

# Democratic consolidation as a teleological concept in the study of post-authoritarian regimes

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## Abstract

*The years that followed the fall of the Berlin wall and various authoritarian regimes in different regions of the world, witnessed the growth of a wide literature on democratization, which was influenced more and more by the paradigm of transition and the “consolidation” of democracy. Since then, evaluations as well as perspectives through which were seen various regimes (the new democracies “with problems”) are developed mainly through the theoretical lens of consolidation paradigm, according to which full democratic consolidation was the endpoint of regime transitions. But it has become clear today that in many countries, in which more than three decades have passed since the fall of authoritarian regimes, the issue of “completion” of democracy in their social and political context is still far from being a happy reality. The purpose of this paper is to criticize both in the theoretical and the empirical level, the concept of “consolidation of democracy”, seeing it as a non-valid concept for the study of democratization. This paper will argue that essentially the concept of consolidation is teleological and problematic in the sense that democracy is seen not as a process but an endpoint product.*

**Keywords:** democratization, democratic consolidation, telos, “the only game in town”, “two turnover” test.

## Introduction and conceptualization of “democratic consolidation” in literature

According to the broad literature on the study of regime change that flourished among many academics starting in the late 1980s and especially in the 1990s, democratization was seen as a process unfolding in three phases. The opening or liberalization of the previous authoritarian regime occurs in the first phase. During this period we have a relief of measures taken by an old authoritarian regime (still in force), in which restrictions are removed and individual and group rights are expanded. Then in the second stage, there follows a *breakthrough* in the old regime, a time when its collapse occurs and the new democratic system emerges, with the coming to power of a new government through elections and the establishment of a democratic institutional structure (Carothers, 2002: 7; Karl, 2005: 7). Holding what are known as the founding elections as well as accepting their results are said to mark the end of transition from authoritarian rule and the establishment of democratic rule. In the third phase, we have the consolidation of democracy, a process in which its institutional framework forms the only framework of the rules of the game for (the whole) society. The most important political actors play according to the rules of the democratic game, not simply instrumentalizing them. Conceptually, as O’Donnell made the difference later, we are dealing with two transitions: one is the transition to democracy (towards establishing a democratically elected government, the second phase here), while the other is the transition towards a democratic regime institutionalized, consolidated (O’Donnell, 1994: 57).

Mainly in the transition and consolidation literature, two types of conceptualizations have emerged, as to when a democracy can be considered consolidated (which in a way can be said to mark the ending, enclosure of the democratization process). The first definition of a consolidated democracy is the one who sees it as being accepted by all important political actors of a particular country as the „only game in town“. A democratic regime is considered to be consolidated when “all politically

significant groups regard its key political institutions as the only legitimate framework for political contestation, and adhere to democratic rules of the game” (Linz & Stepan, 1996, 5; Gunther & Nikofofos & Puhle, 1995: 7). In this case, a regime where the losers do not think to solve their dissatisfaction by replacing or overthrowing it, but all political actors try to solve their dissents within the existing limits of the game. The second conceptualization of when a democratic regime can be considered consolidated is that offered by Samuel Huntington and known as the „two-turnover“ test. It contends, in essence, that democracy becomes consolidated once an electoral regime is fully entrenched and capable of delivering free and competitive elections. Samuel P. Huntington writes that a democracy becomes consolidated “if the party or group that takes power in the initial elections at the time of transition loses a subsequent election and turns over power to those election winners, and if those election winners then peacefully turn over power to the winners of a latter elections” (Cited in Encarnacion, 2002: 486).

### **“Consolidation“ as a teleological and a non-valid concept for the study of democratization**

As we have mentioned so far, consolidation, apart from being the last explanatory stage of the democratization process under the “transitional” model, marks a kind of “closure” in the conception of this process and of democracy itself as a final product. So, through this notion within the consolidation paradigm, which is intended to explain the process of transforming democratic forms into a democratic substance, a process which states that the institutions of democracy are gradually strengthened / consolidated and in time become capable of modeling the behavior of political actors, as well as where the latter are taught to contained to and to apply the rules and practices of the game of democracy. Explanation by this concept of consolidation of democratization processes in a country - as progress oriented processes (linked to the telos of the approach of transitology) which presumably will lead to what O’Donnell has distinguished as the outcome of the “second” democratic transition - is quite problematic in itself and it does not help us at all understand the dynamics of developments or political processes that have occurred (and happen) in most of the new democracies who moved away the authoritarian regimes during the third wave period. As such, the concept of democratic consolidation should now be dismissed as no longer valid for explaining the developments or political processes of these countries, thus re-conceptualizing our approach to democratization.

Let’s start providing a critique to the notion of consolidation starting from a remark of Guillermo O’Donnell, who sharply criticized the literature of consolidation, and noted that: “cases that have not “arrived” at full institutionalization, or that do not seem to be moving in this direction, are seen as stunted, frozen, protractedly unconsolidated, and the like... That some of these polyarchies have been in a state of “protracted unconsolidation” for some 20 years suggests that there is something extremely odd in about this kind of thinking”. (O’Donnell, 1996: 38). So it is exactly due to the fact that a good part of the countries involved in the third wave of democratization (new democracies) have continued for such a long time now facing a weak institutionalization of formal structures and formal rules of democracy in their environments, that makes the author question the usefulness of this concept of consolidation. Just like that, the author also notes that in many “democracies”, even those that somehow are in compliance with (or embrace) the “full package of polyarchy”, there is again a big gap between the formal rules and the way most political institutions actually work makes for a strong affinity with delegative, not representative, notions of political authority<sup>1</sup> (O’Donnell, 1994; O’Donnell, 1996: 44;). Such regimes all over the world, in the face of the institutionalization option and the consolidation of their democratic regime, have continued to break constantly the “rules of the game” of democracy, and this has happened in various forms starting here since the risk the re-enactment of military supremacy in their environments (the “reserved areas”, the “military prerogatives” that authors such as O’Donnell, Linz and Stepan often emphasize mainly referring to Latin American countries); or in contrast with the power almost dominantly focused on the executive branch, thus subjecting the other branches; with officials government who constantly break the rules and act outside the law; by the appearance of the hegemonic or even the leaders with authoritative features that may affect fair election competition; the decline of electoral institutions (but also other ones) in the face of their pressure; without forgetting the many practices of corruption, clientelism, vote buying, which affect the entire functioning of the democratic system in a decisive manner.

Therefore, the explanation through the concept of consolidation (so that these countries are moving towards democratic consolidation) does not help us and is no longer useful to understand the political developments that take place, or even the direction they take in different countries. “If these [third wave] democracies have persisted through serious adversity for a decade and more and they are not consolidated, why not and how can we tell—and what does it matter, if they continue to persist? Without a persuasive answer to these questions, the concept does indeed lose its utility (Diamond, 1997: 6). So it has become clear now that political developments in many third countries have taken different directions, and what is more important is that these countries have continued to survive for a long time as such (without consolidating) rendering invalid the explanatory usefulness of this concept, and thus rejecting the telos of the consolidation paradigm, which sees regimes as being oriented (on the way) towards the end of the “second transition” as O’Donnell remarked, to the institutionalization of the democratic regime in their environments.

<sup>1</sup> By “delegate” the author refers to an executive (personified to the president) “cezarian”, a plebiscite who once resolved and “sees” himself with power to govern the country as he / she sees fit, limited only From the difficult facts of the existing power relations and the time constraints of the mandate. The author also notes that these delegating democracies are not consolidated (institutionalized) democracies, but they can be sustainable for a long time. In Guillermo O’Donnell, “Delegative Democracy”. *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (1994), p. 56-60.

Such an approach to the paradigm of consolidating democracy is essentially characterized by a strong teleological dimension and tendency in itself, by building democratization models that are largely oriented towards telos (goal) and bypassing the understanding of the complexity and specificities of this process in certain places. Thus, focusing more heavily on purpose - that in this case is the shifting of societies, emerging from authoritarian regimes, to the model of liberal democracy - transitologists and consolidators point out the concrete phases in which democratization is seen to pass, explaining it as a process that goes (almost) rationally and without paying much attention to the specific context specifics of each country. Such an approach therefore tends to explain political changes or transformations almost in terms of a rational process that progressively and continuously goes to a teleologically predetermined and desired end result: in this case the consolidation of democracy. However, "consolidation" literature lacks a specified theory of how democracies may be sustained and of how we could tell a 'completed' democracy from one which is not" (Friedman, 2011: 35). Guillermo O'Donnell, seeing this teleological tendency of the transitology paradigm, emphasized that "this mode of reasoning carries a strong teleological flavor. Cases that have not "arrived" at full institutionalization, or that do not seem to be moving in this direction, are seen as stunted, frozen, protractedly unconsolidated, and the like. Such a view presupposes that there are, or should be, factors working in favor of increased consolidation or institutionalization, but that countervailing "obstacles" stymie a process of change that otherwise would operate unfettered" (O'Donnell, 1996: 37). So, an end point in the process of democratization is assumed to be normal, and any case that does not go toward this endpoint is seen as a deviant case.

Consolidation is a problematic concept also for the understanding *democracy*, which, as various authors have emphasized, "precludes closure regarding its own identity (thus, with definitions that determine once and for all what is it), and therefore it should be seen always as a moving target, an open-ended, developmental kind of thing (Schedler, 1998: 104; Whitehead, 2002: 18). As such, the process of democratization itself must be understood as an open, dynamic process, a process that is always "in the making" and can never be completed by itself thus rejecting the teleological nature of any kind of approach that strives to mark "closure" in its conception. In this sense, it is criticized the concept of "democratic consolidation" by Valerie Bunce, for which the concept it is not only unclear in what it means in empirical sense, but also a vague notion: "if democracy is a process, not a result, and if the democratic project can never be completed, than how can we understand the term "consolidation" with its implication of democracy as an end state?" (Bunce, 1995: 124-125). The term therefore imposes "closure" on processes (those of democratization) that in fact must always be understood as open, dynamic, transgressive and the result of which we can never know for sure. The process can move towards an institutionalized and well-functioning democracy, as it may go backwards taking authoritarian forms, or even it may be that a democracy (in the sense that it adheres to somehow to the package of criteria provided by Dahl) proceed in a defective form infinitely. As long as we can not know this end result, it is more correct to talk simply about their open political developments, and about a process that in itself remains open.

## **Over the two different types of definition of consolidation: "the only game in town" and the "two-turnover" test**

Here we come to that part of the literature that makes up two different types of definition (or conception) of what makes a consolidated democracy. The first definition of a consolidated democracy (or a complete democratization) is one that sees it as being accepted by all important political actors of a particular country as "the only game in town". A democratic regime is considered to be consolidated when all politically significant groups regard its key political institutions as the only legitimate framework for political contestation; where they [significant political groups] do not undertake seriously attempts to overthrow the democratic regime, but they believe that any further political change must emerge from within the parameters of democratic procedures" (Linz & Stepan, 1996; Gunther & Nikoforos & Puhle, 1995: 7). Of course, in this case, the "only game in town" metaphor may seem to be an appropriate or a sophisticated alternative to explain when democratization may be reached, but in itself it is quite unclear and does not helps us to understand the processes of democratization in different countries.

Firstly, in some cases, it is very difficult to determine who are the significant political actors and who are not, and from here we come to the conclusion that democratization may be termed as an end point or not in a particular country. As Whitehead pointed out: " by this criterion it is again questionable when or whether democratization has been completed in, say, Italy or Spain. (Are the Basque separatists a 'significant political actor'? This is a matter of careful and contestable evaluation and judgement, not of self-evident objective truth.)<sup>2</sup> (Whitehead, 2002: 27). Likewise, how could we understand the end of democratization in Greece (the making of the "only game in town"), while the high rate of political radicalization that has existed in this country has often questioned the issue of dedication of its "sinificant political actors" to the democratic framework (of the game).

Secondly, the absence of political anti-system actors (that is, accepting "the game") can not again lead us to conclude that democracies are consolidated. If in the first case it is too ambiguous to quantify empirically the consolidation of democracy based on the term "politically significant" (Encarnacion, 2002: 489), now the problem is about the qualitative distinction . The fact that in a country with "consolidated democracy" there may not be "significant political actors" to oppose the system (the

<sup>2</sup> The author follows the justification when he notes that "it is a matter of exquisite judgment whether the Communist Party, or even the strongest currents within the Christian Democratic Party, have ever completely embraced the (democratic) doctrine, whereas Lega Nord (which increased by importance during the '90s) did not explicitly do so".

institutional framework of the game) does not mean that democracy does not face various problems or deficits, either at the structural or normative level, or in some cases even the violation of democratic norms, which may have important implications in its functioning. Just as Giovanni Sartori well reminds us of what constitutes the essence of the definition of democracy, is that “a democracy exists only insofar as its ideals and values bring it into being” (Sartori, 1987, 22). But full embrace of the rules of polyarchy should not mislead us into thinking that all democracies play the same political game (Encarnacion, 2002: 490). So, the problem here is that these democracies, even though in the classification language of different authors can be considered consolidated (where democracy has become the „only game in town“), they can continue to face structural deficits which characterize them in their various fields, ranging from legal systems, shortcomings in the rule of law, political culture, civil society, etc. Likewise, we may also mention the violation of democratic norms or principles in these „consolidated“ democracies, for example. One can mention the use of money power for the purchase of votes or for various favors, illegal electoral funding, the use / instrumentalization of the mass media (which certain actors may have in possession) to influence public opinion in their favor. Perhaps the most typical example to be mentioned here (but not the only one) is again Italy, whose democracy, for almost two decades, is regarded as consolidated by the authors or as „the only game in town“, half of its territory (ie. its South) continues to face all of the above-mentioned problems and challenges, which have no consequences or any implications for the „game“.

Third, a recent problem related to the conceptualization of a completed democratization of making democracy as „the only game in town“ is also related to democratic stability / longevity. This conceptualization, although implicitly, contains in itself the presupposition that a democracy at once fulfilling the conditions for consolidation and thus becoming „the only game in town“, is also capable of ensuring its continuity and sustainability. However, even in this case, this conceptualization of democratic consolidation results in many theoretical and empirical weaknesses in the reality that it tries to explain, and by the very fact that, as we have mentioned above, it imposes „closure“ on political processes and developments that basically always remain open. This also is noted by Lawrence Whitehead when he says that by the same criterion (all significant political actors accept the institutional framework of democracy) we would have to conclude that democratization had been completed in, say, India, Uruguay, or Venezuela in the 1960s—although in all these cases the subsequent course of political development revealed the severe practical incompleteness and normative inadequacy of these accomplishments. Again the definition imposes closure on processes that are in practice still openended, value-laden and transgressive (Whitehead, 2002: 27). Democratization should therefore be understood as an open, complex and dynamic process, which makes it to some extent an unpredictable process.

Now, let's come to the one that constitutes the second conception of when a democracy can be called consolidated in the literature of democratization: the “two-turnover” test of Samuel Huntington. It contends, in essence that democratization begins with the removal from the political scene of an authoritarian regime and ends after competitive elections (electoral regime) have given rise to two subsequent peaceful power transfers between competing parties. It is no coincidence that such a conception has been substantially criticized by the various authors in the field of democratization, so to say in the words of Gunther, Diamandourous dhe Puhle, it leads to “absurd application in the real world (Gunther & Diamandorous & Puhle, 2002: 487). Such a conception, besides being absurd in itself (that it can be said that it is difficult to find a single democratization case that can be precisely explained through this “two-turnover” test), also undermines the very concept of democracy. In all the concepts of democracy (remember in the second chapter of this paper) it is emphasized that democracy is not just a choice, and it means far more than simply an electoral regime that defines the winner and the loser. Remember the example of Pakistan for illustration:

“A ‘generally free and fair election’ is held, for the third time in the five years since a transition from authoritarian rule and for the second time since the inauguration of ‘democracy’; the opposition wins and constitutionally assumes power. Thus what Huntington identifies as the ‘two-turnover’ test for democratic consolidation is satisfied (Huntington 1991, 266–67). However, within a year of that third election the defeated prime minister resorts to creating ‘ungovernability’ by organizing a series of paralyzing strikes in order to force early elections or provoke the army (which still heavily influences the presidency) into dismissing his opponent, who is now again prime minister. In return the current prime minister investigates her opponent’s business empire and arrests his elderly father on charges of tax evasion. Both politicians come from a tiny land-owning elite which dominates the country’s economy, army, politics, and state, and their differences on policy issues are limited at most, but they are far from agreeing on the rules of the game. At the mass level, political, sectarian, and ethnic violence sweeps through the country’s most populous city and also its most remote province, where religious fundamentalists stage an uprising to demand imposition of Islamic law and the chief minister ultimately concedes, in violation of the constitution. Around the country security forces continue to violate human rights with impunity, through torture, brutal prison conditions, extrajudicial killings, and the rape of female detainees” (Diamond, 1997: 7).

According to defining standards Pakistan (which is more or less in a similar situation still today) is qualifying as an electoral democracy and has also satisfactorily fulfilled the “two -turnover” test to which it refers Samuel P. Huntington for democratic consolidation. However, as can be seen from the above quotation, such a country has little to do with democracy: a country where civil rights and civil liberties are not respected, where the state in its actions is not bound by the law, where the conduct of politicians hardly adhere to any kind of democratic norm. Democracy in this country (as far as it makes sense

to apply this term in this case) continues to survive as a kind of facade, and it would be very difficult for anyone to come to the conclusion that Pakistan could be considered as a country with consolidated democracy. So, the “two-turnover” test is an indicator that results in an absurd explanation of the democratization cases upon which it is applied.

## Conclusions

For more than two decades, it has become increasingly clear that understanding or explaining political developments in post-authoritarian countries through the concept or paradigm of their democratic consolidation is no longer valid from an analytical point of view. The concept of democratic consolidation is a teleological concept in itself that is most oriented towards the democratization telos, bypassing the understanding of the complexity and particular problems of the democratization process in certain countries. Such countries that have not long been able to have well-functioning and institutionalized democracies in their environments for a long time should not be perceived as deviant cases from a desirable or desirable end point (telos democratization). Just as Guillermo O'Donnell best emphasized earlier (also making an self-critical as an author) when he suggests that the term “democratic consolidation” can no longer be used by political scientists: “As an author who has committed most of the mistakes I criticize here, I suspect that we students of democratization are still swayed by the mood of the times that many countries have more or less recently passed through... The northwest was seen as the last point of the trajectory that would be traversed largely by removing authoritarian rulers. This illusion was extremely useful during the hard and uncertain times of the transition. Its residue is still strong enough to make democracy and consolidation powerful, and consequently pragmatically valid, terms of political discourse (O'Donnell, 1996: 46-47).

Moreover we emphasized in this paper that the concept of consolidation is also problematic for understanding of democracy as a term that excludes the conceptual closure of its identity. Democratization must always be understood as an open, dynamic process that can mark advancements and backwardness in its path, as well as it can continue staying in a broken form (though problematic, functioning with serious defects) for a long time. Cases of many new democracies in different parts of the world have best demonstrated this in the last 26 years.

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