

Democracies and Dictatorships in Latin America: Emergence, Survival, and Fall*

by **Cláudio Gonçalves Couto**

Fundação Getulio Vargas, São Paulo, Brazil

(Mainwaring, Scott and Pérez-Liñan, Aníbal. *Democracies and Dictatorships in Latin America: Emergence, Survival and Fall*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013)

Scott Mainwaring and Aníbal Pérez-Liñan's book, *Democracies and Dictatorships in Latin America: Emergence, Survival, and Fall*, is a hefty work. In the book, the authors analyzed 65 years of political regime changes in the subcontinent, from 1945 to 2010, with some digressions on the preceding period, since the early twentieth century.

For this analysis, the authors made use of a broad collection of data on regimes and political actors within these countries during the analyzed period. The actors were analyzed regarding their stances on certain basic operating principles of a democracy and on public policies. As for the countries, the authors observed if at the end of each year the regime in force was a democratic, semi-democratic, or an authoritarian regime, classified upon certain conditions of political competition, both by criteria established by the authors and based on other databases, such as *Polity IV*. Lastly, the authors also considered the international scenario (especially the regional scenario) to identify its influence on national political processes. Other variables were also taken into account, such as the level of development, income distribution, social stratification etc, in order to test alternative explanations for the fluctuation of different regimes.

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The book presents two declared objectives: a theoretical and an empirical. The theoretical objective aims to contribute to an approach that will prove useful to comparative studies wanting to understand the survival and collapse of political regimes, whether authoritarian, democratic, or semi-democratic (the three analytical categories considered by the authors). The empirical objective, in turn, is to provide a better understanding of political regime changes in post-war Latin America.

The book is successful in achieving both objectives. Regarding the first objective, the work offers a clear theoretical perspective for understanding the emergence, survival, and fall of different regimes – which can be replicated for contexts other than Latin American, commonly analyzed by democratization studies. As for the second objective, by the end of the book we have a better and broader understanding of the several political regime alternation processes, their main causes, and relevant factors.

The novelty of the work lies in its professed proposal, i.e., to be the first attempt to understand regime changes in several countries over a long period of time based on an approach focused on the actors. Through such an approach, Mainwaring & Pérez-Liñan's book refutes theories, which, as the authors show, do not adequately explain the Latin American experience in the last century, namely: modernization theory, class-based theories, theories based on economic performance, theories focused on the political culture of the masses, theories that privilege an understanding of formal institutions, and traditional theories on leadership and agency. The suggested alternative underscores the preferences of political actors, regarding both political regimes as well as public policies. Such an approach considers these preferences to be the determining factor in explaining the falls, emergence and survival of democracies and dictatorships.

The crucial actors for the problem at issue are the organizations and their leaders (e.g. presidents), structured in coalitions either favorable or against each regime type and with relevant resources for a political dispute within that particular historical quadrature. Their relative strength will ultimately define the prevailing regime. The significance of these actors lies in the fact that their normative preferences toward democracy and public policies are more significant than structural factors – key variables in the refuted theories.

Regarding policy, *radicalism* is the major problem for competitive regimes. Radical preferences toward policies tend to undermine the normative support for democracy, whether because actors place policies ahead of maintaining the system or because they intensify relations among relevant political actors. Such intensification, in turn, may cause actors to halt their regime support, seen as unable to secure their interests.

What is radicalism, so potentially harmful to democracy? It concerns the engagement in a behavior averse to negotiations and trade-offs, replaced by short-term attempts to maintain or implement extreme policies – that is, highly costly policies for other actors. For the opposition, this behavior usually translates into willingness to subvert the law (perhaps resorting to violence) to accomplish the desired policies (or to prevent them from being implemented); in the case of governments, it implies the realization of extreme policies, unacceptable to their opponents.

Note that radicalism does not solely imply strong preferences toward certain policies, but intransigence and impatience. When the desired policies do not represent the status quo, its advocates wish to implement them immediately, unwilling to establish agreements with other actors toward long-term objectives. The same holds true in a reverse situation, where such policies represent the status quo. In this scenario, its advocates do not accept any change whatsoever, thus demonstrating the same intransigency. This gives rise to polarization, a radical conflict between opposing groups. If a democracy proves to be insufficient to enforce their preferences, it runs the risk of being placed aside.

The first hypothesis in the book emerges from observing this scenario, according to which "radical actors increase the risk of breakdown of a competitive regime" (MAINWARING and PÉREZ-LIÑAN, 2013, p. 36). This hypothesis is confirmed by the authors' statistical analysis as well as their case studies of Argentina and El Salvador, where radicalization mechanisms are analyzed in greater depth.

However, radicalism toward public policies is not a sufficient cause for the collapse of competitive regimes in the presence of another factor (in fact, the leading factor): the normative preference for such regimes. Actors with a clear normative preference for democracy (or some form of competitive regime) are

willing to accept the costs of public policy decisions different to their liking. If the normative preference for democracy is weak (or nonexistent), radicalism toward policies becomes fatal since relevant political actors will not hesitate to sacrifice the regime on behalf of their substantive preferences. On the other hand, if political actors have a normative preference toward authoritarianism, their moderate preferences toward policies will be of little use.

It should be noted that both factors are related to a subjective dimension of the relevant political actors: their preferences – whether toward regimes or policies. The centrality given to the actors has, therefore, as its cornerstone, choices. The point is not to mechanically derive them from structural factors (such as social class or culture), but to understand its genesis within the concrete historical process pervading each country – the actors' experiences, learnings, traumas and the international dissemination of values and preferences toward policies.

The latter aspect draws attention to the theory's third explanatory factor, and interferes in the previous two factors: the international scenario. It proved crucial in defining the regime type more likely to prevail in the region in a given historical moment. This is why democratization occurs in waves, with regime changes across several countries toward the same direction and in a short period of time.

The regional effects of the cold war are telling of the importance of the international scenario. The cold war had a deleterious impact on democracy as it increased the left-right polarization, steering the US to support right-wing authoritarian governments, occasioning an authoritarian wave starting from the early 1960s that would only begin to be reversed at the end of the next decade, when a democratic wave – the one in which we are still currently in – spread over to Latin America. From the 1980s onwards, democracy began to set the tone in the region, its values gradually incorporated by key political actors, and the choice for moderate policies gained momentum.

In short, three factors explain which regimes tend to prevail:

Policy moderation, attitudes toward democracy and favorable international political environment – for Latin America, more than the structural variables tapped by modernization theory and class theories

of democratization – have made a decisive difference in whether competitive regimes survive or break down (MAINWARING and PÉREZ-LIÑAN, 2013, p. 121).

But why do regimes change? Because the actors' conditions change: new actors emerge, providing impetus to the current regime's oppositional coalition; the relative distribution of political resources among existing actors changes in favor of the opposition; and relevant political actors change sides, tipping the balance of forces opposed to the regime in force.

International influence is decisive for such alternation processes to occur. Firstly, by promoting the dissemination of normative preferences on democracy and dictatorship, and moderate or radical preferences on policies. Such was the case of the conservative anticommunism during the Cold War as well as the revolutionary leftism after the Cuban Revolution up until the 1970s. Secondly, due to the demonstration-effects, since what appears promising elsewhere influences domestic actors – less because of values and more because of the viability of actions aimed at challenging the prevailing regime. Therefore, military coups in a country (and in others, sequentially) tend to encourage new coups, spawning a wave; on the other hand, democratic transitions introduced in a country encourages oppositions to authoritarian regimes elsewhere in the region and serve as an incentive for dictatorship supporters to change their preferences.

International sanctions and incentives also prompt actors to join or leave coalitions. If this results in the support to the coalition's adversaries sustaining the prevailing regime, tendencies toward change will be even greater. Some transnational actors also have a national dimension, such as the Catholic Church, sympathetic to military dictatorships until the 1960s, but an important player in the democratization process from the 1970s onwards, when it became part of an international human rights defense network. Lastly, although more an exception than the rule, the study indicates that external actors may directly affect the outcome through military interventions (or withdrawal of military support). Especially in this case, the United States is the relevant actor.

More recently, already in the midst of the third democratization wave, a new source of erosion of democracies has emerged, the "presidents who deliberately undercut mechanisms of accountability" and that "often have radical

policy agendas and do not value democracy on intrinsic grounds, inducing a deterioration of civil liberties and political rights" (MAINWARING and PÉREZ-LIÑAN, 2013, p. 251). Venezuela under Chavez clearly falls under this description, and, to a lesser extent, other countries influenced by the process triggered therein, such as Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua. In the latter cases, there has been a regression of democracies to a condition of semi-democratic regimes due to a lack of commitment from governments with the basic working principles of a democracy. As for Venezuela, the erosion of democracy has advanced further, surpassing in 2009 the boundaries of authoritarianism, even though this is an authoritarian regime of a different nature – and less openly repressive – than the military dictatorships preceding the current democratization wave.

Translated by Paulo Scarpa