The Challenge of Semi-Authoritarianism: An Introduction

THE LAST DECADE of the twentieth century saw the rise of a great number of regimes that cannot be easily classified as either authoritarian or democratic but display some characteristics of both—in short, they are *semi-authoritarian regimes*. They are ambiguous systems that combine rhetorical acceptance of liberal democracy, the existence of some formal democratic institutions, and respect for a limited sphere of civil and political liberties with essentially illiberal or even authoritarian traits. This ambiguous character, furthermore, is deliberate. Semi-authoritarian systems are not imperfect democracies struggling toward improvement and consolidation but regimes determined to maintain the appearance of democracy without exposing themselves to the political risks that free competition entails.

Semi-authoritarian regimes are political hybrids. They allow little real competition for power, thus reducing government accountability. However, they leave enough political space for political parties and organizations of civil society to form, for an independent press to function to some extent, and for some political debate to take place. Such regimes abound in the Soviet successor states: In countries like Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, for example, former Communist Party bosses have transformed themselves into elected presidents, but in reality remain strongmen whose power is barely checked by weak democratic institutions. Semi-authoritarian regimes are also numerous in sub-Saharan Africa, where most of the multiparty elections of the 1990s failed to produce working parliaments or other institutions capable of holding the executive even remotely accountable. In the Arab world,

tentative political openings in Algeria, Morocco, and Yemen appear to be leading to the modernization of semi-authoritarianism rather than to democracy, in keeping with a pattern first established by Egypt. In the Balkans, the communist regimes have disappeared, but despite much international support most governments are semi-authoritarian, with only Slovenia and—more recently and tentatively—Croatia moving toward democracy. Even more worrisome is the case of Latin America, where economic crises and sharply unequal distribution of income create the risk of popular disenchantment with incumbent democratic governments, and even with democratic institutions. Already in two countries, first Peru and then Venezuela, steady progress toward democracy has been interrupted by the emergence of semi-authoritarian regimes. In Asia, formal democratic processes are accompanied by strong authoritarian features in countries such as Pakistan, Singapore, and Malaysia, putting them in the realm of semi-authoritarianism.

Semi-authoritarianism is not a new phenomenon—many past regimes have paid lip service to democracy while frequently violating its basic tenets. But the number of such regimes was limited because until the end of the Cold War many governments, often supported by their countries' leading intellectuals, rejected liberal democracy outright. They did so in the name of people's democracy (that is, socialism), or in the name of communal cultural traditions that precluded the egoistic individualism on which, they claimed, liberal democracy is based. Since the end of the Cold War, few governments and even fewer intellectuals are willing to mount an ideological defense of nondemocratic systems of government; most feel they have to at least pretend adherence to the concept of democracy. Even the argument about the cultural bias of democracy is heard less frequently. On the other hand, the number of governments willing to accept the strict limitations on the extent and duration of their power imposed by democratic rule remains small. As a result, semi-authoritarian regimes have become more numerous.

The number of such regimes is likely to increase even further. In many countries that have experienced a political transition since the early 1990s, unfavorable conditions—including weak democratic institutions and political organizations, persistent authoritarian traditions, major socioeconomic problems, and ethnic and religious con-

flicts—create formidable obstacles to the establishment and, above all, the consolidation of democracy. Nevertheless, citizens everywhere have shown their disillusionment with authoritarian regimes, and a widespread return to the unabashedly top-down forms of government so common in the past is improbable. These conditions, unfavorable to both genuine democracy and overt authoritarianism, further enhance the prospects for the spread of semi-authoritarianism.

With their combination of positive and negative traits, semi-authoritarian regimes pose a considerable challenge to U.S. policy makers. Such regimes often represent a significant improvement over their predecessors or appear to provide a measure of stability that is welcome in troubled regions. But the superficial stability of many semi-authoritarian regimes usually masks a host of severe problems and unsatisfied demands that need to be dealt with lest they lead to crises in the future. Despite their growing importance, however, semi-authoritarian regimes have not received systematic attention. In the present study, I propose to start filling the lacuna in the understanding of semi-authoritarian regimes and to put forth some suggestions about how to address the policy challenges they pose.

It is tempting to dismiss the problems created by the proliferation of semi-authoritarian regimes with the argument that, all things considered, they are not that bad and should be accepted as yet-imperfect democracies that will eventually mature into the real thing. For instance, compared to the old communist Yugoslavia, or to a deeply divided Bosnia suffering from the aftermath of civil war and ethnic cleansing, or to a Serbia in state of economic collapse but still defiant, Croatia under Franjo Tudjman did not appear too badly off; nor did it create insurmountable problems for the international community. Similarly, the semi-authoritarianism of President Heydar Aliyev in oil-rich Azerbaijan poses fewer immediate problems for policy makers and for oil companies than would a protracted power struggle with uncertain outcome. The widespread discontent in at least some semi-authoritarian states, however, suggests that further change is inevitable and that it is not in the interest of the United States to ignore the problem until crises erupt.

Promoting the democratization of semi-authoritarian regimes is a frustrating undertaking, since they are resistant to the arsenal of reform programs on which the United States and other donor countries

usually rely. Semi-authoritarian regimes already do much of what the most widely used democratization projects encourage: They hold regular multiparty elections, allow parliaments to function, and recognize, within limits, the rights of citizens to form associations and of an independent press to operate. Indeed, many countries with semi-authoritarian regimes are beehives of civil society activity, with hundreds of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) operating with foreign support. Many have a very outspoken, even outrageously libelous, independent press. Nevertheless, incumbent governments and parties are in no danger of losing their hold on power, not because they are popular but because they know how to play the democracy game and still retain control. Imposing sanctions on these regimes does not appear to be an answer. Such measures are usually ineffective, and the political and economic costs they entail, both for those who impose them and for the citizens of the targeted country, do not appear justified under the circumstances.

In general, sticks are in short supply for donors seeking to address the problem of semi-authoritarian regimes. Carrots are even scarcer: There is little the international community can offer to a stable regime to entice it to risk losing power. The deepening of democracy is in the long-run interest of these countries, but it is definitely not in the short-term interest of the leaders who stand to lose power if their country becomes more democratic. Going down in history as an enlightened leader appears to be less attractive to most politicians than maintaining their power intact.

Analytical Challenges

In addition to creating a policy dilemma about how to deal with specific countries, the growth of semi-authoritarianism poses analytical challenges. The first of these is differentiating semi-authoritarian regimes from others that are neither fully authoritarian nor fully democratic. There is a vast gray zone that occupies the space between authoritarianism at one end and consolidated democracy at the other. The existence of this gray zone is well recognized by analysts, but there is little consensus on the types of regimes residing in it.[1] In gen-

eral, analysts discuss two broad categories of countries occupying this gray zone, depending on whether they look at the process of change or at the character of the regimes: countries still in transition and imperfect democracies.

Analysts who focus on the unfolding process of political transformation but assume that the process will eventually lead to democracy talk variously of unconsolidated or consolidating democracies or countries experiencing protracted transitions. Essentially, nonconsolidated democracies are countries that are democratic, at least to a certain extent, but where there is as yet no guarantee that democracy will last.[2] Countries experiencing protracted transitions are not democratic, but they are on their way to becoming democratic in a particularly slow, gradual way.[3] The problem with both concepts is that they cannot be applied with any rigor except in retrospect—Mexico can now be classified as a country that experienced a protracted transition, but one could not have classified it that way ten years ago without indulging in wishful thinking or making unwarranted assumptions about the inevitability of a democratic outcome. Similarly, democracies that eventually consolidate may not look very different from those that will suffer reversals until the process has unfolded.

Analysts who focus on regime characteristics usually try to capture the ambiguity of gray zone countries by adding a qualifier to the word *democracy*: semi-, formal, electoral, partial, weak, illiberal, virtual, and many others—the differences seem to be based more on the preference and imagination of the analyst than on the characteristics of different regimes.[4] Attempts to classify hybrid regimes on a continuum, ranging from those that are closest to authoritarianism to those that are closest to democracy, have greater rigor and are more satisfactory in theory, but they tend to break down in the application, given the uncertainty and the inherent instability of most hybrid regimes.[5]

I have chosen the term *semi-authoritarian* to denote these hybrid regimes because labels including the word *democracy* are not adequate to capture their defining feature, namely, their deliberate nature. Semi-authoritarian regimes are not failed democracies or democracies in transition; rather, they are carefully constructed and maintained alternative systems. If semi-authoritarian governments had their way, the system would never change. One of the countries included in this study, Egypt, has developed a particularly resilient, almost

institutionalized, semi-authoritarianism that has already lasted more than twenty years and even survived the transition from the presidency of Anwar Sadat to that of Hosni Mubarak. While the Egyptian system is highly unlikely to last forever, there is little explanatory value in defining a system that maintains its stability over a long period as transitional.

Different semi-authoritarian regimes present different mixtures of democratic and authoritarian features. For instance, Egypt is a semi-authoritarian state because it has a formally democratic political system and some open political space, but that space is rather narrow, and it would not take much more narrowing for Egypt to cross the boundary into the realm of authoritarian countries. Conversely, Croatia has a large, open political space and is changing rapidly. Reviewing the entire process of change in the country, beginning with the fall of socialism, analysts may conclude in the future that this was really a case of protracted transition, but such a conclusion could be premature now. But even if specific countries will have to be reclassified, the concept of semi-authoritarianism provides a useful tool for assessing the outcome of many recent political transitions and the challenges the United States and other countries face in dealing with them.

A second analytical challenge posed by semi-authoritarian regimes concerns the validity of some widespread ideas about democratic transitions that underpin the democracy promotion strategies of the United States and other industrialized democracies. First, such regimes challenge the assumption, dominant since the end of the Cold War, that the failure of the socialist regimes means the triumph of democracy. This "end of history" argument puts too much emphasis on the importance of ideologies.[6] It accurately notes that socialism, viewed for the best part of the twentieth century as the ideological alternative to democracy, lost its appeal with the collapse of the communist regimes of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. As a result, the particular type of naked, institutionalized authoritarianism associated with socialism, with its massive single party and complex ideological apparatus, has become exceedingly rare. But relatively few governments, propelled by the genuine pluralism of their society and by an economic system capable of supporting such pluralism, have embraced democracy. Many have devised less heavy-handed, more nimble, and in a sense more imaginative systems that combine authoritar-

ian and liberal traits: This is semi-authoritarianism in its various forms.

The deliberate character of semi-authoritarian regimes also forces a reconsideration of the visually appealing image of countries that fail to democratize because they are caught in a "reverse wave." This idea, set forth and popularized by Samuel Huntington, is that in a particular period many countries embrace democracy—figuratively, a wave propels them forward.[7] Some of these countries safely ride the wave to dry land and prosper as democracies. Others are sucked back into the nondemocratic sea as the wave recedes, hopefully to be pushed back toward land by the next wave some decades in the future. It is an enticing idea, but it is not entirely accurate. It assumes that the leaders of all the countries supposedly being caught in a reverse wave intended to reach the shore, but in many cases they did not, and probably neither did many of these countries' citizens.[8] Most countries that fail to reach the shore are not failed democracies caught in the wave's reflux; on the contrary, many are successful semi-authoritarian states that rode the wave as far as they wanted and managed to stop.[9] The countries discussed in the present study belong to this group. They are semi-authoritarian by design, not by default: They are successful semi-authoritarian regimes rather than failed democracies.

Another widespread idea challenged by the proliferation of semi-authoritarian regimes is that liberalization is a step toward democracy because it unleashes the democratic forces of a country. Liberalization, which can be defined as the opening up of an authoritarian system so that debate and at least limited challenges to the old system become possible, undoubtedly allows all types of previously repressed ideas and political forces to bubble up. What actually surfaces depends on what was there. If a strong substratum of democratic ideas and above all of democratic organizations existed in the country, then liberalization indeed leads to greater democracy. But it can also lead to an outburst of ethnic nationalism, as in Yugoslavia, or of religious fundamentalism, as in Egypt—it just depends on the existing conditions, widely diffused ideas, and the emerging leadership. In developing countries where life is difficult for most, liberalization always releases a vague demand for something better, for change, which can be manipulated by able leaders in almost any direction. It is true that in countries that become democratic the process starts with liberalization.

Semi-authoritarian regimes demonstrate, however, that liberalization can also free ideas and trigger political processes that make democratization difficult, if not impossible.

Policy Challenges

From the point of view of policy makers in the United States and other democratic countries, the most immediate challenge posed by semi-authoritarian regimes is a policy one: How should such regimes be dealt with? Should the United States try to force democratization programs on Egypt, an important U.S. ally in the Middle East, although the Egyptian government would resist and the programs might even prove destabilizing? How should the international community react to Heydar Aliyev's plan to anoint his son as his successor as president of Azerbaijan, as if the country were a monarchy rather than a republic? What action is warranted when Venezuela starts slipping back from democracy to a semi-authoritarian populism? How can donors facilitate Croatia's second transition, the one from semi-authoritarianism? But there is another layer of issues raised by semi-authoritarian regimes, which may appear abstract when first formulated but are actually very important to the outcome of democracy promotion policies. Generally, these issues can be organized under the question, Why do semi-authoritarian regimes come into existence? Is it because of bad leaders (support efforts to vote them out of office), weak institutions (set up a capacity-building program), or a disorganized civil society incapable of holding the government accountable (fund and train nongovernmental organizations)? Or is it because there are underlying conditions that seriously undermine the prospects for democracy (and what can be done about underlying conditions)? Even more fundamentally, does the proliferation of semi-authoritarian regimes indicate that the assumptions about democratic transitions that undergird assistance programs need rethinking?

As long as the United States and other industrial democracies continue funding democracy assistance programs, questions about the nature of semi-authoritarian regimes and the mechanisms of democratic transitions are not abstract, but have a direct bearing on policy

options. Democracy assistance programs are based on a concept of how democratic transitions take place that owes a lot to theory and relatively little to concrete evidence. This is not strange. Democratization is a complicated and little-understood process. In part, this is because the number of well-established democracies is relatively small, making it difficult to detect regular patterns. In part, it is because studies of democratization vary widely in their approaches and methodologies, yielding noncomparable conclusions. As a result, we understand much better how democratic systems function than why and how they emerged in the first place.

In the course of more than a decade of democracy promotion efforts, policy makers in the United States and other countries have developed their own model of democratic transitions. This model is based in part on a highly selective reading of the literature on democratization and in part on the operational requirements of agencies that need to show results within a fairly short time frame—in the world of democracy promotion, ten years already qualifies as long-term, although many studies of democratization highlight processes unfolding over many decades and even centuries. Inevitably, historical studies of democratization that point to the long process of socioeconomic transformation underlying the emergence of democracy have been ignored. There is little policy guidance to be derived from learning that the social capital that made democratic development possible in Northern Italy after World War II started to be built up in the fifteenth century, or that the rise of the gentry in the seventeenth century contributed to the democratic evolution of Britain.[10] As a result, the studies with the greatest impact on democracy promotion have been those that looked narrowly at the final phase of democratic transitions, without asking too many questions about what had happened earlier or what kind of conditions had made the democratic outcome possible.

Furthermore, sophisticated studies are often given simplistic interpretations when they become a tool to justify policy choices. For example, among the most influential works often cited by democracy promoters are the studies of transitions from authoritarian rule in Latin America and Southern Europe carried out in the 1980s by a team of investigators, with Philippe Schmitter and Guillermo O'Donnell drawing the overall conclusions.[11] These conclusions were highly preliminary, as Schmitter and O'Donnell made clear with the final volume's

subtitle: *Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies*. As is often the case with successful works, these highly qualified conclusions took on a life of their own, losing their nuances and turning into outright policy prescriptions. In the midst of the transition from apartheid in South Africa in the early 1990s, I heard many political commentators invoke O'Donnell and Schmitter in support of their favorite policies, ignoring the two authors' careful qualifications of their conclusions. A similar fate has befallen Robert Putnam, whose concept of social capital has been transformed to denote not a culture of trust and cooperation developed over centuries, but something that could be quickly created by funding NGOs and training them in the techniques of lobbying the government, administering funds, and reporting to donors.[12]

The Donors' Model

The model of democratization that donors have developed through this process of distilling the complex lessons of history into policy prescriptions capable of implementation is simple. Democratization is interpreted as a three-phase process: liberalization, lasting at most a few years, but preferably much less; the transition proper, accomplished through the holding of a multiparty election; and consolidation, a protracted process of strengthening institutions and deepening a democratic culture. The tools used to facilitate this project are also fairly simple: in the liberalization phase, support for civil society and the independent press; during the transition, support for elections, including voter education, training of NGOs for election observing, and, more rarely, training for all political parties in the techniques of organizing and campaigning; and in the consolidation phase, new programs to build democratic institutions and the rule of law, as well as the continuation of activities to further strengthen civil society and the media, educate citizens, or train parties.[13]

The model is considered applicable to any country, although different conditions require some adjustment in the programs implemented. This is because the real obstacles to democracy are authoritarian leaders' resistance to change, which can be softened with

carrots and sticks, and the weakness of civil society, political parties, and democratic institutions, which can be lessened through democracy assistance programs. Indeed, the idea that there are virtually no conditions that preclude the possibility of democratization has become an article of faith among democracy promoters.

In the present study I argue that semi-authoritarian regimes call into question the validity of the donors' model. First, these regimes show that liberalization and transitional elections can constitute the end of the process rather than its initial phases, creating semi-authoritarian regimes determined to prevent further change rather than imperfect but still-evolving democracies. Furthermore, this outcome is not necessarily a failure of democratization, but the result of a deliberate decision to prevent democratization on the part of the elites controlling the process.

Second, an analysis of the workings of semi-authoritarian regimes shows that all sorts of conditions—for example, stagnant economies or ethnic polarization—matter, and matter a great deal at that. The semi-authoritarian outcome is not always something imposed by autocratic leaders on a population that wanted something quite different, but it is often something accepted and even desired by the population. In many countries—Venezuela for example—people willingly, even enthusiastically, reject democracy at least for a time. The problem cannot be explained away by arguing that what people reject in such cases was not true democracy to begin with. The reality is more complicated, as the present study will show. Conditions really do affect citizens' priorities and the way they perceive democracy.

Third, semi-authoritarian regimes also challenge the view that democracy can be promoted by an elite of true believers. Democracy promoters extol in theory the virtue and necessity of broad citizen participation beyond the vote, and innumerable projects target the strengthening of civil society. But civil society as defined by donors is much more part of the elite than of the society at large. Donors favor professional advocacy NGOs, which speak the language of democracy and easily relate to the international community.[14] For understandable reasons donors are leery of mass movements, which can easily slip into radical postures and can get out of hand politically. But a problem strikingly common to all countries with semi-authoritarian regimes is that the political elite, whether in the government, opposition parties, or

even civil society organizations, has great difficulty reaching the rest of the society. In the end, this situation plays into the hands of semi-authoritarian regimes.

Dealing with semi-authoritarian regimes thus requires going beyond blaming leaders for nondemocratic outcomes of once-promising democratization processes, no matter how tempting this is. To be sure, leaders with authoritarian tendencies are a real obstacle to democratic transformation. It was pointless to hope for real democratization in Serbia as long as Slobodan Milošević was in power, and Azerbaijan will likely never be a democratic country under the leadership of Heydar Aliyev. Hugo Chávez is not the man who will restore and revitalize Venezuela's now shaky democracy. But the problem goes well beyond personalities. Countries do not necessarily deserve the leaders they get, but they do get the leaders whose rise conditions facilitate. If the leader is removed, the conditions remain. For democracy promoters this is an unpleasant thought, because it is easier to demonize individuals and even to oust them from power than to alter the conditions that propel those leaders to the fore.

Semi-authoritarian regimes usually feature in discussions of democratization as transitional regimes or as imperfect democracies. They would be more properly studied as a distinct regime type that calls assumptions about democratization into question and challenges policy makers to devise more effective policies to stimulate further change.

Understanding Semi-Authoritarianism

It is useful at this point to set forth some preliminary ideas about the nature and major characteristics of semi-authoritarian regimes to back up the claim that they represent a special type of regime, and are not simply imperfect democracies. In particular, I call attention here to four issues, all of which are discussed at greater length in subsequent chapters of the present study: the way in which power is generated and transferred, the low degree of institutionalization, the weak link between political and economic reform, and the nature of civil society.

Limits on the Transfer of Power. The most important characteristic of semi-authoritarian regimes is the existence and persistence of mechanisms that effectively prevent the transfer of power through elections from the hands of the incumbent leaders or party to a new political elite or organization. It is the existence of such mechanisms that makes the term *semi-authoritarian* more appropriate than any that contains the word *democracy*—if power cannot be transferred by elections, there is little point in describing a country as democratic, even with qualifiers. These mechanisms for blocking power transfers function despite the existence of formally democratic institutions and the degree of political freedom granted to the citizens of the country. Semi-authoritarian states may have a reasonably free press. The regime may leave space for autonomous organizations of civil society to operate, for private businesses to grow and thus for new economic elites to arise. The regime may hold fairly open elections for local or regional governments or even allow backbenchers from the government party to be defeated in elections. But there is little room for debate over the nature of political power in society, where that power resides, and who should hold it. Most important, there is no way to challenge the power of the incumbents. At the center, competition is a fiction; even if elections are held, outsiders are not allowed to truly challenge the power of the incumbents. Elections are not the source of the government's power, and thus voters cannot transfer power to a new leadership.

The issue of the source of the regime's power is central to any discussion of semi-authoritarian states. There are conceptual difficulties in confronting this issue, but the problem cannot be avoided. A definition of democracy, and of semi-authoritarianism, that hinges on determining the source of the government's power is admittedly inconvenient, because the source of power is never easy to ascertain in practice. Despite common expressions such as "seizing power" or "assuming power," power is not something concrete, which can easily detected or seized, as Samuel Huntington pointed out long ago.[15] Power is something that is generated and regenerated through protracted engagement of the governors and the governed in society. In democratic systems, it is relatively easy to see how power is generated and how it is exercised. Access to positions of power is consistently determined by election results, although many factors ultimately enhance

or decrease the elected leaders' ability to shape policies. Decisions are made by elected leaders operating within institutions, and while many pressures are brought to bear on those institutions, the process is relatively transparent and the outcome clearly visible. Nondemocratic systems are more opaque. Power is the result of relationships established among individuals. Because these relationships are not institutionalized, they are difficult to map and to explain. And while even in authoritarian countries decisions are influenced by a multiplicity of actors and factors, the process through which influence is exercised is much more opaque than in democratic countries.

Weak Institutionalization. Because of the discrepancy between the way in which power is generated and allocated in practice and the way in which it ought to be generated and allocated according to the formal institutional framework, semi-authoritarian regimes are never fully institutionalized, although some, above all Egypt, come close. Democratic countries build strong institutions—they are organized through the rule of law and institutions, rather than by individuals. Authoritarian regimes also can and do build institutions to generate and allocate power in an orderly, predictable way—see, for example, the powerful single parties developed by communist regimes. But semi-authoritarian regimes cannot develop the institutions they would need to perpetuate the allocation of power without causing the democratic facade to crumble. Nor can they allow the democratic institutions to function without hindrance without putting the continuation of their control in jeopardy. Semi-authoritarian regimes thus constantly undermine their own institutions, usually by generating and exercising much power outside their realm, or more rarely by manipulating them endlessly, as the government of Senegal does. Semi-authoritarian regimes have institutions, but the semi-authoritarianism itself is not institutionalized.

Nevertheless, many semi-authoritarian regimes are remarkably stable over time. Since their stability is based on the leadership of an individual or small elite, rather than on institutions, semi-authoritarian regimes invariably face difficult successions. In single-party authoritarian systems, the problem of succession is solved by the party machinery; in democratic countries, it is routinely solved by the occurrence of elections every few years. Semi-authoritarian regimes, however, have neither the party machine nor an open election system.

Another factor that can shake the delicate balance of these regimes is the level of popular participation—there has to be enough to maintain the facade of democracy and provide a safety valve for social discontent, but not so much as to permit challenges to the incumbent regime. Semi-authoritarian regimes have trouble developing channels for popular participation that are neither threatening to the government nor destructive of the democratic facade.[16]

The dynamics that keep most semi-authoritarian regimes in power are based on a mixture of two factors: deliberate manipulation of formal democratic institutions by incumbents and acceptance of the regime by citizens. Manipulation can take many forms. Semi-authoritarian regimes are adept at avoiding defeat in multiparty elections, often through fairly subtle methods, without resorting to open repression or crude stuffing of ballot boxes; indeed, some go to great lengths to give their elections an aura of legitimacy. Prior to its country's October 1999 parliamentary elections, judged by observers to be neither free nor fair, the embassy of Kazakhstan in Washington, D.C., was publishing a weekly bulletin spelling out in great detail all the measures supposedly being taken to ensure the integrity of the process. Semi-authoritarian governments are good at pressuring the independent press into self-censorship and at delegitimizing democratic institutions by accusing them of being insufficiently democratic. For example, in Venezuela in 1999, Hugo Chávez, a democratically elected president who had no intention of accepting the limits on his power imposed by the constitution, embarked on a campaign to discredit the parliament as unrepresentative and unresponsive to the will of the people. He soon succeeded in replacing the parliament with a pliant constituent assembly.

But semi-authoritarian regimes do not stay in power through manipulation and repression alone. They often also enjoy a degree of popular support because many citizens believe that they offer some public goods that democratic governments are incapable of delivering. In countries where formal democracy is accompanied by high levels of poverty, or where ethnic or religious conflict divides and mobilizes the population, for example, semi-authoritarian governments play on the public's grievances and fears and get support by promising solutions.

Reform Disconnect. Another trait common to countries with semi-authoritarian regimes is the lack of positive synergy between political

and economic reform. In these countries, political openings have not led to economic reform, nor has economic reform led to a more democratic process. On the contrary, both economic and political change have been controlled and manipulated by the regime. The result is that semi-authoritarian regimes have a facade of democracy and a facade of market economy. Semi-authoritarian regimes do undertake economic reform in response to international pressure to free up markets and reduce the sphere of government control. But in most cases, hurried and corrupt privatization programs transfer control over major economic assets from government officials as state representatives to the same government officials as private entrepreneurs.[17] Thus, semi-authoritarian regimes can undergo market liberalization with little political liberalization or separation of economic elites from political elites. The linkage between economic liberalization and democratization is complex, and it is dangerous to assume that the former always encourages the latter.

Limits on Civil Society. Most countries with semi-authoritarian regimes appear to have fairly active civil societies. While their governments usually impose restrictions on openly political organizations, they allow space within which a variety of civil society organizations can operate. Egypt, for example, has an array of organizations independent of the state, ranging from Islamic charities to modern professional associations. Azerbaijan first experienced a flourishing of civic organizations in the period of political liberalization under former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, but new organizations have continued to spring up even in the less free period of independence.

Yet, in countries with semi-authoritarian regimes the contribution of civil society to democracy and openness is more limited than it appears.[18] First, semi-authoritarian governments do impose limitations on civil society organizations, including restrictive registration laws and overt and covert pressures to limit activities to politically safe areas. In 1999, for example, Egypt enacted a restrictive law on voluntary organizations that makes registration difficult and limits the range of activities they can undertake.[19] But even more fundamentally, organizations of civil society in many countries are a manifestation of a social pluralism that is not democratic in character; or they contribute to organizational pluralism but not to political pluralism.[20]

In some countries, organizations of civil society reflect the social

pluralism of religion and ethnicity—there may be Muslim or Christian charities, or ethnic associations of all types. It is often difficult even for democratically minded organizations to overcome the social barriers that make it difficult to operate across ethnic or religious barriers, or even across gender lines. Thus, civil society easily ends up simply reflecting old social divisions. All countries provide examples of this, but Egypt, with its proliferation of Islamist groups, offers a particularly stark reminder of the extent to which the organizational life of a country is inevitably rooted in its social structures. The paradox here is that the same organizations that reflect ethnic or religious divisions may be working for goals that are associated with democracy—religious freedom, for example—while creating barriers to it by perpetuating these divisions.

In all countries with semi-authoritarian regimes, there are some organizations that try to overcome the legacies of social division. Most of the donor-supported NGOs formed since the early 1990s to promote human rights, carry out civic education, or advocate a variety of policy reforms considered to be associated with democracy fall into this category, at least in theory. These are referred to by donors as civil society organizations, although they constitute only a small part of the civil society that exists in a country. The problem is that these groups often have shallower social roots than less democratic ones—for example, human rights organizations in Egypt are small elite groups, while Islamic charities are part of the social fabric. The so-called civil society in semi-authoritarian states, in conclusion, is often shallower and makes a lesser contribution to democracy than it would first appear from looking at the number of organizations and the government's willingness to let them operate.

Types of Semi-Authoritarian Regimes

While semi-authoritarian regimes share some common characteristics, they also exhibit many differences. They do not represent a single regime type but rather a range of types. Some countries fall close to the authoritarian end of the political spectrum—for example, Egypt and Azerbaijan. Other are closer to the democratic end—in Senegal, for

instance, the dominant party managed to block a transfer of power for forty years, including a decade when it enjoyed little popularity, but it also managed to maintain a fairly positive, and gradually improving, human rights record. All semi-authoritarian regimes take steps to preserve their core, namely the power of the central government, even if it means resorting to nondemocratic methods. They differ, however, in their assessment of what constitutes a dangerous challenge to that power. As a result, such regimes show a great deal of variation concerning issues such as freedom of the press and individual liberties. These differences can be quite visible, as the case studies in the present study show.

Semi-authoritarian regimes also differ in terms of their internal dynamics and possibilities for further change. In this regard, it is possible to differentiate among three types of semi-authoritarian regimes: regimes in equilibrium, which have established a balance among competing forces and are thus quite stable; regimes in decay, where the authoritarian tendencies appear increasingly strong and the counterbalancing factors weak, suggesting the possibility that the government will revert to full authoritarianism; and regimes that are experiencing dynamic change that may undermine the government's ability to maintain the status quo, forcing it into opening up new political space and thus providing the possibility of incremental progress toward democracy.

All three types of semi-authoritarian regimes have the potential to become democratic at some point. I am not assuming that democratic transformation is impossible anywhere. However, while semi-authoritarian regimes experiencing dynamic change can become democratic through incremental change, regimes that are in equilibrium would have to undergo too stormy an upheaval before such change could take place. Decaying regimes are probably those least likely to democratize, because they are caught in a downward spiral that may lead back to authoritarianism.

The semi-authoritarianism of equilibrium is the purest form, a stable condition that has already persisted over a long period and is likely to continue in the absence of upheaval. Semi-authoritarian regimes in equilibrium have proven that they can handle ordinary challenges—such as the activities of opposition parties or structural change brought about by a steady period of economic growth—without a

major modification in the structure of power. Egypt (discussed in a later chapter) and Indonesia before the fall of President Suharto are good examples of semi-authoritarianism in equilibrium—some of their citizens would say stagnation.

An interesting feature of such countries is that political equilibrium, or stagnation, can persist even while the countries experience rapid economic growth. Until 1998, Indonesia was one of the most dynamic emergent Asian economies; Egypt's growth has been more modest, but the country has undergone far-reaching economic restructuring since the 1970s and steady economic growth for sustained periods. The two cases suggest that economic growth per se does not necessarily break the equilibrium of a semi-authoritarian regime. Indeed, what made political transformation possible in Indonesia was not economic growth. Rather, it was a sudden economic crisis in the late 1990s that caused widespread hardship and eroded the legitimacy of a regime whose major accomplishment had been economic growth.

The semi-authoritarianism of decay is found in countries that are stagnating or declining economically and socially. This is the most discouraging form of semi-authoritarianism, because it is likely to regress toward full-fledged authoritarianism. Azerbaijan (discussed in a later chapter), Kazakhstan, Malawi, and Zambia, among many others, are examples of this semi-authoritarianism of decay. In many of these countries, the democratic stimulus was relatively weak from the beginning. It came from the outside, from the general post–Cold War political climate and from direct pressure by the international community, but there was a dearth of domestic forces to ensure continued government responsiveness and accountability. In other countries, such as Zimbabwe, there was real internal demand for political change, but also a government determined to stay in power at all costs. Such a situation leads to violence and further political decay rather than democracy.

In all countries experiencing the semi-authoritarianism of decay, there are residual areas of openness. There has been no formal return to the single-party system, and opposition political parties as well as civil society organizations are still allowed. Some independent media organizations still operate despite the many restrictions, the frequent arrests of journalists, and, above all, the ever present possibility that the government will shut them down. But the political space is under

constant threat. In some cases, such as Zimbabwe, it has clearly been shrinking in recent years.

Despite their superficial similarity to stable semi-authoritarian regimes, regimes in decay are in reality quite different, because the balance of power is slowly shifting in favor of the incumbent government. In a country like Egypt, there is an established political culture that makes it difficult for the government to close the existing areas of openness. There is real political pluralism, with political parties, NGOs, and think tanks with a proven capacity to get the necessary political and financial support to continue operating. There are independent media and a rich intellectual life, although there is also a regime that has been able to prevent real competition for about two decades. But in the case of semi-authoritarian regimes in a state of decay, the future is less predictable. There is no established culture that precludes the complete closure of the political space. Pluralism is fragile, with parties forming and folding all the time, and civil society organizations remaining insecurely rooted domestically and heavily dependent on outside donors. Economic conditions likewise do not facilitate political change in countries with decaying semi-authoritarian regimes such as those I have mentioned. The private sector is weak and likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. The natural resources sector does not lend itself to privatization and even less to the development of small and medium-size businesses. For example, monopolies or oligopolies dominate the oil industries of Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan and the copper mines of Zambia. In many countries a privatization program is in place, but it does more to enhance the wealth and power of the ruling elite than to create a new stratum of independent entrepreneurs. Corruption becomes the defining factor in these systems, further reducing the development of small and medium-size enterprises. This greatly diminishes the pluralism of the political system by reducing the autonomy of economic interest groups vis-à-vis the government.

Under decaying regimes, in conclusion, semi-authoritarianism is probably as good as it gets. In the absence of some major new factor affecting the balance of power, the semi-authoritarianism of decay is more likely to regress to authoritarianism than to evolve toward democracy.

The third category of semi-authoritarian states—those undergoing dynamic change—is also characterized by a lack of equilibrium. How-

ever, these countries are experiencing a process that leaves open the possibility, and indeed the likelihood, of further, positive political change and even of democratization. Croatia, discussed in a later chapter, provides an example of a country that appears to be pushed toward democracy by the general ferment the country is experiencing. Taiwan offers an example of a country that outgrew its political system and democratized. In such countries, pressure for change comes from both the political leadership and from autonomous forces operating outside the government and independent of it, although the government's role is probably the most important. Such countries are governed by reformist elites rather than democratic ones. They have leaders who want to promote economic growth, free trade, and fuller integration into the international community—a set of goals they view as critical to the modernization of their respective countries. Such governments usually want to retain control of the process of change, and thus are wary of popular participation, but they also recognize that the modernization they envisage is bound to lead to political change as well. Rapid economic growth is often key to this dynamic process that leads such countries to move beyond semi-authoritarianism, as illustrated by the case of Senegal, which is also the subject of a chapter in the present study. Ruled by a particularly benevolent semi-authoritarian regime, Senegal has been poised for a breakthrough to real democracy for about fifteen years, and yet it continues to be stymied by the lack of dynamism in its economy and society. The semi-authoritarianism of dynamic change very starkly poses the question about the relationship between political and socioeconomic change.

The Present Study

The present study is organized into three sections. The first, consisting of succinct case studies of five countries, highlights the distinctive features of semi-authoritarianism in each and thus the special challenge each poses to policy makers. In the second section, I extrapolate from the case studies and other material the salient characteristics of semi-authoritarian regimes and seek to explain the mechanisms that make semi-authoritarianism possible. In the third section, I discuss

the weak impact on these countries of the democracy promotion strategies usually implemented by the international community, and explore possible alternatives.

The process of choosing five case-study countries from numerous candidates was driven by several criteria: First, I wanted multiple regions to be represented, to support my contention that semi-authoritarianism is not a phenomenon tied exclusively to specific areas, cultures or civilizations; second, I wanted countries that represented different types of semi-authoritarianism, to stress that there is a great deal of diversity among these regimes and thus that in the end no single democracy promotion strategy is likely to be effective everywhere. Finally, I chose countries that are not considered crucial to U.S. security or economic interests, because issues concerning democracy tend to be relegated to the background in such countries' policy-making. However, I made an exception for Egypt, because it is such a perfect example of the semi-authoritarianism of equilibrium. Based on these criteria, I chose Egypt, Azerbaijan, Venezuela, Senegal, and Croatia.

Egypt represents the model of a stable semi-authoritarian regime; the system has long been in equilibrium and comes as close to being consolidated and institutionalized as a semi-authoritarian regime can possibly be—it even weathered a succession (from Anwar Sadat to Hosni Mubarak in 1981) without changing its character. Egypt has also widely oscillated over time between the authoritarian and democratic ends of the semi-authoritarian continuum.

Azerbaijan is a much more recent example of semi-authoritarianism. The country did not become independent until 1991, and the Aliyev regime only established its hold on power in 1993. Although this regime is relatively young it is also quite consolidated, to the point where President Aliyev is seeking to develop a succession strategy that will put his own son in power. Azerbaijan represents a case of the semi-authoritarianism of decay—the overall situation in the country, the fragmentation and disarray of other political parties and of civil society, and the stagnation of the economy in all sectors except oil suggest that for the time being semi-authoritarianism may be as good as it gets in the country. As a relatively new state, Azerbaijan also provides an avenue for exploring the relationship between the process of state building and the development of a political regime.

Venezuela is also an example of the semi-authoritarianism of decay,

but quite a different one: It did not move from authoritarianism to semi-authoritarianism; rather, it regressed to semi-authoritarianism from democracy. Venezuela had a well-functioning democratic system for decades, and until the late 1980s was considered by all analysts to be a consolidated democracy, indeed, an oasis of democratic stability in the ever problematic politics of Latin America. Some democratic processes and institutions still function quite well even now, in particular the election process. President Chávez was elected and reelected in free and fair elections. Political space remains open. But the signs of democratic decay are unmistakable. The president refused to accept the power of the old legislature even for an interim period while a new constitution was being prepared. He was then slow to implement the new constitution and allow the new legislature to play its full role. He politicized the military by appointing large number of officers to government positions—the consequence of this politicization was an unsuccessful coup d'état in early 2002 and continuing divisions between pro- and anti-Chávez officers. Furthermore, the confrontation between supporters and opponents of the regime has moved out of the realm of democratic politics and into the streets. The facade of democracy is wearing perilously thin. It seems increasingly possible that the next transfer of power in the country will take place not through elections but by unconstitutional means.

The semi-authoritarianism of the Chávez regime is extremely unstable. There is no political equilibrium, and even the president claims that the country is in a transitional stage. Furthermore, the past experience with democracy is already leading to demands for a revitalization of that system. There is no doubt, however, that Venezuela is experiencing a period of deep and threatening political decay, and that a regime with strong semi-authoritarian features has emerged in that country with the initial support of a large majority of the population. This decay of an established democratic system raises important issues about the conditions that make democratization possible and democracy sustainable.

Senegal is a relatively open semi-authoritarian state—rather prematurely, some analysts consider it to be democratic. Furthermore, there is a new political dynamic in Senegal. After forty years under the rule of the same political party and of only two presidents, in 2000 the country experienced the long-awaited *alternance*, with the opposition

candidate winning the presidential election. A year later, the new president's party also won the parliamentary elections, by a very large majority. The elections, a milestone in the history of the country, nevertheless did not signal a real transformation of the Senegalese political system. The period since the *alternance* shows the difficulty of changing the politics of a country that is stagnant, even decaying, in other respects. The new regime shares the political culture of the old and operates under the same socioeconomic conditions. The country will likely settle down under a regime that is very similar to the old one, reducing the impact of elections to nothing more than the rotation of personnel within the same elite. Senegal's government was, and will likely remain, a benevolent semi-authoritarian regime, but nonetheless will continue to fall short of being democratic.

Croatia is a country in a period of dynamic transformation. It is struggling to move away from the semi-authoritarianism of the 1990s, and its experience highlights many of the problems that even a country with a willing leadership experiences in going beyond semi-authoritarianism and building a democratic system. The political will of the government that was formed in 2000 is not in doubt; furthermore, most Croatians believe that the country must join the European Union, and expect democracy to be part of the process. However, this new political will and political aspirations are developing in a context of slow economic growth and strong ethnic tensions. In essence, the transition from semi-authoritarianism is being complicated by socioeconomic conditions.

In the second section of this book I draw upon the five case studies to raise crucial issues about semi-authoritarian regimes. First, I discuss the functioning of semi-authoritarian regimes and the mechanisms they use to maintain the balances between openness and closure and between liberalization and repression that are necessary to prevent a transfer of power while maintaining a democratic facade. These issues have direct policy implications, because democracy promotion in these countries has to eliminate, or at least circumvent, the political devices that prevent power transfer. Second, in this section I also discuss the more complicated underlying issues concerning the conditions that facilitate the emergence of semi-authoritarian regimes. These are the most difficult issues for donors to address, but are also the most important.

Finally, in the third part of the study, I consider how the United States and other aid-giving nations have sought to promote democracy in the five case-study states, outline the scant efficacy and sometimes even counterproductive impact of these programs, and offer suggestions about means of addressing the challenge of semi-authoritarianism.

Notes

Notes to the Introduction

1. Rather than provide lengthy references here, I have included a short bibliography on the gray zone at the end of the book.
2. On democratic consolidation, see Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transitions and Consolidation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); and Larry Diamond, Marc Plattner, Yun-Han Chu, and Hung-Mao Tien, eds., *Consolidating the Third Wave Democracies* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).
3. Todd Eisenstadt, ed., "The Neglected Democrats: Protracted Transitions from Authoritarianism," special issue of *Democratization*, vol. 7, no. 3 (Autumn 2000). Among the examples of protracted transitions discussed in the articles that make up this special issue are Mexico, Taiwan, South Korea, Indonesia (just embarking on the process), and, in Africa, the countries of South Africa, Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia. Classifying some of these countries—where the prognosis is uncertain at best—as cases of protracted transition means prejudging an uncertain outcome.
4. David Collier and Steven Levitsky, "Democracy with Adjectives: Conceptual Innovation in Comparative Research," *World Politics*, vol. 49, no. 3 (April 1997), pp. 430–51; Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, "The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 13, no. 2 (April 2002), pp. 51–65; Nicolas van de Walle, "Africa's Range of Regimes," ibid., pp. 66–80. See also the gray zone bibliography.
5. Larry Diamond, "Thinking about Hybrid Regimes," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 13, no. 2 (April 2002), pp. 21–35.
6. Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History," *National Interest*, vol. 16, no. 3 (Summer 1989), pp. 1–18.
7. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).
8. Larry Diamond, "Is the Third Wave Over?" *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 7, no. 3 (July 1996), pp. 20–37; Larry Diamond, "Is Pakistan the (Reverse) Wave of the Future?" *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 11, no. 3 (July 2000), pp. 91–106.

9. A similar argument has been advanced by Joel S. Hellman in relation to partial free-market transitions in postcommunist countries. He shows that such partial transitions are deliberate and that winners often seek to stall the reform in a "partial reform equilibrium" because it is to their advantage to do so. See Joel S. Hellman, "Winners Take All: The Politics of Partial Reform in Postcommunist Transitions," *World Politics*, vol. 50, no. 2 (January 1998), pp. 203–34.
10. Robert Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993); Barrington Moore, Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966).
11. Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).
12. Robert Putnam, *Making Democracy Work*; and "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 6, no. 1 (January 1995), pp. 65–78.
13. A thorough analysis of the democratic transition model and the policies donors enact to promote democracy is found in Thomas Carothers, *Aiding Democracy Abroad: The Learning Curve* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999).
14. Marina Ottaway and Thomas Carothers, eds., *Funding Virtue: Civil Society Aid and Democracy Promotion* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2000).
15. Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1968), pp. 8–11 and 146–47.
16. Huntington's observation that regimes need to maintain the balance between the degree of institutionalization and the level of participation applies quite well to semi-authoritarian regimes (ibid., pp. 78–92).
17. Daniel Kaufmann and Paul Siegelbaum, "Privatization and Corruption in Transition Economies," *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 5, no. 2 (Winter 1997), pp. 419–58; Michelle Celarier, "Privatization: A Case Study in Corruption," *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 50, no. 2 (Winter 1997), pp. 531–43.
18. Sheri Berman, "Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic," *World Politics*, vol. 49, no. 3 (April 1997), pp. 401–29.
19. "Silencing Citizens in Egypt," *New York Times*, June 7, 1999, p. A22.
20. Marina Ottaway, "Social Movements, Professionalization of Reform, and Democracy in Africa," in *Funding Virtue*, pp. 77–104.

Notes to Chapter One

1. A brief overview of this period is provided in "Great Britain and Egypt, 1914–1951," information paper no. 19 (London: Royal Institute for International Affairs), 1952. See also Marius Deeb, *Party Politics in Egypt: The Wafd and Its Rivals 1919–1939* (London: Ithaca Press, 1979).
2. For an interesting analysis of Egyptian society during this period of democratic experimentation, see Anouar Abel-Malek, *Egypt: Military Society* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), part 1.