Extending Przeworski's Model of Democratic Transition to the Middle East

Lisa Blaydes
Department of Political Science
Stanford University
blaydes@stanford.edu

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Political scientists specializing in the Middle East have long been puzzled by the failure of countries in the region to make the transition from authoritarian to democratic government. Modernization theory suggests that democracy is a natural outgrowth of economic development and that once socio-economic requisites reach certain levels, democracy follows (Lipset 1959). The failure of modernization theory to explain the lack of democratization in wealthy Gulf States, not to speak of the vibrancy of democratic life in impoverished countries like India and Bangladesh, has led scholars to develop alternative theories for the region's failure to adopt democratic practices. While some pointed to the democracy-hindering byproducts of oil wealth (Luciani 1987, Ross 2001, Smith 2004), others focused on the effects of Islam and Arab culture generally (Hudson 1995, Tessler 2002), and the subordination of women in Islamic society more specifically (Fish 2002).

Rather than arguing that democratization has cultural or structural bases, scholars in the pacted transitions tradition have argued that democracy has to be a self-enforcing equilibrium of the strategic interactions between a country's key political players (Przeworski 1991). In other words, democracy is only sustainable if it is the stable solution to a strategic game. In such models, three important assumptions are generally made from the start. First, the transition process is assumed to be elite-led. The two elite actors of interest are liberalizers within an authoritarian regime who seek to gain leverage over their hardline counterparts and civil society elite. Second, it is assumed that these elite actors behave strategically. Regional specialists, particularly those focusing on Latin America and Eastern Europe, have argued that the first sign of possible transition is when authoritarian incumbents begin to open up the political system to greater rights for individuals and groups (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986). The goal of the regime is not democratization, but rather to broaden its base of public support. Finally, these models implicitly assume that the elite group representing civil society supports democracy in principle.

Adam Przeworski in *Democracy and the Market* (1991) has developed the canonical model of political liberalization and democratization. Przeworski models the strategic interaction between proto-liberalizers within an authoritarian government and mobilizers within civil society, just at the moment that an authoritarian regime considers opening up, politically. In Przeworski's model, liberalizers hope to broaden the social base of the regime by allowing limited autonomous organization of civil society. Ultimately, liberalizers hope that these civil society elites might serve as future allies for them against regime hardliners. In this memo, I adopt the

basic assumptions of transitology and the Przeworski modeling framework yet advocate for two extensions, one anticipated by Przeworski but the second not. First, I argue that there exists incomplete information on the part of civil society toward the type of liberalizer that it faces. While the model was not solved explicitly by Przeworski in this fashion, this logic existed in his analysis. Second, I argue that for the Przeworski model to apply to the Middle East, the model requires a second extension to include the possibility of a civil society that prefers some outcome besides democracy. Przeworski, inspired by regime transition in Eastern Europe and Latin America, did not consider this possibility in his original conceptualization yet I would argue that this uncertainty over civil society "type" is a defining characteristic of the Middle Eastern political landscape.

Limits of Przeworski's Model for Middle Eastern Transitions

Let me begin by briefly describing the original Przeworski conceptualization (Figure 1). In his model, liberalizers make the first move, deciding whether or not to create an opening in the system for the organized political activity of civil society. If liberalizers decide to take no action, in Przeworski's language to "stay with Hardliners," then the outcome of the game is status quo dictatorship ($SDIC$). If the liberalizers choose to open, then civil society must decide between entering into a compact with the state or organizing politically.

If civil society enters a compact with the regime (enters into a National Charter or National Unity Front, for example), then the result is broadened dictatorship ($BDIC$). If civil society decides to organize, however, liberalizers must decide whether they want to pursue further reforms (i.e. to continue on to democratic transition) or to repress the organized political activity. If liberalizers allow political reform, the result is transition. If the liberalizers decide to rejoin the hardline contingent within the authoritarian government, then they choose to repress civil society. The outcome of repression is determined probabilistically; with probability r the outcome is a narrowed dictatorship ($NDIC$) and with probability $1 - r$ the outcome of the game is insurrection. Przeworski's game is depicted in Figure 1.[1] This game can be treated as one of complete information; although there is a move by Nature, it is at the very end of the game and only determines the result of the repression "lottery." While neither side knows the value of r — the likelihood that repression will be successful — they both have some belief about the value of r.

Consider two straightforward extensions of the original Przeworski model. First, Przeworski's discussion of his original model implies uncertainty: civil society does not know whether it faces a liberalizer that is "soft" and prefers transition to democracy over the use of repressive force, or the type that is "tough" and is willing to use force to put down civil society's autonomous organization. In other words, a first extension — implicit in Przeworski's own discussion — involves the inclusion of incomplete information regarding civil society's beliefs about liberalizer type. In applying the Przerworksi model to the study of political transitions in the Middle East, however, a second extension is required. This second extension involves Pzerworski's assumption that civil society's commitment to democracy is known may not apply in the Middle East. In particular, if an opposition party wins in a country's first democratic election, there exists uncertainty about whether this party would agree to electoral competition in the future. In the Middle Eastern context Islamist parties are the strongest political opposition to existing regimes. While the leadership of such parties go to extreme lengths to convince

[1] I have added generic payoffs to the game where payoffs with subscript 'l' are for liberalizer and payoffs with subscript 'c' are for civil society.

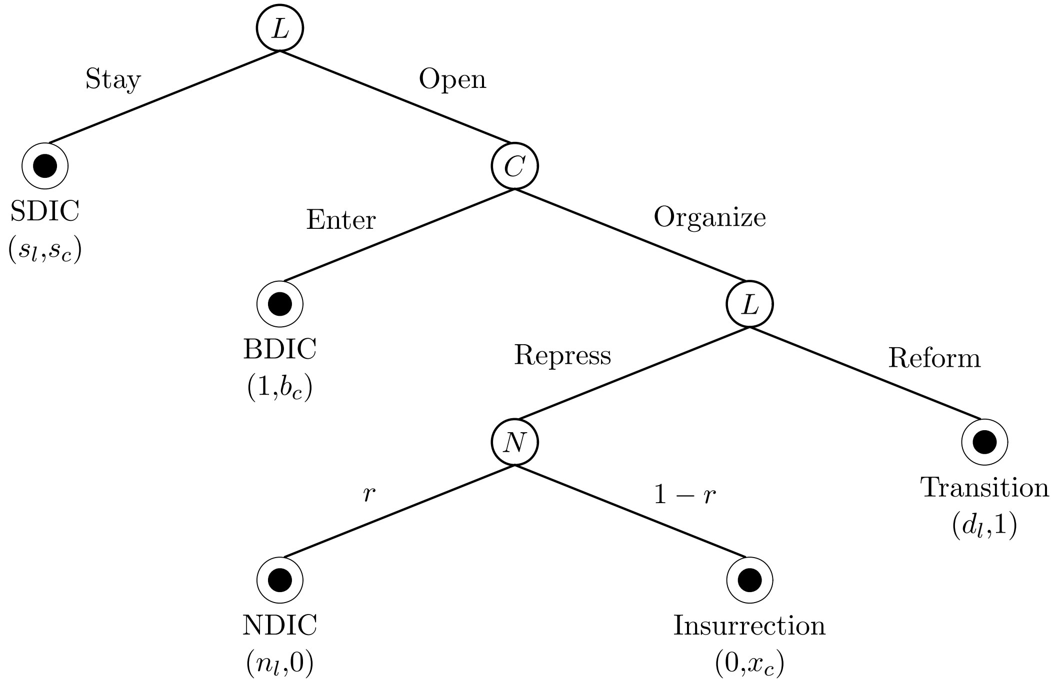

Figure 1: Przeworski's Model of Democratic Transition

both domestic and external audiences that they are committed democrats, ambiguous statements and leadership divisions foster uncertainty on the part of regime liberalizers regarding their future actions.

This would suggest that civil society comes in at least two types: "moderate" and "radical." Moderate civil society prefers democratic transition over an Islamic state in the final node of the game, while a radical civil society chooses to create an Islamic state which may not be subject to future free elections (or may have elections that are only competitive within parameters outlined by the Islamic government as is the case in Iran). This suggests that the incomplete information structure implicit in Przeworski's work may not be the only relevant one in the context of emerging democracy in the Middle East. One way to capture this within the existing Przeworski framework would be to add a choice node at the end of the game (see Figure 2). If the liberalizers reform, then civil society has the opportunity to make a final move where it decides whether it prefers democratic transition, *Democracy*, or an Islamic state, *Theocracy*. The question is, can democracy still emerge under these seemingly unfavorable circumstances and what can we say about the likelihood of its occurrence?

A number of interesting results arise from the solution to this model, which I will summarize in a non-technical way.[2] First, high repressive capacity is a necessary condition for either liberalization or democratization to occur. Civil society knows that the liberalizer will not repress when r is low, allowing them to organize with impunity. Recognizing that their threat of repression is non-credible, liberalizers do not allow civil society to organize, and remain in a status quo dictatorship. Secondly, broadened dictatorships result primarily from an equilibrium where repressive capacity is high and civil society believes the probability the liberalizer they are facing is of the tough type; given this constellation of parameters, broadened dictatorships will occur. The liberalizer chooses to open the system and exploits its capacity and reputation for repression against civil society elites, forcing them to enter into a broadened dictatorship

[2] A complete proof of the solution is available upon request.

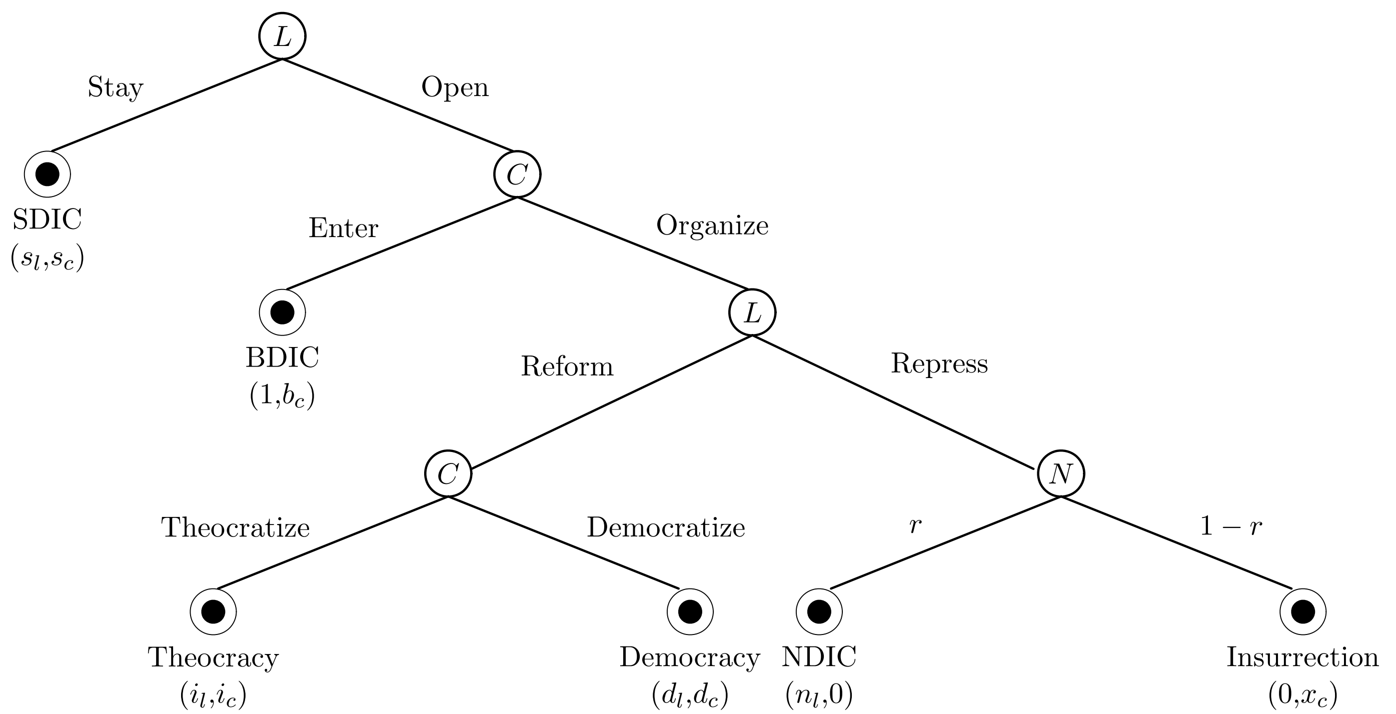

Figure 2: *Przeworski Model with Additional Move by Civil Society*

with a credible threat of repression if they do not comply. I consider the broadened dictatorship to be the modal form of governance in the contemporary Middle East, particularly outside of the Gulf states.

Under what circumstances can democratic transition occur? First, democratic transition cannot occur when repressive capacity is too low. While this result may seem counterintuitive, it holds true in this model because a liberalizer known to have low repressive capacity will always choose status quo dictatorship in the beginning of the game and foreclose the possibility of regime transition on poor terms. Secondly, uncertainty over both liberalizer type and civil society type is a necessary ingredient for democratization to occur. Finally, given these first two conditions, democracy is most likely to occur when regime liberalizers are believed to prefer democracy to a narrowed dictatorship, and civil society elite are expected to honor democratic principles.

Case Studies from the Middle East

In this section, I briefly consider two case studies from the Middle East that I believe are illustrative of the two most common outcomes of strategic elite politics in the region — status quo dictatorship and broadened dictatorship. The goal of this section is not to "test" the results of the model, per se, but rather to explore its plausibility in two important historical contexts.

Low Repressive Capacity, Soft Liberalizer: Saudi Arabia 1975-1991

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was during the late 1970s and 1980s characterized by an intense split in the ruling elite. Competing members of the House of Saud clashed over the pace of modernization and Westernization that should take place within the Kingdom. According to Mackey, during King Khalid's reign, the more Westernized progressive faction was led by then-Crown Prince Fahd, while the traditionalist faction was led by Prince Abdallah (1990, 213). Mackey writes that Fahd and the progressives were the major power bloc within the family, while Abdallah — as commander of the National Guard and second deputy premier at the time — represented conservative tribal interests. Access to large sums of money also served as a major source of competition between factions of the royal family, in addition to their ideological differences (Mackey 1990, 213). Fahd came to power in 1982, upon the death of King Khalid, and was faced with the challenge of consolidating power in an era of declining oil revenue.

The key question is why didn't Fahd undertake controlled political liberalization in order to gain leverage over the more conservative elements of the royal family? The answer to this question lies in the nature of Saudi society and Fahd's knowledge of civil society's belief about his type. Essentially, because of the high level of interconnectedness between the Saudi state and society, civil society elite likely believed that Fahd would be unable to undertake mass violent suppression of civic organization. Looking down the game tree with this knowledge, Fahd decided against political liberalization knowing that in a showdown with a nascent civil society, he would be hard pressed to repress tribal elite, regardless of their commitment to democracy. Some background on the organization of Saudi government and society reinforces this view.

The Saudi government consists of the royal family, the bureaucracy and the *'ulama*, or religious elite. The royal family is the largest and most cohesive group in the kingdom with thousands of members who are related to almost all of the important tribes of Saudi Arabia through marriage. "The marriage connection is central to rule, since familialism as an ideology is an important part of governance...The relatives of the Sauds inside Saudi Arabia are part of a

web of social relations that could include most of the tribes. In this domain of civil society, the royal family is important at the domestic level" (Fandy 1999, 34). Fandy writes that the royal family exists within both civil society and the state simultaneously; to suppress civil society would almost necessarily be the violent repression of one's own (1999, 35).

Fandy argues that the Saudi government could not "get away" with mass arrests or repression (1999, 248). He goes on to write that the royal family is aware of its limitations, even when it is under extreme pressure:

> "After the Riyadh and Khobar bombings, for instance, there were no mass arrests or executions of Islamists, as might be the case in Iraq, or the demolition of whole villages, as happened to the Syrian town of Hama. The Saudis executed one person and arrested a dozen or so. Had there been an Iraqi- or Syrian-style punishment, the royal family would have lost its constituency. It is that awareness of limitations that allows the family to survive" (1999, 242).[3]

The regime's ability to use reform as a strategy for survival, therefore, is highly circumscribed. During this period, "almost every Saudi had a patron prince through family and tribal connections," making it difficult, if not impossible, to undertake mass repression (Mackey 1990, 208). This is not to say that the Saudis were unable to suppress the political and human rights of citizens on an individual basis; clearly they were capable of this type of repression. But the history of repression in the Kingdom is not one of violence against large elements of the citizenry, nor is it a history of suppressive violence against the royal family's core constituency, the tribes.

Fahd and other proto-liberalizers within the regime, therefore, chose not to open the system politically. The result of this inaction was status quo dictatorship, as evidenced by the continued level of authoritarianism in the Kingdom during the 1980s. While many other countries in the Middle East undertook controlled, top-down liberalization programs during this period, the Saudi liberalizers — believed by civil society to be of the soft type with a low repressive capacity — were not able to even consider the use of civil society elite as allies in the struggle for control of the House of Saud.

Tough Liberalizer, High Repressive Capacity: Egypt 1974-1977

Like Saudi Arabia in the 1980s, Egypt in the 1970s was also characterized by splits in the ruling elite. Anwar Sadat — one of the original leaders of the 1952 Free Officers' Coup — had came to power upon the death of President Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1970 and although Sadat had been part of the ruling junta for almost two decades, his attitudes and beliefs were not well known. One scholar writes that "Sadat had only a hazy public image when he assumed power" (Baker 1990, 58). Despite statements of support for Nasserite ideology, Sadat quickly began to clash with top figures in the regime held over from the previous era (Ibrahim 1995). In order to consolidate power, it was clear that Sadat needed to discredit the Nasserite left. At this point, Sadat had a clear incentive to seek an alliance with elements of bourgeois Egyptian society in his struggle against Nasserite opposition within the regime.

Sadat's desire to strengthen his position *vis-a-vis* the Nasserite hardliners would suggest an opening of the political system through a controlled, top-down program of political and

[3] While this quotation refers to political events of the 1990s, Fandy's impression regarding the limitations of the Saudi royal family applies to an even greater extent to the 1980s when the connection between government and civil society was more pronounced than in later years.

economic liberalization. Whether he could pursue this strategy or not, depended, however, on civil society's beliefs about whether or not he was the soft or tough type; while he clearly preferred the status quo to a full democratic transition, a broadened dictatorship where he could ally himself with upper-middle class Egyptian entrepreneurs and bureaucrats would be a boon to his bargaining position within the ruling elite. Whether civil society would enter into a broadened dictatorship with the regime, depended to a large extent, however, on if civil society viewed Sadat as the type of liberalizer that would use repression to avoid democratic transition. Two key pieces of information would inform civil society's beliefs about Sadat's type.

First, these beliefs were affected by the legacy of repression under Nasser, particularly since Sadat had only a sketchy political record himself. Nasser's legacy had been quite brutal. In 1954, following a failed assassination attempt on his life, Nasser launched a series of violent purges in an attempt to suppress the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt's most venerable Islamist organization, which had been implicated in the attempt. Six Muslim Brothers were hanged, including Sayyid Qutb, a leader credited with being one of the founding fathers of the modern Islamic movement. Thousands more were imprisoned and tortured. Nasser also effectively repressed professional associations. In one incident, Nasser banned the Bar Association from having general assembly meetings for four years when it called for a multiparty system (Baker 1990, 56).

Second, and perhaps more convincing, was the rigor with which Sadat was seen eliminating competitors within the ruling elite. By May 1971 Sadat had had his first showdown with Nasserite figures who were still heads of key ministries like Defense and Information as well as Speaker of the Parliament and head of the Arab Socialist Union, Egypt's single political party. Each of these figures was arrested and brought to trial on charges of conspiracy. Junior officers tried to engineer coup attempts in 1972 and 1974 and were suppressed (Waterbury 1983, 376). Sadat had moved swiftly and successfully against a coalition that opposed him from within the regime (Baker 1990, 58); the way in which this was accomplished clearly signaled to the elite in civil society that he was willing to use repression against those that opposed him.

Sadat's decision may have also been influenced by his beliefs about the type of civil society that he faced. While his goal was to achieve a broadened dictatorship, the move to open the political system was potentially more dangerous if he faced a radical civil society. As a result, Sadat encouraged a period of intense information gathering in the run-up to the political opening. Cooper writes that nearly two years of public debate on political issues ensued where strong feelings and sharp conflict over ideology were revealed (Cooper 1982, 179). Nearly all major elite actors made his or her views known (Waterbury 1978, 251). In this way, "Sadat has thus learned how a broad range of hitherto silent groups feel about the future, all the while reserving to himself the right to decide how fast and in what direction to reorient the polity" (Waterbury 1978, 251). When he solicited political platforms for parties in the new multiparty system, he found that only one of the first ten platforms considered included a religious referent (Cooper 1982, 184). This information probably allayed his fears that even in the worst case scenario of a civil society that refused to enter into a broadened dictatorship with the regime, an Islamic theocracy was unlikely at that point in time.

Believing that civil society elite would not press for extensive reform, Sadat introduced his Open-Door Economic Policy (*infitah*) which replaced Arab socialism with greater economic liberalization. At the same time, Sadat began to liberalize the political sphere as well. A permanent constitution was ratified calling for basic civil and human rights. A multiparty system replaced the previous one-party system in 1976. The government declared an end to the type of arbitrary arrest and illegal detention without due process that characterized the Nasser era. Three small opposition parties were permitted to operate and these parties were

allowed to publish their own newspapers. Sadat released thousands of political detainees from Egypt's most notorious political prison and political exiles were invited to return to Egypt. While control over the regime was never open to contestation, Waterbury nonetheless describes the liberalization measures undertaken during this era as "real" (Waterbury 1983, 373).

Essentially, Sadat sought to exploit splits within the regime between old-guard Nasserites and controlled liberalizers like himself. Ibrahim writes that sustained support for liberalization was found amongst the upper and upper-middle classes, the landed bourgeoisie, professionals, and senior or retired managers of the public sector. A new class of entrepreneurs who benefited from open-market economic opportunities become an important constituency for Sadat as well. Believing that Sadat and other liberalizers within the regime were of the tough type, civil society entered into a broadened dictatorship with the regime. Sadat's ability to ally with this class of Egyptians allowed him to pursue his ideological differences with the hardliners as reflected in the major policy shifts he introduced, like political and economic liberalization but also a shift away from the USSR and toward the West, and ultimately recognition of the state of Israel. Sadat's ability to massively repress civil society groups in 1981 suggests that the liberalizers had both the capacity and the willingness to repress when forced to do so and any earlier civil society organization would have met a similar fate.

Conclusions

In this memo, political change is described as the result of the strategic interaction between regime and civil society elite. An influential game theoretic model of the relationship between these key actors is extended to include an incomplete information structure and an additional choice node not considered by Przeworski (whose intellectual inspiration for modeling came from a context where the democratic commitment of civil society was highly certain). For democratic transition to be achieved, two conditions must hold true. First, liberalizers must have uncertainty over civil society's commitment to democratic principles while civil society must have uncertainty over the liberalizer's commitment to preventing regime transition through the use of repression. Secondly, the repressive capacity of the state must lie above a minimum threshold. Under these conditions, democracy is most likely to occur when regime liberalizers are believed to prefer democracy to a narrowed dictatorship, and civil society elite are expected to honor democratic principles. The intuition from this model has been applied to two historical cases from the Middle East.

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