

Popular politics and the path to durable democracy

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The role of mass mobilization in the process of political democratization remains a central question in the study of political sociology today, especially in the wake of the Arab uprisings and the global rise in mass movements and uprisings since 2011.

Adopting a comparative historical approach, Mohammad Ali Kadivar's *Popular Politics and the Path to Durable Democracy* provides a rich and convincing account of the relationship between long protest campaigns and the durability of democracies. Deploying mixed methods and relying on a breadth of original data, Kadivar argues that democracies that emerge out of long periods of mass protest have higher chances of survival than democracies imposed from above (such as Iraq or Pakistan), or those that emerge from short periods of mass mobilization (such as Egypt). Based on a novel and unique cross-national event dataset of unarmed mass mobilization in 80 countries between 1960 and 2010 and building on five in-depth case studies (South Africa, Poland, Pakistan, Egypt and Tunisia); Kadivar shows that movements that develop over a long period of time are bound to build stronger organizational structures and more solid leadership: features that then form the main mechanisms behind the successful transition to durable democracies.

The book is organized around five concise, but very rich, chapters. It proceeds from a quantitative cross-national macro-analysis (Ch. 2) to a qualitative approach through case studies that delve into the mechanisms driving the overall observed trends established statistically (Ch. 3–5). Chapter 1 sets the ground for the discussion and situates the book within the broader theoretical debates about transition to democracy. Chapter 2 demonstrates the book's argument through quantitative analyses that establish the positive relationship between longer periods of unarmed popular mobilization and democratic survival. Chapter 3 offers an in-depth analysis of three case studies from the late 20th century: South Africa in 1994, Poland in 1989, and Pakistan from 1988 to 1999. Kadivar's argument is that both South Africa and Poland are successful cases of democratic transition and survival because the long years of mobilization leading to the toppling of the authoritarian regimes happened in tandem with strong organization and coalition building, which led to the formation of stable democracies and active civil societies post-democratization. In contrast, the chapter argues that Pakistan is an example of failed transition since its democracy emerged without strong pressure from below. Kadivar shows how Pakistan's democratization came in the context of a military agreement with the opposition leader Benazir Bhutto, in the absence of a considerable role for labor unions, political parties, or civil society organizations; hence making it a fragile case of democratization. Chapter 4 and 5 focus on two cases from the "Arab Spring", Egypt and Tunisia

respectively. Chapter 4 argues that Egypt's short-lived democratic transition (2011–2013) can be traced back to what Kadivar calls “the predicaments of rapid success” (p. 71). This chapter argues that the fragmentation of the opposition between Islamists and non-Islamists and the weak organizational capacities of non-Islamist opposition groups laid the groundwork for the military coup in 2013 against the elected president Mohammed Morsy. In this chapter, Kadivar argues that “if the mobilization period had been lengthier, perhaps non-Islamist groups would have reached an agreement with the Muslim Brotherhood or developed stronger organizations to compete with it” (p. 20). Chapter 5 moves to the Tunisian case as an anomalous case of successful democratization (notwithstanding the serious decline in democracy since 2021) despite what the author considers to have been a short period of mobilization (2010–2011). Here, Kadivar highlights the crucial role played by the trade unions—Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT)—in making the democratic transition successful. He argues that despite the fragility of the post-revolution political parties in Tunisia, and the fragmentation of the opposition along Islamist and non-Islamist lines as in Egypt, Tunisia's successful democratic transition was mainly due to the presence of the well-organized UGTT on the non-Islamist side which made the competition between the Islamists (Ennahda) and non-Islamists more balanced. Therefore, Kadivar solves the Tunisian enigma by tracing back the UGTT's formation to the struggles against French colonial rule, when long waves of mass mobilization led to the building of the strong organizational structure of the UGTT that survived through a history of both militancy and cooptation.

While Kadivar's book provides a compelling account of the role of mass mobilization in the building of durable democracies, the analysis calls for a number of questions or further clarifications. First, the details elaborated in the empirical parts of the book seem to be pointing to a crucial role for organization and coalition building, rather than a role for long protest waves per se, in the building of durable democracies. Of course, protests are an important venue for organization and coalition building, as pointed by Kadivar in the book; but the importance of movements in abeyance and the role of movements in exile or underground organization under authoritarian regimes is downplayed despite evidence in the case studies of such types of organization. In that sense, the book's focus on protest campaigns specifically overlooks the important organizational work that can take place off the streets in many cases. Moreover, the argument that long protest waves lead to better organization seems to be based on an assumption that requires further investigation. In fact, long protest campaigns do not always necessarily build networks and facilitate organization. Here again, the book provides evidence of cases where long protest movements tend to actually break down organizations rather than accumulate social networks or fortify organizational building. For example, in both Poland and South Africa the leading organizations shifted over the years and its composition changed drastically, sometimes coalescing previous organizations and other times breaking coalitions and moving in new directions. More attention to the limitations of long-term protest campaigns in terms of building organization and coalitions or creating fractions and breaking activists' networks can be illuminating in the study of social movements more generally. On this point, it is unclear how the length of protest mobilizations is measured throughout the book. For example, while the author argues that Egypt and Tunisia had a short period of mobilization, many accounts would differ with this reading and argue that the uprisings in both countries came in the context of heightened mobilization in the decade preceding 2011, with movements such as Kefaya, the Mahala El Kubra workers' strikes, and the April 6 Youth Movement forming the precursors to what then became the “Arab Spring”.

Second, the evidence provided in the book seems to be clearly pointing to a crucial role of labor organizations in all the successful democratic transitions studied, but this observation is not further elaborated in the central argument of the book. Therefore, the type of organization—pro-democracy or labor-based—seems to be crucial to the book's argument. In fact, all the case studies of successful democratic transitions in the book—South Africa, Poland, and Tunisia—contain a core story of the role of labor unions in pushing the movement forward toward success. This calls for a deeper investigation of the role of labor unions in democratic transitions, and more centering of this finding in the core argument of the book. This would also be a major contribution to the sociological literature on social movements and democratization and would add to a growing literature focusing on the role of organized labor in democratic transitions.

Third, the argument of the book is focused on the internal dynamics of democracy from below and the role of popular mobilization while overlooking the role of external factors such as regional or international powers that can be crucial in facilitating or blocking popular campaigns for democratization. While the argument is convincing throughout the book, controlling for the role of regional and global powers in meddling in the national politics of many countries around the world remains important to delineate the scope conditions of the book's central theoretical contribution. This also brings us to an important aspect that is also not thoroughly covered in the book: the role of repression. Here again, the role of repression in halting protest campaigns or transforming the nature of organizational efforts can be further investigated and accounted for in making the general claim about the role of popular movements in the process of democratization.

Fourth, the book makes a distinction between armed and unarmed mobilizations and focuses on the importance of unarmed movements in shaping a successful path to stable democracies. This distinction is not clearly justified, especially that some of the described successful case studies did have a certain level of violence or armed episodes, such as the guerilla warfare in South Africa for example,

Finally, the book's rich and in-depth investigation of many case studies opens up important avenues for further reflection on today's social movements and struggles for democratization across the globe. In an interesting detail about the United Democratic Front (UDF) in South Africa, Kadivar tells us that in 1987 the organization had more than 80 paid full-time professionals (p. 49). This calls for more thinking about the political economy of contentious politics and the transformation of most popular struggles in the 21st century to horizontalism, leaderlessness, slacktivism, or part-time activism. Similarly, the book's detailed engagement with the case of Pakistan and the civil-military arrangement for a democratic transition forms an interesting case to think about the developments in Sudan since 2018, and the role of grassroots organizations in this path to democratization. Finally, being himself a pro-democracy activist and a descendant of a family of militants in Iran, Kadivar's book offers fresh insights on the importance of popular politics for the path of democratization in Iran and beyond.

Popular Politics and the Path to Durable Democracy is definitely a must read for all scholars and students of social movements and contentious politics. It bridges between the field of democratization and democratic transitions and the literature on social movements and popular politics to provide a rich and sophisticated work of political sociology. This book forms an extremely valuable and timely addition to the literature, and it will be of great use to social scientists interested in the fate of popular politics and democratization since the mid-20th century.

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