

LOST IN TRANSITION: A BOTTOM-UP PERSPECTIVE ON HYBRID REGIMES

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The (Unexpected) Rise and Persistence of Hybrid Regimes

Since the end of the Cold War, the world has witnessed a radical increase in – as well as the unanticipated *resilience* of – a new type of political system; *hybrid regimes*.¹ Typical for these regimes are that they combine some democratic elements – commonly elections – with authoritarian governance, characteristically the lack of rule of law and limited constitutional freedoms and rights. In fact, hybrid regimes are today the most common type of political system.

Against this backdrop, suffrage can no longer be used to distinguish democracies from autocracies. Moreover, with recent transitions to electoral politics even outside the industrialized world, clientelistic and corrupt politics have made a powerful entrance to the democratic scene; hybrid regimes are comparatively more clientelistic and corrupt than both full-fledged democracies and outright dictatorships. As a result, hybrid regimes tend not only to perform worse than consolidated democracies but also than authoritarian regimes on a large variety of public goods indicators, including population health, education, access to clean water and sanitation, as well as to basic infrastructure such as roads and electricity.²

The rise of hybrid regimes as a relatively resilient type of regime runs counter to the case made by several influential schools

of thought, particularly transitional theories of democratization and Median Voter Theory.³ On the basis of these theories, there has been a strong expectation among scholars and policy makers alike that the introduction of electoral politics to the poorer parts of the world should serve as an impetus to democratization, and eventually also to welfare expansion. More specifically, by making it possible for citizens to vote incumbents out of office that do not meet citizens' presumed demands for a democratic and accountable government that serves the needs of the broader population, elections have until recently been viewed – and promoted – not only as a central but an indispensable driver of political and social development.

In short, in the light of dominant theories, the development of hybrid regimes is puzzling: *Why has the expansion of suffrage led to the development of a regime type that typically serves the interests not of the broader population but of a small elite?*

In response to this puzzle, the mainstream approach has been to forcefully blame the elites. More specifically, adopting an analytical framework which revolves around the concepts of *reverse sequencing*, *clientelistic machines*, and *elite manipulation*, the lion's share of studies have depicted democratic failure as it plays out in the developing world as a top-down process under firm elite control.⁴ By such

accounts, many states in the developing world have democratized “backwards,” holding elections before developing core institutional state functions, particularly the rule of law. As a result, unscrupulous and powerful elites have been able to circumvent the presumed democratizing effects of elections – through the means of outright violence, the manipulation of electoral laws, vote buying, illegal party financing, and nepotism – leading to the subsequent demise of any politics or policies favoring the broader population. In short, due to powerful elites taking advantage of weak state institutions, hybrid regimes are not only characterized by what Terry Lynn Karl once coined *the fallacy of electoralism* – i.e. the inability of elections alone to empower the people and help them “guard the guardians” – but they are characterized also by so-called *perverse accountability*.⁵ Within this framework, powerful elites – due to a variety of reasons, ranging from international and stability concerns to the rife opportunities for corruption provided by the system – continue to promote electoral politics at the same time as they turn the very essence of democratic accountability on its head by forcefully using citizens as clients. The widespread selling of votes, the failure of voters to actually *punish* corrupt politicians at the polls, as well as the tendency of citizens to even punish the comparatively few politicians that actually provide public goods, have within this framework been interpreted almost exclusively in the light of particularly poor and vulnerable citizens falling prey to elite manipulation and control.⁶

1) Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way. 2002. “The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism.” *Journal of Democracy* 13 (2): 51-65; Thomas Carothers. 2002. “The End of the Transition Paradigm.” *Journal of Democracy* 13 (1): 5-21.

2) Hung-En Sung. 2004. “Democracy and Political Corruption: A Cross-National Comparison.” *Crime, Law, and Social Change* 41 (2): 179-193; Allen Hicken. 2011. “Clientelism.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 14: 289-310. Michael Ross. 2006. “Is Democracy Good for the Poor?” *American Journal of Political Science* 50 (4): 860-874.

3) Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions About Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); Allan H. Meltzer and Scott F. Richard. 1981. “A Rational Theory of the Size of Government.” *Journal of Political Economy* 89: 914-27.

4) For important exceptions, see Simeon Nichter and Michael Peress. 2017. “Request Fulfilling: When Citizens Demand Clientelist Benefits.” *Comparative Political Studies* 50 (8): 1086-1117; Philip Keefer. 2007. “Clientelism, Credibility, and the Policy Choices of Young Democracies.” *American Journal of Political Science* 51 (4): 804-821.

5) Terry Lynn Karl. 1986. “Imposing Consent? Electoralism versus Democratization in El Salvador.” In *Elections and democratization in Latin America, 1980-1985*, eds. W. Paul Drake and Eduardo Silva, 9-36. San Diego: University of California. Susan C. Stokes. 2005. “Perverse Accountability: A Formal Model of Machine Politics with Evidence from Argentina.” *American Political Science Review* 99 (3): 315-310.

6) Eric Kramon. 2017. Money for Votes. The Causes and Consequences of Electoral Clientelism

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This article does not call into question the importance of powerful elites or the portrayal of particularly poor citizens as victims in the face of these elites. However, on the basis of insights gained primarily from informant interviews from Kenya and Uganda, but also from cross-section analysis, this article calls for a more dynamic approach to our understanding of hybrid regimes.⁷ In line with institutional theory's emphasis on the importance of understanding mechanisms of reproduction in order to be able to achieve change, this article argues that, unless we begin to recognize the ways in which even the poorest of citizens serve not only as victims but as important *autonomous* and *opportunistic* actors in upholding the logic of hybrid regimes, these regimes will most likely continue to be lost in transition.

A Bottom-Up Perspective on Hybrid Regimes

At the core of this article is the argument that the "top-down approach" which dominates the literature is a simplified view of what is actually going on in hybrid regimes. Instead, this article conveys the ways in which

in Africa. *Cambridge: Cambridge University Press*; Matthew S Winters and Rebecca Weitz-Shapiro. 2013. "Lacking Information or Condoning Corruption: When Do Voters Support Corrupt Politicians?" *Comparative Politics* 45 (4): 418-436; Daniel de Kadt, and Evan S. Lieberman. 2017. "Nuanced Accountability: Voter Responses to Service Provision in Southern Africa." *British Journal of Political Science*. Online First.

7) Anna Persson and Bo Rothstein. 2019. "The Democratic Roots of Corruption." Paper prepared for presentation at APSA, Washington D.C., August 29-September 1, 2019; Anna Persson, Bo Rothstein and Jan Teorell. 2019. "Getting the Basic Nature of Systemic Corruption Right." *Governance*. Online First; Anna Persson and Bo Rothstein. 2015. "It's My Money: Why Big Government May Be Bad Government." *Comparative Politics* 47 (2): 231-249; Anna Persson, Bo Rothstein and Jan Teorell. 2013. "Why Anticorruption Reforms Fail—Systemic Corruption as a Collective Action Problem," *Governance* 26(3): 449-47; Anna Persson and Martin Sjöstedt. 2012. Responsive and Responsible Leaders: A Matter of Political Will? *Perspectives on Politics* 10(3), 617-632.

the resilience of hybrid regimes can also be understood in terms of a, if yet highly uneven, *dynamic* process, in which not only political elites but also ordinary citizens *rationaly* and *autonomously* respond to the incentives provided by reverse sequencing.

At the core of this argument is the insight that even the poorest of citizens, quite contrary to how they have typically been portrayed, are in fact to some extent empowered by elections even in a context of reverse sequencing. However, due to the "rules of the game" implied by reverse sequencing, citizens are likely to use this newly won power in quite a different manner than what standard theories would predict. More specifically, the results from the studies referenced above reveal how citizens in developing countries are typically not at all unaware of the limits provided by state weakness in terms of what state actors *can* and *will be willing to provide* in terms of democratic deepening and improved human well-being. Having lived experience of the "rules of the game" of weak and corrupt states, citizens instead tend to share a firm expectation that, whatever elites happen to promise in election rallies, in the end, they will neither have the capacity nor the willingness to expand democracy and welfare. In other words, in countries characterized by state weakness, a shared social contract – i.e. a joint understanding of the state as an instrument of collective action, oriented towards the provision of public goods – is typically lacking. Instead, due to the state's limited financial capacity to actually provide public goods, and on top of that widespread corruption, which even further serves to undermine the prospects for public goods provision, most citizens tend to share an expectation of the state as a resource that will be appropriated to the benefit of whatever ruler that happens to be in power at that particular point in time.

In the light of this widespread awareness regarding what low institutional quality brings to the table – and with a clear insight of the short-term risks and costs associated with challenging the existing

"rules of the game" – the typical citizen will tend to view, as well as use, elections not so much as an arena for articulating demands for public goods, but instead as a perceived *only* chance to get something out of the system, if yet merely in the form of non-programmatic, patronage goods. As a result, contrary to what previous studies have typically assumed, politicians in hybrid regimes do not normally have to spend a lot of effort to circumvent citizens' demands for democratic deepening and welfare expansion; such demands are not likely to become articulated in the first place. Instead, elites are typically held accountable to citizens' demands for targeted goods. As effectively summarized by the interviewees, the introduction of elections in contexts of state weakness can even lead to the development of a political system in which candidates, in fear of losing votes, feel *necessitated* to respond to citizens' demands for cash transfers and other targeted benefits in return for votes. That is, what is developing is a system in which voters are in fact to some extent empowered by elections but still tend to evaluate political candidates not so much on the basis of promises about future institutional reform aimed at serving the public good as on the basis of their capacity to amass wealth and take care of their "own." The interviewees even paint a picture of a "voter's market" in which rational voters, assured that politicians will be unable to monitor their behavior, even sell their vote multiple times and to different candidates in order to gain as much as possible from the system once they have access. As described by one Kenyan interviewee:

[...] *Because if you look at these MPs. Do you know what kind of pressure is on them? It is amazing. They spend so much money, buying the voters stuff.*

[...] *So the electorate has a lot of power in one way.*

The story of the destructive social dynamics of hybrid regimes does not seem to end here. Instead, the aforementioned studies

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uncover how the complicity of ordinary citizens in terms of them actively playing the “rules of the game” during elections is likely to induce a *reactive sequence*, which serves to further “lock in,” even reinforce, the inherent logic of hybrid regimes. This happens via a variety of different mechanisms; ideational, psychological, as well as purely rational. For one thing, to the extent that citizens themselves actively promote clientelistic exchange during elections, they share a propensity to internalize a view that they actually have no subsequent “right” to demand accountability in the form of reforms that serve the public good since they have already been “paid off” during the elections. Citizens’ active participation in clientelistic exchange even seems to underpin the idea that political elites should be entitled to recoup at least some of the resources they lost during the elections, by the way of corrupt activities *between* elections. In other words, even if citizens perfectly well understand that they will be the ones that stand to lose from further corruption, partly because of their own active participation, they remain loyal to the “rules of the game” in a way that serves to further undermine the prospects for democratic deepening and welfare expansion. With the avoidance of what psychologists call “cognitive dissonance” as a backdrop, citizens who are well aware of their own role in the corrupt and essentially non-democratic “rules of the game” will in many cases not only be likely to fail to punish corrupt behavior but will even *encourage* such behavior. Moreover, on a pure rational note, citizens are likely to support corrupt behavior guided by the insight that, at the end of the day, the more politicians are able to reap the fruits from public office *in between* elections, the more resources they will have to distribute to the voters in return for votes during *the next round of elections*. This logic in turn feeds the internalization of the idea of the corrupt politician as the “good” politician.

In these described ways, the equilibrium in favor of hybrid regimes is decisively

maintained not only from the “top-down” but also from the “bottom-up.” As a matter of fact, quite contrary to the understanding of accountability relationships in hybrid regimes as being “perverted” in the sense that citizens who show a tendency not to keep their end of the deal are being threatened by political machines, what the results of the denoted studies reveal is rather a situation in which accountability is in *itself* corrupt. That is, the accountability relationship that develops in the face of reverse sequencing serves to strengthen rather than weaken the incentives for political elites to engage in politics that undermine the prospects for democratic deepening and welfare expansion also through the creation of an outright “non-demand” for such politics from “below.” As forcefully concluded by one of the Ugandan interviewees:

I think in the Ugandan case democracy has encouraged more corruption than it has removed because the big people are slaves now also, they also fear those people who are down.

Summary and Conclusions: The Social Dynamics of Hybrid Regimes

The story of the resilience of hybrid regimes – and the corresponding lack of democratic deepening and welfare expansion despite elections being held – has typically been a story about predatory elites circumventing the demands of poor and vulnerable citizens. Without neglecting the central and powerful role played by elites, this article has painted a somewhat different picture of what is going on in hybrid regimes, focusing on the role played also by ordinary citizens as autonomous and opportunistic actors in sustaining such regimes. In short, what the article has emphasized is the importance of an approach to hybrid regimes that takes seriously the ways in which such regimes develop in response to a *dynamic* relationship between political elites and ordinary citizens. Within the

framework of this dynamic relationship, not only are the people forced to “dance to the tunes of the elites,” such as has typically been described, but political elites are to some extent also forced to “dance to the tunes of the people” – if yet to radically different tunes than what standard theories of democratization and welfare expansion would predict. More specifically, with shared expectations regarding what political elites are likely to be able and willing to do in a context of state weakness as the main driver, not only a limited demand but a “non-demand” for democratic deepening and welfare expansion “from below” is likely to be present that will effectively work in tandem with the “non-provision” of such goods “from above.”

With these insights about the social dynamics of hybrid regimes as a backdrop, the next step for research will be to explore in greater detail how such stable equilibria can be escaped so as not to produce a “third wave of autocratization” but instead a “fourth wave of democratization.”⁸ In this endeavor, the in-depth further exploration of the rational, ideational, as well as psychological, micro-level drivers of citizen behavior should be in focus. What rational reasons beyond material incentives can explain the role of citizens in the maintenance of hybrid regimes? What role do shared expectations about how the system works play? And what are the psychological effects of citizens’ passive as well as active complicity to the logic of these regimes that can help explain why they do typically not act in line with their own and their societies’ long-term interest but instead play a role in maintaining a system which forcefully serves to undermine the prospects for a better life for the broader population?

8) Anna Lührmann and Staffan I. Lindberg. 2019. “A Third Wave of Autocratization is Here: What Is New About It?” *Democratization*. Online First.