

Democratisation
inevitable once
society reaches a
certain level politics
essay



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Levels of increasing economic development and the extent of progress towards the establishment of democratic institutions have been shown to present a clear positive correlation in many states. Nevertheless, a correlation does not in itself equal to causation and the connections between the two variables are undoubtedly more complex. Thus, the aim of this paper is to investigate linkages between development (as a pre-requisite) and democratisation (as an outcome), as well as giving consideration to other factors that may present itself as contributory or as a hindrance to democratisation. The paper will utilize three brief case studies (Mexico, Russia, and China) as central references throughout. Before embarking on an attempt to explore the above question, it must be stressed that the terms of the question should be precisely defined and thus the scope and approach of this paper be clearly outlined. The clarifications are as follows:

1. The question succinctly states democratisation, and not democracy, hence it will be the evidence of progress or process of change that a particular state has made broadly towards formal democracy that will be addressed, rather than inquiring whether the state in question has in presence sufficient and effective democratic institutions that enable its system of governance to be termed as a “ democracy”.

2. Following this, because the answer to this question will also largely depend on how “ development” is defined, it would be pragmatic to set out its definition. “ Development” here will be understood as, according to Joseph Stiglitz, a “ transformation of society” that reaches beyond simple economic justifications (such as annual growth in GDP) and also includes

indicators such as life expectancy, literacy rate and other demographic factors.[2]

3. A suitable timeframe should also be established in accordance to this investigation if a satisfactorily detailed analysis is to be done, as well as keeping within the structural limits of this paper. The focus of this paper will be based on the period set out by Samuel Huntington as the “ Third Wave”[3]of democratisation because this time period is most closely associated with development-related variables, and thus is the most appropriate for the investigation.

The approach and scope of this paper will thus study and compare the linkages and other factors that affect democratisation in Mexico, Russia, and China pertaining to their individual circumstances of development (with regards to proponents within the HDI index) within the “ Third Wave” time period.

When looking at the chain of events from a causal approach, it would seem that Mexico’s democratisation was not due to economic reforms in the late 80’s, but rather the fall of the PRI that allowed such reforms to occur.

However, the question is concerned with development reaching a certain level leading to inevitable democratisation, signifying the implication that development has already occurred. Therefore investigations into the origins of Mexico’s development will not be of primary interest here, and thus this case study will be viewed from a more direct approach, ergo from the economic reforms pioneered by President Salinas.

Mexico's economic liberalization was largely supported through cooperation with NAFTA, by privatizing major firms and opening of the market to its neighbors.[4] Economic theory dictates that this will lead to an increase in domestic and international competition, stemming from an influx of foreign direct investment and increases in economic mobility. Mexico's rapidly expanding middle class during that time would also infer that there has been a rise in income and decrease in relative poverty. Improvements in human developmental aspects such as general standards of living, education and healthcare would naturally play a role as well. Ultimately, consumers will see an increase in choice, and thus, in a political sense, freedom as well. The formation of the many independent trade unions and improvements in voter mobility at the time are few of the many signs that Mexico's population are gradually bringing democratic ideals to fruition. Hence, from the above it can be stated that political reform followed economic reform, in other words, liberalization of the Mexican economy preceded political change.

Although it has been established that democratisation did occur following development, whether if that process was "inevitable" remains to be answered. It can be argued that Mexico's cooperation with NAFTA has had indirect effects that led to the inevitability of democratisation. Mexico's involvement with NAFTA has given international exposure to domestic civil rights groups, thus increasing their influence within the country and their power to determine public policy. It has also given insight into the authoritarian nature of Mexico's regime, legitimizing critical claims that its current governmental structure is aggravating social polarization, giving the United States and its pro-democratic movement further justification to

intervene in Mexico's internal affairs. Additionally, the successor of Salinas has taken office in the beginning of the Zapatista revolution for democracy and justice, which has made considerable progress in shaping democratisation throughout the country. Thus, NAFTA's impact has been a catalyst, letting loose both supra and international grassroots movement that inevitably led Mexico to democratisation.[5]

Russia bears similarity with Mexico with regards to development in that its history of political change after the 1950's has been triggered by external forces that led to domestic restructuring. Despite Russia's tendency in the past to take an antagonistic stand towards capitalism, or rather, American liberalism, the pressure from the IMF and the World Bank to tie financial aid with the West has pushed the Russian Federation to development.[6] Yet, unlike Mexico, Russia introduced political change before economic adjustment in the form of Gorbachev's glasnost (openness) and later perestroika (restructuring). However, it should be known that Gorbachev envisioned a new socialist model that eventually became a socialist pluralist model following pressure from divergent interest groups. This represented a start towards political and human development. The merit of Gorbachev also lies in the fact that he laid a foundation in which his political successors - Yeltsin and Putin - continued to pursue economic reform. The collapse of the Soviet Union during that time was arguably also an extremely important reason that Russian citizens now can enjoy competitive trade, civil liberties and rights. The Russian population can also vote for multiple parties, but despite a high level of voter mobility, it seems that the largest party in

parliament is the Communist Party, suggesting that a high proportion of the population is in favour of returning back to Communism.[7]

Given this, it can be said that even though Russia is experiencing an increase of development in both political and human aspects, it does not seem that democratisation was successful. One reason that the Russians remain politically inert may be due to its historically acquired distrust of American financed endeavours to introduce liberal democracy in Russia. A second reason is that Russia, as compared to Mexico, is much more politically independent and thus is in less need, and less prone, to democratisation. The only extent of democratisation that Russia may have gained is intentionally superficial, as recent Presidents Yeltsin and Putin use their personalities to push for liberal democracy in order to secure the finance from the IMF which Russia depends on, all the while avoiding scrutiny from major democratic states.[8]The oratories of Russian leaders are not in line with reality, and the “ democratisation” of Russia is instigated and controlled by the elite, which is likely to crumble if funding ceases from the IMF. The democratisation of Russia, if any, is different to that of Mexico in that it is a top-down movement rather than the grassroots process as shown above. What this means is that civil society in Russia is weak to the extent that there is little participation by its citizens, which again can be ascribed to the distrust of Western attempts to democratise the state. Also related is the weakness of its political parties; Russia’s political platform is dominated by populism towards a few politicians or a single party leader, and in conjunction with low mass participation and preference for a return to

Communism, means that there is little prospect of real democratisation in Russia despite its progress in development.[9]

China's economic progress and development in the last two decades is unquestionably formidable, the flooding of international players in its domestic market has not only provided modern China with a gateway into the international world, it was also predicted that this rapid shift in economic culture would permeate into China politics. Yet there has been no progress made in the last twenty years towards a " democratic revolution", while the idea of democracy seems palatable to the public and to the top leadership[10], the Communist Party of China (CPC) has not lost its influence, but rather it has adapted to the new economic climate and became far more refined in its management of the country. As it is clear that the country has reached unprecedented levels of development, the question to this particular case study seems to be more of asking why China has been able to defeat the conventional logic of democratisation and political reform.

An answer may lie in the authoritarian nature of the CPC itself, that it is much better suited to foster economic growth as opposed to a democratic system. Certainly, while democratic systems have a propensity to distribute and diffuse power among many actors at many levels, democracies too often become entrenched in bureaucracy and let decision-making become unnecessarily time consuming.[11]As noted by Halperin et al., " the appeal of the authoritarian-led approach has ... at least something to do with its expediency, in comparison to the messy and time-consuming procedures typical of democracy." [12] Thus it is argued that authoritarian regimes such as China are more appropriate in regulating economic development because <https://assignbuster.com/democratisation-inevitable-once-society-reaches-a-certain-level-politics-essay/>

such systems are governance are needed to provide the stability, regulation, and centralization that democratic governments simply would not.

Huntington also strongly advocated the merits of a one-party state with regards to development, arguing that instability will arise as a result of political mobilization being faster than the implementation of the necessary institutions that are needed to support it.[13]The above propositions support the CPC's growth-centered strategy that emerged at the end of the 1970's when China began opening its economy, not only are the CPC's strategies domestically sound, it could be said that the party has adopted this strategy and the justifications as noted above in order to pose a distraction for democratisation demands.

In this sense, the political circumstances of China would provide another explanation as to why Russia's democratisation has been less than successful. Whilst the Russian Federation is not authoritarian, it still shares several similarities with regards to keeping democratisation at bay. Both states have put economic development as a priority over democratisation, and have used the influence of a popular and centralized elite to satisfy the masses. China, like Russia, is highly independent politically, unlike Mexico, where the overbearing influence of NAFTA has inevitably led it to democratisation.

In conclusion, it would then be appropriate to state that, from the examples of Russia and China, that democratisation does not necessarily follow development. As demonstrated, if a state is relatively strong politically before development, it has the capability to capture the benefits of an

integrated global economy without having to transform its existing political
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presence. It is important to realize that while development plays a commendable role in shaping democratisation, such as in the case of Mexico, it would be erroneous to imply that development or the mobilization forces it generates would lead to the inevitable outcome of democratisation. As shown, the role of the state is also vital in determining the success or failure of democratisation, internal factors such as the political culture, influence of political parties, presence of elites, and ideological traditions do have a profound effect on regime change.[14]Russia and China, while presented as anomalous cases, do not necessarily contradict the argument that development increases the chances of democratisation. They reveal that the role of development must be assessed in context of other factors, which can act independently of development. Thus the conjecture that “democratisation is inevitable once a society has reached a certain level of development” is not valid, however it can be concluded that development, if in cooperation with other variables such as those listed above, can create the necessary conditions for democratisation.

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