

# Some Notes on Studies of Democracy in the Third World

Olle Törnquist

University of Uppsala

-  
-

One of the main features on the agenda in the contemporary Third World is political democratisation. The character, potential, and causes of these processes are among the more urgent and challenging subjects that call for research. There is a general need to broaden our knowledge about people's capacity to develop democratic forms of rule in response to rapid and authoritarian transformations of society.

Problems of third world democracy have usually been approached from three points of view. And a fourth point of view is just coming up.<sup>1</sup>

## 1: Modernisation and democracy

During the 1950s and 60s most scholars of political science claimed that social and economic "modernisation" (vis-à-vis "tradition") had generated political democracy in Western Europe, and that this development, as well as the way in which it had been studied, could be replicated in the third world.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, those drawing on

---

<sup>1</sup>I shall briefly summarise main arguments and avoid name-dropping. Key references with names are found in the footnotes. The discussion and the selection of references are partly influenced by the fact that my own empirical research is limited to Indonesia, India, and the Philippines.

<sup>2</sup>For some of the most influential works see e.g. Rostow, W.W., *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960); Almond G. and Coleman J. (eds.), *The Politics of Developing Areas*, (Princeton University Press, 1960); Almond G. and Powell, B. *Comparative Politics: A Developmental Approach* (Boston: Little Brown) 1966.

classical Marxist perspectives claimed also that the expansion of capitalism would undermine authoritarian regimes.

As we know, the course of events soon proved democratisation to be more complicated. Generally speaking, most theorists of modernisation stressed, of course, the lack of capitalist expansion. But many scholars found it also problematic to apply the prescribed approaches. For instance, some emphasised the ways in which "traditional" elements such as caste and patron-client relations survived within a "modern" framework.<sup>3</sup> Others held that economic development and social mobilisation had not opened up for harmonious democratisation, but rather for instability. In their view, there was thus a need for "political order".<sup>4</sup> Enlightened leaders and "modern" party or military organisations could build strong and stable political institutions to guide modernisation as well as democratisation.

However, with the current movement towards democratisation, comparative studies of preconditions for democracy with roots in the modernisation school got a new lease of life. For instance, a huge new U. S. project was initiated in the mid-1980s.<sup>5</sup> The relationship between capitalism and democracy was still taken for granted – even though the importance of different patterns was now emphasised – and there were no studies of "communist countries" because of the "little prospect among them of a transition to democracy [sic!]"<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, while there was now a deliberate effort to consider almost all existing explanations of democratisation, it has at least not been possible to rigourously relate and apply the ten theoretical dimensions singled out in the project,<sup>7</sup> with dozens of variables and propositions, to the case studies from Asia.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup>See eg. Eisenstadt, S. *Modernisation: Protest and Change* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1966), and, with reference to Asia, Rudolph, L. and Rudolph, S, *The Modernity of Tradition: Political Development in India*, (Chicago University Press, 1967).

<sup>4</sup>The most famous book was Samuel Huntington's *Political Order in Changing Societies*, (New Haven, Conn.:Yale University Press, 1968).

<sup>5</sup>See the four volume series edited by Diamond, L., Linz, J.J., and Lipset, S.M., *Democracy in Developing Countries*, of which I am mainly drawing on Volume 3: *Democracy in Asia* (New Delhi: Vistaar Publications/Sage, 1989)

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p.xix

<sup>7</sup>The 10 dimensions: political culture; regime legitimacy and effectiveness; historical development; class structure and degree of inequality; national structure (cleavages); state

Furthermore, scholars drawing on classical Marxist perspectives now return with their ideas about the expansion of capitalism in the Third World. Political monopolies, arbitrary and complicated administration, and exclusionary practices are held to obstruct accumulation. All this may thus necessitate negotiations, which in turn may lead to some democratisation.<sup>9</sup> While certain writers emphasise the structural impetus, others stress the emergence of stronger, more or less traditional capitalists and middle classes, as well as international agencies such as the International Monetary Fund.

## 2: Institutionalism and democracy

The second and third schools of thought emerged during the 1960s and 70s – as democracy failed to appear and authoritarian forms of rule mushroomed despite modernisation. Let me begin with the "institutionalists".

At an early stage, Weberian "modernisation revisionists" demonstrated among other things that "traditional" patrimonialism and clientelism prevailed even among the most "modern" organisations and developmental leaders.<sup>10</sup> And in the mid-1980s, it became fashionable once again to explain the significance of powerful institutions independently of the interests of class and other social forces.<sup>11</sup>

---

structure, centralisation and strength; political and constitutional structure; political leadership; development performance; and international factors (ibid., p.xv).

<sup>8</sup>A major conclusion is that the political leadership do matter, as do checks and balances! Ibid. pp.49 f.

<sup>9</sup>For an exciting recent discussion, see Richard Robison, *The Dynamics of Authoritarianism: Theoretical Debates and the Indonesian Case*, Paper presented to the ASAA Conference, Griffith University, July 1990.

<sup>10</sup>For a good and not too old example in the Asian context, see Harold Crouch's summary of his dissertation, "Patrimonialism and Military Rule in Indonesia", in *World Politics*, Vol. 31, July 1979.

<sup>11</sup>While some institutionalist perspectives, such as those subscribed to by Theda Skocpol, could very well be held as a complement when one had reached as long as possible by analysing control of the conditions of production (including, for instance, public resources), as Pranab Bardhan has tried in his *The Political Economy of Development in India* (Oxford:

From one point of view, the East Asian experience, for instance, indicated that authoritarian and efficient state institutions survived, both because, according to the predominant theories,<sup>12</sup> subordination of certain socio-economic interest groups was necessary for rapid economic growth, and because most people benefited from this development to such an extent that they abstained from democracy.<sup>13</sup> From another point of view, all the huge, but non-efficient and "soft" state institutions in Asia, which could not master conflicting interests and generate rapid growth, were also undermining democracy – because clientelism, patrimonialism etc. were mushrooming, and "machine politics" characterised elections.<sup>14</sup>

While most scholars thus claimed, on the one hand, that there was a need for more solid states, they also, on the other hand, maintained that politics, public institutions, politicians, and bureaucrats in general (rather than monopolisation of private as well as public resources and instruments) were hindering political democracy. In addition to the call for more "order", many scholars concluded that deregulation and privatisation – in order to strengthen "civil society" – was the only solution.

Consequently, there is now a revival of Tocqueville in particular, and of the importance that he assigned to civil rather than political rights, and to voluntary associations as mediating institutions and countervailing forces to state and government. In the Asian context, the discussion is mainly related to the role of so-called non-governmental organisations – often led by entrepreneurial middle-class intellectuals – as well as a large variety of more or less independent social movements, and even autonomy movements,

---

Basil Blackwell, 1984), it was and is usually marketed and subscribed to as a full-scale alternative.

<sup>12</sup>See Mancur Olsen, *The Rise and Decline of Nations*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).

<sup>13</sup>Samuel Huntington, "Will More Countries Become Democratic?", in *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 99, No.2, 1984.

<sup>14</sup>See e.g. Ben Anderson's brilliant article on the resurrection after 1986 of "Cacique democracy in the Philippines" in *New Left Review*, No. 169, 1988, and cf. for a Swedish contribution on India, Blomkvist, Hans, *The Soft State: Housing Reform and State Capacity in Urban India*, (Uppsala University, 1988).

which may be based on cast, ethnicity, gender, religion, interest, and cause.<sup>15</sup>

However, the fact that many of these groups and movements usually focus upon civil liberties rather than sovereignty of the people is rarely discussed. And their emergence and role is difficult to analyse with the traditional conceptualisation of "state and civil society".<sup>16</sup> What is meant to be distinguished is in reality intertwined. And many of the "civil" friends and enemies work through the state; even agencies of foreign states try to "empower the civil society".<sup>17</sup> I shall return to those problems towards the end of the lecture.

### 3: Authoritarianism, capitalism, and democracy

Now back to the 1960s. While some scholars, as we have seen, tried to revise the theories about modernisation, those in favour of the new dependency paradigm almost turned the old theses upside down: Enforced western "modernisation" made political democracy almost impossible. Third World countries were only formally independent. Dominating groups and classes relied on authoritarian rule since they had no firm domestic social and economic bases. Workers and peasants were either benefitting from integration in the world capitalist system or becoming increasingly marginalised.<sup>18</sup>

An intensive debate on modes of production soon challenged this square emphasis on unequal relations between various regions and sectors. Analysis of classes within production was held as the immediate alternative, and knowledge about different social bases of the state made it possible to explain various policies and forms of

---

<sup>15</sup>For one important partisan attempt to theorise, see e.g. Rajni Kothari, *State against Democracy: In Search of Humane Governance* (Delhi: Ajanta, 1988).

<sup>16</sup>For interesting contributions, see e.g. *Civil Society and the State: New European Perspectives*, Ed. John Keane (London: Verso, 1988).

<sup>17</sup>Cf. my "Communists and Democracy: Two Indian Cases and one Debate", Forthcoming in *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* Vol. 23:2, 1991. and "Democracy and the Philippine Left", op.cit.

<sup>18</sup>See the classical writings of, for instance, André Gunder Frank and Samir Amin.

regime.<sup>19</sup> For instance, some scholars talked about bureaucratic-authoritarian states with oligarchic corporatism as a product of economic crisis and based on triple alliances between the state, the local big bourgeoisie, and international capitalists.<sup>20</sup> Others claimed that some few countries, like India, were partly democratic because the so-called "national bourgeoisie" was unusually strong and had tried to influence the state via representative rather than executive organs.<sup>21</sup> Many agreed that Third World politicians and bureaucrats were often relatively autonomous and free to act in many different ways since they had inherited extensive colonial state apparatuses, and because no class or classes were strong enough to dominate them.<sup>22</sup>

My own conclusion was rather that an ideal bourgeoisie might allow some democracy, but that many actual capitalists promoted their positions through monopolisation of state institutions and extensive public resources, something which hardly paved the way for democracy. A *Rechtsstaat* with efficient administration might emerge as dominating groups became economically stronger, but real democratisation would have to be enforced by the majority suffering from political monopolisation. Much of the so-called "relative autonomy" of many Third World bureaucrats and politicians could actually be explained in terms of their exclusive control of state institutions and resources.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup>Some essays of Ernesto Laclau were pioneering, see the collection in his *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* (London: NLB, 1977).

<sup>20</sup>See e.g. O'Donnell, Guillermo, *Modernisation and Bureaucratic-Authoritarianism: Studies in South American Politics* (Berkeley: Institute of International Studies, University of California, 1973) and Evans, Peter, *Dependent Development: The Alliance of Multinational, State, and Local Capital in Brazil*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979). For an Asian discussion in the same tradition, see Budiman, Arief, "The State and Industrialisation in Indonesia", in *Dependency Issues in Korean Development*, (Seoul: Seoul National University Press, 1987).

<sup>21</sup>Martinussen, John, *Staten i perifere og post-koloniale samfund: Indien og Pakistan*, (Aarhus: Politica, Aarhus University, 1980). For a critical discussion of Martinussen's contribution, see my "Class and Democracy in South and Southeast Asia: Some critical Notes", in *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. XX, pp. 113-125, 1987.

<sup>22</sup>Alavi, Hamza, "The State in Post-Colonial Societies: Pakistan and Bangladesh", in *New Left Review*, No. 74, 1972.

<sup>23</sup>For a more comprehensive discussion of various perspectives, see my *What's Wrong with Marxism? On Capitalists and State in India and Indonesia*, (New Delhi: Manohar, 1989).

Consequently, as the current movement towards democratisation started, most scholars were busy explaining authoritarian forms of rule.

Just as those working within the framework of modernisation theory or trying to revise it, researchers with a background in dependency and class perspectives usually abstained from a thorough revision of their basic theses. Even if it was true that it had not been possible to foresee the political democratisation using structuralist theories, one could say that this was because democratisation had left the fundamental relations of power and exploitation intact, at least in view of the old theories,<sup>24</sup> then hold the structural status quo as a precondition for the negotiations and horse-trading between different dominating groups which often preceded political democratisation, and conclude that such a political game should be approached in terms of more or less rational action.<sup>25</sup>

#### 4: Popular demands and struggles for democratisation

In addition to the three main approaches outlined above I should finally like to hint at a more recent fourth perspective. A most powerful argument used to be that while people in large parts of the early industrialised Western Europe were integrated into the political arena through non-personalistic state bureaucracies, mass parties, and unions, Third World citizens were instead incorporated – due to personalistic and particularistic politics in societies where some kind of political modernisation has preceded industrialisation.<sup>26</sup>

However – and irrespective of the various interpretations of the recent economic and political transformations – most scholars now maintain that labour and middle class movements have got more solid socio-economic bases and that many new social movements

---

<sup>24</sup>Cf. the problematic arguments of the Philippine Left after Marcos as analysed in my "Democracy and the Philippine Left", in *Kasarinlan* (University of the Philippines), Vol. 6, No. 1-2, 1990. (Also in *Economic and Political Weekly*, July 6-13 and July 20, 1991).

<sup>25</sup>For scholars with a background in dependency perspectives and class analyses of the state, see e.g. O'Donnell, G., Schmitter, P., and Whitehead, L (eds.), *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Prospects for Democracy* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986) which also includes a theoretical contribution by Adam Przeworski.

<sup>26</sup>Mouzelis, Nicos P. *Politics in the Semi-Periphery: Early Parliamentarism and Late Industrialisation in the Balkans and Latin America*, (London: Macmillan, 1986).

have also mushroomed. The movements grow increasingly more important and their room of manoeuvre expands. It is true that some seem to be almost neo-liberal, and that many, for instance, seek shelter behind various ethnic or state-based patrons. But the movements in general contribute to the extension of civil rights. Actors as different as the World Bank and leftist aid activists are supportive of a stronger "civil society" and "non-governmental organisations". And the various demands put forward by the movements, as well as the cooperation between them, may lead to democratic concessions from ruling groups.<sup>27</sup>

I myself would even suggest that the current political and economic transformations may have altered the conditions to such an extent that popular movements aiming at radically different development may come to play an important role in the full emergence of democracy by giving priority to democratisation, as did many similar movements in Western Europe. The results from my recent research of communist-oriented movements in Indonesia, India, and the Philippines indicate that the special brand of capitalist expansion in the area has given birth to fundamental contradictions over politically facilitated control of essential conditions of production. Some new and renewed popular movements of importance may therefore have to promote democratisation even for basic material reasons.<sup>28</sup>

I shall return to this in my next lecture on popular movements. Let me just say that I think it is very important that we now try in various ways to study under what conditions and with what perspectives various movements might contribute to democratic changes and perhaps even focus upon democratisation in their own work.

---

<sup>27</sup>Cf. Björn Beckman's *Structural Adjustment and Democracy: Interest Group Resistance to Structural Adjustment and the Development of the Democracy Movement in Africa – a Research Proposal*. (Department of Political Science, University of Stockholm, 1990).

<sup>28</sup>See especially my *Dilemmas of Third World Communism: The Destruction of the PKI in Indonesia* (London: Zed Books, 1984), *What's Wrong with Marxism...*, op. cit., *What's Wrong with Marxism. Vol. 2: On Peasants and Workers in India and Indonesia*, (New Delhi: Manohar 1991), and "Democracy and the Philippine Left", op.cit.