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The Phenomenon of Democratic Transition in Political Systems: A Conceptual Study

ظاهرة التحول الديمقراطي في الأنظمة السياسية : دراسة مفاهيمية

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Abstract:

This research paper explores the shifts towards democratic reform observed across various political systems. It seeks to clarify the essence of democratic transition, charting the phases it encompasses, and delineating the predominant patterns and manifestations it may adopt. Furthermore, the study investigates the key indicators of democratic transition and the challenges it potentially encounters.

Concluding that democratic transition is inherently a protracted process, it follows a chronological progression beginning with the dismantling of authoritarian regimes and culminating in the enhancement and consolidation of democratic norms. Central to this transition are foundational principles such as political and party pluralism, the integrity and regularity of elections, the assurance of peaceful power transitions, and the establishment of robust political institutions.

Keywords: Democratic Transition , Political System, Democratic Transition Indicators, Democratic Transition Obstacles.

الملخص:

اتجهت العديد من النظم السياسية إلى الإصلاح الديمقراطي، وهو ما تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية لدراسته، حيث تسعى إلى الإلمام بمفهوم التحول الديمقراطي والمراحل التي يمر بها، وكذلك أهم الأنماط والأشكال التي يمكن أن يعرفها التحول الديمقراطي، كما تسعى إلى رصد مؤشرات وجوده وما يمكن أن يواجهه من عقبات. لتخلص الدراسة بأن عملية التحول الديمقراطي هي عملية طويلة المدى تقوم على تتابع زمني، بدءاً بالقضاء على النظام السلطوي وصولاً إلى مرحلة تعزيز وترسيخ هذا التحول الديمقراطي، كما يقوم التحول الديمقراطي على أسس أهمها، التعددية السياسية والحزبية ونزاهة ودورية الانتخابات، وضمان تداول سلمي على السلطة ووجود مؤسسات سياسية فعالة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التحول الديمقراطي، النظام السياسي، مؤشرات التحول الديمقراطي، معوقات التحول الديمقراطي.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the latter half of the 20th century, "Democratic Transition" or "Democratization" has emerged as a focal topic within political science discourse. Scholarly literature on this subject has extensively explored various concepts, theoretical frameworks, and methodological and analytical approaches pertinent to this phenomenon. It has scrutinized a plethora of issues and variables associated with the transition process, encompassing its antecedents (causes), methodologies (transition mechanisms), and consequences (the nature of political systems post-transition).

In light of significant developments and transitions within the political landscape, marked by the shift from authoritarian to democratic regimes in numerous regions, particularly in Arab countries over the past two decades, a myriad of challenges has surfaced, prompting pivotal inquiries among thinkers and scholars in political science. These inquiries concern the methods, approaches, and tools of analysis, as well as the conceptual and theoretical models employed in comparative politics or comparative political systems.

This publication addresses these critical issues by examining key concepts and theoretical propositions that facilitate the democratic transition process. It defines the concept of democratic transition, monitors and analyzes the causative factors, explores the various methods through which the transition occurs, and evaluates the outcomes of this process, especially concerning the consolidation of democracy in the post-transition phase.

2. The Concept of Democratic Transition and its stages

First: The Concept of Democratic Transition

Transition meaning:

The term "transition" linguistically denotes change or transfer. It describes the act of altering something, moving it from one place to another, or transitioning it from one state to another. In common usage, one might say an object was transformed from one form to another, or a person was transformed through advice or admonition.¹

The word "transition" in English corresponds to moving or passing from one state, stage, or place to another.² When we talk about democratic transition, we refer to the intermediate phase between a non-democratic and a democratic regime. A political system undergoing this change is in the midst of moving from an undemocratic state towards becoming a democratic regime.³

Defining this concept precisely can be challenging as there is no universal definition accepted by all scholars and democracy experts. However, several influential definitions stand out. For example, Professor "Samuel Huntington " defined the wave of democratization as a series of transitions from non-democratic systems to democratic systems within a specific period, with these movements outnumbering any regression during the same time.⁴

"Charles Andrian" described it as a transition from one system to another, signifying a change in the existing system and the policymaking methods it employs. He refers to this as a change between systems, meaning profound shifts across the system's cultural, structural, and policy dimensions. These shifts often arise from

contradictions within these dimensions, leading to the old system's inability to manage under its previous framework and methods.

Therefore, democratic transition can be viewed as a series of distinct stages starting with the dismantling of authoritarian regimes, followed by the rise of nascent democracies that strive to solidify their systems. This transition involves a redistribution of power, diminishing the state's dominance in favor of civil society institutions and fostering a balance between state and society. This process entails the emergence of multiple power centers and the acceptance of political discourse.⁵

"Huntington" emphasized the critical link between legitimacy and waves of democratic transition in his analysis, underscoring that all political systems grapple with issues of legitimacy. Echoing Jean-Jacques Rousseau, he noted, "One who holds power can only sustain it if he transforms this power into a rightful claim to govern and an obligation for the populace to comply."⁶

Democratic transition is often understood as the process by which methods and rules for resolving conflicts peacefully are established. This evolution leads to the creation of a democratic constitution, the conduct of free and fair elections, and the expansion of political participation. These changes are seen as essential for the growth and democratization of the political system.

This transition involves a shift from an authoritarian system, characterized by relationships based on control and compliance, and often enforced through deterrence, to a more democratic system where relationships are founded on leadership that inspires obedience rather than submission. This new system is marked

by societal consensus, which confers legitimacy and allows a designated group to make political decisions and translate them into legal norms.

Samuel Huntington notably began the study of democratic transition by introducing the concept of "waves of democratic transition." He identified three main waves: from 1828 to 1926, 1943 to 1962, and 1974 to the present.⁷ These waves highlight the phenomenon's dependence on certain foundational conditions, including the renunciation of coup ideologies, economic stability, religious reform, and the absence of external threats.⁸

Democratic transition, therefore, aims to reevaluate the power dynamics within the political system and restore balance between formal state forces and informal institutions, such as civil society organizations. This change is not merely administrative but is a profound overhaul at all system levels.

The diversity in the definitions of democratic transition reflects each thinker's perspective and the particular variables they emphasize to describe this process. Generally, the path of democratic transition can experience numerous setbacks and is influenced by many internal and external factors.

Summarizing procedurally, democratic transition is an extensive process that fundamentally concerns human rights and the activation of citizenship principles, including equality and public freedoms. It upholds the rule of law, respects national sovereignty, and embraces the popular will.

Its narrative encompasses the implementation of competitive, free, and fair elections and extends, ultimately, to fostering societal development and elevating nations to higher levels of progress and prosperity. This development aims to

achieve greater stability and balance across social, political, and economic dimensions.⁹

Second: Stages of Democratic Transition

“Rostow Dancourt” divided the steps of democratic transition to four stages are :

- **Initial stage:** This phase marks the formation of a broad consensus on national identity, accompanied by an overwhelming agreement to accept the political boundaries of the state in question.
- **Conflict emergence stage:** This stage witnesses either a violent or a peaceful confrontation among various social segments or classes within the new political entity. This confrontation concludes either with a decisive victory for one group, which obstructs progress towards democracy, or with the establishment of a new social equilibrium.
- **Political decision-making stage:** Amidst ongoing conflicts, stakeholders engage in negotiations and craft compromise solutions, grounded in rational assessments of gains and losses.
- **Consolidation stage:** The future of democracy remains in flux until it gradually evolves into a routine practice and is internalized as a social norm.¹⁰

In parallel, other scholars such as “O’Donnell, Schein” and “Linz” have expanded upon Rostow's framework by emphasizing the transitional phase. Accordingly, they propose a four-stage model for democratic transition:¹¹

A - Dismantling the Authoritarian Regime:

This stage is characterized by intense conflicts aimed at fulfilling the aspirations of those leading the transition. It involves defining the rules of the political landscape and identifying the players allowed to participate. The disintegration of the authoritarian regime does not inevitably lead to the establishment of a democratic government.

Failures may occur due to resistance from elites, both military and civilian, who are antagonistic to change, or due to the absence of favorable social, economic, and cultural conditions and institutions.

B - Deciding on democratic transition:

The decision to undertake democratic transition is made in response to pressures from both domestic and international environments, aimed at adaptation and self-preservation. During this stage, the institutions of the authoritarian regime may coexist with those of the emerging democratic regime, necessitating a power-sharing arrangement between democrats and authoritarians, achieved through either conflict or consensus.

C - The Stage of strengthening the democratic system:

This stage acknowledges the realization among key political actors that democratic processes are indispensable for attaining power. Democratic cohesion is facilitated by phasing out remnants of the old authoritarian regime and simultaneously establishing new institutions that foster democratic governance.

Key to this stage is the elite’s acceptance of inclusive electoral participation and the establishment of civilian control over the

military. Ensuring that the military and its related agencies are under the governance of an elected civilian authority helps solidify democratic support and unity.¹²

D - The stage of democratic maturity:

This stage focuses on enhancing democratic governance and increasing citizens' capacity to participate effectively, thus promoting social welfare. Social democracy is achieved when citizens fully exercise their rights and responsibilities. John Luca describes the democratic process as an expansion of citizenship, making it accessible to previously excluded individuals and extending it to encompass issues and institutions not formerly engaged in democratic participation. Concurrently, economic democracy is pursued to ensure equitable distribution of economic benefits among all individuals.

3. Modes of Democratic Transition and its Forms .

First : Modes of Democratic Transition

In his analysis of democratic transitions, Samuel Huntington identifies four primary patterns:

- **Transition pattern:** Here, the ruling elite of a totalitarian or authoritarian regime spearheads the democratic transition. This elite plays a central role in dismantling the old regime and fostering a new democratic framework.¹³ Often termed as a transition from above¹⁴, this mode typically results in a limited democracy where power remains concentrated within a small group of elites who dominate political and economic spheres. This pattern has been prevalent in numerous democratic

transitions across Latin America and some Asian nations.¹⁵

- **Transplacement style:** This pattern emerges through collaborative efforts between ruling and opposition elites.¹⁶ The objective is to resolve elite conflicts, bolster their influence, and tailor political processes to serve their interests, thereby ensuring political stability post-transition.

It aims to integrate the elites into a robust democratic structure that safeguards their interests. If the elites do not perceive the new system as protective of their interests, they are unlikely to acknowledge its legitimacy, potentially undermining the democratic transition.¹⁷

- **Replacement pattern:** This pattern of transition emerges under the weight of popular pressure¹⁸, often triggered by a national crisis that leads to extensive mass mobilization against the regime, which fails to resolve the crisis. Known as Transition from Below¹⁹, this transition is propelled by grassroots-level pressures.

According to Huntington, the prospects for stable democracy under this pattern are slim, as the possibility of authoritarian regimes reemerging in new forms persists.²⁰

- **Foreign intervention pattern:** In this scenario, the catalyst for transition is external intervention and pressure²¹. Beyond direct military involvement, the influence of foreign nations and international institutions that provide economic aid plays a significant role in shaping the decisions toward democratic transition in some economically challenged authoritarian regimes. Instances of this pattern are

seen in American interventions in Haiti, Panama, and Somalia during the 1990s, as well as in Iraq more recently.²²

In the context of the Maghreb countries, democratic practices have predominantly been initiated through top-down decisions. These decisions, often reactive to internal pressures and fears of political upheaval, have led to numerous issues and challenges. These democratic openings were not born out of a deep-rooted conviction in the value of democracy as a mechanism for managing the societies of the Maghreb.

Second : Forms of Democratic Transition

The route to democratic transition can manifest either through peaceful means, rooted in a conviction of the value of such governance, or through violent means, which often result in significant losses for those involved.

A - Peaceful Transition:

This form of change occurs without resort to violence, often initiated by the ruling authority out of a recognition of the need for change and adaptation to new data and circumstances. Alternatively, it can result from external pressures not escalating to violence, such as when the populace refuses to cooperate with the regime.

This non-cooperation can manifest in work stoppages by employees and laborers, effectively reducing rulers to the status of ordinary individuals.²³

The mechanisms of peaceful change include transition, adaptation, non-violent coercion, and dissolution. During the transition phase, the authority recognizes the legitimacy of the opposition's goals.

In the adaptation phase, the government offers limited concessions designed not for radical change but to forestall further demands. The phases of nonviolent coercion and dissolution mark the beginnings of a shift in power dynamics, ultimately leading to comprehensive change.²⁴

B - Violent Transition:

This form of transition employs violence as a means of regime change, either among members of the ruling elite through a military coup, or by popular revolution²⁵discontent into a revolutionary force that disrupts the regime's foundation.

Historically, the mode of transition significantly influences the quality and stability of the emerging democratic system. Smooth and peaceful transitions, whether initiated by the ruling elite, negotiated between ruling and opposition forces, or achieved through peaceful popular uprisings, tend to result in a higher degree of democracy with better prospects for its sustainability and consolidation.

Conversely, violent transitions often lead to lesser degrees of democracy and reduced chances for the continuity and stability of the democratic system. Such scenarios increase the likelihood of reverting to authoritarianism or descending into internal conflicts or civil wars. Transitions resulting from external military interventions have seen varied outcomes, with success in a few instances and failures in many, each influenced by specific circumstances and factors.²⁶

4. Indicators of Democratic Transition and its Obstacles.

First : Indicators of Democratic Transition .

Drawing from the aforementioned stages, we identify the indicators of a democratic transition:

- **The constitution:** This document serves as the fundamental framework of the state and the ultimate reference for the political entity, outlining the rights and responsibilities of citizens among other provisions.
- **Public freedoms:** These include individual and group rights to express opinions, the freedom to conduct scientific research, and the right to hold differing views. This category also encompasses freedoms related to opinion, expression, organization, press, and an effective system for communication and information exchange.²⁷
- **Political pluralism:** As a direct manifestation of public freedoms, political pluralism affords various societal forces the opportunity to engage the populace, thereby influencing governance. Absence of such pluralism negates the existence of a democratic environment.
- **Representative system:** This principle fosters political participation, a requisite for democracy, and facilitates the establishment of legislative authority, a cornerstone of the modern national state. Alan Turin notes that a crisis in political representation has arisen in numerous countries, attributing this to reduced public engagement.²⁸
- **The Peaceful transfer of power:** This is a pivotal indicator of democratic transition. It necessitates that the transfer of power among various political forces aligns with the general electoral results and reflects the electorate's choices.

- **Integrity of elections:** The hallmark of democratic governance is the conduct of elections that are free, fair, and devoid of violence. This encompasses the constitutional election of executive officials, legislative members, and ensuring that all legally eligible individuals can vote and run for office.²⁹
- **Separation of powers:** This principle is crucial for maintaining a balance of power, allowing each branch of government to check and balance the others within their respective limits, while fostering cooperative interactions that ensure the state effectively serves its society.
- **The Political Institution:** It involves institutionalizing civil society organizations, encompassing various components and fundamental actors.³⁰

Second: Obstacles of Democratic Transition:

The shift to democracy in countries rooted in non-democratic governance presents significant challenges.

This transition presupposes that rulers either voluntarily relinquish their powers and privileges, an exception rather than the rule, or are compelled to do so by democratic forces within society capable of both instigating and sustaining democratic governance.³¹

Consequently, the prerequisites for implementing democracy in Arab nations are currently misaligned with the necessary democratic culture. Societies enter the democratic process while still divided over fundamental issues related to citizenship, statehood, and constitutional values.

While parliaments in established democracies debate everyday matters such as taxes, health, education, and internet

policies, the democratic indicators in Arab countries often reflect a descent into sectarianism and factionalism. This raises critical questions about the future of these democratic experiments: Will they progress, or are they doomed to regress?

Historical patterns from the 1980s and 1990s showed promising starts to reforms that ultimately stalled. The shifts towards liberalization did not lead to genuine democratic transitions, and the Arab world witnessed the ascent of radical ideologies and violent movements.³²

In general, we can delineate the principal challenges to the democratic process *in Arab countries as follows:

1. Entrenched elites:

The persistence of the current ruling elites, whether those of hereditary royal lineage or technocratic backgrounds, hinders democratic transition. Despite constitutional provisions and formal mechanisms, practical experience indicates the difficulty, if not impossibility, of altering the regime's leadership or its foundational structure.

This challenge is exacerbated in military political systems that rely on the legitimacy of force to maintain power.³³

Dr. Mahmoud Al-Majzoub posits that in Arab regimes, the executive branch is disproportionately powerful, bolstering the dominant political party, even when it lacks significant public support.³⁴

2. Social and political structures:

The limited scope and effectiveness of modern social forces, coupled with the persistent view of the tribe as the primary social unit, impede progress. Maghreb society, for example, is transitioning from a traditional stage dominated by inheritance to a more achievement-oriented stage.

Democracy necessitates pluralism, which includes vibrant political parties and ideological competition manifesting through reasonably fair elections, conditions compromised by tribal, sectarian, or patronage-based biases.³⁵

3. Weak opposition:

The absence of a robust political opposition capable of effectuating change through its ideas, orientations, and stances is a significant barrier. Unlike some European experiences where the opposition has successfully ascended to power, in Arab countries, meaningful opposition achievements are scarce and often superficial, as exemplified by the experience in Morocco. Various interpretations have been offered to justify the perpetuation of the ruling regimes in light of these dynamics.

4. Political and legal constraints:

Numerous restrictions on political pluralism and the activities of political parties further complicate the landscape. Laws governing parties often impose hurdles that prevent their formation and growth, especially when these parties are tied to religious, ethnic, or sectarian identities.

Additionally, electoral laws in Arab countries tend to favor the dominant party, which consistently secures a disproportionate share of seats and benefits from biased electoral mechanisms. These laws not only facilitate the use of violence, sometimes by the ruling parties themselves, but also encourage the proliferation of independents in the political arena, a phenomenon that deviates from the conventional party-based political process.

5. Union and professional involvement in politics:

The involvement of unions and professional organizations in political activities and their exploitation during electoral periods is a recurrent theme in Arab experiences. This involvement often serves as a tool for political maneuvering rather than genuine professional advocacy.

6. Absence or disruption of actual popular participation:

When political institutions fail to translate public demands into concrete decisions and policies, they become perceived as ineffective or even redundant. This ineffectiveness leads to public disillusionment about the utility of these institutions, resulting in low participation rates and a diminished sense of civic duty.

7. Weakness of representative institutions:

Representative bodies, such as parliaments, often fall short in performing their core function, to accurately represent and advocate for the interests of constituents. When legislative decisions do not align with the public's needs or beliefs, it undermines the value of political participation and hampers the prospects for genuine democratic transition.³⁶

8. Disregard for human rights in maghreb political systems:

A prevailing disregard for human rights within Maghreb political systems often stems from a belief among some leaders that democratic processes, such as elections and representative governance, hinder development and the execution of strategic plans.³⁷

9. Non-application of constitutional texts:

Despite constitutional guarantees for party formation, freedom of opinion, and pluralism, citizens often live under oppression and lack assurance about their safety, rights, and freedoms. This contradiction between constitutional promises and practical implementation is marked by:

- A. Legal and bureaucratic barriers that inhibit the exercise of constitutionally guaranteed rights, with many constitutions delegating the regulation of these rights to restrictive laws.
- B. Observations that political power tends to be monopolized by the same factions that advocate for political participation, yet restrict it in practice.³⁸

Conclusion:

The discourse on democratic transition will persist as a central theme in comparative politics research for the foreseeable future. This sustained focus is driven by the emergence of new research avenues within this domain. Transitioning to a democratic system and ensuring its stabilization and continuity is inherently complex, often requiring an extended timeframe to achieve.

Transitioning from a non-democratic regime does not, by itself, guarantee the establishment of a robust and stable democracy. Such a transition demands numerous preconditions and a matured framework to be successfully realized.

In general, the critical outcomes of studies in this area can be outlined as follows:

- ✓ Democratic transition, as a process of evolving from non-democratic to more democratic systems, rests on

several foundational principles including political and party pluralism, the integrity and regularity of elections, ensuring a peaceful transfer of power, and the presence of effective political institutions.

- ✓ The journey toward democracy is inherently lengthy, unfolding through a defined sequence. It begins with the dismantling of the authoritarian regime, moves through a transitional phase, and culminates in the reinforcement and stabilization of democratic structures.
- ✓ There is no uniform path to democracy. The global landscape of democratic transitions reveals a variety of approaches, each shaped by specific circumstances and characteristics unique to each context.
- ✓ Free and fair elections are cornerstone mechanisms of a democratic system, essential for legitimizing governments and enabling genuine representation.
- ✓ Democracy cannot be imported or imposed from external sources; it must be nurtured from within, intertwined with a country's economic, social, and cultural fabric. External entities can support this growth, but the foundational development must be indigenous.
- ✓ Every nation transitioning towards democracy must craft institutional and procedural frameworks that not only uphold democratic ideals but also resonate with and respect its unique social, civilizational, and cultural contexts.

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* _” Winston Churchill” expressed his famous saying, "Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others." While this saying is taken as being in favor of liberal representative democracy, it is in fact an expression of doubt, and whatever the slogans, political analysts and politicians doubt extremely of representative democracy as an effective way to manage governments. From the reference: Eric Hobsbawm, Globalization, Democracy and Terrorism, (translated by: Akram Hamdan and Nazeah Tayeb), first edition, Al Jazeera Center for Studies, Arab Scientific Publishers, Doha, Beirut, 2009, p 86_.

³³ _Jandli Abdel Nasser, Strategic Transformations in International Relations since the End of the Cold War, Dar Qana for Publishing and Binding, Algeria, 2010, p181.

³⁴ _ Omar Ferhati, "Obstacles to Democratic Transition in Arab Countries" Journal of Human Sciences, Issue 29, 2008, p 142.

³⁵ Burhan Ghalioun, A Statement for Democracy, Fifth Edition, Arab Cultural Center, Beirut, 2006, p14.

³⁶ _ Omar Farhati, Op.cit , p. 144.

³⁷ _ Lajjal Ajjal Muhammad Lamine, previous reference, pp. 54 to 57.

³⁸ _ Omar Farhati, previous reference

³⁹ _Burhan Ghalioun, A Statement for Democracy, Fifth Edition, Arab Cultural Center, Beirut, 2006, p. 14.