

Enabling Environments for Civic Movements and the Dynamics of Democratic Transition



By Eleanor Marchant and Arch Puddington

Overview

In November and December 2004, in what became known as the Orange Revolution, millions of Ukrainian citizens demonstrated in the streets in favor of free and honest elections. In September 2007, tens of thousands of Burmese, led by Buddhist monks, marched peacefully through Rangoon in a challenge to their country's oppressive military regime. While nonviolent protest characterized both of these movements, only one resulted in a successful transition to democracy.

For many in the international community, faith in the transformative power of nonviolent action was reinforced when the Orange Revolution led to the fair election of opposition leader Viktor Yushchenko as president. The Ukrainian movement joined other nonviolent civic movements that have emerged triumphant in practically every part of the globe and in such highly diverse settings as the Philippines, in 1985–86, and Georgia, in 2003–04.

But more recently, the failures of monk-led protests in both Burma and Tibet have prompted some to doubt the efficacy of nonviolent action. In addition, in three countries where so-called color revolutions took place—Georgia, Lebanon, and Kyrgyzstan—democratic gains were subsequently eroded by the actions of both the government and the political opposition. The past several years have brought few, if any, nonviolent movements that have been successful in promoting a transition to democracy.

The mixed results have led to questions about whether one can identify underlying, preexisting conditions that favor the emergence, success, or failure of such civic movements. This study, *Enabling Environments for Civic Movements and the*

Dynamics of Democratic Transition, seeks to provide data and analysis that will help answer those questions.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The impetus for *Enabling Environments for Civic Movements* came from the interest generated by a Freedom House study released in 2006 in conjunction with the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict. That publication, *How Freedom Is Won*, looked at the political dynamics in 67 countries where democratic transitions had occurred over the last three decades.

The study evaluated each country for three factors: (1) the degree of influence that civil society had over the transition process as compared with the power holders, (2) the strength and cohesiveness of the nonviolent civic coalition, and (3) the sources of any violence that took place. By looking at these factors, researchers were able to determine which countries had strong, nonviolent, civic-led transitions and whether such conditions were likely to lead to a stable democratic system.

How Freedom Is Won found that most successful regime changes occurred as a result of the actions of domestic political forces that employed nonviolent means of struggle and resistance. Such nonviolent civic movements were seen to emerge in a variety of situations, regardless of political, economic, or social factors. The study further found that there was a statistically significant correlation between the existence of robust nonviolent civic movements, regime change, and the long-term outlook for freedom within a country. In other words, the emergence of a strong, nonviolent opposition movement appeared to be an important factor in ensuring the longer-term success of the democratic system.

These results had a number of potentially significant policy implications. One was that the best way to promote democratic transition is to invest in the creation of a dynamic civic life. Another was that internal as well as external donors should encourage the leaders of a range of civic groups to join together in broad-based coalitions for democratic change.

The principal finding from the first study—that nonviolent civic action is often crucial for a successful democratic transition—generated discussion among scholars and policymakers about the need to continue to explore what, if any, environmental factors might be conducive to the emergence of such movements. *Enabling Environments for Civic Movements* was conceived as a means of further analyzing the proposition that broad-based, prodemocracy civic movements can emerge in any societal setting, regardless of political, economic, or social factors.

STUDY STRUCTURE

Data and Methodology

Data for this study are drawn from original research as well as preexisting data sets for the categories that look at environmental factors. To identify the countries that would be included in the study, researchers used information from Freedom House's authoritative publication *Freedom in the World*, which has analyzed the level of political rights and civil liberties for every country in the world on an annual basis since 1972. *Enabling Environments for Civic Movements* also used data from other studies about democratization or political transitions that have taken place during the same period.

To be included in the study, a country needed to meet three criteria. It had to have: (1) a population of more than one million, (2) a successful transition to democracy within the *Freedom in the World* study period, and (3) sufficient available data on the selected environmental factors for the period under examination.

In all, 64 countries met these criteria and were eventually divided into two categories: (1) those that experienced a civic movement in the years immediately preceding the democratic transition and (2) those where civic movements were absent in the years immediately preceding the transition to democracy. In the first category, there were 37 countries—8 in Latin America, 7 in Africa, 7 in Asia, and 15 in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union (CEE/FSU). In the second category, there were 27

countries—5 in Latin America, 10 in Africa, 2 in Asia, 7 in CEE/FSU, 2 in Western Europe, and 1 in the Middle East.

Breaking the countries down in this fashion enabled researchers to test for any factors present in the first group that were absent from the second group. Though *How Freedom Is Won* had found a significant relationship between strong civic movements and durable democratic governments, *Enabling Environments for Civic Movements* did not aim to examine that conclusion. Consequently, for the purposes of this study, it was not relevant that a number of countries eventually reverted to authoritarian governance after the initial transition.

Evaluation Factors

To determine which preexisting societal factors the study would examine, Freedom House convened a series of methodology meetings with scholars in the field of democratization. The methodology team recommended that the study look at economic and development indicators, including gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, economic growth, and life expectancy. By examining all of these components, researchers were able to get a well-rounded picture of the level of prosperity and development in each country.

The study also determined the type and power of the preexisting authoritarian regime. Using Barbara Geddes's work on regime types,¹ researchers organized the countries' preexisting governments into six categories: military; personalist; a military-personalist hybrid; a single-party hybrid with either a military or a personalist regime; and finally an amalgam of military, personalist, and single-party types. The study looked at the amount of power a particular regime had and the extent of centralization within the system.

Finally, the study examined the impact of preexisting divisions within the society, especially ethnic, linguistic, or religious differences.

Time-series data for these categories were drawn from a variety of sources, including the Penn World Tables and the World Bank Development Index,² for each country in the

study. Researchers then analyzed this statistical data and correlated all of the information with the presence of a nonviolent, prodemocracy, broad-based civic movement in each country prior to its transition.

In summary, countries were evaluated in terms of these factors: economic development; regime type; concentration of power; and the fractionalization of society along ethnic, linguistic, or religious lines. A detailed country narrative accompanies each assessment, with information about the preexisting regime, the progress of the transition, and the durability of the resulting democratic system.

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

A regression analysis found that, with one exception, the political and environmental factors examined in the study did not have a statistically significant impact on the emergence of a civic movement.

All else being equal, an economically poor country may be just as likely to foster a successful civic movement as a more affluent, industrialized one. Indeed, the country studies in this report include several cases of impoverished societies that experienced democratic transitions propelled by active civic movements. Two especially striking examples are the West African countries of Mali and Niger.

Before its democratic transition in 1991, Mali's GDP per capita was only \$250, and the average life expectancy was just 46 years. Niger also had poverty-level statistics prior to its democratic transition in 1999. Its GDP per capita was \$970, and its average life expectancy was 44 years. In contrast, Argentina registered a GDP per capita of \$9,732 and a life expectancy of 71 years at the time of its transition in 1983. During its transition in 1984, Brazil had similarly high economic figures. GDP per capita was at \$6,064, and the average life expectancy was 64 years.

Polarization along ethnic, linguistic, or religious lines may also have little impact on the potential for a cohesive civic opposition. The lack of correlation for this factor is illustrated by the fact that countries as homogeneous as South Korea or Poland and

those as diverse as Benin or Brazil could all foster nonviolent civic movements that eventually lead to a democratic transition.

Benin, for example, has a polarization factor of 0.8196 (where 1 is the most diverse and 0 is the most homogeneous), with a wide variety of ethnic groups and at least eight principal local languages that are regularly used in addition to the official language of French. Yet this diversity did not prevent 40,000 people from demonstrating in the streets against President Mathieu Kerekou's authoritarian rule and in favor of democracy. Nor did it prevent that movement from taking hold throughout the country and permanently changing the political landscape. Meanwhile, with a polarization factor of only 0.0519 and a population that is 95 percent Roman Catholic and 96 percent ethnically Polish, Poland is one of the most homogeneous countries in the study. Nonetheless, it too was able to foster a broad-based civic movement that forced the communist authorities to the bargaining table in 1989 and eventually brought about democratic change.

Also worth noting is the fact that the type of regime did not appear to have any impact on the likelihood of a civic movement emerging. Of all the regime types, single party was by far the most prevalent, owing to the wide spread of communism in the post-World War II world. A total of 27 of the 64 countries in the study were ruled by a single party prior to the transition, with a 52 percent chance that the country would experience a civic movement. A full 86 percent (or 18 countries) of the 21 CEE/FSU countries in the study fell into this regime type, and of these, 61 percent (or 11 countries) experienced a broad-based civic movement before their democratic transition. The percentage was roughly the same for most of the other regime types.

There was one factor that did emerge as statistically significant. In a small but potentially important number of countries, the centralization of power was found to have a positive effect on the emergence of a cohesive and robust civic movement with enough strength to pose a challenge to the existing regime. In other words, the more political power was dispersed to local leaders or governors throughout the country, the *less* likely it was that a successful national civic movement would emerge.

The data in the study showed that very few of the 37 countries in which a nonviolent civic movement formed had any sort of decentralization prior to their democratic transition. In fact, only eight countries had such a structure, three of which were in Latin America. The implication is that most of the authoritarian regimes, whether led by the military or by a personalist dictator, maintained control with executive power highly concentrated in the system's center, rather than with authority dispersed throughout the country.

Given the relatively small number of countries with decentralized systems examined in the present assessment, further research is needed to explore this relationship, but a number of plausible reasons for the correlation exist:

1) In a federated or decentralized system, ordinary citizens are more likely to be able to affect political decisions than they would be in a centralized system. As in many democratic federal systems, citizens can press local officials for changes in policy, and the officials in turn have the power to respond without direct supervision and approval from the central government. As citizens' complaints may be more readily acted upon, it is more likely that popular discontent will be mitigated at the local level. Thus the prospects for a national movement whose objective is democratic transformation may be limited. By giving citizens the ability, however circumscribed, to bring change at the local level, a federated system can minimize the likelihood that discontent will coalesce on a national level.

2) A federated system not only means that most of the country's political power is widely dispersed across local jurisdictions or in rural areas, it also means that the inhabitants themselves may be similarly dispersed. This can significantly complicate the mobilization and coordination of a broad movement with the strength to challenge the regime.

3) A centralized regime usually maintains power through a paramount leader and limited number of senior officials. If an opposition civic movement is able to discredit or challenge the leader and his inner circle, the "pillars of power" on whom the country's

government structure rests, it has a better chance of opening political space than it would where a federated network of power holders is dispersed throughout the country. Thus, while many authoritarian leaders prefer to keep power close to home, the findings of this report indicate that such a choice can leave them more exposed by contributing to the emergence of a successful prodemocracy civic movement.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Many transitions from authoritarian rule do not lead to a free democratic society. When tyrannies or closed systems collapse, democracy is by no means the only alternative, as the examples of Russia, Belarus, and other former Soviet countries attest. Similarly, even when political transitions lead to democratic government, a nonviolent civic movement is not always the means used to achieve that goal.

However, the original *How Freedom Is Won* study showed that when a strong nonviolent movement is the means to the democratic end, the resulting democratic system is more likely to be a stable and durable one. Consequently, for policy decisions related to promoting democracy, the most provocative finding of the *Enabling Environments for Civic Movements* study is that a centralized political system may facilitate the emergence of successful prodemocracy civic movements.

This finding implies that the inability of civil society to mobilize forces centrally, or to communicate and coordinate actions throughout all parts of a country, could limit the success of a prodemocracy movement. It further indicates that building a broad-based, cohesive movement, with a unified message and a base of support strong enough to put sustained and successful pressure on the government, appears to be much more difficult under a federal system.

The results of *Enabling Environments for Civic Movements* suggest that one way of fostering the emergence of new and durable democracies would be to encourage dialogue between diverse domestic civic groups and provide mechanisms for building cooperation among them.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

It is essential to the advancement of democracy that the concrete mechanisms through which freedom progresses be better understood and more widely discussed by the policymaking and analytical communities. The earlier Freedom House study, *How Freedom Is Won*, showed these communities that civic movements enjoying broad support and using nonviolent means can be crucial to ensuring the success of a transition and the stability of the ensuing democratic system.

Enabling Environments for Civic Movements and the Dynamics of Democratic Transition provides information and data to reinforce that finding. It also argues that international and domestic actors should find ways to encourage civil society organizations within authoritarian countries to move toward common action. Ultimately, the pressure exerted by broad, unified coalitions committed to nonviolent resistance may well make the difference in the struggle to replace political repression with an open, democratic order.

¹ Barbara Geddes, “What Do We Know About Democratization After Twenty Years?” *Annual Review of Political Science* 2 (1999): 115-1

² Other sources included Alberto Alesina, Arnaud Devleeschauwer, William Easterly, Sergio Kurlat, and Romain Wacziarg, “Fractionalization,” *Journal of Economic Growth* 8 (2003): 155-194; James D. Fearon, “Ethnic and Cultural Diversity by Country,” *Journal of Economic Growth* 8 (2003): 195-222; Barbara Geddes, “What Do We Know about Democratization after Twenty Years?” *Annual Review of Political Science* 2, no. 1 (1999): 115-145; and Valerie Bunce, “Rethinking Recent Democratization: Lessons from the Postcommunist Experience,” *World Politics* 55 (2003): 167-1

Regression Analysis Results Chart

This chart illustrates the most important results from the study's principal regression analysis. The analysis took each of the study's independent variables (listed in the left-hand column of this chart) and tested to determine whether or not they had any significant impact upon our dependent variable—the likelihood that a broad-based pro-democracy civic movement would emerge prior to a successful democratic transition. The values in the middle column, the $P > |t|$ column, indicate whether or not the relationship between an independent variable and our dependent variable is *statistically significant*. In other words, they indicate whether or not any meaningful, sound conclusions can be drawn from the analysis. In order for the relationship to be statistically significant the value in this column must be 0.1 or less. *Federalism* is therefore the only independent variable that has a statistically significant result.

The right-hand column, the coefficient column, illuminates the *nature* of the relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable. If the number in that column is positive, then the independent variable has a positive impact upon the likelihood of a pro-democracy civic movement emerging. If the coefficient is negative, then the nature of the relationship is reversed.

In this case, the middle column shows that federalism is the only independent variable with a statistically significant result, while the right-hand column shows that the existence of a federated form of governance in a country has a negative impact upon the likelihood that a broad-based civic movement will emerge prior to a democratic transition.

Independent Variable	P>[t]	Coefficient
GDP	0.257	1.07758
Economic growth	0.63	-0.026311
Life expectancy	0.922	-0.0086646
Federalization	0.1	-2.564185
Fractionalization	0.358	2.178076
Polarization	0.526	-1.263195
Regime Type 1	0.395	0.8202083
Regime Type 2	0.329	1.54553
Regime Type 3	0.11	1.516408
Regime Type 4	0.358	1.315632
Regime Type 5	0.74	-0.5469561
Regimes Types:	1	Military
	2	Military/Personalist Hybrid
	3	Personalist
	4	Single Party Hybrids with either Military or Personalist
	5	Military/Personalist/Single Party Amalgam

Country Reports

This study, *Enabling Environments for Civic Movements and the Dynamics of Democratic Transition*, looks at the question of whether there are political or socioeconomic factors that inhibit or facilitate the development of civil resistance movements committed to the democratic, nonviolent transformation of authoritarian societies.

An earlier study sponsored jointly by Freedom House and the International Center for Nonviolent Conflict found that an overwhelming number of transitions to democracy in the latter part of the twentieth century featured civil resistance, including strikes, civil disobedience, boycotts, and mass protests. That study, *How Freedom Is Won*, concluded that "bottom up" transitions far outnumbered those driven by political elites. *Enabling Environments for Civic Movements* carries the original study a step further in laying out a case for what Peter Ackerman has called the primacy of skills over conditions in determining the outcome of a conflict driven by civil resistance.

Based largely on original research, *Enabling Environments for Civic Movements* concludes that neither the political nor environmental factors examined in the study had a statistically significant impact on the success or failure of civil resistance movements. Among the major implications of this finding is that civic movements are as likely to succeed in less developed, economically poor countries as in developed, affluent societies. The study also finds no significant evidence that ethnic or religious polarization has a major impact on the possibilities for the emergence of a cohesive civic opposition. Nor does regime type seem to have an important influence on the ability of civic movements to achieve broad support.

The one significant factor that does emerge is government centralization. The study suggests that high degrees of centralization correlate positively with the emergence of a robust civic movement with the potential to challenge regime authority. The reverse also appears to be true: the greater the degree of government decentralization, the less likely it is that a successful movement of civic mobilization will arise.

The study's most important policy conclusion is that the growth of strong civic movements committed to tactics of nonviolent resistance can play the key role in bringing about democratic transformations in authoritarian settings. Policies that contribute to the strength of movements of civic mobilization may make the difference in the struggle to replace dictatorship with a democratic order.