



Eritrea Symposium 2022

Need for a Shared Vision for a Stable Transition



Empowering the People's Agency in Democratic Transition

Seamless Progression of Change into Democratic Transition

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This topic has two parts which are strongly related to one another:

Seamless progression of change and democratic transition

- Seamless change means in this context continuous, flowing, easy or agreeable type of change, and it is opposite to discontinuous, stumble, difficult type of change.
- The transitional phase or period has its own mechanisms in the establishment for a phase completely different from the previous one. It is open to the possibilities of regression or progression toward the establishment of a permanent political solution/system.
- “National Unity” is very crucial in the transitional period. Unity in the sense of bringing together the different parties who are interested in and interact with the requirements of the democratic transition and are engaged in establishing a new political and economic system.

- Any democratic transition period is often accompanied by ideological conflicts based on identities, political affiliations, etc ... which contribute to wasting energies and weakening the capabilities of the democratic progress.
- What is needed in any transition is a strategic alliance between various political actors against the supposed representatives of the previous regime in its political, economic and social structures.
- The role of the political actors or elites is considered to be the most crucial in managing democratic transition.
- Elites, as a product of their society at a certain stage of history, must undertake the task to change the “paradigm” of the collective mind “paradigm shift”.
- The elites are supposed to have a better understanding and interaction with cultural, political and social realities.

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- Elites draw strategies and formulate tactics that establish a state that prevent setback or regression of the democratic transition in all its multiple meanings.
  - They work to monitor the areas of regression and provide the appropriate and urgent solution to the contradictions of society by modifying the compass of the cultural and political choices.
  - The importance of the elite in this context is that it is a leading segment, not in the sense of a hierarchical structure, but in the sense of being preoccupied with issues of the people.
  - In the process of any democratic transition we are required to pay close attention to the deep differences that characterize societies.
  - Any transition experience differs in the sense of: a) Every experience is unique, there is no match or similarity between two experiences, b) It has to fulfill victory of the new system over the old one, c) Geopolitical dimension has a crucial role, and finally, d) The accumulated experience of the people has a decisive role.

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- The last few decades witnessed the most remarkable developments toward political democracy, referred to as “the third wave of democratization”. Eritrea became independent during what is known to be “the third wave of democratization”, but unfortunately our country did not join that wave or club of countries.
  - Some scholars focused on the various causes of regime change. They placed major emphasis on the prerequisite for democratization on socioeconomic development, political culture, and the role of civil society.
  - Studies of democratic transition can be loosely grouped into two categories: studies that focus on the objective conditions of regime transformation, and those that concentrate on political strategies and choices.
  - There are four theoretical approaches: structure-oriented approach, process-oriented approach, institutional context-oriented approach and political economy approach.

**The most famous among them are four:**

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### **1) Structuralist approach**

This approach is dominated much of the political science scholarship of Latin America and Southern Europe in the 1960s and 1970s. Some scholars of this approach assume that economic development, political culture, class conflict, social structures, and other social conditions can explain particular outcomes of the transition. They sought to explain the causes and effects of democracy and the nature of their relationships. They found a positive correlation between democracy and economic development, and causal influences of the level of wealth, industrialization, urbanization, and education on democratization, and the role of civic culture, class conflict and interest groups. Certain social and political structures must be in place before democracy can be inaugurated

## 2) Strategic choice approach

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This type of approach challenges the structuralist one and focuses on the interaction of the elite strategic choices as a possible explanation for the success or failure of democratic transition. The advocates of this approach focused on the role of elites and their strategic choices, splits within the authoritarian regime, and the compromise between the “soft-liners” and “hard-liners”. They believe also in the autonomy of political process rather than the economic determinants of political change. The critical role of elites and their strategic choice and the compromise between the “soft-liners” and the “hard-liners” “elite dispositions, calculations and pacts” largely determine whether or not an opening to democracy will occur at all. They give special attention to the negotiated arguments between the ruling elites and opposition elites to accept democracy as the best regime form under given conditions, if the right steps in the process of regime transition were undertaken.

### 3) Institutional approach

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Emphasizes on the impact of institutions on the formation of policies and political actions. The role of institutions in shaping and constraining the objectives and preferences of political actors is stressed. The changes in the state - society relations play a crucial role in democratic transition. Historically created, pre-existing structures and institutions can be the confining conditions that determine the very parameters of political action.



## 4) Political economy approach

This approach focuses on the interplay between politics and economy as explanatory variables determining variations in the transition outcome. Political and economic reforms should go hand in hand. During the transition process, economic conditions may affect the capacity of the ruling elites to determine the timing and nature of their withdrawal from authoritarianism. One of the underlying assumptions was the correlation between economic crisis and regime change. In cases such as China, economic liberalization was pursued first at the expense of political liberalization. After the economic reform strategy was put into place, there was no guarantee that authoritarian elites would choose to carry through with political democratization.

## Critical review:

- Structuralist approach helps us to understand why the old regime is challenged but cannot tell us why and how the elites make the change in one way or another. One of the weaknesses of this approach is that it argues that democracy can be duplicated from earlier democratic experiences.
- Strategic choice approach is an elitist model, and fails to explain how the elites make their choices in a particular context that confines their preferences and calculations of the costs and benefits of different transition strategies. The process of transition is temporary, uncertain and unpredictable.
- Institutional approach tries to use the strengths of both the structural and the strategic choice approach. The challenging question to this approach will be why different structures produce different outcomes. There must be some unexplained variables that affect regime change in different ways although the preexisting socioeconomic structures and political institutions are similar.
- Political economy approach emphasizes the economic determinants of political change and democratization. In this approach economic crisis have deterministic and explanatory role in leading to regime transformation. This can be true in some countries but not in all.

## Reference

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- Issues and studies 35, no. 4 (July/August 1999) pp. 133-148.  
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