
From Development to Democracy: The Transformation of Modern Asia

Dan Slater and Joseph Wong (Princeton University, 2022), 348 pages, endnotes, bibliography, index.

Reviewed by Anthony T. Sutton

It is widely accepted that wealth and democracy go together, yet it is little agreed why. Slater and Wong offer one way to relate the two, framing democratization as sometimes a strategic choice by autocrats grown strong enough to hazard political competition. The book's main service is supplying this big idea, equipping a reader with one more conceptual lens through which to view a blurry question. The potted histories of economic progress and political arrangements in 12 East Asian polities will be a convenience for any officer who lacks experience with the region.

Slater and Wong revive and revise modernization theory, a generations-old idea that economic growth sets the stage for democratization by moderating lower-class radicalism, diluting the benefits of nepotism, facilitating civil society, and introducing cosmopolitan social structures.^a Founding thinkers focused on societal forces independent of the state, making generic a story best told of first-wave democracies that urbanized, industrialized, and liberalized gradually from the 1700s to the early 1900s. Intellectual successors, watching developmentalist states modernize their economies amid mature global markets, observed the state protecting the social and economic privileges of entrepreneurs and white-collar workers. A second-generation modernization theory therefore focused on societal forces dependent on the state.^b

Slater and Wong direct our attention instead to regime and elite interests throughout a country's course of development. A successful developmentalist regime will have built up legitimacy by delivering prosperity. Such a regime typically also enjoys political and governmental bureaucracies that are competent and extensive. Thus advantaged, a regime has the strength to democratize with some confidence that it can win elections and maintain stability. All it needs then is motivation, which comes

from growing public demands—for less corruption, less repression, better labor conditions, freer civil society—that the autocracy is poorly suited to meet.

A regime can choose to translate its autocratic power into democratic dominance while it is in what the authors call the “bittersweet spot,” strong enough to choose democracy and scared enough to want to. This analysis expects a developmentalist autocracy's power to peak because the very success of economic development creates new challenges of societal expectations, per modernization theory, as well as new challenges of economic growth, per the theory of the middle-income trap, which is little explored here.^c Choices can go either way, of course, allowing the theory to comfortably explain examples and excuse exceptions as the book turns to clustered case studies.

Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea best illustrate democratization through strength. In each case, civilian conservatives were better organized than prospective political opponents and better reputed because they claimed credit for earlier economic growth. Electoral designs favored these conservatives: avoiding proportional representation in Japan that would have seated some communists; drawing multimember districts in Taiwan to reward internal coordination; and overweighting districts in South Korea in which the incumbent party had the most supporters. Geopolitical conditions also nudged ruling parties toward democracy because too much repression would risk access to US consumer markets and security protections.

Indonesia, Thailand, and Burma had military autocracies especially concerned with stability in the context of regional or communist insurgencies. After victories eased these fears, they experimented with reversible steps

a. The canonical introduction to modernization theory is: Seymour Martin Lipset, “Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy,” *The American Political Science Review* 53, no. 1 (March 1959).

b. See, for example, Eva Bellin, “Contingent Democrats: Industrialists, Labor, and Democratization in Late-Developing Countries,” *World Politics* 52, no. 2 (January 2000).

c. See instead Richard F. Doner and Ben Ross Schneider, “The Middle-Income Trap: More Politics than Economics,” *World Politics* 68, no. 4 (October 2016).

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toward democracy, ensuring access to power through constitutional arrangements and elite networks. Indonesia had the best-developed party, and democracy stuck. Thailand's military lacked a similarly developed civilian partner because the monarchy remained the locus of conservative civilian politics. Burma had still less party strength or developmental success. Thai and Burmese militaries ended democratic experiments that threatened their control.

Malaysia, Hong Kong, and Singapore inherited strong colonial legal systems and oversaw economic growth, but modernization via connection to global finance and commodity markets produced less of the societal pressure that might have motivated their regimes to hazard democratization. Controlled elections should have built confidence that the ruling party could win a fair vote, but Malaysia's regime feared ethnic unrest and factional divisions, Hong Kong's choice was dictated by mainland China, and Singapore's autocrats never felt the need. These regimes passed their peaks of strength and probably could not democratize as smoothly now as if they had tried earlier.

China, Vietnam, and Cambodia are only now reaching levels of development that could give their regimes the confidence to democratize. These case studies are forward-looking, asking whether regimes will attempt democracy through strength rather than explaining past decisions. The regimes might fear electoral defeat and fundamental instability if they democratize, in part because their socialist histories complicate the translation of unequal economic growth into ruling-party legitimacy. They will also struggle to gauge public discontent,

lacking the electoral signals available in autocracies that host unfree elections.

Slater and Wong write as regionalists building up to a theory rather than logicians imposing one on national histories. They appreciate the nuances that make cases more and less suitable to their argument. Consequently, a reader will gain more if they are already familiar with several literatures that appear only as passing allusions. Slater and Wong explicitly introduce modernization theory, but they provide less background on state-led developmentalist strategies,^a the debate about sequencing state capacity and democracy,^b game-theoretic models of democratization as a solution to lower-class demands for redistribution,^c the dynamics of leadership succession in autocracies,^d and the importance of geopolitical context.^e The book pairs well with Ziblatt's explanation that conservative-party strength determined the landed elite's sufferance of democracy in the early 1900s,^f yet Slater and Wong give their fellow traveler only a cursory citation.

As a reading experience, the book might exasperate a quick study when it repeats points in nested introductions to the book, each cluster, and each case. An officer more interested in efficiently extracting ideas than in languidly contemplating those concept would do well to seek the summaries and skim the details.

Still, this book introduces an analytically powerful idea and serves up case studies to help explore it. It reminds us that political actors can choose democracy as a self-interested strategy rather than a committed ideal. When our standard imagining is democratization forced upon a collapsing regime, it is valuable to picture how an autocracy can pursue democracy through strength.



The reviewer: Anthony T. Sutton is a governance analyst at the CIA.

a. See Stephan Haggard, *Developmental States* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

b. See Haakon Gjerlow, Carl Henrik Knutsen, Tore Wig, and Matthew Charles Wilson, *One Road to Riches? How state building and democratization affect economic development* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

c. See Carles Boix, *Democracy and Redistribution* (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

d. See Ludger Helms, "Leadership Succession in Politics: The Democracy/Autocracy Divide Revisited," *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 22, no. 2 (May 2020).

e. See Seva Gunitsky, "Democratic Waves in Historical Perspective," *Perspectives on Politics* 16, no 3 (September 2018).

f. Daniel Ziblatt, *Conservative Parties and the Birth of Democracy* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).