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Fresh carnations or all thorn, no rose? Nonviolent campaigns and transitions in autocracies

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Abstract

Whereas optimists see the so-called Arab Spring as similar to the revolutions of 1989, and likely to bring about democratic rule, skeptics fear that protest bringing down dictators may simply give way to new dictatorships, as in the Iranian revolution. Existing research on transitions has largely neglected the role of protest and direct action in destabilizing autocracies and promoting democracy. We argue that protest and direct action can promote transitions in autocracies, and that the mode of direct action, that is, whether violent or nonviolent, has a major impact on the prospects for autocratic survival and democracy. We present empirical results supporting our claim that nonviolent protests substantially increase the likelihood of transitions to democracy, especially under favorable international environments, while violent direct action is less effective in undermining autocracies overall, and makes transitions to new autocracies relatively more likely.

Keywords

democratization, direct action, nonviolence, protest, transitions

Introduction

The Egyptian Revolution emanating from the protests in Tahrir Square almost immediately prompted a search for appropriate historical analogies.[1] People typically seek historical analogies to help understand contemporary events and anticipate future developments (e.g. Khong, 1992). The competing historical analogies here entail very different interpretations of the future of the Egyptian Revolution as well as the broader so-called Arab Spring (Byman, 2011; Dupont & Passy, 2012; Goldstone, 2012; Lynch, 2012; Springborg, 2011a,b). Optimists see the Egyptian Revolution as a case of widespread protest bringing down a dictator, with events such as the Portuguese Revolution of Carnations, the 1989 revolutions in Eastern Europe, or the Philippine People Revolution as the most appropriate historical referents. These observers tend to see transitions to democracy as a likely outcome, in spite of the region's lack of experience with democratic rule. By contrast, skeptics argue that protests may succeed in bringing down specific dictators, but are more likely to bring about new dictatorships than transitions to democracy or liberal reform. From this perspective, the most appropriate historical analogy is the Iranian Revolution in 1979. The Shah was challenged by a broad coalition calling for political reform through largely nonviolent protest, yet the fall of the regime was followed by an autocratic Islamic

[1] Consider, for example, the 9 February 2011 BBC Newsnight discussion of the Egyptian revolution in comparative perspective (http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00yjxt6).

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republic rather than liberal democracy. Our aim here is not to debate the appropriate historical analogies for the Arab Spring, but to bring to bear theory and historical empirical evidence and examine more systematically how protest and direct action may undermine dictatorships and whether particular types are more likely to bring about transitions to democracy.

Research on transitions has generally paid little attention to popular protest and direct action. We argue that although both violent and nonviolent direct action can undermine autocracies, nonviolent conflict is much more likely to lead to subsequent transitions to democracy than violent conflict. Our article is the first to simultaneously consider different types of protests and direct action and to distinguish between transitions to democracy and new autocracies as plausible alternatives when dictators fall. Our article also speaks to the broader question of whether transitions to democracy display regularities. Some scholars argue that we at best can aspire to study what influences the stability of autocratic regimes, and hold that it is essentially random whether subsequent transitions are to democracy or new autocracies (Przeworski & Limongi, 1997; Przeworski et al., 2000). We disagree, and argue that transitions to democracy are much likely under specific triggers, such as nonviolent direct action, and favorable transnational contexts, such as a greater number of democratic neighbors.

We first review existing research on transitions, highlighting the relative neglect of conflict and popular direct action. We then turn to how direct action can destabilize autocratic regimes, how nonviolent direct action differs from violent conflict, and why the former is more likely to precede transitions to democracy while autocracies ousted under violence are more likely to give way to new autocracies. We examine empirically the effects of predominantly nonviolent and violent campaigns on transitions to democracy and new autocracies over the period 1900–2004. Consistent with our claims we find that transitions to democracy are more likely than irregular transitions to a new autocracy after nonviolent direct action. The likelihood of transitions to democracy after nonviolent dissent is especially large when more neighboring states are democratic. By contrast, violent dissent makes transitions to new autocracies relatively more likely.

Protest and democratization

With some notable exceptions that we return to later (e.g. Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Karatnycky & Ackerman, 2005; Schock, 2005; Teorell, 2010; Ulfelder, 2005), protest and direct action have received only limited attention in research on democratization and autocratic stability. Macro-level explanations emphasize structural social and economic factors such as income or education as underlying social requisites of democracy (see e.g. Vanhanen, 1990 for a review). This perspective generally pays less attention to agency or events that promote transitions (e.g. Rustow, 1970). Micro-level explanations of transitions explicitly highlight the role of actors, often emphasizing their relative autonomy from social and economic conditions. However, the first studies tended to emphasize *transition from above*, or how democracy emerges from elite pacts, drawing on experiences from Latin America (e.g. O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986; Przeworski, 1991).

Other researchers challenge the purely elite driven perspective, where non-elite actors are mere passive bystanders in transitions, and have highlighted the prominent role of actors such as labor unions in facilitating transitions to democracy (Collier, 1999). This underscores the possibility of *transition from below*, where popular collective action undermines authoritarian regimes and is a cause of democratization rather than merely a symptom of weakening autocracies. Many researchers argue that democracy should be seen as a response to conflict, and that actors agree to democratic procedures when they face plausible threats of revolts, or no individual actor can expect to impose its rule on others (e.g. Acemoglu & Robinson, 2006; Gleditsch & Ward, 2006; Olson, 1993; Przeworski, 1988; Wantchekon, 2004; Wood, 2001). The literature on power-sharing institutions highlights democratization as a possible solution to settling civil wars. Indeed such institutions could be endogenous to conflict in the sense that they are more likely to be accepted when parties are unable to prevail militarily (Wucherpfennig, 2011).

The literature on conflict and social movements provides rich theoretical and empirical accounts of when we are likely to see popular mobilization. Grievance theories highlight how deprivation motivates protest or political violence, and several studies point to political and ethnic exclusion as particularly important motives in autocratic regimes (e.g. Gurr, 1970; Horowitz, 1985; Opp, 1988; Tucker, 2007). The social movements literature emphasizes how resources and opportunity structures facilitate collective action (e.g. Tilly, 1978; McAdam, 1982; Tarrow, 1994; Meyer, 2004, for a review). However, the focus here is primarily on the origins of conflict or mobilization rather the outcomes of such campaigns or their implications for regime change.

Direct action from below can come in many different types, and there are strong reasons to expect that the specific strategies or type of direct action used can influence outcomes. Democracy could in principle come about through violent revolts overthrowing dictators. Costa

Rica is an often cited case where democracy is set up in the aftermath of a violent civil war in 1948. In El Salvador in the 1990s, the civil war settlement included agreements on democratic reforms and elections under UN auspices (Wood, 2001). However, the defeat of autocratic governments in civil war has tended to bring about new autocratic regimes (as for example in Ethiopia in 1991), and the most significant challenges to autocratic governments weakened by conflict are often from aspiring autocrats (e.g. Bormann & Gleditsch, 2012). The connection between violent conflict and democratization is at best weak, and a prior history of peace and absence of territorial conflict seems to provide better prospects for democracy (see e.g. Gibler, 2012; Gleditsch, 2002; Gleditsch & Ward, 2006).

However, the social movements literature highlights the much wider repertoire of tactics in contentious politics beyond violent conflict. Nonviolent direct action can seriously challenge autocratic governments, either through unseating a government directly or inspiring challengers to stage coups, and may help promote transitions to democracy. There are many studies of individual cases where contentious direct action seems to have destabilized dictatorships and promoted democratization (e.g. Bermeo, 1997; Bratton & Van de Walle, 1992; Collier & Mahoney, 1997; Schock, 2005; Slater, 2009; Wood, 2001). Karatnycky & Ackerman (2005) evaluate the role of violence and direct action in 67 countries with transitions to democracy over the period 1973–2004. They find that nonviolent direct action was influential in many transitions, and that countries where nonviolent action preceded transitions were more likely to remain democratic in 2004. However, they consider only cases with transitions, and hence cannot evaluate the extent of direct action outside transitions.

Some large-N studies have looked at the effects of direct action events on transitions or regime survival, using data on riots, strikes, and antigovernment demonstrations from the Cross-National Time-Series (CNTS) Data Archive (Banks, 1979). Ulfelder (2005) finds that certain events (notably strikes and antigovernment demonstrations) can promote the breakdown of autocratic regimes, in particular single-party and military regimes. Teorell (2010) finds that antigovernment demonstrations can promote changes toward greater democracy, while riots and strikes do not seem to have a positive effect. Noting that the estimated effect of antigovernment demonstrations exceeds the effect of riots, Teorell (2010: 116) concludes that 'there is a strong force from below, when peaceful'. However, these studies are constrained by the crude nature of the CNTS data. The data lack transparency, are only available as annual counts, and do not allow identifying the specific actors or events involved. The coding criteria and distinctions between the different events are rather elusive. It is unclear how the typologies are derived and how much violence would be required to classify a given event as a violent riot rather than a demonstration. For example, although the protests in Tahrir square were largely nonviolent, there arguably were elements of violence, possibly due to infiltration and provocation tactics. Finally, the data are proprietary and restricted to licensed users.

Chenoweth & Stephan (2008, 2011) consider whether nonviolent and violent campaigns differ in their success of achieving their objectives, i.e. regime change, anti-occupation, and secession. Using a new dataset on nonviolent and violent campaigns (NAVCO, which we will return to later), they find that countries are more likely to have a higher level of democracy or be democratic after nonviolent campaigns. However, since Chenoweth & Stephan (2008, 2011) look only at cases with campaigns, it is not possible to compare the effect of nonviolent campaigns with the likelihood of democratization absent campaigns, and to what extent this exceeds the secular trend towards greater democracy over the period. Moreover, because they only focus on degree of democracy they cannot consider to what extent campaigns increase the risk of transitions to new dictatorships, as critics highlight when raising the specter of the Iranian revolution. Goemans, Gleditsch & Chiozza (2009) note that irregular transitions to new autocracies have been more common than transitions to democracy; they identify 246 irregular autocratic transitions and only 116 transitions from autocracy to democracy over the period 1875–2004.

Beyond democratization, the relative effectiveness of nonviolent campaigns remains contested. Shaykhutdinov (2010) argues that nonviolent protests are more likely to produce autonomy arrangements. By contrast, Svensson & Lindgren (2011) find that nonviolent campaigns in non-democracies that aim for secession or territorial autonomy have tended to be less successful than campaigns seeking regime change. They attribute this to the problems of maintaining legitimacy when there are significant horizontal or group-based cleavages between states and dissidents. This suggests more generally that success hinges both on the relationship between dissident and state supporters and on the relative openness or resistance to possible compromise outcomes.

In sum, previous research strongly suggests that protest can destabilize authoritarian regimes and make transitions to democracy more likely, but has a number of limitations. Existing research has studied either authoritarian

survival or transitions to democracy, but has never considered transitions to democracy jointly with the possibility of alternating autocratic regimes. Factors affecting the breakdown of autocratic regimes do not necessarily translate into a greater likelihood of democratization, since a new autocratic regime can also emerge after the fall of a dictatorship. Looking only at transitions that result in changes in the degree of democracy leaves us unable to assess the effects of dissent on the stability of dictatorships, and whether this also influences whether subsequent regimes will be autocratic or democratic. Przeworski & Limongi (1997) famously argued that transitions to democracy were inherently random and that we only see systematic variation in the longevity of specific autocratic regimes. Other researchers contend that various conditions have demonstrably different effects on the likelihood of transitions to democracy and alternation between autocracies (e.g. Gleditsch & Ward, 2006; Wright & Escribà-Folch, 2012). We expand below on why we expect nonviolent direct action to have divergent effects and strengthen the prospects for democracy over new autocracies after the fall of a regime.

Many existing comparative analyses examine only successful cases where we see transitions to democracy following direct action, with no comparisons to cases of campaigns in autocracies where we do not see transitions, or the transition rate in cases without protests or direct action. This raises the usual perils of causal inference under selection on the dependent variable, if selecting on transitions (or an independent variable, if restricted to cases with campaigns). Moreover, case studies often highlight the idiosyncrasies of specific transitions, with less emphasis on general theory or mechanisms. Although all transitions on some level are unique, we believe that it is more helpful to see if specific transitions can be subsumed under more general theory or mechanisms, where specific factors may be considered plausible substitutes with similar consequences.

Conflict, direct action, violence, and regime change

In this section we detail a theory of conflict and regime change, highlighting how protest may undermine dictatorships, and why we believe that the distinction between violent and nonviolent direct action matters for the likelihood of transitions to democracy and the prospects for new autocratic regimes when dictators fall. We expand on the mechanisms through which violent and nonviolent direct action can undermine autocratic regimes as well as the likely transition trajectories following direct action.[2] To anticipate, we argue that dissent in general tends to make dictatorships less stable. However, the prospects for transitions to democracy and new autocracies vary systematically depending on the predominant means used by a campaign. We expect nonviolent direct action to be generally more effective in undermining dictatorships than violent conflict, due to its ability to mobilize larger numbers of people and decrease barriers to participation, increasing the prospects for tactical innovation, as well as its effects on the prospects for successful repression and elite defection. Furthermore, we expect nonviolent direct action to be more likely to lead to subsequent transitions to democracy rather than new autocratic regimes, due to its effects on dispersing power and increasing the incentives for compromise and concessions relative to violent conflict. Finally, we link the incentives for democratic institutions to a country's regional context.

Studying transitions is complicated by the many ways in which political change can occur and the difficulties in assessing ex ante the potentially influential actors and events. As discussed above, democracy can emerge from below, as in the fall of Marcos in the Philippines confronted by popular protest. However, transitions may also come from above, through elites introducing reform, as when President Alia in Albania allowed competitive elections in 1991. Such moves may be based on anticipated popular pressure, even if this has not yet materialized (e.g. Acemoglu & Robinson, 2006). Creating typologies of different transition paths can lead to classification trees with as many branches as there are actual transitions. This may help reflect variation in how transitions can occur, but is less helpful for general theory and understanding.

We instead prefer to see if the different trajectories in transitions can be subsumed under more parsimonious general concepts and mechanisms. We follow Gleditsch & Ward (2006), who propose a common framework for studying regime transitions focusing on power, mobilization, and the evaluations of key actors. If politics entails conflict over influence, democracy can be seen as a compromise likely to emerge when no single actor can prevail over others, establishing political rights and power-sharing methods to prevent the costs of unmitigated

[2] We look only at the consequences of observed conflict for transitions. We do not try to account for how actors manage to achieve collective action or choose specific violent or nonviolent tactics. Our focus is limited to autocratic regimes, where transitions to democracy can occur, and we do not consider how violent or nonviolent direct action may affect the stability of democracies.

conflict. Existing theories of democratization can from this perspective be interpreted in terms of how features influence the relative power and resources of actors as well as their beliefs. For example, power tends to be more dispersed in more developed economies with greater specialization. Democracy is more likely to be accepted if democratic rule is seen as less threatening to powerful interests. Taking a broader view of preferences, evaluations of democracy and actors' preferences for particular political arrangements are likely to evolve with domestic and international experiences. For example, democracy is easier to establish if many actually believe that democratic rule can lead to favorable economic outcomes, democracies are more likely to receive external support or approval from other states, or autocracy becomes relatively less common and ostracized (Gleditsch & Ward, 2006; Mueller, 1992, 1999).

From this perspective, conflict and direct action can influence the likelihood of transitions in two ways. First, manifest conflict reveals the relative power of actors and highlights inconsistencies that make a current regime seems less tenable, for example a relative lack of support and an opposition capable of mobilizing large-scale protest. If actors excluded from political power can actually command substantial resources they can challenge the regime directly. However, dissidents are rarely able to directly seize power, as most ruling regimes have a significant resource advantage and benefit from control over the repressive apparatus of the state.

A second way that manifest conflict can undermine regimes is through its effects on the regime's power base. Regimes that fall are rarely 'conquered' by opposition forces, but typically undermined as core supporters defect or challenge the current executive rulers. For example, East German General Secretary Honecker admired the Chinese approach to the protest on Tiananmen Square, and was clearly willing to use massive violent force against protests in 1989. However, Honecker was ultimately ousted by members of the Politburo, who for various reasons were less optimistic about the likely success of such repressive strategies and concerned about the consequences of a bloodbath.[3] Iran in 1979 provides another case of a regime collapsing, following the refusal of the security apparatus to obey orders to repress demonstrators (see also Francisco, 2005, on defections by state security agents in other revolutions).

Thus, beyond defeating governments, mobilization through direct action seeks to extract concessions from governments or promote reform through imposing various forms of governance costs (Lake, 1999; Sharp, 1973). Conflicts pitting non-state actors against governments are often highly asymmetric, as the non-state dissidents have little prospect of victory in the short run. However, they may be able to undermine a government in the long run through imposing high governance costs and a greater willingness to endure sustained costs. Sharp (1973) proposes a theory of direct political action based on 'withdrawal of dissent', where all governments ultimately are sensitive to widespread non-participation and refusals to obey orders. Initial protest can serve to highlight the extent of dissatisfaction with a regime and encourage greater participation and defections.

Violent and nonviolent conflict

So far we have only considered conflict of interests between governments and non-state actors rather than the specific means dissidents may use. Despite the focus on violence in much of existing conflict research, there is no inherent link between conflict and violence (see e.g. Boulding, 1963; Most & Starr, 1989). An incompatibility, or conflict of interest between actors, can also motivate nonviolent direct action, such as demonstrations or boycotts/non-cooperation campaigns. It is helpful to distinguish between routine political behavior, that is, actions sanctioned by the government such as voting, and non-routine direct action, where individuals either do something not sanctioned by the authorities or refuse to do something they are expected or ordered to do (e.g. Bond, 1988; Sharp, 1973). In autocracies, the options for routine dissent tend to be extremely limited, so almost all political opposition is likely to involve some form of direct action (Tilly, 2007). Direct action can be violent, as in civil wars and terrorism, or non-state actors may use nonviolent methods such as demonstrations, boycotts, or non-cooperation campaigns to impose costs or unseat the government.[4] We refer to Cunningham (2013) and Asal et al. (2013) for systematic analyses on features affecting nonviolent and violent campaigns.

[3] The hardline Minster of State Security Mielke reportedly told Honnecker, 'Erich, we cannot beat up hundreds of thousands of people' and joined in the efforts to unseat him (Przeworski, 1991: 64).

[4] Note that nonviolence here refers to the strategies or tactics of dissidents rather than the government. In particular, violent repression by the regime does not make a direct action campaign violent unless dissidents also resort violence.

The above discussion suggests that nonviolent and violent protest could be possible substitutes. There clearly are cases where groups shift between violent and nonviolent strategies (Sandler, Tschirhart & Cauley, 1983; Shellman, Levey & Young, 2013; Dudouet, 2013). Organizations such as the ANC or the IRA provide prominent examples, substituting nonviolent methods for violent actions when the government was willing to engage in negotiations. However, there tend to be notable differences between largely violent movements and nonviolent movements, and we believe the violence versus nonviolence distinction is central for the implications for autocratic stability and transitions to democracy. We organize our discussion around how violent and nonviolent direct action is linked to systematic variation in key features such as (a) actor constellations in conflicts, (b) the ability of the state to repress, (c) elite divisions and concessions, and (d) the distribution of power and preferences among actors.

Nonviolent conflict and actor constellations

Although violent and nonviolent direct action in principle could be substitutes, there are in practice likely to be important differences between the two. Existing research shows that civil wars tend to be fought in the periphery and often involve groups that are ethnically distinct from the groups dominating the political center (Buhaug & Gates, 2002; Buhaug, Cederman & Rød, 2008).[5] Nonviolent campaigns are often urban phenomena, which recruit disproportionately from students, individuals from the middle classes, or included social segments. Insurgencies are often small and do not require a large recruitment base. By contrast, nonviolent direct action against a government is usually highly dependent on numbers, as individual decisions to participate in nonviolent actions hinge on expectations that others will participate, as well as the social incentives for participation (Kuran, 1989; Opp, Voss & Gern, 1995). This suggests that predominantly violent and nonviolent tactics tend to be used by different groups and often entail very different recruitment bases and opportunities for growth. Many argue that nonviolent movements are more likely to attract broad participation due to greater opportunities for mobilization and larger capacity for tactical innovation (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2008, 2011; Schock, 2005). If there is power in numbers (Di Nardo, 1985), and a group can mobilize sufficient numbers, nonviolent protest can have a comparative advantage over violent protest. The so-called color revolutions, for example, 'mobilize[d] ... up to a million participants in peaceful protests' (Beissinger, 2007: 272; see also Tucker, 2007).

Nonviolent conflict and the cost of repression

Greater numbers can help demonstrate dissatisfaction in ways that can contribute to undermining a regime or promoting concessions (Lohmann, 1994). Although protest is often met with government repression, the effects of repression are ambiguous and in many cases lead to escalation rather than deterrence, especially if repression is seen as excessive and alienates people from the government (Davenport, 2007; Gartner & Regan, 1996; Lichbach, 1987; Martin, 2007). Nonviolent protest can increase the costs of government repression.

Repression against large numbers of protesters will by itself entail significant logistical challenges. Moreover, it is generally easier for a government to order or justify repression against ethnically distinct rebels or groups with extreme demands than normal citizens with moderate demands (Gartner & Regan, 1996). Police and soldiers are more likely to identify with dissidents that cannot easily be labeled as distinct or extreme. Poe (2004) highlights how decisions to repress hinge on perceptions about regime capacity and threats. Leaders may order repression, but state security agents may refuse to repress if they consider orders illegitimate, unrelated to plausible threat, or counterproductive as they can generate support for the opposition (Lichbach, 1987; Martin, 2007; Nepstad, 2013). By contrast, violence makes it easier for leaders to justify violence to preserve state security against credible threats.

Nonviolent conflict, elite factionalization, and concessions

As discussed above, protest and direct action can undermine a regime from within by encouraging elite defection and possible concessions. States usually encompass a diverse set of actors, and nonviolent direct action is likely to highlight divisions within a regime over how to respond to political challenges. Such divisions can facilitate negotiations with dissidents as well as agreements on transitions to democracy. A regime faced with mass mobilization and possible defection may be inclined to step down or open for competitive elections, possibly in exchange for concessions on issues such

[5] Conflict emanating from a failed military coup can be a notable exception of urban civil wars. Such civil wars are also unusual in involving non-state actors from the political center (i.e. elements from the security forces) rather than the periphery.

amnesties and preserving military independence. Moreover, autocratic elites in dominant parties can often remain relevant after transitions to democracy, especially if other parties are poorly organized (Geddes, 2003: 50). As such, nonviolent protest should be more likely to encourage autocratic elites to accept democratic reform.

Nonviolent conflict and the distribution of power and preferences of actors

Nonviolent and violent direct action are likely to have different consequences for the distribution of power among actors. Dissent can undermine dictatorial regimes, but nonviolent direct action is more likely to disperse power among actors in ways that will favor democratization. Many point to how violent conflict leads to centralization and polarization. Government repression usually imposes restrictions on political activities and decreases the space for opposition. Violence tends to strengthen hierarchy and decrease diversity on the dissident side, as nonconformists are purged or marginalized. By contrast, nonviolent movements tend to be broader based than violent movements and are often decentralized, loose coalitions of diverse actors. If nonviolent direct action tends to disperse power, individual actors become less likely to dominate, and some form of power sharing or coalition becomes more likely within movements. By contrast, as violent conflict tends to centralize power, autocratic rule becomes a more feasible option for privileged actors. Beyond the effects on power alone, nonviolent direct action should be more likely to foster compromise and preferences for democratic institutions. Nonviolent direct action can be perceived as less threatening to regime supporters and more likely to encourage defection and support for democratic reform. Moreover, if nonviolent movements are more diverse than violent movements, they may be more likely to be in favor of, or committed to, democratic practices.

Finally, the power of actors and preferences for institutions can be shaped by transnational context and factors outside an individual country. Previous research has showed that transitions to democracy are much more likely when a state has a higher proportion of democratic neighbors (Bormann & Gleditsch, 2012; Gleditsch & Ward, 2006). A number of mechanisms have been suggested for why this may be the case. One the one hand, forces seeking to promote democratic change in autocracies may have greater access to resources from neighboring countries. The *Otpor!* (Resistance!) campaign against Milosevic in Serbia, for instance, was able to convene meetings and raise resources in neighboring countries (e.g. Cohen, 2000). Moreover, the costs to leaders for ruling in a non-democratic manner are likely to increase when democracy becomes relatively more common among neighbors and comparison or reference countries. For example, although Paraguay was not ostracized during most of Stroesser's 44-year strongly autocratic rule, it became increasingly isolated as other countries in the region become democratic, and a 1989 coup eventually led to a process of democratic reform. In sum, greater linkages to more democratic states can both make nonviolent direct action more likely and provide more incentives for elites to support democratic reform when an autocratic regime falls.

Empirical analysis

We have outlined a number of possible mechanisms that might explain how dissent can undermine autocratic regimes, and why nonviolent direct action should be more likely to promote transitions to democracy than violent conflict, as well as why violence is more likely to promote new autocracies when dictators fall. The specific mechanisms that we have discussed are generally difficult to evaluate directly in a comparative analysis. Although analytical narratives can be helpful for assessing to what extent specific mechanisms may have applied in individual regime crises and transitions (e.g. Tilly, 2007), the different mechanisms can be substitutes or complements, and each need not apply in a specific transition. Moreover, looking only at transitions leads to the problems of selecting on the dependent variable, and it is difficult to systematically assess counterfactuals or 'how unlikely' particular mechanisms would be in cases where transitions did not occur (e.g. Tetlock & Belkin, 1996). However, we can consider other observable implications of our arguments, in particular whether direct action increases the prospects for transitions in autocracies, and whether nonviolent and violent direct action have different effects on the relative likelihood of transitions to democracies and new autocracies. We do this through a country-year analysis, including all cases where states are autocratic in the previous year, with measures of both transitions from autocratic regimes to democracy and transitions from one autocratic regime or coalition to another autocratic regime, as well as measures of violent and nonviolent campaigns. Based on the available data, our analysis covers the period 1900–2004.

With respect to the dependent variable, an autocratic regime at time t–1 can give rise to three possible observable outcomes at time t. First, a specific regime may survive from t–1 to t. Second, we may have a transition to

democracy, where an autocratic regime at t–1 is replaced by democratic institutions at t. Third, we could have an irregular transition where an autocratic regime at t–1 is replaced by a new autocratic regime at t rather than a democracy.

We identify transitions from autocracy to democracy using the Polity data, and consider states democracies if they have a Polity score above 6, in line with many other studies (e.g. Gleditsch & Ward, 2006). We look at the institutions in place at the end of the year.[6] Identifying changes between distinct autocratic regimes is less straightforward. This requires an operational definition of what constitutes a distinct regime, which is often defined in ways similar to Justice Potter Stewart's (in)famous definition of pornography. We focus on the manner of entry and exit of individual leaders to identify changes in the political coalitions that hold power in a country, using the Archigos data (see Goemans, Gleditsch & Chiozza, 2009). Leader changes can be voluntary or occur according to prevailing practices, for example when an outgoing president hands over power to an appointed successor, which entails a continuation of the same regime by our criteria. However, changes can also occur in an irregular manner, where an outgoing leader is ousted involuntarily and a new leader seizes power in contravention of existing rules and practices, as for example in a coup.[7] To provide some illustrative examples, Bashar al-Assad assuming power in Syria upon the death of his father Hafez al-Assad does not constitute a change in coalition or a transition to a new autocratic regime. By contrast, the 1979 Iranian revolution entails an irregular transition, with a change in political coalitions from the Shah to the Mullahs.

As for our main independent variables, we use the NAVCO (Non-Violent and Violent Campaigns and Outcomes) data developed by Chenoweth & Stephan (2008, 2011; see also Chenoweth & Lewis, 2013). The NAVCO data identify campaigns, defined as 'a series of observable, continuous, purposive mass tactics or events in pursuit of a political objective, directed against the state', with start and end dates, and classify whether these are primarily nonviolent or violent.[8] Nonviolent campaigns are identified from existing lists and an expert survey, and violent campaigns from existing data on wars. We create two binary indicators reflecting whether a country has a violent or nonviolent campaign at time t. We have 199 country-years with ongoing nonviolent campaigns and 786 country-years with violent campaigns in our data.[9]

We include a series of control variables plausibly associated with both the likelihood of violent and nonviolent protests and the prospects for transitions to democracy and autocratic instability. First, a great deal of research examines how income affects autocratic stability and the prospects for democracy (Kennedy, 2010; Przeworski et al., 2000). Civil wars tend to be much more common in poor countries (see e.g. Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Fearon & Laitin, 2003), and there is some evidence suggesting that nonviolent campaigns may be more likely in wealthier societies (Chenoweth & Lewis, 2013). As such, GDP per capita income is clearly a relevant control variable. We include logged GDP per capita figures, using data from Gleditsch (2002), and for the pre-1948 observations, predicted GDP per capita values based on energy consumption per capita data from the Correlates of War project as well as a time trend.

Second, the age of a regime is likely to affect its stability and possibly also the risk of both violent and nonviolent direct action (see Bormann & Gleditsch, 2012; Gleditsch & Ruggeri, 2010). As such, we control for the log of the length of time that a specific coalition has remained in power as control variable, counting from either the last transition or the first observation in the data, whichever is the more recent.

[6] As such, observations where a transition to democracy follows an irregular transition earlier in the year are considered transitions to democracy since the institutions in place at the end of the year are democratic.

[7] More specifically, we code irregular transitions if one leader exits power irregularly and another leader enters in an irregular fashion within a six-month interval. We exclude partially irregular leader transitions, where a particular leader is ousted in an irregular manner, but a designated second-in-command such as a vice-president subsequently assumes power, thus continuing the same regime.

[8] See the online appendix at http://www.ericachenoweth.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/WCRWAppendix-1.pdf. Note that the NAVCO data identify distinct campaigns, and one country may have multiple ongoing campaigns. For example, Indonesia in 1998 has four recorded campaigns: violent secessionist campaigns in Ache and West Papua, a nonviolent autonomy campaign in East Timor, and a nonviolent anti-Suharto campaign.

[9] The NAVCO data identify the predominant mode over the course of a campaign, and we are unable to consider the effects of specific events in campaigns (violent campaigns often encompass significant nonviolent events). The interactive relationship between protest and repression is interesting in its own right, but existing global data are too limited to assess to what extent government repression may modify the effects of campaigns on transitions (the CNTS negative sanctions data, for example, are available only for 1958–82, excluding the third wave of democratization).

Table I. Multinomial logit regression estimates for transitions to democracy and transitions to new autocracies

	Transition to democracy			*Transition to new autocracy*		
Variables	*Coef.*	*SE*	*Z*	*Coef.*	*SE*	*Z*
Intercept	−4.346**	0.334	−13.018	−2.978**	0.302	−9.866
Nonviolent campaign	1.648**	0.280	5.876	0.615	0.475	1.295
Violent campaign	0.103	0.278	0.369	0.411†	0.264	1.560
GDP pc, logged	0.001**	0.027	0.049	−0.033	0.034	−0.991
Prop. democ. neighb.	3.134**	0.362	8.664	−0.356	0.506	−0.703
Time at regime, logged	−0.259**	0.096	−2.707	−0.353**	0.092	−3.821

N = 5,557. Log likelihood = –908.23 (df = 12). LR χ^2 = 63.53 (df = 10).
** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$ (two-tailed); † $p < 0.1$ (one-tailed).

Finally, regional context is an important control variable for estimating the impact of nonviolent campaigns on transitions, both through its impact on potential support for campaigns and taking into account the background conditions that may influence the prospects for democratization when autocratic regimes fall. We consider the proportion of neighboring states that are democracies within 500 km of a state's borders, using the Polity > 6 threshold and minimum distance data calculated from the Cshapes project (see Weidmann et al., 2010) post-1945 and the Gleditsch & Ward (2001) data for pre-1946.

Empirical results

Table I displays the estimates of a multinomial logit model of the likelihood of transitions conditional on campaigns and the other variables discussed above. The leftmost columns provide coefficient estimates indicating how the specific covariates influence the log odds for transitions to democracy over autocratic survival (the reference category), while the rightmost columns indicate the effects on the log odds of transitions to a new autocratic regime over the survival of the same autocratic regime. The large and statistically significant positive coefficient for nonviolent campaigns in the left column of Table I provides strong support for our claim that nonviolent campaigns make transitions to democracy much more likely than autocratic survival. For transitions to a new autocracy the coefficient is also positive, but much smaller than the corresponding effect on the log odds of transitions to democracy and not statistically significant. For violent campaigns we find a positive coefficient for transitions to new autocracies, although the statistical significance is somewhat marginal (the coefficient comes close to significance at the 0.05 level in a one-tailed test, as $\Pr(Z > 1.56) = 0.059$). By contrast, the coefficient for violent campaigns on transitions to democracy is close to 0 and far from statistically significant. These results are consistent with our claim that nonviolent direct action is more effective than violent conflict in undermining autocracies. Although both forms of transitions become more likely with direct action, nonviolent campaigns make transitions to democracy relatively more likely while transitions to new autocracies are relatively more likely following violence.[10]

Table I also provides strong evidence that transitions to democracy become much more likely when autocracies have a high share of democratic neighbors, while transitions to new autocracies become less likely. Beyond controlling for the possible influence of differences in regional environments and transnational factors on the likelihood of nonviolent direct action, this result underscores how the overall effects of a nonviolent campaign on transitions differ dramatically depending on the regional context. More specifically, the baseline probability of transitions to democracy is much higher when an autocracy is surrounded by predominantly democratic countries. Hence, the combined net effect of a nonviolent campaign and a more democratic context entails

[10] Since campaigns are defined independently, countries may have both violent and nonviolent campaigns ongoing at the same time. This occurs in 14 countries in our sample, for example Argentina in 1977, where the violent ERP/Montoneros (ending in 1977) and the nonviolent pro-democracy movement (continuing until 1981) overlap. The model specification in Table I is additive, and the implied effect of having both a violent and a nonviolent campaign is simply the sum of the two coefficients. This may not be fully realistic, and we have considered a multiplicative interaction between the two terms. This provides some evidence of a declining effect when both types occur simultaneously; however, the standard errors are very large, given the low number of cases where this applies, and the multiplicative term does not notably improve the overall model fit.

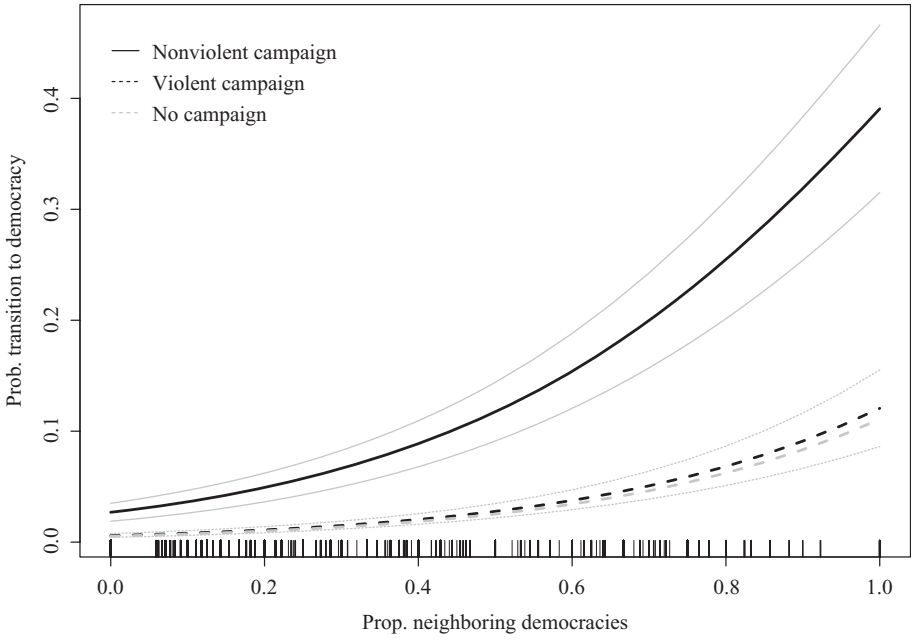

Figure 1. Probabilities of transition to democracy by campaign type and proportion of neighboring democracies, based on Table I estimates, all other values held at the median

substantially higher prospects for democratization after the fall of a dictator.[11]

With regards to the other control variables, the results in Table I suggest that GDP per capita may marginally reduce the odds of transition to new autocracies, but although the sign is negative the coefficient does not reach statistical significance at conventional levels. The negative coefficient for time at regime indicates a strong consolidation effect for specific autocratic regimes, where regimes that have been in power a short time are much more likely to fall. However, consolidation does not have much of a distinct effect on the prospects for transitions to democracy and new autocracies, consistent with the claims of Przeworski et al. (2000).

It is difficult to interpret multinomial logit coefficients directly, since the coefficients indicate the effect of a covariate x on the log odds of a specific outcome k over the baseline outcome. However, the effect of a covariate on the overall probability of an outcome ultimately depends on how the covariate affects the other possible outcomes. Indeed, that an outcome k becomes more likely over the reference outcome with higher values of a covariate x does not necessarily imply that outcome k becomes absolutely more likely, as x may increase the likelihood of other outcomes even more. Hence, to provide some illustration of the implied predicted probabilities from the results in Table I, we plot in Figure 1 the predicted probabilities of transitions to democracy following a nonviolent campaign (solid black line), a violent campaign (dashed black line), and a case without any campaign (dashed grey line), by changes in the proportion of neighboring countries that are democracies, for observation profiles with all the other covariates held at their median values. Confidence intervals for the predictions are displayed by thin grey lines.[12] We add a rug plot with the observed data points in the estimation sample on the horizontal axis to

[11] The effects of campaigns may arguably not be constant in the log odds or differ by transnational conditions beyond their impact on the baseline odds. Adding a multiplicative interactive term between nonviolent campaigns and the proportion of democratic neighbors yields an insignificant coefficient. However, multiplicative terms may not be the most appropriate formal test of interaction in a non-linear model, where the specific marginal effects on probabilities will depend on other variables through the baseline odds (see Berry, DeMeritt & Esarey, 2010).

[12] These confidence intervals are based on the approach suggested by Fox & Andersen (2006), using the delta method to derive standard errors confidence for the predicted log odds of each outcome at specific values of the covariates and then converting these confidence intervals to the probability scale. To avoid clutter, the lower confidence interval indicates the upper and lower bound for the (indistinguishable) predictions for the scenarios with violent campaigns and without campaigns.

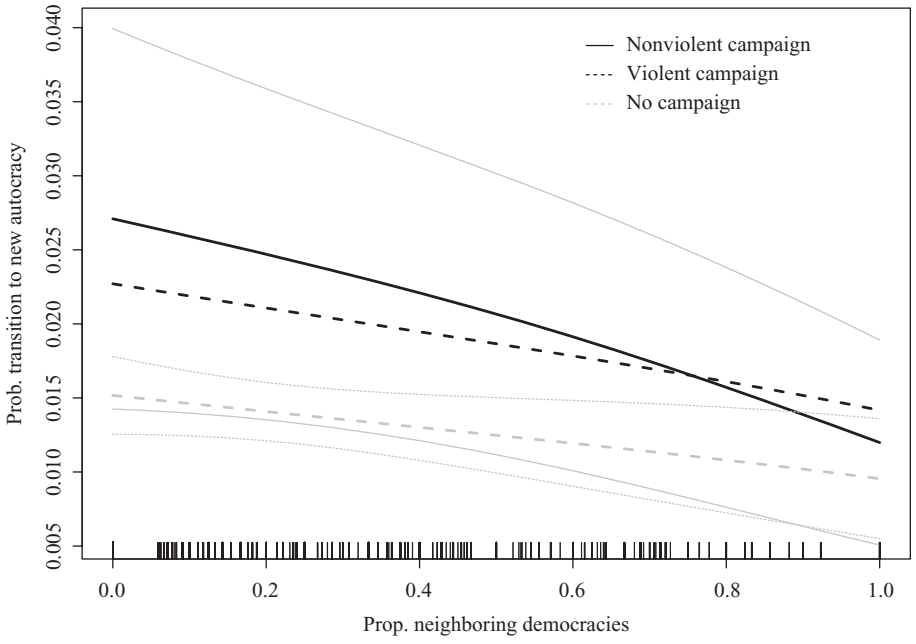

Figure 2. Probabilities of transition to a new autocracy by campaign type and proportion of neighboring democracies, based on Table I estimates, all other values held at the median

illustrate the (wide) distribution in the proportion of neighboring democracies. First, we note from Figure 1 that the probabilities of a transition to democracy are always considerably higher following a nonviolent campaign. The predicted probability of a transition to democracy in a year becomes substantial when a nonviolent campaign takes place in a situation where an autocratic state is located among predominantly democratic neighbors, exceeding 0.25 when 75% of its neighbors are democracies. By contrast, the predicted probability of a transition to democracy following a violent campaign is in essence indistinguishable from the likelihood in the absence of a campaign. When a country is surrounded by other democracies the predicted probabilities of transitions to democracy are much higher after violent campaigns, but this is mainly due to the effects of external context rather than the campaign itself, and the predicted probabilities under the violent campaign scenario are only marginally higher than under the no campaign scenario.

In Figure 2 we plot the probabilities of a transition to a new autocracy by campaign scenarios and regional context. Consistent with our notion that all protest reduces autocratic stability, Figure 2 indicates that both violent and nonviolent campaigns increase the risk of a transition to a new autocracy compared with a case without a campaign. Unlike the case for transitions to democracy we now see a substantial difference for violent campaigns compared with a non-campaign scenario. Although the confidence interval for the likelihood of irregular transitions under violent campaigns is large, the confidence interval for the no-campaign scenario is always below the predicted value for the violent campaign scenario. Figure 2 provides some support for the pessimistic view cited at the outset of our article, as nonviolent campaigns also increase the risk that an autocracy will be replaced by a new autocracy. Indeed, although the difference is not statistically significant, the predicted probability of a transition to a new autocracy is actually marginally higher for nonviolent campaigns than violent campaigns in highly autocratic environments. Nonviolent direct action is clearly not by itself a guarantee for bringing about democracy if dictators fall. However, looking at how the likelihood of the different outcomes changes with the proportion of democratic neighbors indicates the important modifying role of transnational context. As seen in Figure 1, transitions to democracy become much more likely when a larger number of neighbors are democratic. The probability of a transition to a new autocracy also declines rapidly with the proportion of democratic states in Figure 2. Although the standard errors are very large, our best estimate for the predicted probability of a transition to a new autocracy following a nonviolent campaign declines relatively more quickly with the regional context than the likelihood of an irregular autocratic

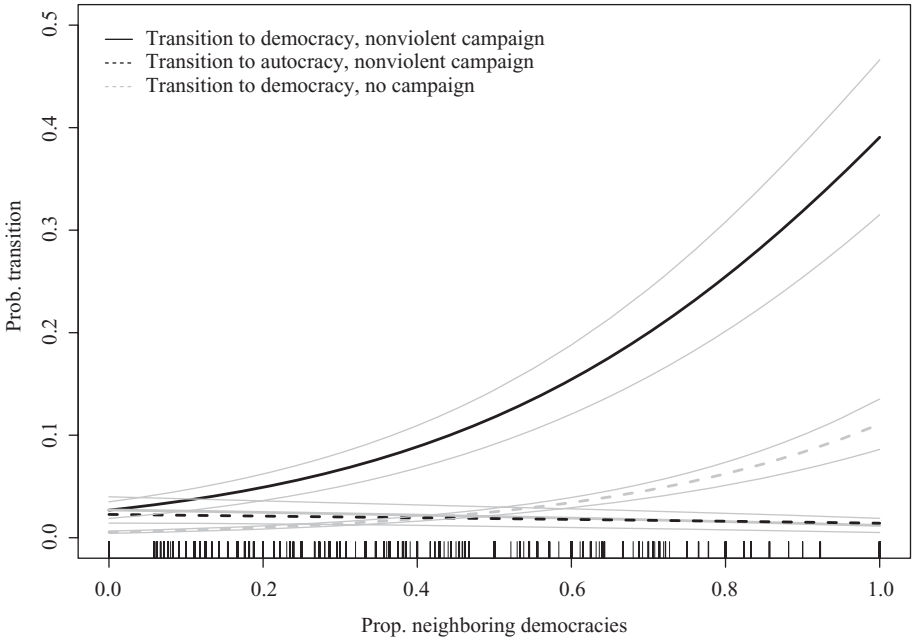

Figure 3. Probabilities of distinct transitions by campaign type and proportion of neighboring democracies, based on Table I estimates, all other values held at the median

transition after a violent campaign, and falls below the latter when the proportion of democratic neighboring states exceeds 0.8.

Figure 3 combines the predicted probabilities for transitions to democracy and transitions to new autocracies by regional context under various scenarios on the same plot. The predicted probability of a transition to a new autocracy following a nonviolent campaign is actually slightly above the predicted probability of a transition to a democracy if a state has no democratic neighbors at all, although the confidence intervals for the two predicted values overlap in this region. However, the predicted probabilities for the two outcomes diverge substantially even for relatively modest proportions of democratic neighbors, and the likelihood of transition to democracy is significantly higher when the proportion of neighboring states is above 0.2. This is consistent with our argument that direct action can play an important role in undermining autocracies, and that nonviolent direct action is more likely to bring about a transition to democracy than a transition to a new autocracy. Moreover, the increase in the likelihood of transitions to democracy is not just driven by differences in the regional context. Comparing the solid black line for transitions to democracy after a nonviolent campaign with the dashed grey line for a no-campaign scenario demonstrates that nonviolent campaigns have a substantial effect on the predicted probabilities.

Discussion and conclusion

We have argued that direct action can play an important role in undermining authoritarian rule and that nonviolent action in particular enhances the prospects for democratization. Our empirical results provide strong support for these claims. However, although our results are consistent with what we would observe under the mechanisms that we have outlined for why nonviolent direct action promotes transition to democracy, they provide only a test of the observable implications rather than the mechanisms themselves. Our research so far has looked only at the observed regime outcomes and the presence or absence of campaigns in a binary fashion. In future research we hope to be able to focus on the specific actors involved in direct action and the specific events in order to examine how these plausibly influence changes in the relative power of different political forces and their preferences, as well as the incentives for elites to withdraw, make concessions, or introduce reforms. Research into the opportunities for collective action and protest potential will also help us understand when actors are likely to consider different types of campaigns, and how mobilization and tactics are influenced by expectations about other actors and the prospects for success.

We started this article by referring to the divergent predictions for the prospects for democracy in the

Middle East in the wake of the Arab Spring, highlighting the contrast between the highly optimistic assessments of the likelihood of future democratic reform by some observers and the extreme pessimism expressed by others. In Egypt, for example, elite defection constrained the ability to repress dissent and eventually forced Mubarak to hand over power to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces. A tug-of-war followed between various actors and different institutions with competing claims to authority, with competitive – if restricted – elections, and it remains to be seen whether the country ultimately will become democratic.[13] We do not profess to have any particular competence on the Middle East; the future of the region can be influenced by a number of issues, and the outcome of many potentially influential events remains unsettled as of the time of writing, including the civil war in Syria. However, we strongly believe that the theoretical arguments and empirical analysis presented here can improve on the battle of contending analogies and provide insights to help evaluate the prospects for democracy and stability in the region. Our analysis provides some support for the cautious optimism for greater democracy in countries that have seen large-scale nonviolent dissent, such as Egypt and Tunisia, consistent with the views expressed by Goldstone (2012). Although there is no automatic connection between nonviolent direct action and democratization, our results suggest that democratization has been substantially more likely to occur in the aftermath of nonviolent campaigns. Violent conflicts, such as that currently occurring in Syria, have historically been consistently less successful in ousting autocratic rulers, and even when dissidents have succeeded in overthrowing government through violence (as in Libya), the historical record suggests that new autocracies have been relatively more likely to follow.

Our analysis also suggests that the transnational context in which direct action occurs shapes the likely outcomes and reinforces the finding from previous research that transitions to democracy are much more likely when autocracies are surrounded by a high proportion of democracies. This would at a first glance suggest that transitions to democracy might be especially difficult in the Middle East, since the region is so consistently authoritarian and democracies have been so thin on the ground. However, the evidence for emulation and learning across countries in the direct action that the region has seen so far during the Arab Spring also suggests that future political change in the region is likely to be highly interconnected (e.g. Lynch, 2012). If a large country such as Egypt can successfully democratize after the revolution, this may both help to inspire direct action and help to foster transitions to democracy in other states.

[13] At the time of writing, the latest Freedom House data (2011) rate Egypt as 'not free' (with a value of 6 political rights and 5 for civil liberties), while the Polity data have a 2010 score of –3.

Replication data

The dataset and do-files for the empirical analysis in this article can be found at http://www.prio.no/jpr/datasets.

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