

# Transitions from Authoritarian Rule

Tentative Conclusions  
about  
Uncertain Democracies

Guillermo O'Donnell  
Philippe C. Schmitter

*With a new foreword by*  
Cynthia J. Arnson *and* Abraham F. Lowenthal

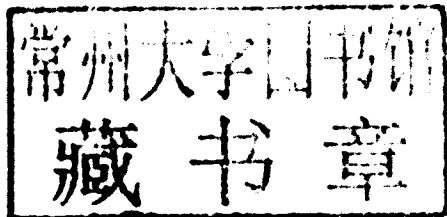
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# Transitions from Authoritarian Rule

*Tentative Conclusions  
about Uncertain Democracies*

*Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Prospects for Democracy*,  
edited by Guillermo O'Donnell, Philippe C. Schmitter, and  
Laurence Whitehead, is available in separate paperback editions:

*Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Southern Europe*,  
edited by Guillermo O'Donnell, Philippe C. Schmitter, and  
Laurence Whitehead

*Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Latin America*,  
edited by Guillermo O'Donnell, Philippe C. Schmitter, and  
Laurence Whitehead

*Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Comparative Perspectives*,  
edited by Guillermo O'Donnell, Philippe C. Schmitter, and  
Laurence Whitehead

*Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative  
Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies*,  
by Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter

## FOREWORD

CYNTHIA J. ARNSON *and* ABRAHAM F. LOWENTHAL

Transitions from various forms of authoritarian rule—with the hope of moving toward more open, inclusionary, and accountable democratic governance—are taking place once again: from North Africa to the Middle East and West Asian region and beyond, even in Myanmar. More such transitions appear likely in the years to come, as hereditary monarchies, vestigial communist regimes, and military rule all become ever less viable. It is too soon to talk confidently of a new “wave” of democratizing transitions, or to exclude the possibility of severe undertows back to authoritarianism. But it is not premature to note that the recurrent issues posed by transitions from authoritarian rule are once again at the heart of international politics. How important countries and regions develop in the coming years will be significantly shaped by whether and how they navigate the many challenging passages opened up by transitions from authoritarian rule.

The pioneering and landmark exploration of the causes, characteristics, processes, and complexities of transitions from authoritarian rule in the 1970s and 1980s was the “Transitions” project, launched by the Woodrow Wilson Center’s Latin American Program more than thirty years ago, in 1979. Conceived and proposed by the late Guillermo O’Donnell and Philippe Schmitter of the Program’s Academic Council, the project was strongly supported by Council members Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Albert O. Hirschman, and by Abraham Lowenthal, the Program’s founding director. It comprised three major conferences, several seminars and exchanges, and numerous working papers over several years. The enterprise culminated in 1986 with the publication by the Johns Hopkins University Press of the four-volume compendium *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Prospects for Democracy in Latin America and Southern Europe*, co-edited by O’Donnell, Schmitter, and Laurence Whitehead, with a foreword by Lowenthal. The capstone volume, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclu-*

sions about *Uncertain Democracies*, is widely referred to as the Green Book, because of its bright green cover.

That brief volume, which is also being published electronically by JHUP to make it more easily available around the world, won quick acclaim and has long been considered the indispensable “state of the art” reference. Some 23,000 copies have been sold in English, and translated versions have been published in Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese, Arabic, Croatian, and Kurdish.<sup>1</sup> Subsequent research projects in various countries have been designed around its arguments and insights and their relevance to other national situations. Rarely has an edited academic text made such a major impact on scholarship in so many countries. And the Green Book had an impact beyond academia; a number of important political leaders in the 1980s and 1990s—Ricardo Lagos of Chile and Nelson Mandela of South Africa among them—testified to its influence. Many of its insights remain relevant.

When the *Transitions* project was first organized, authoritarian regimes were beginning to crumble in Southern Europe—in Portugal, Greece, and Spain—but in South America, all but three countries were still firmly under authoritarian military rule. That contrast, and their own experience with authoritarian repression, motivated the project’s organizers and structured their approach. They had a frank bias for democratic governance based on citizen participation, constitutional restraints on power, and the protection of fundamental individual human rights. But their approach was analytic; they wanted systematically to examine the nature and dynamics of diverse authoritarian regimes. Their ultimate aim was to assess the possibilities of, and potential opportunities for, bringing these regimes to an end in order to open the way toward democracy. As Lowenthal noted at the project’s first meeting, some commentators were ready to dismiss the whole exercise as “wishful thinking,” but its organizers from the start understood their effort as one of “thoughtful wishing”—a normatively generated inquiry that was scholarly, empirically based, deliberate, and rigorous in its methods. As O’Donnell and Schmitter emphasized, “All of us who have participated in this project hope that at least it will contribute to a more intelligent and better informed discussion, by activists and scholars, of the potentialities, dilemmas, and limitations involved in the complex process of the demise of authoritarian rule and its *possible* replacement by political democracy.”

*Transitions from Authoritarian Rule* certainly achieved that goal. The capstone volume and the case studies in the other volumes together provided rich, nuanced, contextually sensitive analyses, mapping the diverse ways in

which authoritarian regimes could be undermined, opened up, transformed, or defeated. Sometimes this could be accomplished mainly by reinforcing initiatives from within the regime, sometimes by mobilizing and channeling external opposition, and often by reinforcing tacit or explicit cooperation between “soft-liners” within the regime and moderates in the external opposition. The methods, perspectives, and styles of the project’s many participants varied greatly, as the organizers encouraged methodological pluralism. But, as O’Donnell and Schmitter underscored, all the participants focused on disaggregating the authoritarian regimes and analyzing how an improved understanding of the dynamics within such regimes could be employed to nudge history in the direction of ending authoritarian rule. The Green Book shows a keen understanding of the pressures, dilemmas, difficult choices, and contingent circumstances that shape such transitions. The subsequent transitions in Chile, Uruguay, and South Africa, among other countries, showed how prescient it was.

The core insights developed by the project remain relevant today. Authors identified a number of central characteristics of transitions, among them: the great uncertainty about outcomes; high levels of fear about the possibility of an authoritarian regression; constant flux in how the rules of the political game are defined; the role of periods of liberalization in preceding a democratic transition; and the importance of divisions between hard-liners and soft-liners within the authoritarian regime. The authors also identified core tasks of a new, post-authoritarian government: removing the armed forces from politics; establishing procedures for dealing with past human rights abuses; organizing mechanisms of political participation, including the convening of “founding elections,” to channel long pent-up demands; and creating a consensus as to the rules regarding how political power is held and exercised. These broad observations, along with the central role ascribed to the behavior of political elites and to competitive elections, have by and large stood the test of time, continuing to inform the understanding of transitions from authoritarianism within and outside Latin America.

## Beyond the Transition Moment: Constructing Effective Democratic Governance

In the nearly three decades since the publication of the *Transitions* volumes, the comparative study of democratization, beyond the moment of transition, has blossomed and evolved worldwide. Within Latin America, this



evolution reflects changing circumstances in the region, the rise of challenges that were not foreseen at the time of the transitions, and efforts to apply the lessons of the Southern Cone transitions beyond that region.

The contributors to the original *Transitions* project may have underestimated how hard it would be to build robust, functioning democracies once the transition to civilian rule had taken place. Indeed, the difficulty of achieving transitions from authoritarianism pales in comparison to the obstacles to achieving effective and inclusive governance. The challenges, from guaranteeing the conditions for effective citizenship to strengthening the capacities of state institutions to provide a range of public goods in a democratic context, have informed the work of the WWICS Latin American Program to this day. The core values that inspired the work of the original *Transitions* project—human rights, the rule of law, meaningful civic participation, the peaceful resolution of conflicts—remain the touchstone of the Program's work.

Understanding how the study of democratization has evolved is useful in identifying, and thereby hopefully minimizing, the threats to an emerging democratic order. Initially—and for a period that extended through the 1990s—scholars debated how and under what circumstances the inauguration of a civilian, elected government could lead to the establishment of a consolidated democratic regime. The concern was not only with the possibility for a return to authoritarianism—scholars focused attention once again on the behavior of the armed forces and economic elites, groups that had conspired in democracy's breakdown—but also with the ways that weak political institutions and channels of interest articulation (parties and legislatures), entrenched patterns of clientelism and corruption, and the severe economic crisis of the 1980s and 1990s undermined the legitimacy of new democratic governments. Some analysts emphasized that outcomes depend on historical and political legacies: that is, the strength of democratic institutions and civil society prior to the democratic breakdown. If there was a tone of concern in the study of the second phase of transition, it was combined with the optimism that transitions would achieve a consolidated “end point.” As defined by Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, this would come about when, behaviorally, attitudinally, and constitutionally, democracy was “the only game in town.”<sup>2</sup> This optimism was reinforced in the international sphere by the end of the Cold War and, along with it, the sense that the United States would no longer support military coups in the name of anti-communism.

The debates opened in the 1990s previewed many of the major themes

that continue to shape the study of comparative democratization today. Major assumptions of the “transitions paradigm”—that democratization proceeds sequentially (albeit not in linear fashion) towards consolidation; that a move away from dictatorial regimes is a move toward democracy; that transitions are built on functioning, coherent states—came under attack.<sup>3</sup> The critique reflected just how difficult it was to combine the procedural minimum of democracy—free and fair elections under conditions of universal suffrage—with more substantive dimensions such as the rule of law, the functioning of robust institutions, and the practice of citizenship. Guillermo O'Donnell and others anticipated how deeply the notion of democratic consolidation would be called into question. This was principally because the ways some democracies were evolving in practice bore little resemblance to an ideal of liberal democracy founded on the separation of powers, accountability that was horizontal (within and across government institutions) as well as vertical (between governments and voters), and respect for basic civil and human rights and liberties.

The *quality* of democracy came to the fore, along with numerous adjectives and qualifiers to describe liberal democracy in its diminished form. Some analysts argued that deep poverty and socioeconomic inequality made true democracy unsustainable. Many scholars focused on democracy's political “deficits” and the disenchantment (*desencanto*) felt by citizens. The hyper-concentration of power in the executive branch, the chronic weakness and disrepute of governance institutions, inequality before the law, and low levels of citizen participation raised conceptual questions. Were these missing attributes of flawed democracies or characteristics of a different regime type altogether? Some scholars insisted that “democracy with adjectives” was misleading and that the identification of new regime types was the best way to understand Latin American political systems.<sup>4</sup> Diverse experiences in the region—from the *autogolpe* (self-coup) in Alberto Fujimori's Peru, to chronic instability in Bolivia and Ecuador, to the nexus between democratization and guerrilla insurgencies in Central America and Colombia—pushed scholars to look beyond the original transitions paradigm for context-specific analyses of the prospects for democracy. At the same time, political scientists began adopting or creating quantitative indicators to compare emerging democracies on a wide range of variables, including the rule of law. Quantitative methods were also helpful in measuring public attitudes toward democratic systems and identifying the specific issues that were of greatest concern to citizens.

By 2012, the diversity of experiences with democratization in Latin America was simply too great to permit broad-brush generalizations. Some celebrated the hemisphere-wide discrediting of military coups as a path to power; the armed forces' removal of an elected president in Honduras in 2009 was an exception, although power was quickly ceded to civilians. Ideological conflicts eased as center-left and center-right regimes converged on the need for a strong state to enhance social welfare while facilitating the dynamism of a market economy. The first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century saw historic reductions in poverty and some reductions in inequality, the growth of the middle class, and the engagement of vibrant civil societies in articulating and solving national problems. Indeed, representative democracy appeared to thrive most fully in some of the countries that had experienced the devastation of democratic breakdown in the 1960s and 1970s.

Yet, if the “thoughtful wishing” of the original *Transitions* project was grounded in the norms of liberal democracy, there is reason to be discouraged in today's circumstances. The profound deficits of representation and consequent collapse of party systems in Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia have given rise to new forms of populism that explicitly reject liberal, representative democracy in favor of direct and vertical linkages between the leader and “el pueblo,” the renewed invocation of polarizing antagonisms within society, and the gutting of checks and balances on executive power. Elsewhere, electoral democracy survives amidst new threats—the unprecedented increase in rates of crime and violence abetted but not entirely caused by the growing activities and sophistication of transnational organized crime. Rampant citizen insecurity in turn undermines support for democratic systems and expands support for hard-line, *mano dura* approaches in which the armed forces play a leading role.

For countries only now going through a process of political transition in other regions of the world, Latin America's experience illuminates some of the many challenges that face societies after authoritarian rule ends.

## Transitions, Then and Now

Contemporary transitions are taking place in circumstances very different from those of the 1970s and 1980s. Today's transitions are occurring after the end of the Cold War, and are free of its special pressures, especially those linking property regimes and political institutions to international geopolitical rivalry, which caused a number of countries for many decades to

ban communist and even leftist parties. Contemporary transitions cannot be understood in terms of the clear left-right divisions salient from the 1950s into the 1990s. And they emerge in a world where democratic governance is widely accepted as the only legitimate basis for political order.

Circumstances today are also quite different from the 1990s, when the end of the Cold War reduced tensions over property and economic policy, and when political and economic liberalization both seemed likely, perhaps even inevitably linked. In today's world, with the economic policies and financial institutions of market economies under severe challenge, the framework for state-market relations is once again contested.

Most of the transitions from authoritarian rule in the 1970s and 1980s, and a few of those in the 1990s, took place in countries that had at least some prior experience with constitutional democratic governance. In some cases, institutions of democracy were still in place. Today's and tomorrow's transitions from authoritarian rule are taking place or will do so mainly in countries with little or no such prior experience.

Many transitions today are occurring or may occur at a time when a prominent international division exists between fundamentalist and moderate Islamic movements; consequently, many familiar assumptions need to be rethought. In such situations, for example, the armed forces are usually committed to a civic rather than a religious state; they are thus not necessarily conservative by comparison with the approaches of Islamic traditionalists. Property rights and concepts are different in Islamic countries, as are religious values and precepts. The Truth and Reconciliation commissions that developed in Chile, Argentina, South Africa, and many other countries that experienced transitions during the 1980s and '90s emphasized the official obligation to investigate human rights crimes, striking in each case a different balance between truth, justice, and reconciliation. Several commissions highlighted confession, penitence, and forgiveness, concepts from the Judeo-Christian tradition; the approach to transitional justice issues may, therefore, be different in Islamic societies.

With the exception of some oil-rich states, transitions today and in coming years will occur in countries with socio-economic levels considerably lower than those of the countries that made a transition in the 1970s and 1980s. Most such societies are less urbanized, with relatively low levels of national or social cohesion, and many have large numbers of frustrated young people, unable to find gainful employment and ready to protest. Contemporary transitions also will take place amidst the threat of mass

terrorism by non-state actors; in the presence of the extraordinary level of corruption that characterizes transnational criminal activities; and, in many cases, in countries with strong ethnic and religious divisions. All of these factors present new, difficult, and destabilizing challenges.

The incentives for unilateral external intervention against authoritarian regimes are lower and the constraints against such intervention are much higher today than fifteen or twenty years ago, but the possibilities of multilateral intervention, by international organizations or “coalitions of the willing,” are considerably higher. Many of the European transitions were reinforced by the strong drive toward regional integration and incorporation into the European Union, a factor that does not exist in today’s transitions. How transitions from authoritarian rule will be affected by international and transnational actors is unknown.

Finally, the techniques and facility of communications in the age of social media and video phones introduce important new dimensions to potential transitions from authoritarian rule, the overall consequences of which are by no means clear; they may very well depend on how political actors learn to use and to shield themselves from these technologies. Guillermo O’Donnell and Philippe Schmitter understood and emphasized the role of contingent circumstances, of imperfect information, and of decisions taken on multiple chessboards under intense pressures and short deadlines, but they could hardly have imagined the pace of developments in today’s ultra-connected world.

## FOREWORD TO THE 1986 EDITION

ABRAHAM F. LOWENTHAL

The three coeditors of *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule* have kindly invited me to introduce this effort because it resulted from the Woodrow Wilson Center's project on "Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Prospects for Democracy in Latin America and Southern Europe."

The "Transitions" project was the most significant undertaking of the Wilson Center's Latin American Program during the seven years I had the privilege of directing its activities. The resulting four-volume book contributes substantially on a topic of vital scholarly and political importance. I want to highlight both these points, to underline some of its strengths, and finally to say a bit about what is still left to be done.

The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars was created by an act of the United States Congress in 1968 as a "living memorial" to the twentieth president of the United States, a man remembered for his idealism and for his commitment to democracy, for his scholarship, for his political leadership, and for his international vision, but also for his interventionist attitudes and actions toward Latin America and the Caribbean. The Center supports advanced research and systematic discussion on national and international issues by scholars and practitioners from all over the world. It aims to bring together the realms of academic and public affairs, as Wilson himself did.

The Latin American Program was established early in 1977, within the Center's overall framework, to focus attention on the Western Hemisphere. The Program has tried, from the start, to serve as a bridge between Latin Americans and North Americans of diverse backgrounds, to facilitate comparative research that draws on the Center's special capacity to bring people together, to emphasize the highest standards of scholarship, to stress privileged topics that merit intense cooperative efforts, and to help assure that opinion leaders in the United States and Latin America focus more atten-

tively and more sensitively on Latin America and the Caribbean and on their relation with the United States.

In all its undertakings, the Program has been striving to assure that diverse viewpoints—from men and women with varying national, professional, disciplinary, methodological, and political perspectives—are presented, and that complex issues are illuminated through the confrontation of different analyses. But the Program's orientation has never been value-free; it has stood for vigorous exchange among persons who disagree about many things but who fundamentally respect the academic enterprise and who share a commitment to the core values all the nations of the Americas profess. The Program has sought diversity of many kinds, but not artificial balance. It awarded fellowships in the same semester to writers exiled because of their convictions from Argentina and from Cuba, for example, but it has never invited their censors on an equal basis. It has sponsored research on human rights from many different standpoints, but never from the perspective of the torturers. And it sponsored the project on "Transitions from Authoritarian Rule" with a frank bias for democracy, for the restoration in Latin America of the fundamental rights of political participation.

The "Transitions" project was begun in 1979 on the initiative of two charter members of the Latin American Program's nine-person Academic Council: Guillermo O'Donnell (then of CEDES in Buenos Aires) and Philippe Schmitter (then of the University of Chicago), with the active encouragement and support of the Council's chairman, Albert O. Hirschman, and of Council member Fernando Henrique Cardoso of Brazil. During the project's first phase, I served as its coordinator. As the project grew in scope and complexity, it became clear that another Center-based person was needed to focus more fully on it; we were fortunate to recruit Laurence Whitehead of Oxford University, a former Wilson Center fellow, who then worked closely with O'Donnell and Schmitter and became coeditor of the project volume.

The "Transitions" project illustrates the Wilson Center's aspirations in several respects:

Its leaders are recognized as among the world's foremost academic authorities in Latin America, the United States, and Europe.

It attracted the participation of other top-flight scholars from all three continents and encouraged them to work closely together in a structured and linked series of workshops and conferences.

It emphasized comparative analysis, and sharpened the focus on Latin American cases by putting them into a broader perspective.

In its various workshops, the project drew on the perspective not only of scholars but of several persons—from Latin America and from among former U.S. government officials—experienced in politics and public affairs.

Its findings have been made available to opinion leaders from different sectors through specially organized discussion sessions in Washington.

It maintained a creative tension between its normative bias, its theoretical ambitions, and its empirical and case-oriented approach. The project's animus, as I had occasion to say at its first meeting, was never wishful thinking but rather "thoughtful wishing," that is, it was guided by a normative orientation that was rigorous and deliberate in its method.

Finally, the project illustrated a point the Wilson Center's director, Dr. James H. Billington, has often emphasized: to seek tentative answers to fundamental questions rather than definitive responses to trivial ones. All the project's participants know that the complex issues involved in transitions to democracy have not been dealt with conclusively in this volume, but they can take great satisfaction in what they have contributed.

## Transitions from Authoritarian Rule

Ultimate evaluations of this book's import, obviously, will have to come from analysts less involved in the project's inception and management than I. I would like, however, to suggest some of the reasons why I think *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule* is important.

It is the first book in any language that systematically and comparatively focuses on the process of transition from authoritarian regimes, making this the central question of scholarship as it is today in Latin American politics.

Its analytic and normative focus on the prospects of building democratic or polyarchic politics in the wake of an authoritarian transition provides a vantage point that organizes the materials in ways useful not only to scholars and observers but to political actors as well.



Its comparisons of cases in Latin America and in Southern Europe and of cases of transition from bureaucratic authoritarianism, military populism, and sultanistic despotism allow for considering several different variables.

*Transitions from Authoritarian Rule* is rich in nuanced, contextually sensitive analysis, and each of the case studies is written by a leading authority. Although the methods, perspectives, and styles of the various authors understandably differ, their agreement on shared assumptions makes this a coherent volume. The book is filled with subtleties, complexity, and a keen sense of paradox.

Throughout, disaggregation is emphasized. All authoritarian regimes are not equated with each other. No authoritarian regime is regarded as monolithic, nor are the forces pushing for democratization so regarded. Distinctions are drawn between “democracy” and “polyarchy”; between “democratization” and “liberalization”; between “transition” and “consolidation”; between “hard-liners” and “soft-liners” or accommodationists within the authoritarian coalition; and among “maximalists,” “moderates,” and “opportunists” in the coalition supporting *abertura* (liberalization).

From the various cases, several points emerge that deserve special mention here. These cases show that, although international factors, direct and indirect, may condition and affect the course of transition, the major participants and the dominant influences in every case have been national. They demonstrate the importance of institutions, of mediating procedures and forums that help make the rules of political discourse legitimate and credible in a period of change. They illustrate the vital significance of political leadership and judgment, of the role of single individuals in complex historical processes. They point out, again and again, the importance of timing, the complexity of interactive processes carried out over extensive periods, the various ways in which transitions produce surprises, and some of the ironies and paradoxes that result.

Above all, the cases analyze the ways in which transitions from authoritarian rule are conditioned and shaped by historical circumstances, unique in each country but patterned in predictable ways, by the way in which a previous democratic regime broke down, by the nature and duration of the authoritarian period, by the means the authoritarian regime uses to obtain legitimacy and to handle threats to its grip on power, by the initiative and the timing of experimental moves toward *abertura*, by the degree of security and