Recent transitions

How did third-wave democracies make the transition from the preceding authoritarian order? What were the political processes involved? Drawing lessons from this historical experience is, again, of practical value, providing helpful background for those involved in any future transitions. Figure 3.3 summarizes the key stages, providing a template against which any particular example can be examined. We will outline these stages in general terms before reviewing the example of Spain after Franco.

However, it must be borne in mind that, as the Arab Spring confirms, a transition from an authoritarian regime does not entail an immediate or even medium-term transition to liberal democracy. Another authoritarian order, perhaps with greater freedom of speech, is an alternative outcome. In particular, Figure 3.3 reflects research on the successful transitions in Southern Europe and Latin America, rather than the more varied outcomes from the later collapse of the Soviet Union (O’Donnell et al., 1986).

The liberalization of the authoritarian regime initiates the reform sequence. Military regimes often lose a sense of purpose once the crisis that propelled them to office is resolved; communist regimes lost the prop of Soviet support. In the more liberal environment that emerges, opportunities increase to express public opposition, inducing a dynamic of reform. For instance, as regimes decay, so the ruling coalition shrinks through defections.

The key point is that transitions are rarely initiated by mass demonstrations against a united dictatorship. Rather, democracy is typically the outcome – intended or unintended – of recognition within part of the ruling group that change is inevitable, or even desirable. As O’Donnell and Schmitter (1986, p. 19) assert:

There is no transition whose beginning is not the consequence – direct or indirect – of important divisions within the authoritarian regime itself,

principally along the fluctuating cleavage between hardliners and softliners … In Brazil and Spain, for example, the decision to liberalize was made by high-echelon, dominant personnel in the incumbent regime in the face of weak and disorganized opposition.

In the fraught and often lengthy transition to democracy, arrangements are made for the new system of government. Threats to the transition from hardliners (who may consider a military coup) and radical reformers (who may seek a full-scale revolution, rather than just a change of regime) need to be overcome. Constitutions must be written, institutions designed and elections

Figure 3.3 Stages of democratization

Democratization can be separated into the final stages of: liberalization, transition, consolidation and deepening. However, as the notion of an unconsolidated democracy implies, reaching the fourth stage is far from guaranteed.

Hardliners in an authoritarian order judge that the perpetuation of non-democratic rule is both feasible and desirable. By contrast, softliners in the old regime accept the inevitability or desirability of securing legitimacy for their rule through elections. Softliners and moderate reformers can constitute an influential reform coalition against hardliners.