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BOOK REVIEW

The Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War; The Politics of Uncertainty: Sustaining and Subverting Electoral Authoritarianism; Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization

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The Domestic or International? Assessing the Factors in Competitive Authoritarian Regimes' Trajectories and Outcomes: A Review of Levitsky and Way, Schedler and Brownlee

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The collapse of the Soviet regime and the subsequent end of the Cold War signaled a shift in the international environment away from the previous one: a new era in which the West was the winner and—at least initially—that the liberal democracy seemed to be the only game in town. Consequently, many closed or hegemonic authoritarian governments felt the pressure to either leave the political arena or to reform their way of ruling and their institutions. In this effort, they introduced multiparty systems and elections in various degrees. Thus in the aftermath of the Cold War, the proliferation of democratization efforts reached a peak and at its maximum level, this phenomenon has come to be referred to by scholars as the 4th wave of democratization. Actually not very surprising, this was exactly the time period where—out of these democratization efforts—history witnessed the emergence of competitive authoritarian regimes that mixed, in various degrees, democratic institutions with an authoritarian rule. However, contrary to the expectations of many democratization scholars, who assumed this phenomena to be a transitional stage which would lead to full democracy, many of these regimes preserved their authoritarian stability as opposed to establishing stable democracies and, additionally, others emerged as unstable competitive authoritarian regimes open to contingent outcomes.

Considering the fact that the world witnessed the emergence of more competitive authoritarian regimes than democratic ones, maybe we should examine what the causal factors of these developments may be. With this objective in mind, I aim to give the key theoretical points which Levitsky and Way¹, Schedler² and Brownlee³ stressed in their books about regime trajectories and their outcomes. My second aim will be to evaluate these theoretical arguments with regard to the importance of domestic factors affecting the regime trajectories and their outcomes. In the final part, I'd like to share my views about the extent to which I found their arguments influential.

Briefly summarizing, in their book Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, analyzes a total number of 35 competitive authoritarian cases in Eastern Europe, the Americas, the former Soviet Union,

- 1 Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *The Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- 2 Andreas Schedler, *The Politics of Uncertainty: Sustaining and Subverting Electoral Authoritarianism*, United Kingdom, Oxford University Press, 2013.
- 3 Jason Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Asia and Africa in a time span from 1990 to 2008. Following these searches, the authors suggested that an incumbent's capacity to remain in power and consequent regime trajectory depends mainly on 2 factors: 1- linkage to the West or the density of ties (economic, political and diplomatic, social and organizational and cross-border flows of capital, goods and services, people and information) between these countries and the US and EU 2- the incumbents' organizational power, that is to say, on the scope and cohesion of state or governing-party structures. In their theoretical configuration, they follow a 3 step argument: where linkage to the West was extensive, as in Eastern Europe and the Americas, competitive authoritarian regimes democratized during the post-Cold War period. As they suggest

By heightening the international salience of autocratic abuse, increasing the likelihood of Western response, expanding the number of domestic actors with a stake in avoiding international isolation, and shifting the balance of resources and prestige in favor of oppositions, linkage raised the cost of building and sustaining authoritarian rule. High linkage created powerful incentives for authoritarian rulers to abandon power, rather than crack down, in the face of opposition challenges. It also created incentives for successor governments to rule democratically. Among high-linkage cases, not a single authoritarian government remained in power through 2008 and nearly every transition resulted in democracy. This outcome occurred even where domestic conditions for democracy were unfavorable such as Guyana, Macedonia, and Romania.⁴

Where linkage was low, as in most of Africa and the former Soviet Union, external democratizing pressure was weaker and in many cases intermittent compared to high linkage cases. Consequently, regime outcomes were affected primarily by domestic factors, especially the organizational power of incumbents. In this context, where state and/or governing parties were well organized and cohesive, incumbents were able to manage elite conflict and deal with even serious opposition challenges including both mass movements and electoral challenges. Thus, the competitive authoritarian regimes managed to survive. Where state and governing-party structures were less developed and weak in cohesion, regimes were less stable. In these cases, because the incumbents lacked the organizational capacity to prevent elite defection, manipulate the elections, or repress the protests, they were vulnerable to even relatively small and weak opposition challenges. Consequently, regimes were more open to contingent results than in other cases. In this context, a third factor –states' vulnerability to Western democratizing pressure or Western leverage was often effective in regime trajectories. Where countries' strategic or economic importance prevented external pressure such as in Russia, or where assistance from counter-hegemonic powers reduced the impact of that pressure, even relatively weak regimes survived. Where Western leverage was high, such governments were more likely to fall. In these cases, turnover created instances for democratization. However, in the absence of close ties to the West or a strong domestic push for democracy, transitions often brought to power new authoritarian governments. In a way, low-linkage cases having low organizational power were associated with unstable competitive authoritarianism.

Briefly elaborating, in his book, according to the quantitative study that he did about the authoritarian electoral politics from between 1980-2002, Schedler theoretically suggests that regime struggles in electoral authoritarian regimes reveal themselves as a twin competition between regime and opposition over what he calls the uncertainty of knowledge (opacity) and the uncertainty of the future (insecurity). Under electoral authoritarian conditions, these competitive struggles show

⁴ Levitsky and Way, p. 23.

themselves as two-level conflict (which he calls the asymmetrical game) over the hearts and minds of voters (at the game level of electoral competition) and over the essence of the political system (at the meta-game level of institutional reform).⁵ Relevantly, in the empirical section of the book, he explores the contingency that reveals in authoritarian electoral arenas through the analysis of short-term relationship between two types of meta-game strategies as regime manipulation and opposition protest and two types of game outcomes as electoral competitiveness and regime change. Following the empirical analysis, he highlights two fundamental theoretical arguments that he believes to have explanatory power for his analysis: “the creativity and the relative autonomy of electoral politics.”⁶ Contrary to the tendency to neglect the identity of political actors by supposing that all actors have similar motives and skills in the political arena and considering the structural environment that imposes material constraints on actors, Schedler stresses that “we need to understand how political actors adapt to given constraints, but also how they transcend and transform given constraints. Otherwise we ignore their defining essence: their capacity for action.”⁷ That is to say, in what he describes as the politics of uncertainty, competing actors continuously make efforts to preserve or reform the authoritarian institutions. Institutional certainty does not materialize on its own accord nor does it stand there as inherent. Preserving or changing it requires constant effort and activity by the actors. Secondly, he argues that in the comparative study of authoritarianism, rulers are perceived as rational actors who have the necessary information and foresight to identify and anticipate threats to their power and act accordingly either through immediate or preemptive measures. Thus, the fragile nature of institutional equilibria over which the actors make efforts to affect them—is overlooked. Regarding the relative autonomy of electoral politics, he claims that the institutions clearly structure political conflicts but they don’t cause unchangeable results and don’t reveal certain results by their mere presence. Thus, the multiparty elections are asymmetrical competition arenas that have unpredictable results. Elections depend on conflictive interactions and these interactions have their own logic, importance and outcomes thus they are independent. The dynamics of the electoral game affect the regime outcomes so authoritarian elections matter and they are consequential.

Briefly summarizing the main points, in his book Jason Brownlee tends to assess the factors behind the durable and stable authoritarian regimes by analyzing 4 cases: Iran, Malaysia, Egypt and the Philippines. In his cases, Egypt and Malaysia exhibit similarities as they both managed to maintain their authoritarian regimes during the democratization waves. On the other hand, Iran and Malaysia developed unstable authoritarian regimes, which were open to contingent outcomes and instances of democratization. Evaluating these divergent regime forms, as a causal explanation he stresses the importance of institutions particularly the party organizations. He claims that the continuity of an authoritarian regime depends on ruling parties that consist of a long-term elite cohesion and, on the opposite side of the spectrum, the lack of a ruling party composed of coherent elites. Elaborating his theory, he adds that in the period of regime formation where the institutional essence of a government is constructed—especially the ruling party as one of them—elite conflict and whether or not it is resolved and mediated brings some institutional legacies carried into the future with which elites and incumbents have to deal with. In the phase of regime formation, a potential ruler forms his circle composed of a narrow group and then integrates it to a party organization and to the extent that the elite conflict is resolved in successful manner, the

5 Schedler, *The Politics of Uncertainty*, p. 372.

6 Schedler, *The Politics of Uncertainty*, p. 373.

7 Schedler, *The Politics of Uncertainty*, p. 373.

party organization becomes more powerful and elite cohesion is maintained during other years and increases its capacity to join other members and consequently consolidates its authoritarian regime. At the opposite end of the spectrum, unresolved elite conflict and its subsequent weak party organization is vulnerable to elite defections as it lacks the cohesion that has the potential to bring the elite into a collective benefit mentality in the long term via party organization. In addition to this, he suggests that the presence or lack of a coherent party affects the regime trajectories in a way that neither a strong leadership, nor a mass movement or coercive capacity and constitutional design are sufficient on their own to explain authoritarian stability or collapse. According to Brownlee, although almost all leaders in authoritarian cases tend to overshadow the institutions and party as one of them, a regime backed only by leadership is less stable and more prone to lose its authoritarian survival. Secondly, contrary to the tendency in the literature to stress the importance of mass-movement to change regime trajectories, he claims that in authoritarian cases, unless mass movements supported by elite defections and subsequent counter-coalitions made by them, they can't be able to shake and bring down the authoritarian regimes on their own. Thirdly, contrary to the Skocpolian argument that social revolutions occur in cases where the states loses the coercive capacity to crack down its foes, Brownlee argues that the organization of elite conflict affects the state's ability to use violence against the political opposition. About the constitutional design such as electoral rules, he claims that elections do not affect the regime outcomes; regimes that have fragmented their coalitions destroy themselves. Their weakness reveals itself in elite defections and subsequent electoral defeats. Another point is that so long as the ruler holds a political coalition, such institutions are vulnerable to the elite's tendencies to manipulating them for their own advantage.

Starting my analysis with Levitsky and Way, I aim to reconsider whether conceiving the high and low linkage as the primary cause of the competitive authoritarian regime trajectories and considering the domestic factors as those to care secondarily in the low linkage cases can be held for other cases out of their study. Rethinking the cases of Brownlee in this context, there can also be the cases where Western assistance or intervention comes after already-changed dynamics driven by domestic factors especially by the presence or absence of a coherent ruling party. As shown by the cases of Philippines and Egypt in Brownlee's research, American involvement followed events rather than pushing them. In both the Philippines and Egypt, U.S. administrations waited and did not engage until a strong opposition movement arose against the country's ruler. As Brownlee suggests the result in Egypt has been that successive U.S. administrations have favored the Mubarak regime and eschewed vigorous advocacy of structural reforms that would empower the opposition and "In one of the more striking reversals of causal direction, domestic politics in the Philippines drove U.S. foreign policy rather than the reverse. Although Republican politicians had expressed ambivalence toward Marcos much earlier, not until the People Power movement declared and established its electoral victory did the Reagan administration openly call for and abet Marcos's departure."⁸ Although Levitsky and Way addresses that this kind of situation occurs where linkage is relatively low; in the case of Philippines, a relatively high linkage was present considering the long time dominance of the US in the aftermath of Spanish forces. Whether the decision of the US to interfere with the domestic politics was a strategic one or that they merely did not have the long-term economic interests of the Philippines in mind, the situation proves that there may be cases where the West doesn't always have a strong desire to change the political arena in favor of democracy leaving aside its other considerations even in the case of a relatively high linkage.

⁸ Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization*, p.211.

Let's also consider that although the Philippines may be considered a high linkage case—having relatively unfavorable domestic conditions such as a fragmented opposition, weak civil society and weak opposition, the Philippines did not achieve a stable democracy on the contrary to the argument supported by Levitsky and Way that countries with high linkage to the West had the chance to democratize even in the presence of unfavorable domestic conditions. In this spirit, perhaps we should also reconsider the case of Malaysia. Although having historical ties with Britain as an ex-colony, developing a coherent ruling party such as UMNO became decisive in sustaining the authoritarian rule in the following years even if Britain intermittently tried to affect the regime trajectory. Here the argument of the presence/absence of a strong ruling party can be reconsidered as a prevailing domestic force that will be analyzed more in detail in my reevaluation of Brownlee.

Rethinking the study of Brownlee, I strongly agree that the presence of a coherent ruling party is crucial for authoritarian stability and neither leadership, nor a mass-movement or a constitutional design may not be sufficient on its own to change the regime trajectory. However, in regards to the coercive capacity argument, there may still be cases, which fit into the Skocpolian argument. For example, although suffering from internal conflicts caused by relatively weak ruling parties, with its strong and cohesive coercive capacity, Armenia managed to sustain its authoritarian regime. A strong army as the outcome of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and largely funded by Russia, paramilitary organizations supported by the government and a vast internal security apparatus helped Armenia to control the society and repress strong opposition movements during 1990s and most of 2000s.

Rethinking Schedler's argument, although I agree that elections matter and have an importance as it reveals the political conflicts of actors to change both the electoral politics at the game level and to affect meta-game level structures, given the fact that they don't occur outside the societal context but constrained by it, I am suspicious of whether it really has an idiosyncratic importance to affect the regime trajectories and probable outcomes in electoral authoritarian regimes on its own. After all we witnessed and are still witnessing how something that may be call as a path dependency dominates regime trajectories. In authoritarian cases, actors compete to affect the regime but the historical path reveals itself as successor governments in many cases such as Georgia during Saakashvili after the Rose Revolution or Ukraine during Yanukovich after the Orange Revolution, followed the same authoritarian traits leaving aside democratic promises.

Overall, this review is not for claiming that the one author's argument is more or less relevant than other in assessing the competitive authoritarian regime trajectories. In my point of view, all three books are of critical importance and can serve as the guides to those who wish to understand the dynamics of competitive authoritarianism and further the dynamics of authoritarian rule regardless of their subtypes. Besides the relevance and critical importance of domestic factors, Levitsky and Way may lead us to rethink the very specific environment that trump the international environment and its consequences for divergent authoritarian regime trajectories and their outcomes in the aftermath of Cold War. Besides the structural constraints of critical value that affect the authoritarian regimes, Schedler can lead us to rethink the very distinct and contingent dynamics of authoritarian electoral politics and the influence of various actors behavior and their proactive capacity. Finally Brownlee can lead us to rethink the importance of the presence/absence of a coherent ruling party in affecting an authoritarian regime's stability or fragility besides all other relevant international and domestic factors.