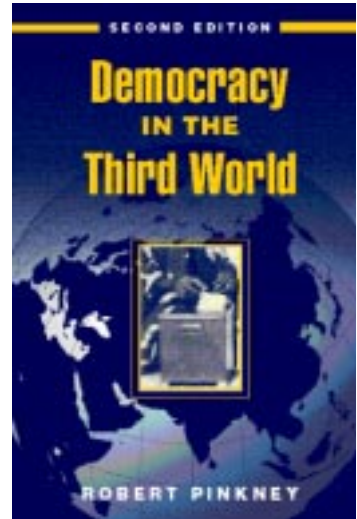


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SECOND EDITION

Robert Pinkney



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Introduction

In 1994 I noted that a book on democracy in the third world written twenty years earlier would have been a very short book. Competitive elections and civil liberties had survived since the achievement of independence in India, the Gambia, Botswana, Mauritius, and some of the islands in the West Indies, and, since the ending of civil war, in Costa Rica. But these were oases in a desert dominated by military governments, one-party regimes, and personal dictatorships. Today, virtually all the governments of Latin America have been chosen by means of competitive election. Asia, South Korea, Bangladesh, Thailand, Nepal, the Philippines, and Indonesia have all emerged from authoritarian, military, or personal rule, and single-party domination in Taiwan has ended with the main opposition party winning a free election. In sub-Saharan Africa the vast majority of countries have held competitive elections since 1990, even though many authoritarian tendencies still persist and political violence continues. This leaves Myanmar (Burma), Pakistan, and much of North Africa and the Middle East under authoritarian rule, with question marks over whether the dominant one-party systems of Singapore and Malaysia can yet be regarded as democratic. The transformation of so much of the world in so short a time is remarkable by any standards. Why should democracy have emerged, or reemerged? What is its significance, and what are its future prospects?

To use the terms “democracy” and “third world” in the same sentence is to provoke immediate arguments about definitions and the utility of particular concepts. The term “third world” is probably no more illuminating than the terms that preceded it, such as “developing countries,” “underdeveloped countries,” or “emergent countries,” yet it has come into common usage for want of anything better. One can argue about where the third world ends and where the first and second worlds begin, but I shall accept the common usage and take it to include the countries that are characterized by greater poverty—compared with Western Europe, North America, and

the Antipodes—though they have not had their political systems transformed by membership in the communist bloc. The poverty can be measured not only by narrow material indicators, such as per capita income, but also by illiteracy, low life expectancy, high infant mortality, and unsafe drinking water. It is these social and economic circumstances, together with an unequal relationship with the developed world outside and, in many cases, a recent experience of colonial rule, that help to give third world politics its distinctive flavor, even though there is much diversity among the individual countries. In particular, it has frequently been argued that these countries are the ones least likely to be able to sustain democracy. Politics is more of a life-and-death struggle, in which those who possess a disproportionate amount of the meager resources available are not likely to risk losing these resources by permitting free elections.

How, then, can one explain the emergence and survival of democracy in such a hostile climate? When the first edition of this book was published, much of the academic debate centered around the relative importance of the preconditions for democracy as compared with the skill of political actors in achieving transitions from authoritarianism to democracy. The former approach has been concerned mainly with explaining why countries in the West enjoyed the right preconditions, such as material prosperity, urbanization, cultures that encouraged tolerance and participation, and political institutions that had developed accepted ways of resolving conflicts. Third world countries lacked most of these preconditions and were therefore much less likely to be able to establish or maintain democratic political systems. The transition approach, in contrast, acknowledged that many countries were developing democratic systems and sought to explain such developments in terms of the ability of different political actors, whether inside or outside government, to reach sufficient consensus on a new set of rules of the political game.

These two approaches continue to provide invaluable insights and enable one to test hypotheses about why democracy has succeeded or failed in a particular country, but they do not tell the whole story. One could argue that a “developed” country like Singapore enjoys many of the preconditions that would favor democracy but that democracy has failed to materialize because insufficient actors or actions have been present to initiate a transition, whereas Benin has achieved a transition despite the absence of most of the generally accepted preconditions. Democratic setbacks in the Gambia and Pakistan might suggest that the foundations of democracy remain shaky if many preconditions are absent, whereas the survival of democracy in much of Latin America in the face of economic decline might suggest a triumph of political will over hostile conditions.

Yet a discussion of preconditions and “transitology” alone leaves us with many unexplored areas. At least three aspects of the subject have

become more important and the subject of greater debate since the publication of the first edition of this book: relations between the state and civil society (discussed in Chapter 5), external influences (Chapter 7), and democratic consolidation (Chapter 9). Civil society tended to be neglected in the earlier literature because it was frequently assumed that most transitions involved negotiation between government and opposition, or elite and counterelite, with the wider society having little more than a walk-on role in the occasional riot or attempt at communal self-help. It is now widely acknowledged that there is a significant new relationship between state and society. Society has shown its willingness to challenge the state as it pressed for the ending of authoritarian rule, and the state has been forced to accept a more modest role as it suffers diminished resources for economic development, social provision, and the maintenance of order. More human activity now takes place away from the shadow of the state umbrella. Not all of this will be conducive to democracy, but the general effect is to establish a more pluralist political process.

The importance of external influence was acknowledged in the past to the extent that one could see the impact of major events and decisions such as the collapse of communism, the ending of the Cold War, the withdrawal of Western support for authoritarian rulers, and the insistence on good governance as a condition of aid. But we now need to look at more subtle influences. External support for authoritarianism or democracy is not simply something that can be switched on or off at will but involves a range of intended and unintended influences running through a variety of channels. Third world countries may respond to these pressures in a variety of ways, sometimes bowing to Western demands, sometimes putting their own interpretation on them, and sometimes rejecting them. And beyond links between governments, there has been the growth of global forces that have been seen sometimes as an aid to the transmission of democratic values and sometimes as damaging democracy by reducing the ability of elected governments to carry out the popular will.

The concept of democratic consolidation became more important as the focus of interest shifted from the ability of countries to achieve transitions to democracy to their ability to sustain and deepen it. If it is accepted that there is more to democracy than holding periodic elections, questions arise as to the extent to which governments are accountable and responsive to public opinion, the extent to which there are adequate means of participation and representation for civil society, and the extent to which there are adequate constraints to prevent the arbitrary exercise of authority, especially by the armed forces. This requires us to build on the discussion of the relationship between the state and civil society but also to pursue the more traditional concerns of political scientists about the adequacy of institutions.

In addition to exploring these new areas, Chapter 6, which focuses on continuous democracies, has been expanded to include a fuller discussion on India. Although that discussion still cannot do justice to such a vast country, it seems important to explore the reasons for the survival of democracy in a poor, heterogeneous, and heavily populated country. Scholars are rightly skeptical of any suggestion that the experience of one country necessarily provides a model for others to follow, but if democracy is ever to be established in China or consolidated in Indonesia, the Indian experience might be more relevant than that of smaller states.

Chapter 10, a new chapter, explores the question of whether there are distinctive African, Asian, or Latin American factors that influence the shape of democracy. It is suggested that while each individual country is obviously unique, there are similarities of history, culture, institutional patterns, and external relations within each continent that may explain some of the variations in democratic patterns or, indeed, some failures to establish democracy at all.

For the rest of this book, all the themes of the first edition are preserved.

We begin by looking at the various definitions and forms of democracy in Chapter 1. Although we are no nearer than the ancient Greeks to arriving at a universally agreed definition or deciding which form of democracy is best, there has been some process of elimination. People's democracy, as practiced until recently in Eastern Europe, is out of favor, and the practicability of socialist democracy, at least in the old-fashioned sense of the common ownership of the means of production, has come increasingly into question as the limitations of the capacity of the state have come to be recognized. The focus has thus narrowed, at least for the present and the immediate future, to variations on liberal democracy, with free competition for elective office complemented by a "free economy." Many advocates of democracy might want to go beyond this stage to a more participant, egalitarian system, but most would still accept liberal democracy as a necessary stage along the road, and it is therefore this form of democracy that occupies much of our attention. But even the minimal definition of liberal democracy is too generous a description of some third world democracies. The term "electoral democracy" is often used to characterize political systems in which relatively free elections are held but with few of the traditional checks and balances and with few opportunities for public participation.

Whether it is a staging post or an ideal in itself or even the final destination marking the end of history, liberal democracy offers third world countries something that is in stark contrast to the alternatives most of them have experienced. At the very least, it implies an absence of arbitrary arrests, tortures, and executions; of costly decisions taken by arrogant rulers whose fallibility no one could question; and of demeaning personality cults that encouraged sycophancy in place of informed debate. Even the achievement

of such practical objectives as stability, order, and development has generally eluded authoritarian rulers. And, although democracy has seldom been canvassed primarily as a means of achieving these objectives, it can help to contain the worst excesses of corruption, prestige spending, or individual shortsightedness through the checks and balances it provides. What, then, are the opportunities available for, and obstacles in the way of, achieving the democratic goal?

Following the discussion on the meaning of democracy, Chapter 2 examines the debate on the conditions conducive to its emergence. Although much of the debate is centered on developments in the West, we consider the extent to which the theories can be adapted to the third world and the extent to which new explanations of democratic development need to be added. Most of the third world countries were colonies of European powers before they attempted to develop democratic institutions, and the varied effects of colonial rule are considered in Chapter 3. The majority of countries established some form of pluralism after achieving independence, although this involved a lengthy time interval in Latin America, but these eras generally proved to be false dawns, with incipient democracies superseded by authoritarianism. The explanations of this eclipse of democracy are discussed in Chapter 4.

Chapter 5 looks at relations between state and civil society, as already explained, and Chapter 6 considers the exceptional countries that have preserved democracy continuously since independence. Chapter 7 discusses external influences, and Chapter 8 offers a revised discussion of the processes of transition to democracy. It takes into account the arguments about preconditions and then examines the different perspectives from which the different political actors can be viewed. Whereas the earlier literature saw actors largely in terms of government versus opposition, I suggest that they may also be perceived as members of social classes, elites, or groups or simply as influential individuals. We then look at the context within which the interaction between them takes place, including the underlying political cultures, economic conditions, and the roles of particular institutions.

Chapter 9 examines the successes and failures of attempts at democratic consolidation, as explained above. It looks backward at the circumstances in which democracy was established and forward at the ability of countries to develop democratic institutions. Chapter 10 explores the variations in the experience of democracy between the African, Asian, and Latin American continents.

The concluding chapter may seem more pessimistic from the point of view of democrats than the conclusion in the first edition, though that is for the reader to judge. Since the early 1990s, apartheid has been dismantled peacefully in South Africa, and the remaining one-party states have gone. In Indonesia the longest-serving military ruler has had to step down. Equally

remarkable has been the way in which nearly all the bridgeheads gained for democracy have been held. Very few countries have reverted to authoritarianism. Yet according to expert observers, only one of the many countries emerging from authoritarian rule is deemed to have achieved democratic consolidation. If the shallowness of democracy was simply a matter of inexperience that could be overcome in the fullness of time, that would not be a matter of any great concern, but there are reasons to believe that the problem is much more deep-rooted.

There has been little improvement, if any, in per capita income in most third world countries, and little if any reduction in poverty or debt. Even if extensive poverty is not an insuperable barrier to democratization, it is likely to do little to stimulate democratic participation or to increase the commitment of the masses to a political system that is bringing them few benefits. Competitive elections continue to be held, but many rulers are learning how far they can go in ensuring their own reelection without provoking too much resistance at home or abroad. Western powers continue to proclaim their belief in democracy, yet their own practice of democracy has not always provided a model that is conducive to democratic consolidation in the third world. Their growing acceptance of market forces reduces the scope for democratic control over economic policy, and democratic choice in the third world is limited now that social democratic alternatives are deemed to be ideologically incorrect. Western acceptance of the permissive society gives third world rulers a pretext for associating Western democracy with moral decadence, and a growing willingness by Western governments to make generous concessions to big business makes it difficult for them to urge other governments to combat corruption.

None of this means that any further democratic advance is impossible in the third world, but we should at least be aware of the rocky terrain to be negotiated. Democratization in the West in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries generally occurred against a background of economic growth and a political order in which governments were willing to use the machinery of state to expand social welfare and redistribute wealth. The justification for democracy has never been simply that it offers a better means of material advancement, but unless it can give voters something in return for their votes, no amount of philosophical argument about liberty, human rights, or political choice will ensure its survival. That is the challenge facing both third world governments and Western governments that proclaim a belief in democratic values.