Thought piece on how democracies fail

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Focusing on the period from 1950 to the present, democracies fall apart in three ways. 1) They can collapse at the hands of the military; 2) they can be endangered by civilian elites who ascend to power through competitive elections; and 3) they can be captured by criminal groups. The first are the well-known cases of regime collapse; and the latter two are less well understood forms of gradual deterioration.

1. Democratic collapse through a military coup

The scholarly literature offers various explanations of this mode of democratic collapse. First, the international regime plays a critical role in the nature and stability of political regimes (Boix, 2011). The Cold War was extremely destabilizing for democracy. The US legitimized military coups, offering economic resources and military support to autocratic regimes that promised to defeat communist threats. The Soviet Union, for its part, gave direct military and economic backing to armed guerillas and communist regimes. These external forces worked to exacerbate internal ideological polarization, empowering extremist from the left and right and undermining consensus building.

Second, scholars have argued that the more unequal a society is, the more elections can threat the interests of the economic elite, creating incentives for the wealthy to support military regimes. In highly unequal societies, voters are more likely to support extreme forms of redistribution, demanding a larger share from the generation of wealth. This argument presupposes that in equilibrium democracy should not emerge under conditions of extreme inequality, and if it does, this regime should be unstable and fragile. Acemoglu & Robinson (2005) and Boix (2003) are the most heavily cited proponents of the idea that autocracies are means to prevent redistribution and that democracies involve equalizing policies, although recent work by Albertus (2015) and others suggest that autocracies also redistribute wealth.

Third, modernization theory suggests that where there is poverty, a frail middle class, limited civic engagement, and low literacy levels, democracy will have a harder time surviving. The scholarly literature has also shown that this form of democratic collapse was particularly common in Latin America. One reason why democracies collapsed in that region more often, as explained by Przeworski et al (2000), is that countries there experimented with democracy “much earlier” or at lower income levels than the rest of the developing world.

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Lastly, the literature has demonstrated that in addition to poverty, episodes of severe macro-economic imbalances (e.g., hyperinflation, currency devaluations, capital flight) and a history of military coups makes countries more prone to experience future coups (Londregan and Poole, 1990). The argument makes sense to a point. As argued above, after the end of the Cold War, military coups are no longer seen as a legitimate course of action, and even where a country has experienced many past coups, these might no longer be considered as part of a reasonable repertoire. Consider the case of Argentina, which has a long history of coups. The military in that country suffered total discredit after the last time it was in power, when the regime imploded as a result of economic deterioration and the defeat in the *Malvinas* War.

2. Democratic failure at the hands of civilian leaders

In the post-Cold War military coups have become significantly less common. The main threat to democracy today comes from elected governments. Unlike leaders such as Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe or Mobutu Sese Seki in Zaire, these civilian leaders ascended to power in a democratic system by means of legitimate elections. Once in power, they gradually weaken democratic institutions, often to the point where they make it extremely difficult for the opposition to defeat them in future elections. Venezuela under Hugo Chávez, Peru under Alberto Fujimori, Russia under Vladimir Putin, Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Hungary under Viktor Orban are some of the best-known cases. Other more debatable cases are the Kirschners in Argentina and president Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines.

The underlying dynamics of this form of democratic collapse are significantly different from military coups. Paradoxically, the threat to democracy comes from the mobilization of the people, not from guns and soldiers. In these cases, leaders use the instruments of democracy -- in particular popular elections-- to ascend to office and thanks to their popular support they can amass sufficient political power to undermine democratic institutions.

The scholarly literature has paid considerable attention to the nature of so called "electoral autocracies" or competitive authoritarian regimes (see for example, Levitsky and Way, 2010; Magaloni, 2006; and Blaydes, 2010). Less has been written about how democracies deteriorate to the point that they become autocracies while still holding multi-party elections.

The first variables to consider are the existing democratic institutions and the nature of the system of economic redistribution. Commonly what triggers these leaders' ascent to power is significant popular discontent with the economic status quo and the nature of the existing representative institutions. Previously disenfranchised groups who feel unrepresented by the party system, and who might be hurting because of economic dislocations, tend to mobilize behind them.

For example, in the case of Venezuela, Chávez came to power because of the failure of the democratic system to give voice to the poor and provide them a share in the

process of wealth creation. Moreover, the two-party system that had given stability to the country's oligarchic democracy had become sclerotic, demonstrating its incompetence to deal with persisting economic deterioration, joblessness, and the economic dislocations produced by the recession of the late 1980s and 1990s. Analogous atrophies characterized the democratic system in Peru prior to Fujimori's ascend to power. When he closed down parliament, this institution had limited legitimacy among citizens and hence nobody stood there to defend it.

Once in power, these civilian leaders use their popular legitimacy to undermine the existing system of checks and balances, including courts, parliaments, and autonomous bureaucratic agencies. Many of these leaders make use of electoral instruments – including popular referenda – to engineer new constitutions, to get rid of term limits, and to pack courts, undermining the independence of the judiciary. In more extreme cases, they resort to closing down the parliament, prosecuting and imprisoning their opponents, and silencing the free press and civil society groups.

A second critical factor to consider is that these civilian leaders heavily rely on the mobilization of popular support to undercut their opponents and concentrate power in the executive hands. Unlike military coups which unequivocally signal the end of democracy, in these cases democracy erodes gradually, and it can even happen without democratic actors and citizens becoming sufficiently alarmed.

One way in which they amass popular support is by using their control of the bureaucracy to administer government programs and transfers so as to create a popular base. Chávez, for example, created various government programs under the umbrella of the Bolivarian Missions that focused on social welfare, education, the construction of thousands of medical clinics, food and other anti-poverty measures. These Missions were used as a platform to promote the No Vote in the recall of 2004. The names of those who signed in favor of the No in the infamous Maisanta list were distributed to the state bureaucracies. There is robust empirical evidence showing that these opponents were punished with fewer jobs, salaries and benefits (Hsieh et al, 2011). This form of "punishment regime" has been shown to be a centerpiece in the survival of other competitive autocratic regimes, such as the PRI in Mexico (Magaloni, 2006). The tragic brilliance of this system is that citizens –and especially the poor -- end up playing an active role in sustaining the autocrats.

Another way in which these leaders seek popular support is by fueling passions of the moment –for example, mobilizing public nationalism and blaming outsiders and minorities for social ills. This form of nationalism has been a central strategy in the case of Orban in Hungary and Putin in Russia. These right-wing populist leaders mobilize popular support appealing to the creation of ethnically homogenous nation states, promoting "alternatives to modernity" critical of modern democracy, and championing white supremacist.

Ultimately, the line separating democracy from autocracy in these systems is tenuous. The deterioration of democracy happens gradually, with considerable popular

support. A clear moment that defines the crossing of the line separating democracy from autocracy, in my view, is when the system of checks and balances is undermined. After these leaders are able to appoint their friends and sympathizers to courts, National Assemblies, bureaucratic agencies and electoral authorities, it becomes extremely difficult to restrain them.

For example, in the case of the Mexican PRI, for most of its life it had super-majoritarian control over the three branches of government, as well as governors and mayors, and this meant that the PRI could unilaterally engineer the constitution and the electoral institutions (e.g., electoral laws and tribunals, criminal and judicial review procedures, the system of property rights and rules for their expropriation, etc.) to rule with few constraints.

Chávez in Venezuela followed the same approach. He called for a referendum to appeal for a constitutional assembly and won it with 88% of the votes. He also called for an election to elect the members of the assembly and he won another overwhelming victory, taking 95% of the seats. The new constitution concentrated power, undermined the independence of the Supreme Court, and allowed the President to run for two consecutive terms. Chávez's government controlled every branch of the Venezuelan government for over 15 years after the new constitution passed.

A third aspect to consider relates to divisions among opponents. The more the opposition remains divided, the easier it is for these civilian authoritarian leaders to concentrate power. These leaders can gradually close the political space by dividing the opposition, isolating and repressing their more radical opponents -- for example, blaming them for disrupting stability, portraying them as violent, selectively rigging them from electoral victories, and even jailing them. In contrast, they often seek to compromise with the more “loyal” opponents –those willing to cooperate in exchange of limited policy influence and access to government spoils (Gandhi and Przeworski, 2007; Magaloni, 2006; Lust-Okar, 2005).

After institutions fail to constrain civilian rulers, a last safeguard might be civil society and protests, although the mechanisms of success are not well understood. In recent decades, citizens all over the world took to the streets to protest against predatory regimes. Some paramount cases include the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, Georgia’s Rose Revolution in 2005, Burma’s Saffron Revolution in 2007, Iran’s Green Revolution in 2009, and the most recent Arab Spring. The willingness of (mostly) unarmed demonstrators to risk their lives to oppose fraudulent elections, economic hardships, corruption, and lasting repression underscores the power of mass dissent.

Not enough is known about the conditions under which mass protests are likely to spread and eventually succeed. The Orange and Rose Revolutions suggest one way in which citizens success is possible even against well-funded armed forces: massive street demonstrations can convince the military and other elite insiders to switch sides (Magaloni, 2010).

Although protest may be a powerful way to restrain autocratic abuse, we know of many instances where momentum gradually erodes. Moreover, even where autocratic leaders might be ousted following protests, the masses often lack a unified voice, making it possible for new autocrats to replace the old.

For society to be able to coordinate vs. autocratic abuses, a strong social consensus regarding basic democratic values and the limits of the state is necessary, as Weingast (1997) has convincingly argued. This consensus requires that even when some groups stand to benefit from the autocrat's policies, these need to stand united with the groups that are victimized by these policies. This is the reason why societies that are sharply polarized along ethnic, class, party or religious lines have a very hard time coordinating against autocratic abuses.

Moreover, in many cases abuses are not common knowledge, which further complicates social coordination. Take the case of electoral fraud, which is seldom common knowledge given that it is perpetrated in secret. Voters need form their evaluations about whether there was fraud or not by listening to the declarations of elites and their opponents. But as I have argued elsewhere, allegations of electoral fraud are often not fully credible because parts of the opposition might have incentives to call fowl play even when elections are clean (Magaloni, 2010). Moreover, international observers have limited powers to actually monitor the votes (Hyde, 2017). These information problems complicate how voters form expectations about fraud and ultimately their capacity to coordinate.

Coordinating against other forms of abuse might be even more difficult. Autocrats often resort to selective repression of their opponents, deploying the intelligence services and the police to detain and prosecute them. Since this form of selective repression might remain hidden to the public, perpetrated in the dark of prisons cells and torture chambers, it might be difficult for society to coordinate against it.

Furthermore, the capacity of protests to ignite social change sharply differs in open and closed regimes. In a recent paper, we demonstrate that protests are more likely to bring regime change in closed autocracies than in more open regimes (Garfias and Magaloni, 2017). Although under more repressive regimes it is significantly harder to orchestrate a mass protest —phones are likely to be intervened, conversations spied, citizens interrogated, the mass media controlled -- the most dangerous protests occur where political institutions are highly repressive and dissatisfaction is general. Where citizens face significant risks of being jailed, tortured, or killed if they protest, protests have their maximum *information revealing potential* where defiance constitutes a powerful signal about the strength of anti-government sentiment and the underlying weakness of the regime.

Instead, when protest is part of the daily repertoire and becomes routinized, it can lose its signaling potential. Consider Mexico during the PRI regime. Peasants, teachers, employees, debtors, victims of natural catastrophes, continuously negotiated with the autocrats using protests. In institutionalizing protests, the autocrats managed to reduce

its signaling content and hence to weaken their political impact. This means that democracies might be more immune to protest than autocracies, and among these, electoral authoritarian regimes that routinely allow citizens to take to the streets to protest might be significantly less vulnerable.

3. Democracies can fail captured by criminal groups

A third way in which democracies can deteriorate is at the hands of criminal groups. Consider a system where armed criminal groups decide who runs for office and assassinate candidates who disagree with them. A system where prosecutors and courts protect assassins, kidnapers and rapists and where the police are controlled by the mafia.

This form of criminal governance has become common in many Latin American countries. During the Uribe presidency in Colombia, for example, the infamous "parapolitics scandal" revealed that politicians had colluded with criminal groups to get elected (Arjona, 2016). Paramilitaries sought to institutionalize their influence throughout the country by directly passing legislation and gaining access to the Congress. Politicians, for their part, wanted to rely on the paramilitary to intimidate voters and eliminate candidates of the opposition. A parallel scandal, known as FARC-politics, revealed that the guerillas had co-opted local politics in many municipalities (Arjona, 2016).

Mexico is experiencing an analogous form of criminal capture with tremendous consequences for security and potentially for democracy. Thousands have disappeared and died since 2006. More journalists are murdered in that country than in most other countries in the world. In recent years, mass graves have been found around the country containing hundreds of bodies of unidentified victims. The mass graves are not only abominable, but reflect the state of violence, corruption, and impunity that reigns in vast areas of Mexico. Victims' relatives are afraid to bring these cases to the police. Another serious threat to the population is extortion.

The reason why criminal groups can extort, rape, kidnap and murder with impunity is that local governments are too often associated with the criminals.[2] State officials and their law enforcement agents are either too weak to confront criminal gangs or too eager to work for the local mafia. The adage "plata o plomo" (silver or lead) encapsulates this approach to doing business: A drug cartel or criminal group will force the state to cooperate by means of either a bribe or a bullet. The resulting phenomenon might best be described as a mafia state.

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[2] The case of 43 male students from the Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers College who went missing in September of 2014 that gained world-wide condemnation made it transparent the extent to which the Mexican state is implicated in the violence and human rights violations. The federal government was quick to blame local authorities, including the local mayor, his wife and the local police for the disappearance of the 43 students. An interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts (CIEI, by its initials in Spanish) was created in November of 2014 through an agreement between the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights, the Mexican state and the representatives of the disappeared students in Ayotzinapa. The CIEI's Ayotzinapa report raises suspicion not only regarding the involvement in the atrocity of the local police and mayor, but also the army and the federal police.

Because mayors usually appoint local police chiefs, they are key assets in the cartel's criminal activities. Kidnappers, extortionists, and bandits looting mines or engaging in illegal logging or anything that generates cash have become a principal threat. These criminal activities often require the cooperation –even collusion – from local governments and their police corps.

The rise of so-called "self-defense groups" (auto-defensas) among communities in the state of Michoacán and ten other states in Mexico that took arms to defend their livelihoods, family and property against organized crime and the local state's complicity revels the extent to which the state in Mexico has failed to provide security. The rise of these militias also reveals how deep the association between criminal gangs and local state authorities has become in some places. A mafia state is the best manner to describe the phenomenon, the root cause of impunity and violence in Mexico.

Killing mayors has also become a common practice. Criminal groups might resort to assassinating politicians who are honest and refuse to take the money. Another reason to assassin mayors might be because they could be working with the rival criminal group. Drug lords are increasingly interfering with Mexico's election process. Competitive elections and alternation of political power in office might take place, but in this type of regime criminal groups decide who ascends to power, who appoints the police and what type of law enforcement and system of justice citizens get.

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