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The End of the Transition Paradigm

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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The End of the Transition Paradigm

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In the last quarter of the twentieth century, trends in seven different regions converged to change the political landscape of the world: 1) the fall of right-wing authoritarian regimes in Southern Europe in the mid-1970s; 2) the replacement of military dictatorships by elected civilian governments across Latin America from the late 1970s through the late 1980s; 3) the decline of authoritarian rule in parts of East and South Asia starting in the mid-1980s; 4) the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe at the end of the 1980s; 5) the breakup of the Soviet Union and the establishment of 15 post-Soviet republics in 1991; 6) the decline of one-party regimes in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa in the first half of the 1990s; and 7) a weak but recognizable liberalizing trend in some Middle Eastern countries in the 1990s.

The causes, shape, and pace of these different trends varied considerably. But they shared a dominant characteristic—simultaneous movement in at least several countries in each region away from dictatorial rule toward more liberal and often more democratic governance. And though differing in many ways, these trends influenced and to some extent built on one another. As a result, they were considered by many observers, especially in the West, as component parts of a larger whole, a global democratic trend that thanks to Samuel Huntington has widely come to be known as the "third wave" of democracy.¹

This striking tide of political change was seized upon with enthusiasm by the U.S. government and the broader U.S. foreign policy community. As early as the mid-1980s, President Ronald Reagan, Secretary of State **[End Page 5]** George Shultz, and other high-level U.S. officials were referring regularly to "the worldwide democratic revolution." During the 1980s, an active array of governmental, quasi-governmental, and nongovernmental organizations devoted to promoting democracy abroad sprang into being. This new democracy-promotion community had a pressing need for an analytic framework to conceptualize and respond to the ongoing political events. Confronted with the initial parts of the third wave—democratization in Southern Europe, Latin America, and a few countries in Asia (especially the Philippines)—the U.S. democracy community rapidly embraced an analytic model of democratic transition. It was derived principally from their own interpretation of the patterns of democratic change taking place, but also to a lesser extent from the early works of the emergent academic field of "transitology," above all the seminal work of Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter.²

As the third wave spread to Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, sub-Saharan Africa, and elsewhere in the 1990s, democracy promoters extended this model as a universal paradigm for understanding democratization. It became ubiquitous in U.S. policy circles as a way of talking about, thinking about, and designing interventions in processes of political change around the world. And it stayed remarkably constant despite many variations in those patterns of political change and a stream of increasingly diverse scholarly views about the course and nature of democratic transitions.³

The transition paradigm has been somewhat useful during a time of momentous and often surprising political upheaval in the world. But it is increasingly clear that reality is no longer conforming to the model. Many countries that policy makers and aid practitioners persist in calling "transitional" are not in transition to democracy, and of the democratic transitions that are under way, more than a few are not following the model. Sticking with the paradigm beyond its useful life is retarding evolution in the field of democratic assistance and is leading policy makers astray in other ways. It is time to recognize that the transition paradigm has outlived its usefulness and to look for a better lens.

Core Assumptions

Five core assumptions define the transition paradigm. The first, which is an umbrella for all the others, is that any country moving *away* from dictatorial rule can be considered a...

THE END OF THE TRANSITION PARADIGM

Thomas Carothers

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