



## **Democratisation and dictatorship revisited**

**Michael K. Miller: Shock to the System: Coups, Elections, and War on the Road to Democratization, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2021, 348 pp, ISBN: 978-0-691-21759-8**

**Anne Meng<sup>1</sup>**

Accepted: 13 December 2021

© European Consortium for Political Research 2022

In *Shock to the System*, Miller provides new insights to an age-old question in political science: when and how do countries democratise? He argues that democratisation generally follows one of two paths. In the first path, democratisation occurs after one or more violent shocks (coups, civil wars, assassinations, foreign war defeats, or hegemon withdrawal) that dislodges the previous authoritarian regime. If pro-democracy actors can successfully outcompete efforts to reinstate the fallen dictatorship or attempts to create a new autocracy (a big if!), then the country democratises. A second path is one of electoral continuity. In these cases, a strong ruling party voluntarily democratises because party elites know that they can continue to win (and even thrive in) free and fair democratic elections. The book uses a broad dataset of global democratic transitions from 1800 to 2014, in addition to comprehensive case studies, to illustrate how the vast majority of transitions follow these two paths. The empirical patterns are stark: out of 139 democratic transitions since 1800, more than 9 out of 10 fit one of these two paths.

Miller's book is big, ambitious, meticulous, and inspiring. It challenges core ideas about democracy, autocracy, and regime change. Everyone should read this book! Three big contributions stand out. First, the book reframes democratisation largely as a *continuation* of existing elite arrangements, rather than as a monumental sea change. Miller notes that “democratization is most likely when the resulting shift in power is *as small as possible*, because leaders either are already weak in autocracy or believe they will be strong in democracy” (pp. 4, emphasis added). In the first pathway, weak dictators who face an extremely high risk of overthrow democratise in order to exit gracefully (and with their lives). In the second pathway, strong and durable party elites introduce elections that they know they can win. This re-conceptualisation of democratisation as an *incremental* shift in power, rather than a tidal wave of sweeping change, is compelling and provocative.

---

✉ Anne Meng  
ameng@virginia.edu

<sup>1</sup> Department of Politics, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, USA



As a second big contribution, this book highlights the fact that democratisation is a *strategic elite decision*, rather than a process that is initiated by popular pressure from below. As Miller notes, the violent shocks (such as coups or civil wars) that unintentionally create openings for democratisation begin primarily as *elite* contestations for power. For countries that follow the electoral continuity path, ruling party elites decide whether and when to democratise. By highlighting the central role of elites and regime conditions, the book posits that pro-democracy protests, in themselves, are *not sufficient* for democratisation (which explains the failure of prominent movements, such as Tiananmen Square and most of the Arab Spring, in successfully ushering in democracy). As Miller succinctly argues, “protest is limited in what it can achieve alone, yet crucial to democratization on the whole” (pp. 245).

A final core contribution of this book is that it marries scholarship on authoritarian stability with studies of democratisation. A big takeaway of this book is that democratisation is highly contingent on either autocratic regime weakness (shock path) or regime strength (electoral continuity path). Whether the regime is weak enough to fall into the shock path or strong enough to follow the electoral continuity path depends largely on the institutional configuration and durability of the incumbent authoritarian regime. Importantly, the stability of the autocratic regime affects whether the conditions (especially shocks) that foster democratisation arise at all! Many dictatorships can withstand and prevent crisis, therefore *blocking* pathways to democratisation.

Recent scholarship on authoritarian durability also introduces some conceptual challenges to the study of democracy and autocracy: what does democratisation really mean in the age of electoral authoritarianism? The average dictatorship in the post-Cold War era looks strikingly “democratic”, as autocratic leaders have learned that in order to stay in power, they must adopt the language of democracy. Most modern autocracies have the whole host of nominally democratic institutions: parties, multi-party elections, constitutions, legislatures, and courts. Because Miller adopts a minimal procedural definition of democracy (one that doesn’t require electoral turnover), it is sometimes difficult to know whether we are looking at a case of electoral authoritarianism or true democratisation. For instance, Mozambique and South Africa are listed as countries that have democratised, even though the ruling parties in those countries have never lost power. It is hard to know for sure whether FRELIMO or the ANC would be willing to step down and concede power peacefully in the event of an electoral loss. While democratisation is often thought of as the “decision to hold free and fair elections”, a better test for democratisation is really the “decision to *lose* free and fair elections”. Relatedly, the book notes that the electoral continuity route has become a more common pathway to democratisation, which can also be interpreted as the growth of durability authoritarianism: as ruling parties become more skilled at staying in power, they can afford to *appear* as if they are loosening the reins.

**Publisher’s Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

**Anne Meng** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Politics at the University of Virginia. Her



research centres on authoritarian politics, institutions, and elite power sharing. Her book, *Constraining Dictatorship* (2020), examines how executive constraints become established in autocracies.

