this were Przeworski (1986, 1991) and Di Palma (1990).
3. In addition, other indices of democracy such as the Bertelsmann Transformation Index show a mirror-reversed image of development, i.e. slight gains for democracy since 2006 (Bertelsmann 2006, 2009).
4. This saying is attributed to such different personalities as Karl Valentin, a Bavarian comedian, or the Danish physicist, Niels Bohr.
5. Of course, these are just statistical approaches to the question of democratic stability. They have to be contrasted and compared in each individual case with respect to the case’s destabilizing factors (and potentially existing stabilizing factors which may compensate for the former).
6. It is curious to note that Przeworski (1986, 1991) sometimes appear as a hard core rational choice theoretician and sometimes as a proponent of modernization analyses. As brilliant as both strands of analyses are, they always seem to be rather unconnected.
7. Geddes uses data that cover the period from 1946 to 1998. Most single-party regimes of this period were communist party dictatorships that lasted, as a rule, from 1946–1948 until 1989–1991. This historical peculiarity must be assumed to strongly influence statistic calculations. Neither before 1946 nor after 1998 can we expect to find similar figures. As a consequence of this selection bias, the generalizability of her persistence-hypothesis is much lower than the author suggests.
8. Moreover, we have to differentiate more between ‘bureaucratic modernization’ regimes such as those of, e.g. Latin American on the one hand, and pure enrichment-regimes run by gangster militaries in Africa on the other.
9. A notable example is Brazil where during the last 10 years the inequality of income has decreased as has the still high number of the poor and marginalized.

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