

Review of “Popular Politics and the Path to Durable Democracy”

By Mohammad Ali Kadivar

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In *Popular Politics and the Path to Durable Democracy*, Mohammad Ali Kadivar provides a groundbreaking sociological analysis of democratic consolidation. The book is, first and foremost, a response to elitist approaches to democratization that either underestimate the role of social/mass mobilization in democratization or point toward the “antidemocratic tendencies” of mass uprisings (p. 5). In his comparative analysis of cases of both democratic success and failure, the book contributes to the scholarship that shows the critical role that social movements play in democratization. However, the book’s contribution goes beyond demonstrating the importance of pro-democracy social movements for successful democratic transitions. It shows that the duration of social movements for democratization is key to post-transition outcomes. Rather than short-term mobilizations, long-term movements for democracy enhance the durability and quality of emerging democratic regimes.

The book focuses on the organizational legacy of “unarmed popular campaigns that mobilize over a long period” (p. 7) to explain why democracies that emerge from longer social movements have a better chance of survival. Long-term mobilizations against repressive regimes produce formal organizations that determine the paths that the transition and post-transition period may take in emerging democracies. More specifically, such “organizational structure provides leadership cadre for the new regime, creates stronger democratic institutions, forges links between the government and society, and strengthens checks on the power of the post-transition government” (p. 7). Unlike long routes to democratization, brief mobilizations or short outbursts of popular protest against authoritarian regimes do not translate into formal organizations that are crucial for building strong alliances and leadership, which is fundamental for successful transitions.

The book uses a combination of methods to study the relationship between sustained/long-term unarmed mobilization and democratic durability. In its first empirical chapter, the book presents a quantitative analysis, using a new and original dataset of political regimes based on 113 cases of “democratic transitions between 1950 and 2020” (p. 26) in 80 countries. The findings of the statistical analyses show that “democracies from longer periods of mass mobilization are more likely to survive, more likely to improve, and more likely to have a robust civil society” (p. 26).

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To unleash the mechanisms that account for this relationship, the book engages in a compelling comparative analysis of different pathways and their political outcomes through five case studies: lengthy mobilization leading to successful democratic consolidation in South Africa (1994–present) and Poland (1989–present), top-down democratic transition with no popular mobilization and democratic failure in Pakistan (1988–1999), short wave of mobilization leading to the ousting of a dictator but eventually leading to democratic failure in Egypt (2011–2013), and the relative success story of democratization following a short period of mobilization in Tunisia (2011–present).

South Africa and Poland undertook lengthy mobilizations that were followed by successful democratic consolidations. Prolonged mobilization against repressive regimes in both cases led to the creation of “an organizational structure to sustain the mobilization and to bring together otherwise separate groups in the opposition. The momentum of the mobilization and the capacity of these movements to organize enabled them to have a stronger position in the negotiations and therefore remove authoritarian privileges of the prior regime effectively” (p. 47). On the other hand, an elite brokerage between military and civilian leadership without popular mobilization led to the emergence of a fragile democracy in Pakistan, which eventually ended with a military coup. While the short mobilization during the Egyptian Revolution was successful in toppling the authoritarian Mubarak regime and led to competitive elections, the duration of mobilization was not long enough to create enough ties between opposition groups to provide a smooth transition to democracy. The inability of the secular opposition to provide a solid organizational framework created an organizational imbalance between Islamist and non-Islamist/secular opposition, giving way to the secular camp’s support for military intervention against the new Islamist government formed by the Muslim Brotherhood. As an anomalous case, Tunisia represents a successful democratic transition after a short mobilization, mainly because of the key role played by an established trade union, the Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT, The Tunisian General Labour Union) (p. 21). The organizational strength and presence of UGTT were crucial for the secular opposition to counterbalance the Islamist government that was elected (p. 124)—unlike the secular camp in Egypt that turned its face to the military against the Islamists.

Popular Politics and the Path to Durable Democracy is essential reading for a wide range of scholars who are interested in democratization, social movements, contentious politics, civil society, and revolutions. Besides its theoretical and substantive contributions in these areas, the book is a stellar example of comparative historical analysis that builds on original data and rich case studies. Kadivar masters both theoretically informed comparative-historical analysis and theory building through nuanced comparison of his cases. Aside from showing the importance of protest mobilization, organization building, and civil society, the case studies also point toward the centrality of strong working-class movements and organizations in the successful cases—South Africa, Poland, and Tunisia—and their ability to build and take part in pro-democracy coalitions and/or mediate transitions. Despite this, as the author also states, the book does not underline a class component in the overarching analysis (see p. 43). Still, Kadivar’s comparative analysis has theoretical and empirical implications that may contribute to the scholarship on the working class and democratization.

The book entails theoretical and practical lessons for scholars of democratization in a global conjuncture marked by democratic decline and rising authoritarianism. First, it shows how democratic institutions and a strong civil society are actually forged on the ground rather than being elite-driven top-down processes. Second, it carries important lessons for scholars of social movements and social change by showing how revolutions and uprisings will fall short of bringing long-term democratic change without the long and protracted route of movement and organization building on the ground. By doing so, he joins the ranks of scholars who show the importance of the “war of position” (Gramsci 2011) and “interstitial transformations” (Wright 2013) that are necessary for long-term social and political change.

References

Gramsci, Antonio 2011. *Prison Notebooks*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Wright, Erik Olin 2013. "Transforming Capitalism through Real Utopias." *American Sociological Review* 78(1):1-25.