Book Review:

How to Survive the Western Democratising Pressure?

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Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War by Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, 2010, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Deciding whether a country is democratic is always an act of power. Of course, political scientists do not overthrow regimes, but one cannot deny that if a country is considered non-democratic, international and popular attitude towards it changes, even though the actual change can be merely 0.5 points on the Freedom in the World scale by Freedom House (2013). The problem of countries in what Georg Sørensen (2010) calls the grey zone has intrigued tens of authors encouraging them to different solutions usually resulting in labels like 'hybrid regimes', 'electoral democracies', 'semi-democracies', 'illiberal regimes', 'managed democracies', etc. Those attempts have often ended in conceptualisations that are too weak or have been, on the contrary, too narrow to be fruitful.

Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way have been dealing with the same problem for several years, culminating their efforts in the book *Competitive Authoritarianism. Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War* (2010). They have probably made the most comprehensive, elaborate and convincing attempt to create order in the grey zone between democracy and full authoritarianism. Levitsky and Way do not try to solve the problem of all hybrid cases – they categorise only regimes filling special criteria as 'competitive authoritarian'. On the other hand, they indicate that 35 regimes were or became competitive authoritarian during 1990-1995 – around one sixth of all countries in the world at that time. Levitsky and Way define an ideal type – competitive authoritarianism – as an autocratic regime that employs a substantive number of elements of democracy, a regime where political competition is real but unfair. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was an emergence of unprecedented international pressure to democratise. On the other hand, autocrats soon realised that they could mitigate Western pressure by simply allowing multi-party elections, so they were not introducing full democracy, making competitive authoritarianism a rather popular choice in the first half of the 1990s.

According to Levitsky and Way, competitive authoritarianism can be described as democracy lacking (at least) one of its core elements. It is either without free and fair elections, with civil liberties applied selectively or without a level playing field between elections. The latter requirement is an innovation to the theory of democracy, introduced by Levitsky and Way. It follows the idea that the abuse of power between elections can be so massive that there is no need for (overt) fraud on election day. The result is predetermined by biased access to resources (money), media and law. Competitive authoritarianism can also be defined according to its other border as full authoritarianism with two supplementary features – real competitive elections and opposition that is allowed to exist above ground.

The authors also introduce a distinct way of describing regime change and stability. For them, it is the interplay of domestic and external factors, with the latter being more decisive and divided into two parts. The regime outcome of competitive authoritarian systems is primarily defined by structurally external variables, called 'linkage to the West'. The authors show that, first, almost all competitive authoritarian countries with high linkage have democratised, regardless of other aspects. Second, according to their theory, if the organisational power of the regime and the party in power

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is high, the regime will not fall easily and is likely to stabilise. Western leverage, consisting mostly of democracy promotion from the outside (and aspect related to it) comes as a less influential third factor.

The authors claim that the aim of the book is not so much in defining competitive authoritarianism as it is in studying the outcomes of regimes that started as competitive authoritarian during 1990–1995. They define three possible outcomes – democratisation, unstable authoritarianism and stable authoritarianism. Thus, it empirically appears that high linkage to the West tends to cause democratisation, high organisational power brings authoritarian stabilisation, and in the case of contradictory powers at play, the result will often be unstable authoritarianism.

The book by Levitsky and Way deserves a lot of acclaim. The most remarkable advantage could be its explanatory power: the authors are able to find meaningful patterns in an area in the modern world of regimes that is hardest to systematise – the grey zone of hybrid regimes. Their ambition is not to explain everything in the hybrid zone but to describe one crucial pattern. This is precisely what makes the theory so fruitful – one now realises that the logical connection behind the countries in the grey zone can be quite different, but there is a large number of regimes that share a considerable number of common traits.

The second major advantage of the concept is its closeness to real life. Looking at the world from a larger perspective, the ideal type of competitive authoritarianism may seem to be too narrow and temporal, but one cannot deny that there have been more than 40 cases that meet the criteria and 35 of them simultaneously. In parallel, Juan Linz's concept of sultanism can appear more distinct from other ideal types of regimes, but today it explains only a few real life cases (Raun 2012). In addition, the concept of competitive authoritarianism deserves credit for its international applicability. It is much easier to explain regime trajectories focusing on countries with a similar geographic location and a shared past, i.e. post-communist. However, the fact that competitive authoritarianism also helps to explain processes outside of Europe, situated in different backgrounds, shows that Levitsky and Way have touched upon something essential to the modern world.

Though being the most remarkable attempt to conceptualise regimes in the grey zone, the book also contains some theoretical and methodological aspects that need some further elaboration. For example, Levitsky and Way seem to employ two parallel approaches towards regime types that contradict each other, raising doubts that they have not elaborated enough on issues concerning ideal type creation. The main logic proposed in the book divides regimes into three: democracies, competitive authoritarian and full authoritarian regimes. However, the authors also acknowledge the fact that there are hybrid regimes that do not fall under either of the authoritarian categories. These are; first, 'tutelary regimes', where elected governments are constrained by nonelected religious, military or monarchic authorities; second, 'semi-competitive' (or restricted) democracies, where a major party is excluded from elections; and third, 'constitutional oligarchies' (or 'exclusive republics'), where a major segment of the adult population is denied suffrage. A few pages later they also exclude from the competitive authoritarian model regimes under foreign occupation and 'illiberal' electoral regimes, where democratic mainstream politics is combined with widespread human or civil rights abuse against non-mainstream parties or ethnic groups.

Interestingly, Levitsky and Way neglect all other hybrid regimes in their discussion of regime paths out of competitive authoritarianism. Competitive authoritarian regimes can only turn either democratic or full authoritarian. However, while acknowledging some inconsistencies with categorising and naming other non-democratic regimes, 'full authoritarianism' turns out to be the most problematic type. The authors claim that 'because democracy is multidimensional, there are multiple ways to be partially democratic'. Following the same logic, it is reasonable to assume that 'full authoritarianism' is also multidimensional. But the borderline drawn in the book seems to be overwhelmingly based on the questions of absence of meaningful multiparty elections and of

measuring the regimes' attitude towards opposition. So, in order to not undermine their own logic, it would be wise of the authors to conceptualise full authoritarianism more seriously or to advance the competing logic of regime categorisation used in the same article. Furthermore, most monarchic, theocratic and military regimes reflect more full authoritarianism than hybrid regimes, but Levitsky and Way do not categorise them as fully authoritarian. In this light, 'full authoritarianism' does not look like a meaningful and successful category. However, such regimes resemble the 'traditional' ideal type of authoritarian regime proposed by Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan (1996) and, therefore, could be classified as bureaucratic authoritarian.

In addition, the logic of case selection in the book raises questions. There seem to be some disproportions in case inclusion and exclusion. For example, only regimes that were or turned competitive authoritarian during 1990-1995 were included in the study. At the same time, some cases included are clearly exceptional, for example the Russian Federation. Such a major player on the world stage is probably never going to evidence even medium Western linkage or Western leverage, thereby being a country whose regime trajectory is only vaguely describable by the three variables proposed by Levitsky and Way. But there is no elaboration in the book on why such inclusion is more justified than, for example, the exclusion of countries that turned competitive authoritarian after 1995. There is also no easy way to test why some cases were omitted from the study, as the data in the appendices covers only the countries already categorised as competitive authoritarian. Kyrgyzstan, for example, is left out of the study, but a closer analysis shows that it is impossible to place it under any other regime type described by Levitsky and Way (Freedom House, 1998). Furthermore, Levitsky and Way classify as competitive authoritarian six countries that Freedom House considers in its Freedom in the World survey to be democratic ('free') in 1995 (Freedom House, 2013). Similar controversy appears with four countries considered 'not free' by Freedom House (rough equivalent to 'full authoritarianism'). Although it is worth credit that the authors are trying to catch the essence of regimes instead of relying on a score of democracy, the fact that ten cases out of 35 'cross the boundaries' probably raises the need for additional evaluation or justification in some cases.

Finally, the question of the impermanence of competitive authoritarianism as a regime type rises. Levitsky and Way have calculated that out of their 35 cases only 19 remained competitive authoritarian by 2008. It seems that in the long run such countries tend to become either democratic or more ('fully') authoritarian; which, of course, means that several cases may stay competitive authoritarian for decades. Transiency is also a substantial weakness of competitive authoritarianism. Out of the three key variables in defining a competitive authoritarian outcome, two – linkage and leverage – depend on the supremacy of the West on the international arena. However, if, for example, China became the new hegemonic power in the world (without democratisation), linkage and leverage would probably start producing opposite results – favouring authoritarian regimes and weakening domestic efforts for democratisation. Of course, a turn of this scope would take decades, but a fruitful regime type should take such possibilities into account, if only to protect itself from criticism.

In conclusion, despite some problems, the book is a remarkable, thought-provoking masterpiece that one cannot ignore when studying different regimes and trying to understand the modern world. M. Steven Fish has formulated it perfectly on the back cover of the book by saying that "*Competitive Authoritarianism* establishes Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way as the Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan of their generation". Books are published daily, but books like this only once in a decade.

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