CCE-069 | What Are the Paths from Authoritarianism to Democracy?

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Abstract:

What happens after the leader of an authoritarian regime steps down? Statistics compiled by comparative politics scholars Barbara Geddes and others on 280 authoritarian regimes from 1946 to 2010 show that leadership changes in postwar authoritarian regimes led to democratization in fewer than one quarter of cases. After regimes collapsed, transitions to another form of authoritarianism were more common than transitions to democracy [1]. This article therefore does not ask whether a transition will happen, but how a

crucial step was taken in transitions that did occur. It selects four cases for which official archives or authoritative secondary sources are available—the Republic of China (Taiwan), South Korea, Spain, and Poland—and summarizes them as four paths: incumbents loosen their grip first; street pressure forces concessions; the old regime's legislature reforms itself and submits the change to a referendum; and a roundtable negotiation allocates seats. The four paths have a common feature: the real turning point was an enforceable change in the rules, not a change of leader; the endpoint was a competitive election in which incumbents could lose. Counterarguments matter as well. Thomas Carothers argues that calling every country that leaves dictatorship a "transitional country" is itself misleading; a 2021 report by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (Mainland China) criticizes externally imposed models of democracy [2][20]. This article does not predict which path the People's Republic of China (Mainland China), governed by the Chinese Communist Party, might take. It offers readers only a measuring stick for assessing claims about "transition."

1. A Basic Question First: What Happens After a Dictator Falls?

When people talk about "transition," they often imagine a sequence: the dictator steps down, an election is held, and democracy is established. The dataset compiled by Geddes, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz reminds us that this sequence is not the norm. They catalogued 280 authoritarian regimes that existed from 1946 to 2010, recording how each regime left power, how much violence occurred in the process, and whether its successor was democratic or another authoritarian regime. In the authors' account, when a leader of an authoritarian regime loses power, there are only three possible outcomes: a leader elected democratically takes over; another person from the same ruling group takes over and the regime continues; or the ruling group is replaced by another group that establishes a new authoritarian regime [1].

The numbers are sobering. The article notes that over nearly 65 postwar years, only about 45% of leadership changes in authoritarian regimes became regime changes, and more than half of regime breakdowns led from one type of authoritarianism to another. In other words, fewer than one quarter of leadership changes brought democratization [1]. The examples in the article

are intuitive: after Egyptian President Anwar Sadat was assassinated, Hosni Mubarak, from the same ruling circle, succeeded him and the regime continued; after Tunisia's Zine El Abidine Ben Ali fled in 2011, the military and political elites who had supported him shifted toward democratization; when the Shah of Iran was overthrown in 1979, he was replaced by a theocratic authoritarian regime of a completely different kind [1].

Another set of findings is also worth remembering. Across the entire postwar period, only military regimes were more likely to transition to democracy than to a new authoritarian regime after collapse. Personalist dictatorships were the least likely to democratize. Dominant-party regimes democratized more often than personalist dictatorships, but across the postwar period, new authoritarian regimes still emerged more often than democracies after their collapse. Prospects for democratization rose markedly from 1990 to 2010, although the relative ordering of regime types did not change [1]. One qualification: this article cites the preprint version made available on the PSU website; the work was formally published in *Perspectives on Politics*, volume 12, issue 2, and the page numbers should be taken from the published version.

So "what are the paths?" is really a subsequent question: among the few transitions that did lead to competitive elections, how did they succeed?

2. The Republic of China (Taiwan): Incumbents Loosen Their Grip First; Opposition and Courts Push the Door Open

The Republic of China (Taiwan) had been under martial law since 1949. In October 1986, President Chiang Ching-kuo was interviewed by Katharine Graham, chair of the board of *The Washington Post*. According to the newspaper's report of October 8, 1986, he said the government would propose ending martial law [3]. On July 7, 1987, the Legislative Yuan adopted a resolution. Martial law was lifted in Taiwan effective July 15, 1987; Kinmen and Matsu were lifted separately later and are not discussed here [4].

Lifting martial law was liberalization, not democratization. At the time, the main members of the representative bodies were still the first-generation central representatives, who had not been re-

elected for many years [5]. In March 1990, university students held a sit-in at the plaza of Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall in Taipei, calling for the dissolution of the National Assembly, repeal of the Temporary Provisions Effective During the Period of National Mobilization for Suppression of the Communist Rebellion, a national affairs conference, and a timetable for political and economic reform, among other demands [22]. On June 21 of that year, the Council of Grand Justices issued Interpretation No. 261, requiring the first-generation central representatives to cease exercising their authority no later than December 31, 1991 [5]. On May 1, 1991, the Temporary Provisions were formally repealed [6]. In 1996, the Republic of China (Taiwan) held its first direct presidential election. Voter turnout was 76.04%; Lee Teng-hui and Lien Chan received 5,813,699 votes, or 54.00% [7]. In 2000, Chen Shui-bian was elected. The Central Election Commission records this as the first change of ruling party, with Chen receiving 39.30% of the vote [8].

The defining feature of this path is that the old regime initially controlled the pace of reform, while the opposition movement, student movement, and constitutional interpretation together pushed the door open. In a 1989 study, political scientist Tun-jen Cheng described the Kuomintang regime of the time as “quasi-Leninist” and discussed how it moved toward democracy [9]. The interval from the lifting of martial law to the first direct presidential election was about nine years, and to the first change of ruling party about thirteen years—the longest of the four cases in this article. Freedom House’s *Freedom in the World 2026* gives ROC (Taiwan) a score of 93 out of 100 and classifies it as “Free” [21].

3. South Korea: The “June 29 Declaration” Forced by Street Pressure

South Korea’s path began with a decision to suspend discussion of constitutional revision. In 1987, the Chun Doo-hwan regime introduced the so-called “April 13 Constitutional Protection Measures,” calling for constitutional revision to be put on hold, while opposition forces and students demanded direct presidential elections [10]. Events including the torture death of Park Jong-cheol during interrogation in January 1987 and Yonsei University student Lee Han-yeol being struck by a tear-gas projectile during a June

demonstration—he died on July 5—became flashpoints. Large-scale protests broke out simultaneously across the country [11].

On June 29, 1987, Roh Tae-woo, presidential candidate and chairman of the ruling Democratic Justice Party, issued an eight-point declaration. It called for constitutional revision through negotiations between the ruling and opposition parties as soon as possible, direct presidential elections, and a peaceful transfer of power in February 1988; revision of the Presidential Election Act to ensure free candidacies and fair competition; amnesty for Kim Dae-jung and others and release of most political prisoners; strengthening fundamental rights; and protection of press freedom and political party activities, among other measures [10]. The ruling party and Chun Doo-hwan subsequently accepted the declaration, the “April 13 Constitutional Protection Measures” were withdrawn, the constitutional amendment was approved by referendum on October 27, and a direct presidential election was held on December 16, which Roh Tae-woo won [10][11].

The defining feature of this path is that the turning point came when street pressure was at its greatest and it remained uncertain whether the military would intervene. South Korean scholarship offers two interpretations: one holds that this was a reluctant choice by the ruling group after it abandoned the use of force to suppress protests; the other sees it as a strategy to divide the democratic opposition and prolong the incumbents’ rule [13]. The latter interpretation has factual support: during the same period, the main opposition forces split into Kim Dae-jung’s Peace Democratic Party and Kim Young-sam’s Reunification Democratic Party, and Roh Tae-woo won the election [11][12]. In other words, the rules changed, but the incumbents could still win.

4. Spain: The Old Regime’s Parliament Votes to “End Itself”

Spain’s transition took place after Francisco Franco’s death. In July 1976, King Juan Carlos appointed Adolfo Suárez as prime minister. The new government promised democratic elections by the end of June 1977 [16]. The key document was the Law for Political Reform: it was passed by the parliament (Cortes) of the Franco regime in a plenary session on November 18, 1976, and then submitted to a referendum [15].

The official results of the December 15, 1976 referendum were: 22,644,290 registered voters; 17,599,562 voters (about 77.7%); 16,573,180 votes in favor; 450,102 against; 523,457 blank ballots; and 52,823 invalid ballots [14]. Among those who voted, about 94.2% voted in favor. The provincial data also show disparities: turnout in Guipúzcoa was only about 45.2%, and in Vizcaya about 54.1%, both markedly below the national average. The table gives no explanation, and this article does not speculate about the reasons [14].

The king signed the Law for Political Reform on January 4, 1977, and it was published in the official gazette the following day [16]. The law provided that members of the Congress of Deputies would be elected by adult Spanish citizens through universal, direct, and secret suffrage; it also declared fundamental rights inviolable and binding on all state authorities [15][16]. Spain held a general election on June 15, 1977. The Spanish Parliament’s website calls it the “first visible step” toward a democratic system [16].

The defining feature of this path is that the old law served as a bridge: the old regime’s legal procedures were used to approve a law that ended the old regime. The advantage was a smaller social rupture; the cost was greater retention of the old regime’s institutional legacy and personnel arrangements.

5. Poland: Roundtable Negotiations and Reserved Seats

Poland’s turning point was a negotiation. In early 1989, the government and the opposition, centered on the Solidarity trade union, held roundtable talks for about two months. On April 5, they reached an agreement covering trade-union pluralism, the re-legalization of Solidarity, and political reform [18]. The core of the agreement was a “contract”: of the 460 seats in the lower house (Sejm), 65% were reserved for the party-state camp, while the remaining 35% (161 seats) were open to competition by non-party candidates; all 100 seats in the newly restored Senate were to be freely contested [18][19].

In the first round of voting on June 4, 1989, Solidarity’s Citizens’ Committee won 160 of the 161 contestable lower-house seats and 92 of the 100 Senate seats. Of the 35 candidates on the party-state

camp’s national list, only two received more than half the votes [17]. On June 12, with Solidarity’s consent, the State Council amended the electoral law, transferring 33 seats to constituencies for a second-round by-election on June 18 [17]. Solidarity then won the last remaining lower-house seat and seven of the eight additional Senate seats, giving it 99 Senate seats in total [17]. Turnout was about 62% in the first round and only about 25% in the second [18]. Some within the opposition also boycotted the election and criticized the roundtable agreement [17].

The defining feature of this path is that seats were allocated in advance in exchange for the old regime’s consent. Its advantage was that the old regime’s coercive forces did not intervene; its cost was that most parliamentary seats were initially reserved in advance. The country’s first fully free parliamentary election was not held until October 27, 1991 [17]. An article by Poland’s Institute of National Remembrance also notes that Solidarity did not make full use of its electoral victory, allowing post-communist elites to continue participating in public life during the early years of the Third Republic [17].

6. Differences and Commonalities Among the Four Paths

When the four cases are considered together, there are three main differences. First, who moved first: in ROC (Taiwan) and Spain, the ruling group began to loosen its grip; in South Korea, street pressure came first; in Poland, both sides made concessions at the negotiating table. Second, the form of the turning point: in ROC (Taiwan), it was a series of constitutional amendments, constitutional interpretations, and elections; in South Korea, an eight-point declaration followed by a constitutional referendum; in Spain, a law followed by a referendum; and in Poland, an agreement allocating seats. Third, the time from the first concession to a fully competitive election: about six months in Spain (from the end-of-1976 referendum to the June 1977 general election); about five and a half months in South Korea (from June 29 to December 16, 1987); in Poland, the first partially free election came two months later, but a fully free election took two and a half years; in ROC (Taiwan), it took about nine years to the first direct presidential election and thirteen years to the first change of ruling party.

The commonalities are equally clear. First, each real turning point was a rule change recorded in a concrete text: the martial-law lifting order and repeal of the Temporary Provisions; the June 29 Declaration and constitutional referendum; the Law for Political Reform; or the roundtable agreement and electoral-law amendment. Second, each endpoint was a competitive election in which the incumbents could lose, rather than a transfer of power that merely changed the officeholder. Third, in all four cases, the key rule changes were made by domestic political forces, not imposed from outside.

7. Counterarguments: How Reliable Is This Classification?

First, we must confront Carothers's critique of the "transition paradigm." He notes that in the 1980s and 1990s, nearly 100 countries were treated as "transitional countries," as if leaving dictatorship necessarily meant moving toward democracy. But he argues that fewer than 20 may have clearly been moving toward a well-functioning democracy or maintaining democratic momentum; most entered a "gray zone" that was neither dictatorship nor democracy [2]. Poland and ROC (Taiwan) are among the few success stories he himself identifies [2]. This means that the four cases selected here were success stories from the outset; summarizing them as "four paths" risks giving the impression that the paths themselves produce the outcomes. The data from Geddes and others point in the opposite direction: overthrowing a dictator does not mean moving toward democracy [1].

Second is the official position of the People's Republic of China (Mainland China). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs' report *The State of Democracy in the United States*, published on December 5, 2021, criticizes externally imposed democracy and "color revolutions," while also acknowledging the diversity of democratic forms [20]. This criticism does not conflict with the four cases in this article, because the rule changes in all four were made by domestic forces. But the official emphasis on "each country choosing for itself" does not answer another question: after a choice is made, are competitive elections open, and can incumbents lose? That is the common feature of the four cases and one test for distinguishing "different forms" from "no transition."

A third question is whether concessions such as South Korea's June 29 Declaration and Poland's roundtable agreement were sincere reforms or schemes to preserve power. South Korean scholarship itself is divided on this [13]. This article's position is that motive is not the standard of judgment; the rules are. If a concession is written into an enforceable text and opens up competition, it changes the rules of the political game regardless of the motive. If it remains only verbal, it is merely a temporary expedient.

8. Limitations of This Article

First, the case selection is biased toward success. Transitions in Latin America, Africa, and post-Soviet countries are much more diverse; the data of Geddes and others extend only through 2010, and this article does not cover those cases. Second, "four paths" is this article's classification, not an established standard classification in the academic literature, and the cases overlap: South Korea's June 29 Declaration also involved negotiations between ruling and opposition parties, while constitutional amendments in ROC (Taiwan) also involved negotiation. Third, some sources are abstracts or search excerpts rather than full texts: the June 29 Declaration is based on an entry in the Encyclopedia of Korean Culture; the Spanish Law for Political Reform is based on the official gazette and parliamentary webpages; and the works by Carothers and Geddes are preprints or publicly available PDFs. Fourth, the section on ROC (Taiwan) relies on secondary sources for the student movement's demands and dates. Fifth, this article does not assess democratic consolidation after transition. For example, recent disputes over the Constitutional Court in ROC (Taiwan) are discussed in other articles in this series on constitutional constraints and judicial review.

9. Conclusion

Returning to the question at the beginning: what are the paths from authoritarianism to democracy? Based on the four cases selected here, there are at least four: incumbents loosen their grip first, with the opposition and courts pushing the process forward (ROC (Taiwan)); street pressure forces concessions (South Korea); the old regime uses its own legal procedures to end itself (Spain); and

roundtable negotiations reserve seats (Poland). But a path describes "how to get there," not whether one will get there at all: the statistics compiled by Geddes and others show that most leadership changes do not lead to democracy.

For civic education, three questions are more useful. First, was the turning point recorded in a verifiable text, such as a constitutional amendment, a law, or an agreement? Second, did the process end in a competitive election in which incumbents could lose? Third, was there someone able to hold the authorities to their promises, and an institution able to enforce them? This article makes no prediction about whether or how similar changes might happen in the People's Republic of China (Mainland China). It offers only a measuring stick that can be applied to any claim about "transition."

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