

Distinctive Features of Transitions from Monarchy to Democracy
With some reflections on the Contemporary Middle East
CDDRL Conference, Stanford University, June 5-6, 2008

By Larry Diamond

Monarchical rule is a form of authoritarian rule. As such it bears many similarities with other types of autocracies, and so we would expect that the path of transition from absolute or ruling monarchy to democracy (or something else) might also bear many similarities. In all forms of authoritarian rule, a relatively small elite holds power and is not democratically accountable to the masses. Monarchy is not unique in concentrating so much power in the person of one leader; some personalist dictatorships also do that, and some monarchies effectively involve a much broader distribution of power within the ruling family or royal court. In most forms of traditional authoritarian rule, not just the monarchical form, and in some modern ones, economic and political power tend to be heavily fused, often giving the ruler monopoly control over much of the economy. And of course, all forms of authoritarian rule rest, as does absolute monarchy, disproportionately on the regime's control over the means of coercion.

Yet there are certain distinctive features of monarchical rule that have the potential to shape or constrain a political transition.

First, hereditary monarchs have (or at least claim) almost by definition a special degree of traditional legitimacy, and often this is infused with explicit religious overtones or underpinnings, even divine right—as in the Moroccan King's self-identification as the “Commander of the Faithful.” Particularly in a context of a religious and conservative society, monarchies that have managed to establish and are able continually to exploit this basis of legitimacy may have a certain added degree of insulation from the kinds of

social, economic, and political problems and grievances that would more quickly bring down other forms of dictatorship. This does not make them invulnerable, but it provides a different and possibly for a time more durable source of legitimation. On the other hand, in the context of modernization and secularization, this traditional basis of legitimacy may wane or cease to resonate altogether, rendering the monarchy vulnerable to collapse or overthrow if it resists somehow redefining the nature and basis of its rule. History shows that absolute monarchies cannot indefinitely defy the laws of economic and sociological gravity (especially with respect to modernization).

Secondly, monarchies are limited—and in many cases completely constrained—in their scope for weighing political capacity in the succession to rule. Where the succession goes inflexibly to the eldest son, the survival of the monarchy may be subject to a game of “genetic roulette,” correctable only by extraordinary, extreme, and artfully hidden means. Where the king can designate his successor from among his progeny, or where there is some capacity for a royal council to choose the successor to the throne, there is more scope to avoid a genetic political disaster, but it is only limited. Moreover, where the succession is not fixed, then the scope for behind-the-scenes maneuvering without clear rules can also sow divisions in royal circles that can be destabilizing.

Third is the global historical context, that ruling monarchies began to go out of fashion in the eighteenth century, and have now become antiquated in all but a few parts of the world. In short, there is something distinctly *unmodern* and historically outmoded about monarchical rule. Moreover, the trend is only in one direction: While ceremonial monarchies may occasionally be resurrected after a hiatus (as in Spain), there is no case in recent decades of the formal establishment or restoration of an absolute ruling

monarchy. Even where a republican presidency has perpetuated itself through father-to-son succession—as in North Korea, Syria, and prospectively Egypt and Libya—the regime drapes the process in modern political garb, through the mechanisms of a ruling party, and dares not portray it as any kind of imposition or restoration of hereditary royal rule. Neither can any of these inheritors of republican dictatorship claim the traditional or religious authority of true monarchy. Thus, historical movement is only in one direction: When absolute monarchy vanishes, it is gone for good, never to be restored. (Here exceptions may prove the rule. Thus, while the current Thai King has been able over time to extend his power, this has happened informally, and under the guise of a formally constitutional system. And the attempt of the last, hapless King of Nepal to reassert absolute royal authority proved the death knell for the monarchy). One implication of this is that monarchies may fight harder to stay on. Unlike the military, they cannot exit and then return to rule at some point. And unlike a hegemonic ruling party, like the KMT in Taiwan or the PRI in Mexico, they cannot open political space to democratic competition and then hope to retain it or at least some day recover it under those new rules.

On the other hand, absolute monarchies do have a potentially appealing exit option—a “soft landing”—that no other form of authoritarian rule can ponder. That is the prospect of retaining formal political status as head of state, even while they surrender control of government. Absolute monarchs can become—and indeed quite a number in northern Europe did become—constitutional monarchs, retaining a unique political prestige and even reverence, along with considerable and even immense wealth. This is not the same as the power to rule, but it may seem better than oblivion and it can co-exist

in some societies with some greater informal power or influence, which (as in Thailand) if adroitly wielded can in fact become considerable. Moreover, in a number of countries, it has survived for generations and appears to be strangely if not bizarrely compatible with political modernity.

There is a more important implication for thinking about contemporary transitions from absolute to constitutional monarchy. Beginning in the seventeenth century in Europe, some of these transitions have occurred gradually over a long period of time, as ruling monarchs incrementally ceded greater and greater power to other political actors and institutions and ultimately to popularly elected government. It is possible to imagine that the transition from absolute to constitutional monarchy in the Middle East (including Morocco) could unfold incrementally through a number of discrete steps. Indeed, in some of these monarchies, such as Morocco, Jordan, and Kuwait, many of the trappings of democracy already exist, most notably, elections between competing parties and candidates to choose a parliament with some capacity to legislate. But in each of these countries, the electoral playing field remains constrained (though least so in Morocco) and the parliaments lack much effective power. A cabinet government may emerge from parliament, but it serves at the mercy of the Palace and does not control the real levers of power.

In theory, that could change. There are many possible steps, and they could unfold in many possible sequences. For example, a ruling monarchy that was serious—or was effectively pressed to become serious—about transforming its status into a constitutional one, could take early steps to establish the independence of the courts and the state bureaucracy (possibly while still retaining some veto rights over the appointment

of judges). It could also move early on to allow significantly greater space for civil society and independent media, protected by the increasingly independent courts. Then it could move to negotiate with the political opposition a pact (not unlike what has happened in transitions from military and one-party rule) concerning the timing and structure of a political transition, the modalities of sharing power in the interim, and guarantees of property rights and immunity from prosecution at the end of the transition. It is also possible that the monarchy could retain for a longer period of time (longer than any democrat would want) some explicit or implicit levers of control (and thus protection) over the “last lines of defense,” the state security apparatus—the army, and perhaps the police, the intelligence system, and the courts. Hopefully this would not be to harbor violators of human rights but to ensure that these institutions were not captured by implacable ideological foes of continuing the monarchy as an institution in any form. (This could bear some similarities to the Turkish transition, where, after the transition back to democracy in 1983, the military kept for itself control over the National Security Council, the military as an institution, and indirectly the Constitutional Court, while also retaining the fairly strong presidency for the first term of a largely parliamentary system).

There are always risks to democracy of a negotiated (pacted) transition. Principal among them is that the country will wind up with a diminished democracy, degraded by extensive “reserved domains of power” for the old authoritarian forces. In Chile, these have gradually been removed. In South Africa, they were rather quickly removed after one transitional five-year term. In other cases, they have mutated into a hybrid regime—something less than democracy altogether. Thailand today could well be considered an example of this. Pakistan is clearly another.

On the other hand, any political option must always be compared against plausible alternatives. The ideal would be a swift transition to a liberal democracy. That rarely happens in the world, however, and as most of the remaining autocracies are among the most difficult cases in terms of favorable cultural and developmental conditions for liberal democracy, more realistic paths of transition to eventual democracy need to be contemplated.

Unfortunately, we return to many of the same issues that shape transitions from other forms of authoritarian rule, most of all: What will induce them? Rare is the case of a leader who decides purely out of benevolence, enlightenment, or enlightened pragmatism that the time has come to organize from above a genuine transition to democracy. Typically, even when they lead such a transition, autocrats do so in response to considerable domestic, and in recent decades, international pressure. This then raises the questions of where the domestic mobilization for political reform will come from, whether it will be amenable to a gradual transition path, and whether it will be willing to live with constitutional monarchy as the ultimate result. It also opens the possibility that when the mobilization becomes strong enough to compel royal compromise, it will be too late for that, because the mobilizers will be revolutionaries who will, as in Nepal, settle for nothing less than the overthrow of the monarchy altogether. To many ruling monarchs in the Middle East who lived through the trauma of the Iranian revolution, the lesson must be clear: Don't loosen up too much, don't liberalize too far, don't weaken the fundamental mechanisms of control, or the monarchy will lose everything (literally).

This may be (and I believe is) precisely the wrong lesson to draw from the Iranian revolution, but it nevertheless appears to be the dominant one. This fear—made more

plausible by the powerful presence of radical Islamist forces that have similar aims to their Shiite revolutionary kin—is a key factor motivating the Sunni Arab monarchies of the region to draw a clear line at anything beyond tactical liberalization. Thus, until their perceptions change or the correlation of internal and international forces change dramatically, the Arab monarchies appear stuck more or less in their absolutism, resolutely unwilling to entertain even a gradual and incremental pace of transition to a democratic constitutional monarchy that they do not want and in any case probably do not believe is achievable. It is a pity, because history alerts us to the long-term consequences of hanging on to absolute power indefinitely in the face of explosive demographic, economic and social pressures. If they fail to adapt and change politically, to liberalize and eventually democratize by modes and timetables that are at least partly their own design, ultimately these absolute rulers will lose everything, and what follows may not be any more democratic than what followed the Shah in Iran.