

Brazilian democratic transition: elements for the analysis of a possible transition in China

We conquered democracy again on our own way, through struggles and irreparable human sacrifices, but also through national pacts and agreements, which were in large extent translated into the 1988 Constitution. Apart from respecting and honoring those who bravely fought for democracy, facing the illegal truculence of the state, I recognize and appreciate the political pacts that led to democratization.
President Dilma Rousseff¹

1. Introduction

Advocates of the impracticality of a democratic regime in China often point to the fact that in such a big country with very unique characteristics only a strong centralized regime can maintain harmony. The creation of a harmonious society is not only one of Hu Jintao's administration most important guiding principles, as stated in its Scientific Development Concept, but it also stems from an ancient Chinese understanding that emphasizes the collective over the individual and praises respect for hierarchy.

However, the same critics also seem to ignore the fact that democracy is not a totally unknown concept in China or for societies based on Confucianism. China experienced a democratic period in the 20th century, which was not perfect but yet introduced some of the elements that characterize the current understanding of democracy. Apart from that, the Republic of China (ROC) in Taiwan democratized its political system in the 1980s and is considered now a society living under a democratic system.

India shares some characteristics with China, such as having a big and ethnically diverse population spread out in a huge territory. Democracy seems to work there, even though it has some flaws. However, some may argue that India does not share some of those elements that jeopardize the rise of democracy in China. Then, the suggestion is that the combination of the features of a huge country with the elements inherent to China creates a fatal impossibility for democracy to flourish.

The transition in Russia is often cited as an example of why democracy is sometimes not desirable. The problematic Russian democracy would seem to create

¹ Part of President Dilma Rousseff's speech delivered on May 16, 2012, during the ceremony of creation of a "Truth Commission" to investigate human rights violations committed by past authoritarian regimes in Brazil. Original in Portuguese: "*Nós reconquistamos a democracia a nossa maneira, por meio de lutas e de sacrifícios humanos irreparáveis, mas também por meio de pactos e acordos nacionais, muitos deles traduzidos na Constituição de 1988. Assim como respeito e reverencio os que lutaram pela democracia enfrentando bravamente a truculência ilegal do Estado, e nunca deixarei de enaltecer esses lutadores e lutadoras, também reconheço e valorizo pactos políticos que nos levaram à redemocratização*". Available at: <http://m.noticias.uol.com.br/politica/2012/05/16/leia-a-integra-do-discurso-de-dilma-na-comissao-da-verdade.htm>

more instabilities than benefits, hindering its capacity of defending its own national interests. That, therefore, would be something to be avoided by China.

Then, this paper intends to address the matter of a possible transition in China looking at past experiences from a different perspective, which is the example of Brazil. Brazil shares some common features with China – and many differences as well –, but it is not often regarded as a possible model for a democratic transition in Asia.

Brazil has roughly the same territorial size as China, and it also has a big population. Even though its 200 million inhabitants are dwarfed by China's massive population of more than 1.2 billion, Brazil is the 5th most populated country in the world. The two countries are at least regionally relevant powers and also fast-developing economies. They are said to be among the countries that will shape the future international order; one argument in favor of that would be the growing importance that the BRICS is gaining in multilateral discussions, for example. In terms of past democratic experiences, neither of them has a long tradition.

The Brazilian democracy is quite recent and also has some flaws, but looking at the transition the way it happened in Brazil might highlight some features that could be used in an analysis of a possible Chinese transition to democracy. Could a similar process be conducted in China?

2. Democracy and democratic transition

This section presents a theoretical framework with some key concepts of democracy and democratic transition that are used in the article.

One of the assumptions is that democracy is desirable over other forms of political systems, since it allows people to be free, express themselves freely and take part indirectly in decisions through the delegation of power to the representatives who are by them chosen. There are various definitions of democracy, such as the minimalist (Schumpeter, 1976) which focuses on the existence of elections. However, such approach is not appropriate for analyzing how effective democracy might be in a country. Venezuela is an example: even though President Hugo Chávez was elected by popular vote, there have been violations of freedom of press, and anti-government individuals and organizations are oppressed.

This paper considers the fundamental elements of democracy as the ones present in Dahl's (1971) concept of Polyarchy, which are: freedom to form and join organizations, freedom of expression, right to vote, eligibility for public office, right of political leaders to compete for support, alternative sources of information, and free and fair elections. It is not a perfect model of political organization, since problems such as irrational voters or an oppression by the majority may exist, but yet it is the one that best promotes human rights, people's freedom and freedom of speech and, hence, accountability.

O'Donnel and Schmitter (1986) define transition as the “interval between one political regime and another”. According to the authors, a transition starts with the collapse of an authoritarian regime and the installation of a more democratic one, the return of a new authoritarian regime or the emergence of a revolutionary alternative. Then, during the transition period there would be many uncertainties, while the rules of the game are not yet defined.

Mainwaring (1989) highlights the difference between political liberalization and transition to democracy: “political liberalization implies an easing of repression and extension of civil liberties within an authoritarian regime, whereas a transition to democracy implies a change of regimes”. The difference is crucial, since one implies a change within the regime while the other focuses on a change of regime. Regime here has a broader definition; apart from the government, it also includes other forms of governance that might exist, such as institutions (Mainwaring, 1989).

Dankwart Rustow (1970) developed a model of transition to democracy with different phases. Rustow's required background condition for the rise of the democracy is quite simple: national unity, where citizens know “which political community they belong to”. The first phase or “Preparatory Phase” is where there are inconclusive struggles between polarized social forces. During the “Decision Phase”, there is an acceptance of diversity in the national unity by the political leaders, which involves a certain degree of compromise. In the last phase, “Habituation Phase”, the political agreement from the previous phase gains legitimacy and acceptance by the society. More important than pre-conditions in Rustow's model is the agreement achieved by different actors over the political debates.

That vision is different from authors such as Huntington (1991), for whom the existence of certain conditions would facilitate the rise of democracy in a society. The lack of a democratic tradition, for example, would hinder the prospects for democracy. Regarding societies based on Confucianism, Huntington claims that they tend to be antidemocratic, since they prioritize the group over the individual, defend patriarchal traditions and do not require the inexistence of constraints above the state, such as a legal framework.

Finally, it is worth distinguishing different forms in which there might a transition: defeat or collapse of the regime, transition – where there is a change of regimes but the formal framework is not broken – and extrication, in which there is such change and the rules are broken (Mainwaring, 1989 *apud* Valenzuela, 1992).

As we analyze democracy in Brazil, it will be possible to conclude that the transition – understood as a change of regime in which the legal framework is not broken – was achieved in accordance with Rustow's model of phases. Brazil's current system, a Polyarchy, contrasts with the Chinese one, which probably will go through some process of liberalization before it achieves a full transition to democracy.

3. Democracy in Brazil

Brazil is not a country with a long democratic tradition, but yet it managed to build a democratic regime in the 1980s after facing various difficult challenges for centuries. Even though it is not perfect, the Brazilian democratic regime is an example in defense of the argument that democracy can be achieved even when circumstances are not favorable. The President of the United States Barack Obama and the United Nations Development Program recently praised the Brazilian transition to democracy as a model to be followed.²

The country only became independent from Portugal in 1822, after centuries of colonial rule and suppression of any movements towards the construction of an independent nation. After 1822, however, Brazil saw the rise of a monarchic rule that lasted until 1889. That was a very rare phenomenon in the history of the Americas, with parallels only found in the Mexican brief monarchic experiences of the 19th century (1821-1823 and 1864-1867). Even though the Brazilian Imperial rule had some liberalization periods, with the relaxation of press freedom for instance, it was a regime that was not democratic and which also tolerated widespread slavery.

In 1889, Brazil became a Republic, which was predominantly dominated by oligarchies. It would take more than 40 years until the first direct and unrestricted popular vote would elect members for the Parliament in 1930. Seven years later, however, a dictatorial regime began and lasted until 1945, in what is known as the *Estado Novo* (or “New State”) period.

Only in 1946 Brazil would have what is now known as its first real democratic rule. All the rights were reestablished after the end of the *Estado Novo*, including the right to establish political parties and the freedom of expression. However, in 1964, a civil-military coup put an end to that brief democratic period.

3.1 The most recent dictatorship (1964-1985)

The last of the Presidents in the previous period, João Goulart, frightened the Brazilian oligarchic elites as well as other sectors of the society, especially the military, with his left-wing tendencies and sympathy towards communism. After President Jânio Quadros resigned, vice-President João Goulart was to assume the presidency. So he did as soon as he returned to Brazil after visiting the Communist China.

² UNDP, 2012. Egyptians learn from transition to democracy and social-economic advances in Brazil. Available at: <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/presscenter/articles/2012/04/19/egyptians-learn-from-transition-to-democracy-and-social-economic-advances-in-brazil/> And Bacon Jr., Perry & Forero, Juan. Obama praises Brazil as Model of Democracy. The Washington Post, March 21, 2011. Available at: http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/obama-visits-brazil-with-libya-on-his-mind/2011/03/20/ABZrNb1_story.html

That was the Cold War period, and João Goulart's promises of education, tax, electoral and especially land reforms created a feeling of uneasiness among those who saw the possibility of drastic changes rising. In terms of foreign policy, Goulart refused to join the American-led sanctions against Cuba, and Brazil strengthened its ties with the Communist bloc, increasing the tension that involved the opposition between the two ideological sides of the Cold War. Brazil was the second biggest country in the Americas; its turning into a Communist country was obviously not favorable for the United States or the rest of the Western bloc.

The coup that overthrew Goulart was not exclusively military, but rather military-led. There were many sectors that opposed his administration. The United States had prepared a contingency plan that was to assure the success of the coup.³ Then, on March 31, 1964, the Brazilian authoritarian regime started its rule, which would last until 1985.

The two decades of authoritarian rule in Brazil were a cruel period in the country's history. Many were killed, imprisoned or had to seek exile abroad. Anderle and Girón (1997) highlight that the regime, in spite of being ruthless, had legitimacy to govern. According to them, for the period between 1964 and 1974, such legitimacy was founded on the defense of national security and of "civil values", on geopolitical reasons in the context of Cold War and on the promotion of economic development, which pleased a great part of the Brazilian population and the country's closest allies.

The regime allowed a very limited degree of political freedom with the creation of a two-party system. Arena (*Aliança Renovadora Nacional*) was the supporting party, while MDB (*Movimento Democrático Brasileiro*) was the party where the moderate opposition groups could find a way to have political expression. Left-wing forces and radical groups were outlawed and persecuted by the regime. The two-party system created a *façade* of political democracy, which increased the legitimacy of the regime; the real influence of elections and of the MDB itself was negligible (Horváth, 1997).

The liberalization of the regime started in the mid-70s. During the two decades of authoritarian regime, many opposition groups were active, including the ones that used armed actions in some occasions. President Ernesto Geisel announced a "slow,

³ Recently released cables show that the American involvement was not necessary, but the country was prepared to take action. "A cable from the US ambassador the first day of the coup quotes Brazilian General Humberto Castelo Branco, the leader of the uprising, 'He has told us that he doesn't need our help'. The next day a U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff memo summed up the situation: "Package of arms and ammunition continue to be held at McGuire [U.S. Air Force Base] pending Ambassador Gordon's determination of whether Brazilian military forces or state police forces will require early U.S. support. MercoPress, April 12th, 2012. The 1964 'Made in Brazil' coup and US contingency support-plan if the plot stalled. Available at: <http://en.mercopress.com/2012/04/15/the-1964-made-in-brazil-coup-and-us-contingency-support-plan-if-the-plot-stalled>

gradual and safe” liberalization,⁴ indicating the regime was unilaterally willing to promote reforms. The reasons behind that are summarized by Horváth (1997).

First of all, the argument of national defense was no longer appealing in the 70s, since most of the opposition or guerrilla groups had already weakened or been annihilated. Second, the promise of economic development also failed. After the so-called “Brazilian miracle” years, a period of high-economic growth that ended with the oil shocks, the popular support as well as the business class support to the regime declined. Thirdly, the international environment also changed. That was the period of *détente* between the two superpowers, so the relative importance of Brazil inside the Western bloc declined; the Brazilian regime was now criticized by the international community for its violations of human rights. Apart from that, the MDB victory in parliamentary elections in 1974 presented a new challenge for the authoritarian regime.

It is worth noticing that the liberalization promoted by the regime was more derived from the perceived inevitability of its collapse rather than from any concern over respect for human rights or democracy. As noticed by Horváth (1997) the transition process was long enough to allow the authorities to organize and control the change in a top-down way. Then, the military force would safely leave the power without losing prestige. That is the essence of the negotiation transition (*transition négociée*) which is believed to have happened in Brazil (Oliveira, 1984 *apud* Horváth, 1997). It involved negotiations not with the whole society, but with those who had political power.

Moisés (1995) adds that the terror campaigns promoted by the regime made some political actors change their behavior and also their perception about democracy, which started to be considered more beneficial than the authoritarian regime itself. Moreover, the limited and partially competitive election system allowed debates in the society, giving room for the perception that the authoritarian regime was not legitimate to govern the country. As a result, dissidence grew among the elites. Finally, two decades of economic and social modernization caused big social changes, making the society more urban and industrial and also created greater demands and expectations.

A series of surveys conducted by Rochon and Mitchell (1987, 1989 & 1993 *apud* Moisés, 1995) indicate that there actually was a drastic change in the support from the public to the participation of the military in politics. The figures dropped from 79% in 1972, to 52% in 1982 and to 30% in 1993. People in favor of direct elections rose from 57% in 1972 to 82% in 1982, right before the democratization.

Another factor that has to be considered in the Brazilian transition to democracy is the so-called Snowball effect. The cases of successful democracies in the region might have been an incentive for other countries to also democratize, including Brazil. Moisés (1995) mentions that the expansion of the communication industry improved

⁴ Distensão in Portuguese, which can also be translated as *détente*.

connectivity and hence the simultaneous diffusion of information. Right before Brazil did it, some other countries had already democratized in Latin America and in Europe (Spain and Portugal), which might have served as a model.

All the factors mentioned above, as well as the moves of the Catholic Church and of European countries and the United States are the causes identified by Huntington (1991) behind the Third Wave of Democratization, where the Brazilian transition can be categorized.

3.2 The transition

In 1985 a non-military President was elected by indirect vote, putting an end to the Brazilian dictatorship. The first direct Presidential election was carried out in 1989, when Fernando Collor was elected. The first years of consolidation of democracy were unstable in various realms. The 80s are known as a “lost decade” for the Brazilian economy, which was plagued with hyperinflation and low economic growth. It was also a politically unstable period; President Collor suffered an impeachment amid corruption scandals.

Since the election of Fernando Henrique Cardoso in 1994 the political realm has gained stability. Freedom House classifies now Brazil as a free country. It is an electoral democracy with free and fair elections. Constitution guarantees the freedom of expression and there are no restrictions on internet access, freedom of association or right to strike.⁵ However, the organization also highlights that corruption, criminal violence and discrimination are still widespread problems in the country. Freedom of expression is hindered, not by actions of the state, but by criminal organizations that often target journalists.

The distinctiveness of the transition in Brazil lies on the fact that the process took a long time and was top-down managed, which did not include negotiations with the opposition groups (as in Hungary or Poland) or a social pact (as in Spain) neither. It was not an abrupt change triggered by the collapse of the regime neither, as in most of Latin America (Horváth, 1997). There seemed to be a transition that followed Rustow’s Phases model. During the Brazilian Decision Phase, however, the debate was not as inclusive as proposed by the author.

Problems exist, but Brazil seems to be willing to continue on the democracy path of Dahl’s Poliarchy, solving the remaining issues. Human rights violators from the Dictatorship period were never punished criminally due to an amnesty law from 1979 that is still valid. However, recently the country created a “Truth Commission” that will investigate all the crimes perpetrated by the state in previous authoritarian regimes.

⁵ <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2011/brazil>

Brazil went through a unique transition process. Some anomalies, such as the fact that human rights violators were never punished are some of the caveats. However, such a consensual and agreed process guaranteed a smooth transition and allowed the society to work on the consolidation of democracy, an important step towards democratization. It is a model that did not treat justice and fairness in a quite appropriate way, but it did emphasize harmony. If China is ever to face a dilemma on which model to follow when seeking to liberalize, the harmonious and agreed transition model of Brazil might be a real option.

4. A transition in China?

This part discusses whether China has the potential to eventually democratize and, if it does, whether the Brazilian experience could be broadly repeated in the Asian nation.

China is currently not a Poliarchy or not even a democracy according to any definition of the term. Rather, its ruling regime shares some characteristics with the one that ruled Brazil between 1964 and 1985: lack of freedom of expression, control of information, emphasis on nationalism, on national security and on economic development, suppression of anti-government individuals or organizations. The elites and the bureaucracy have connections with the ruling forces as well as they did in Brazil. Some noticeable differences are the duration of the regimes and the inexistence of a dual party system in China, which in Brazil fulfilled only symbolic purposes but eventually became a way for the expression of dissatisfaction. The Brazilian authoritarian rule was much shorter, and there seem to be no prospects for the end of the Chinese one.

However, many authors argue that China will eventually have to at least go through a process of liberalization if not a complete transition to democracy. Rising inequality, social unrest, unemployment, urbanization and environmental degradation will pose a great challenge to the CCP, which will need to liberalize in order to provide transparency, accountability and good conditions for economic growth (Saich, 2011).

Schubert (2012) adds other factors that are present in today's China and that might lead to the demise of the authoritarian one-party rule: "political decentralization, the rise of social movements, world market integration and, last but not least, China's quest for international respect".

After understanding that a transition might happen, the question then is whether democracy can fit in the Chinese cultural and historical backgrounds. Similarly to Brazil, China does not have a long democratic tradition, but the Latin American country did not need it to consolidate a democratic regime. Then, there is no reason to argue that it is a necessary pre-condition. The Chinese cultural uniqueness, however, is arguable.

Some say that Confucianism and its emphasis on values such as the group mentality and the respect for hierarchy would hinder the development of elements which are important for a democratic regime (Huntington, 1991). Authors such as Anne Cheng (2012) argue that

“a consensus is forming today that while the ‘Confucian/Asian values’ defended by authoritarian governments are the product of ideological manipulation, they may or even must eventually be taken seriously when it comes to adapting these regimes to the democratic model”.

On the other hand, Pierre-Étienne Will (2012) summarizes the “positive evaluation of the Confucian philosophy”, which assumes that such group of beliefs does foster democracy: the Confucian values would not only explain the economic successes of Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan and China, but they should also

“enable China to invent a participative, communitarian, sui generis democracy and evolve an approach to human rights distinct from the individualistic and competitive conceptions of the West, which is in any case deep in the throws of a moral crisis and looking for new models”.

Refuting any possibility of a successful democracy in China based on cultural values means ignoring an academic debate that is not over.

Saich (2011) argues that “future scenarios for China’s development depend to a large extent on the capacity for the economy to keep developing smoothly”. The beginning of the liberalization period in the Brazilian authoritarian regime coincided with the end of the so-called Brazilian Miracle period. The trigger for that was the fact that the regime perceived the poor prospects for the continuation of its rule, so it tried to handle the transition which was thought to be inevitable. In China, if such a perception does not exist, then not necessarily a similar pattern might be repeated.

The CCP could then lead a process of liberalization if either moderates gain more preponderance inside the party and work for democracy or if the Central Party feels compelled to do so, similarly to what happened in Brazil. Gordon G. Chang (2011) foresees a collapse of the regime in the short term due to the growing instabilities in the country, and also sees the growth of social unrests in the country as a sign of the coming process.

However, surveys conducted by Chu, Diamond, Nathan & Shin (2008) show that in 2002, 17.1% of the people surveyed labeled the expected change from the current to a future regime as a “struggle for democracy”, 43.2% as a “development of democracy” and 23.3% as a “consolidation of democracy”. 72.3% of the surveyed answered that democracy is desirable for China, whereas 67% did so for democracy being suitable. Concerning the perceptions of the current regime, 59.3% said that China is somewhat democratic and 24.5% very democratic, which were higher than the figures in the Philippines (47.3% and 22.5%) and similar to the ones in Taiwan (60.9% and 22.7%). In other words, the majority of the surveyed people seem to desire democracy, whatever they consider it to be, but they do not feel that the CCP is obstructing it.

Findings by Yun-han Chu (2011) show that the general level of regime support in China is high. When asked if the current political system was the best for the country, around 70% of the people “somewhat agree”, whereas around 10% of them “strongly agree”. The interesting thing about it is that apparently the regime receives high support from people at all ages and with different educational backgrounds.

Nonetheless, Kai He and Huiyun Feng (2008) argue that some present conditions might be the causes of transition that will soon produce democracy in China, such as the conflict between different factions inside the CCP and economic development. A sign of that would be the current intra-party democracy that Hu and Wen would be promoting. They suggest a model in which it could take form, the Complex Democratization Model.

This complex democratic model suggests a top-down type of democratic transition and is a refined negotiation-pact transition model, also highlighting the important but secondary role of economic development, political culture, and the middle class in the process of democratic transition.

Such model is similar to the one that took place in Brazil. However, it is important to notice that, differently from the Brazilian experience, it was not the military that took over the power in China. The CCP is more representative than that, so it is natural that its interests are more diverse as well. The military intended to keep a favorable position in the Brazilian society after the democratization, but it does not seem plausible that the CCP would try to do something similar. It is not a constitutive part of the society as the military. In other words, after a transition, the CCP might fall into inexistence while the military could not in Brazil.

5. Conclusion

Brazil needed centuries to have a democratic regime. Overcoming pessimistic prospects of the inadaptability of democracy in a multi-ethnic and colonized country, which was plagued with authoritarian regimes, Brazil seems to have shown that pre-conditions for democracy are a very limited idea. The country democratized in a smooth and agreed way in the 1980s. In recent years, the transparency and stability that a consolidated democratic regime provides are part of the reasons why the Brazilian economy is showing some vigor.

China and Brazil have remarkable differences, but by comparing the two it is possible to highlight that a process similar to the one that happened in Brazil can take place in China, if some conditions are fulfilled. First, the CCP needs to perceive that it is lacking widespread support, which is not the current situation. It might choose to handle a change that is thought to be inevitable. Second, it must be able to negotiate with relevant actors a peaceful and not revengeful form to transfer power. Third, the CCP might choose to continue being part of the politics in China. The chances of causing a self-annihilation by being excluded from the decision-making are low, so the

party should also be interested in building an order where its own interests would to some extent prevail. Fourth, and this is something that can still be improved in Brazil, by increasing investments in education and culture, the consolidation of democracy would be more achievable.

The transition could be, just like in Brazil, top-down managed and harmonious. Those two elements seem particularly capable of fitting into the Chinese society and its traditions.

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