Chapter 11: Political Change: Authoritarianism and Democratization

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, students should be able to do the following:

11.1: Identify multiple organizational strategies by which authoritarian regimes maintain political control, and give country examples
11.2: Identify conditions that weaken authoritarian regimes and the organizational vulnerabilities of different types of authoritarianism
11.3: Specify key conditions that help or harm a country’s chances for successful democratization
11.4: Evaluate competing arguments for and against the notion that democracies like the United States should actively promote democracy elsewhere
11.5: Identify multiple explanations for the fall of authoritarian regimes in the Arab Spring

Review of Learning Objectives

11.1 Identify multiple organizational strategies by which authoritarian regimes maintain political control, and give country examples

To consider democracy’s future prospects, we must first understand how non-democracies maintain power. They use a variety of organizational strategies:

- Dictatorships and monarchies build networks of personal loyalty
- Military regimes use the armed forces to manage the state
- One-party regimes create huge party organizations that oversee the state
- In theocratic Iran, a religious hierarchy plays a similar role

Across all these variants, twenty-first-century authoritarians have also increasingly experimented with carefully controlled mechanisms of accountability, such as limited elections in Iran or administrative responsiveness in China. These fairly sophisticated “hybrid” mechanisms may strengthen authoritarian regimes, or may create inroads for reform or revolt.

11.2 Identify conditions that weaken authoritarian regimes and the organizational vulnerabilities of different types of authoritarianism

Authoritarian regimes occasionally succumb to invasion or diplomatic pressure, but their most common threats lie in the economy. Economic crises often encourage critics to challenge these regimes. Economic success, too, may lead to pressures for change as the growth of a strong business class empowers people who are not directly controlled by the state. Each kind of authoritarian regime tends to be vulnerable to certain kinds of challenges. The personal power of dictators often encourages corruption that citizens ultimately reject. Reliance on professional militaries in military regimes tends to invite calls for the military to return to its professional security role and leave politics to civilians. Theocracies attract similar criticisms that call for clerics to concentrate on the religious sphere rather than worldly government. Single-party regimes create professional political managers who may begin to prioritize their management tasks over loyalty to the regime, therefore becoming internal reformers. However, it is very hard to predict just when regimes might succumb to any of these vulnerabilities. Sudden waves of “contagion” can quickly shift public opinion against a regime that seemed solidly in control.
11.3 Specify key conditions that help or harm a country’s chances for successful democratization

Like with the fall of authoritarians, economic success and failure play a major role in the chances for successful establishment of a new democratic government. Economic crises that topple authoritarians also make democratization harder; democratization is more likely to succeed in an environment of economic success, coupled with a rising business class. Especially problematic are situations of “double transition,” when countries simultaneously confront major political changes and attempts to reconfigure economies for market-based growth. Citizens who feel pain from the economic transition may disrupt the political transition. Also important is the degree to which the organization of the previous regime enables its supporters to find a place in the new democratic system. Integration of dictators’ supporters is often extremely difficult, but in principle other authoritarians have better chances: militaries can return to the barracks, clerics can return to the religious sphere, and dominant parties can become one party among many. International pressure from powerful democracies can often support the establishment of democracy, but it also often provokes counterproductive reactions against external meddling.

11.4 Evaluate competing arguments for and against the notion that democracies like the United States should actively promote democracy elsewhere

Antidemocratic ideologies like fascism, Islamism, or devout socialism are not interested in promoting liberal democracy, and environmentalists tend to see it as a secondary issue. Even within the liberal tradition on which liberal democracy is built, there is substantial disagreement about whether established democracies should actively spread their model. The common modern-liberal position is that promotion of democracy abroad is a moral imperative for the same reasons we value it at home, and thus targeted support and pressure for democratization should be a core aspect of all democracies’ foreign policy. In the United States, they are echoed even more strongly by neoconservatives on the Right, who argue for using America’s military power to spread its values. Diverse voices speak up against these democracy promoters, like when traditional conservatives argue that meddling in other countries’ affairs rarely achieves positive results. Far-right libertarians are even more skeptical that government action can promote democracy successfully, as part of their general skepticism of active government. Far-left radical liberals tend to see democracy promotion as a cover for rich countries to exploit and control poorer ones.

11.5 Identify multiple explanations for the fall of authoritarian regimes in the Arab Spring

To review for this objective, try to imagine rational-material, institutional, and ideational explanations of the fall of authoritarian regimes in the Arab Spring without looking at Section 11.5. Begin by asking yourself the following questions:

- What long-term or shorter-term shifts in the material resources of these regimes or the material resources of their citizens might have led to revolutions?
- How could the institutional structure of these regimes have made them vulnerable to challenges? What institutional features might we suspect that they have lacked?
- If neither material nor institutional conditions shifted decisively before the Arab Spring, how might the spread of certain ideas have led to the Arab Spring?

After brainstorming your answers to these questions, return to Section 11.5 to see how well you have constructed plausible alternatives to explain this case.
Lecture Outline

I. Inside Authoritarianisms
   A. Organized Bases of Concentrated Control
      1. Four main ways of maintaining tight control of the state with a small number of people
         a. Personal networks
            (i) Built around one individual leader or a ruling family
         b. Militaries
            (i) Already tightly organized
         c. Dominant parties
            (i) Used by the most sophisticated authoritarian regimes
            (ii) Best example today: China
         d. Religious leadership
            (i) World’s only partial theocracy: Iran
   B. Not Grandpa’s Authoritarianism: Managed Accountability and Hybrid Regimes
      1. Authoritarian regimes of the past overtly dismissed democracy
         a. Examples: Soviets, Nazis, and early Chinese Communists
      2. Only a few countries continue that model today
         a. Examples: North Korea and Turkmenistan
      3. Others find ways for citizens to participate
         a. Examples: China, Iran, etc.
      4. Iran
         a. Elections with universal adult suffrage
         b. Some real contestation
            (i) Regime would likely block any truly threatening candidate, legislation, or election
      5. China
         a. Purer authoritarian regime
         b. Permits elections for village councils
         c. Influence of Yu Keping’s article, “Democracy Is a Good Thing”
      6. Overlap with abusive illiberal democracies (partial forms of managed accountability)
         a. Russia
         b. Tunisia and Egypt before Arab Spring
         c. Many other examples in Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia

II. How Authoritarians Fall
   A. War and International Pressure
      1. Military pressure
         a. Regimes in Germany and Japan defeated in World War II
         b. Soviet Union collapsed at the end of the Cold War
         c. United States and allies intervened in Yugoslavia, Somalia, Afghanistan, and Iraq
      2. Nonmilitary pressure
         a. Comprehensive economic sanctions
         b. Targeted economic sanctions
         c. Conditionality (carrot at the end of the stick)
         d. Civil society programs
      3. Most common reasons for fall of authoritarian regimes, in order
         a. An internal coup
         b. Popular uprisings
c. Voluntary resignation to make way for democracy

4. Pressure has been ambiguous or counterproductive
   a. Democratic countries send mixed signals
   b. Democratic countries’ efforts may unintentionally reinforce authoritarian regimes

B. Economic Crises and Authoritarian Transitions
1. Democratic and authoritarian regimes in poor countries tend to collapse
2. Democratic and authoritarian regimes in wealthy countries tend to be stable
3. Democracy tends to “stick” better than authoritarianism in middle-income countries
4. Reasons authoritarian regimes in middle-income countries tend to collapse
   a. Lack ways to blame crises on old leaders and bring in new ones
   b. Regime’s legitimacy depends on its ability to deliver services for citizens, rather than an electoral process

C. Economic Success and Challenges to Authoritarianism
1. Most common cause given for fall of monarchies across Europe: growth
   a. Short term: growth stabilizes any regime
   b. Long term: markets weaken centralized control
      (i) Commercial sector spreads information and education
      (ii) Business class values rights to do as they wish
      (iii) People outside the state develop resources
2. Recent examples: Taiwan and South Korea
   a. Authoritarian regimes into the 1980s
      (i) Pro-capitalist regimes opposed to Communist China, North Korea, and the Soviet Union
      (ii) Allied with United States, exported goods to huge American markets
      (iii) Protests became democratization movements
      (iv) Full liberal democracy by the 1990s

D. Organization and Authoritarian Vulnerability
1. Returning the military to the barracks
   a. Short average lifespans of military regimes
   b. Militaries are not designed to be governing bodies
   c. Some officers may prefer a normal military role in a new regime
      (i) Example: Egypt
2. Personal Networks and Corruption
   a. Personal dictatorships generally become corrupt
      (i) Examples: Haiti, Syria, Democratic Republic of the Congo
      (ii) Leaders directly reward loyalists and enrich themselves
      (iii) Often use violence to maintain power
         (a) Cronies know they will have no role in future governments if the regime falls
         (b) Examples: Syria and Libya
3. Professional authoritarians and internal reformers
   a. Single-party regimes tend to last longer than other types of authoritarian regimes
   b. Example: China
   c. Can better manage perceptions of corruption
      (i) Anticorruption campaigns target lower-level officials
   d. Broad, impersonal organizations able to transfer power at top levels more easily than dictators and military regimes can
   e. Huge parties can fall due to internal reformers
4. Returning the clerics to the seminaries?
   a. Iran’s regime has some of the advantages of a single-party system
   b. Supreme Leader claims divine authority
   c. Failure to provide material benefits less likely to affect clerics’ status
   d. Not immune from accusations of corruption and embezzlement
   e. Complaints from Iranian business sectors about international isolation
   f. Like military leaders, religious leaders are not trained politicians

5. Collective action and “contagion”
   a. Citizens’ dissatisfaction in Eastern Europe in 1989 and in Egypt, Syria, and Libya in 2011 was obvious, but no one expected such rapid collapse
   b. Waves of rebellion as people realize revolt is possible

III. Challenges of Democratization
   A. Economic Growth and Democracy’s Foundations
      1. Modernization theory
         a. All modern countries will eventually develop similar features
         b. Economic development and democracy go hand in hand
         c. Schumpeter: “Democracy is a product of the capitalist process.”
      2. Modern criticism of modernization theory
         a. Not all countries that embraced democracy were wealthy capitalist countries
            (i) The United States was a preindustrial society that would be considered very poor today
         b. Rich countries do tend to be democratic because democracy “sticks” better at higher levels of development
         c. Democratic countries that surpass middle-income levels almost never return to authoritarianism
            (i) Economic growth helps democrats consolidate democracy
         d. Predictions for China
            (i) Some still believe capitalism will inevitably lead to democracy
            (ii) Most believe China’s bourgeoisie may continue to support authoritarian regime
               (a) Fear of instability, nationalist rejection of Western models, and cultural focus on the good of the community over individual rights
   B. The Challenge of Double Transitions
      1. Starting a new democracy in economic crisis is difficult
         a. Eastern Europe after 1989: entire command economy was scrapped
            (i) Leaders’ two fears: (a) Voters would end painful economic reforms, undercutting the economic transition (b) Voters would turn to authoritarian leaders, ending the political transition
            (ii) Transition did cause broad economic collapse in some countries
            (iii) Some voters did limit economic reform or elect illiberal leaders
         b. Latin America: challenges in economic development after the debt crisis
            (i) Pressure to adopt the “Washington Consensus”
            (ii) Results were mixed
   C. Deals with the Devil: Opposition, Pacts, and Democratic Consolidation
      1. Dilemmas after World War II regarding supporters of defeated regimes in Germany and Japan
a. Oppressive groups had to be prevented from returning to power, but the new government needed their experience to operate  
b. All surviving leaders were tied to the old regimes since they had eliminated opposition while in power  
c. Allies tried to rehabilitate the lower-level leaders and bring them into democracy, despite moral qualms  

2. Fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime  
a. U.S.-led occupation dismissed Hussein’s party leaders and disbanded the army  
   (i) Left no incentives for them to participate in building democracy  
   (ii) Fed ethnic and religious tensions  

3. Fall of dictatorships in Southern Europe in 1970s and Latin America in the 1980s  
a. Pacts with members of the old regimes helped transitions to democracy take root  

4. Prediction for Iraq, Egypt, and Afghanistan  
a. Consolidating democracy may require pacts with Islamic fundamentalists  

D. Benefits and Costs of International Support  
1. Supporting democracy a priority for United States, Canada, and Europe after the end of the Cold War  
a. Mainly focused on post-communist Europe, then on Middle East  
b. Benefits  
   (i) International agencies and NGOs have helped set up constitutions, improve education, develop free media, etc.  
c. Costs  
   (i) Pressure to please outsiders since they have the resources  
   (ii) Pro-democratic groups can look like tools of foreigners  

IV. Political Ideologies and the Promotion of Democracy  
A. Democracy Promotion as the Key to a Just and Safe World  
1. Wilsonian interventionism: need to “make the world safe for democracy”  
2. Modern liberals prefer support and incentives rather than force  
a. Except in grave humanitarian situations, such as Obama’s intervention in Libya  
3. Recently, Wilson’s view shared by neoconservatives  
a. 2003 invasion of Iraq  

B. Democracy Promotion as Risky, Arrogant, or Disingenuous  
1. Conservatism: we should mind our business  
a. Outside meddling can strengthen nationalism and therefore authoritarian regimes  
b. Reliance on outside support may weaken democracy in the long run  
c. Realism: utopian crusades in a dangerous world are pointless and risky  
   (i) Republican opponents of Iraq invasion  
   (ii) Tea Party Republicans and libertarians  
2. Left and far left: democracy promotion abroad can be immoral and misleading  
a. Reflects righteousness and pride  
b. Akin to a religious mission  
c. Invasion of Iraq was motivated by oil interests, not altruism  

V. Explaining Cases: Uncovering the Whys of the Arab Spring  
A. The Rational-Material Story  
1. Huge demographic rise of young people  
2. Economy weakened by the Great Recession  
3. Empowering effect of technology and social media
4. Democratization will succeed only if economy grows in an open, decentralized way

B. The Institutional Story
   1. Arab Spring countries had the most personalized dictatorships in Arab world
      a. Top leaders were seen as corrupt
   2. Democratization will depend on institutions designed to encourage participation from all groups

C. The Ideational Story
   1. Effect of countries’ political cultures and citizens’ ideas
   2. Democratization will require recasting identities so that democracy is seen as compatible with Islamic and Arabic nationalisms

D. Research on Within-Case Processes
   1. Study the processes that led to the uprisings

E. Research on Cross-Case Patterns

VI. Conclusion: Why the Future of Democratization Matters to You
   A. Citizens’ Prospects Tied to Fates of Political Regimes around the World