

Midterm Essay:

Critical Analysis of Fukuyama

Francis Fukuyama's *Political Order and Political Decay* claims that countries in which democracy preceded modern state building have strong, impersonal and accountable political institutions compared to those that inherited modern states from absolutist times. Although state building after the advent of democracy is possible, it often requires the new social actors and political leadership to mobilize. A critical variable in this political process, Fukuyama maintains, is the size of the middle class and its support for democratic leadership over authoritarian regimes. This essay, first, explains Fukuyama's theoretical perspective on the role of the middle class for political development and in consolidating democracy. Second, the essay exemplifies what is problematic about this perspective by presenting the cases of Thailand and Egypt, which both experienced military overthrows of elected governments with the support of the middle classes despite previous support for a democratic opening. Fukuyama's argument about the central role of the middle class for democratization is critiqued because key variables such as urban-rural class disparities and the impact of populist narratives are underspecified in his framework.

Before we begin, we must define a few key terms. The first distinction important to our discussion is between establishing democracy versus consolidating democracy. While the former refers to the process by which a democracy starts, democratic consolidation involves how new democracies mature such that in the absence of external shocks, they are unlikely to changeover to authoritarianism. According to Fukuyama, a sizeable middle class is neither a sufficient nor a necessary cause to bring about liberal democracies, but it is essential in securing their

continuation. Second, we must clearly define the notion of the middle class: while economists emphasize a society's average wealth in its definition, statistics about consumption or income render comparisons between middle classes from different nations vague and unclear. Absolute measures are also inadequate because individuals perceive class status relative to other socioeconomic classes. On the contrary, sociologists contend that the most important markers of middle-class status are occupation, level of education and ownership of assets. Fukuyama favors the latter definition for two crucial reasons: a) protection of assets is a priority for a politically active middle class seeking to secure its interests and b) educated middle-classes are more likely to value individual freedom and values of democratic accountability (Fukuyama, 2014, p. 440).

Fukuyama's interpretation of political development posits that the ability to consolidate a stable liberal democracy is higher in countries that have large middle classes, in contrast to ones in which a relatively small middle class exists between a wealthy elite and a mass of poor people (Fukuyama, 2014, p. 441). Fukuyama does concede that "the middle classes are not inevitably supporters of democracy" (Fukuyama, 2014, p. 443). However, the important indicator in his framework is size. When the middle class still constitutes a minority (20-30%) of the population, political participation may lead to unsustainable demands for redistribution, incentivizing the middle class to align with authoritarian rulers who better protect property rights. A pertinent example for this phenomenon was Thailand's populist politician Thaksin Shinawatra who organized a mass political party with the goal of supporting rural Thais. The dwindling middle class which supported democratic processes in the early 1990s turned against Thaksin and braced a military coup that forced him from power in 2006 (Fukuyama, 2014, p. 442). However, reconstituted iterations of Thaksin's party (People's Power Party in 2006 and Pheu Thai in 2011) regained power for short periods once the military stepped back out of government (Jarach &

Speece, 2014). Ultimately, in 2014, the Thai military successfully pushed out an elected government, with widespread middle-class support for these military moves. Fukuyama asserts that the central reason behind the dissolution of democracy in Thailand was the small size of its middle class.

Fukuyama goes on to state that since the size of the middle class relative to the poor usually increases with greater wealth, democracy becomes more stable at higher levels of per capita income. The only obstruction to this inevitable process is stark levels of income inequality. He posits that in Latin American countries or China, the greatest threat to social stability is precisely rapid increases in income inequality levels (Fukuyama, 2014, p. 443). We will challenge this point using the example of Thailand.

The Bangkok middle class supported democracy and specifically demanded a liberal state which ensured political rights that protected from the abuse of power by the elites. However, in 2005, the middle class corroborated on a new movement called the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) and started protests to overthrow Thaksin, primarily considered a champion of the poor, on the grounds that he was taking over capital ("Why isn't Thailand's middle class fond of democracy?," 2017). While on the surface, the middle class and civil society claimed to be guarding democracy, at a deeper level, however, it was the fear that Thaksin and his assertive populist policies would empower marginalized rural citizens that explained why the middle class rejected his kind of democracy ("Why isn't Thailand's middle-class fond of democracy?," 2017).

This unexpected outcome sprung from how the middle class found themselves to be the structural minority in Thailand once democracy was institutionalized. Bangkok's middle class ignored the rise of a rural middle class demanding full participation in social and political life, which it dismissed as 'the poor getting greedy'... ("Bangkok Election Reinforces Class Divide,"

n.d.) Eventually, the Peau Thai party's rule was equated with unsustainable welfare expenses, which would eventually lead to bankruptcy. The middle class broadly felt that corrupt politicians were using their taxes to "buy votes" from the "greedy poor" and were robbing the middle class (Bello & Focus, 2014). Two pieces of evidence support this argument: firstly, while it is true that between 2001-2016, combined household surveys, fiscal data, and national accounts indicate that income inequality was very high in Thailand, Gini coefficients, in reality, decreased by 0.04, reaching 0.60 in 2016 (Jenmana, 2018). Second, the bottom half of Thai populations has grown faster than the average since 2001, while the middle class has grown at a rate below the national average (Jenmana, 2018). By focusing on class conflicts through the lens of preference for democracy, we can see how these structural changes have spurred a strong reaction against democracy from the middle class.

In addition, Fukuyama's assumption that sizeable middle classes always consolidate democracies breaks down in Egypt, where the middle class of Cairo supported the army's restoration of a military dictatorship after the first wave of the Arab Spring (Ignatieff, 2014). In fact, when the uprising against Hosni Mubarak's government began in 2011, the middle class in Egypt constituted roughly 44% of the population (Shokr, n.d.). This large segment of the Egyptian population revolted mainly due to social and economic grievances resulting from the unfair distribution of wealth in preceding periods (Shokr, n.d.). Although the country's economic and social conditions have remained poor under current President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's authoritarian regime (Hamzawy, 2017), a social narrative constructed by the new government has exploited nationalistic populism to ignore the realities of repression and manufacture consent from its middle class. Generals have convinced middle-class populations that all opposition is to blame for the growing crises in Egypt (Hamzawy, 2017). Using religious

and nationalistic rhetoric to paint its rules as a moral paragon, they have induced the belief that a citizen must support the government and obey the generals (Hamzawy, 2017). This approach allows Egypt's politicians to claim that their policies are aligned with national interests and national security while engaging in a climate of undemocratic practices such as weakening viable opposition movements and civic activism and using intelligence and security services to detain tens of thousands of people (Hessler, 2016).

As illustrated in the above examples, the concept of middle class as an agent of democratic consolidation is under challenge, with Egypt's authoritarian regime contradicting the notion that sizeable middle classes ensure democratic stability and Thailand's preference against democracy resulting from resentment of an urban middle class as opposed to rises in income inequality. Given these criticisms, the essay calls for a fundamental overhaul of the democratization debate in political science that should consider more refined arguments with broader explanatory power for political systems around the world.

HC/LO Appendix:

#practicaltheory: I have demonstrated my mastery by clearly breaking down Fukuyama's argument to its constituent independent variables and their causal relationship to democratic consolidation, namely a) a *sizeable middle class* consolidates democracy and b) the only obstruction to this process are high *levels of income inequality*. In doing so, I was able to pick the specific examples of Egypt and Thailand to falsify each theory.

#poliscimethods: I have used two qualitative case studies to falsify Fukuyama's theories about the middle class and democratic consolidation. Note that I have explicitly stated the crucial similarity between both cases which is relevant to the discussion, as well as the difference in terms of the specific portion of Fukuyama's argument its political trajectory falsifies. I have also referred to quantitative arguments drawn from sources such as the Thai National Statistics Office (NSO), Thai Ministry of Finance, and Gini index to measure income inequality and test the hypothesis that high level of income inequality impedes democratic consolidation in Thailand. Through a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods from multiple credible sources, I believe I have accounted for the most important variables (internally valid) and by using at least two examples of political systems from different regions with separate political backgrounds, demonstrated that my criticisms are externally valid. By exploring the core historical and structural elements which contributed to political outcomes in each country, I have indirectly demonstrated path dependence in political systems.

#democratization: I have demonstrated my mastery over this LO by clarifying early in the essay what distinguishes democracy and its consolidation and what is relevant to my essay and to the

argument from Fukuyama that I critique. In addition, I specified an operational definition of the middle class which is relevant to political development, with clear justification for why the sociological definition is preferred over the economic.

#structuralism: I used structuralism to dispute Fukuyama's argument that high levels of income inequality impede democratic consolidation. In specific, I used quantitative research results drawn from sources such as the Thai National Statistics Office (NSO), Thai Ministry of Finance, and Gini index to show that a) income inequality in Thailand has actually decreased in between 2001-2016 and b) the bottom half of Thai populations have grown at a faster rate than the urban middle class, providing greater evidence that rural-urban class conflicts was more central to the democratic instability of Thailand which culminated in the military overthrow of an elected government.

#constructivism: I used constructivism in the context of Egypt to show how a middle class inflicted by economic and social grievances can be persuaded to give their unwavering support to an authoritarian regime. Crafting a specific interpretation of current situations which places full blame on past political parties, as well as using religious and nationalist rhetoric to elevate the perception of Sisi's power, I have demonstrated that the state can use its political apparatus to construct ideas and identities that have a lasting effect on political development, to the extent that regularities in size of middle class and democratic consolidation no longer apply.

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