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**Opposition, Stability and Liberalization in Competitive Authoritarian Regimes**

“Elections are won by men and women chiefly because most people vote against somebody rather than for somebody.” –Franklin P. Adams.

When people think of elections, the word “democracy” often comes to mind. After the third wave of democratization in the post-Soviet world ended in the early 1990s, a number of former authoritarian regimes held elections as they began to transition to democracy. Authoritarian regimes that survived, however, were experiencing pressure from both external and internal actors. To temporarily quell the pressure, some began to allow competitive elections in which opposition parties could participate. This new political system, neither democratic nor authoritarian, became known as “competitive authoritarianism,” and it stood as the potential gateway to change.

Although elections are commonly associated with democracy, they can also significantly influence competitive authoritarian regimes. Generally speaking, competitive authoritarian elections are marred by fraud, ensuring a win for the incumbent. As a result, opposition parties normally have little effect on the party in power. Yet on certain rare occasions, the victory of the opposition in these elections has led a state to liberalization. Such an outcome causes many scholars to question the process in which this occurs.

The notion that elections can lead to liberalization through a victory of the opposition is not incorrect. However, the question is not when elections *can* lead to liberalization but when they actually *do*. There is a common assumption that oppositional victory means liberalization, but if the opposition is unstable, it could reverse attempted reforms. This indicates that although
oppositional victory is necessary for liberalization, it does not guarantee its actual occurrence. As a result, there must be an alternative deciding factor.

If an opposition party wants to be successful in a competitive authoritarian regime, it must present a strong united front behind its candidate. If it is unstable or weak, the opposition will not be effective in the election process and will fail to win office. To combat this problem, opposition parties often form alliances united behind a common cause. Such manifestations are defined as a coalition, or a union of parties designed to achieve a particular goal.¹ Once in office, the opposition must remain stable in order to provide a solid basis for liberalization. For liberalization to actually occur after an election, it must enact positive changes such as increased policy utility and reforms. Therefore, the stability of the opposition party after elections is an independent variable in the prediction of liberalization. The organizational cohesion of the opposition party/coalition is important in enforcing party discipline and is thus one of the factors that determine stability.² This requires analyzing the overall stability of both the opposition party and its leader in power during their time in office. This not only includes party/coalition stability, but also a new leader’s ability to carry out reforms and policies and avoid backsliding. At times it is not the party, but rather its leader, who is tempted to revert to the ways of his or her predecessor.

Case studies of Iran, Kenya, and Georgia provide a basis of comparison for the factors involved in this outcome and help us to fully understand electoral processes in authoritarian regimes. Using these examples, I will analyze the processes and agents involved in the election, as well as events during the new leaders’ time in office. By placing these events in context, I will be able to demonstrate how the stability of the opposition is an independent variable determining

¹ Bunce and Wolchik, “Defeating Dictators,” 62.
² Ibid.
whether or not liberalization will occur. Additionally, this will allow me to explain why it is necessary to consider the opposition’s time in office when examining the process of liberalization.

While the post-communist space is one of the most common areas for such an election process to take place, I have purposefully included countries located elsewhere. This allows me to compare any varying components among such studies, yet also shows the consistent characteristics of this regime type. By using countries in the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and Africa as case studies, we can prove that our results apply to more than one geographical region.

Before proceeding with the case studies, I will first provide a general explanation of the concepts involved in this research. Democratization, in simplified terms, is a process resulting in a complete change of regime. This includes the establishment of regularly held free and fair elections for popularly elected officials in the new political system.\(^3\) Although democratization and liberalization are often seen in the same light because they both lead to an increase in individual political freedom, liberalization does not include the implementation of a new regime. The common concept of liberalization involves the election of a less authoritative regime, in addition to the improvement of public rights and free and fair elections.\(^4\) As I will show in the upcoming case studies, liberalization can occur without democratization.

**Why Stability?**

The current literature on elections and liberalization provides a general definition of these two terms. Most literature considers the main indicator of liberalization to be the election of an opposition candidate and the immediate aftermath.\(^5\) However, such an approach disregards the

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\(^3\) Kopstein and Lichbach, 449–452.

\(^4\) Pop-Eleches and Robertson.

\(^5\) Ibid.
entirety of the opposition’s term in office. Such a definition could be especially problematic when discussing cases of backsliding during the opposition’s term.

The outcome of an election in a competitive authoritarian regime depends on many factors, yet the most influential is the state of the opposition. Without a strong opposition party to challenge the incumbent, there is little chance for success. For this reason, the existing literature often focuses on the importance of a united opposition and its positive effects on elections.\footnote{Howard and Roessler, 50; 365–381.} Although such an approach emphasizes the elections themselves, the characteristics and methods involved can also affect the stability of the party once in office. Because I argue that the stability of the opposition is an independent variable, a brief discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of a united opposition will aid in analyzing the case studies.

Elections in authoritarian regimes are far from free and fair, offering little chance for the success of the opposition. A united opposition is often necessary to combat this trend. More often than not, the ruling party receives the majority vote while the various opposition parties share the remainder. The joining of multiple groups into what is often called a rainbow or umbrella coalition can greatly increase the chance of success by uniting the opposition, thereby shifting the focus from competition against each other to defeat of the ruling party. The display of a united opposition behind a single candidate can increase media attention and mobilization among the people. Depending on the status of the regime, it can also encourage members of the ruling party to switch sides.\footnote{Ibid.} This united front gives credibility to the opposition, thus garnering greater support and encouraging involvement in the electoral process.

Although some countries manage a two-party system, most transitional regimes consist of multiple parties due to factors such as ideology or ethnicity. When these parties form a united
opposition, they must make agreements to prevent division within the coalition. Such compromises often depend on the success of the opposition, guaranteeing positions of power or other forms of compensation. Along with creating an organized structure, this makes it more difficult for key players to stray.\(^8\)

While such compromises prove to be a strong strategy for victory, they can lead to problems once the opposition is in office. If the multiple opposition parties unite out of the mutual desire to remove the incumbent from office, ideological and ethnic differences can cause divisions among the members or parties of the coalition after the common enemy is no longer in power. Those who have no loyalty to the coalition outside of the power structure have little desire to support the new party, and this forms an obstacle to any change or implementation of reform.\(^9\) A lack of change, in turn, discourages constituents who hold the party to its word. An unstable coalition can also produce a winning candidate who, once in power, reverts to authoritarian rule. This often occurs if the new incumbent fears he or she will not be reelected or is concerned about his or her position. Rather than risking the possibility of losing reelection, the opposition leader often chooses to adopt the strategies of the former regime. Moreover, although a united opposition can result in victory, it does not ensure liberalization. Unless the united opposition is also stable, conflicts within the party can prevent liberalizing reforms, discouraging voters and reducing the chance of victory in future elections. Although most scholarly literature presents victory of the opposition as an indicator of liberalization, this definition disregards events after the election, making it difficult to determine when elections actually lead to liberalization.

\(^8\) Bunce and Wolchik, “Defeating Dictators,” 62.  
\(^9\) Wahman.
In summary, by identifying the elements of a united opposition, we can better judge the influence of stability on liberalization, furthering my hypothesis that the stability of the opposition constitutes an independent variable.

**Case Study Methodology**

In order to demonstrate that the stability of the opposition party after elections is an independent variable for determining the state of liberalization, I will focus on two important aspects of each case study. First, before analyzing the stability of the opposition and its effect on liberalization, I will summarize the events leading up to an election. By studying the ingredients involved in oppositional victory we can better understand the outcome, both in the short and long term. These ingredients include: 1) the regime; 2) the opposition party; 3) civil society organizations and media; 4) foreign and domestic actors; and 5) the electoral process.

Next, I will examine whether or not the stability of the opposition during its term in office has an effect on liberalization. Using a qualitative method to analyze each case study will make it easier to recognize the factors that resulted in that particular opposition’s degree of stability. Although numerical data provides a basis for study, it cannot account for certain conditions and interpretations. Case studies take into consideration the context of each election, providing a better opportunity to analyze each event in its entirety and expose causal mechanisms. Although I focus on the stability of the party as an independent variable, the victory of the opposition is also a key element to liberalization, even though it does not necessarily determine this outcome. It does, however, provide insight into various factors that may influence the party.

My hypothesis is that liberalization after an opposition breakthrough will be greater when the new government remains cohesive. If my hypothesis is wrong, however, the case studies will
show no connection between opposition stability and liberalization, producing combinations such as an unstable opposition and a high level of liberalization in the same instance.

Though the question of elections and liberalization is most commonly associated with Eastern European countries, I chose these case studies specifically for their differing historical and political contexts. Not only does this provide a unique perspective on each case, but it also allows one to explore authoritarian regimes in various cultures. These case studies also display variation in the dependent variable, that is, liberalization, raising the question, what specific factor determines liberalization after elections. Case studies allow for a better analysis of the effects stability has on liberalization.

A Case Study of Georgia

In the 2003 elections in Georgia, the party in power competed against multiple opposition parties, resulting in a revolution and the overthrow of the incumbent. These events subsequently became known as the Rose Revolution. What factors contributed to this revolution and what did it mean for Georgia’s future?

The Rose Revolution designated a significant change in the Georgian political system. In the years leading up to the 2003 elections, the integrity and effectiveness of Eduard Shevardnadze’s regime had begun to decline. In contrast to the previous elections in Georgia, corruption and electoral fraud were constant within the structure of the government, which itself was largely ineffective.\(^\text{10}\) As a result, various members of the government began to distance themselves from Shevardnadze.

In the months immediately preceding the 2003 elections, Georgians’ resentment toward Shevardnadze and his crumbling regime grew. In contrast to previous elections, the regime now

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\(^{10}\) Mitchell, 342–346.
had little support and was politically weak.\textsuperscript{11} In order to secure victory, it resorted to several different forms of electoral fraud, including ballot stuffing and multiple voting. In other words, the elections were anything but free and fair.

The opposition could no longer tolerate the regime and its corruption. Mikhail Saakashvili, the leader of the United National Movement party, along with Zurab Zhvania, leader of the Burjanadze-Democrats, proved that the election had been fraudulent on the basis of information provided by exit polls and the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy, an election monitoring organization. They then used this information as a justification to demand new elections. Opposition groups and various organizations had planned protests in anticipation of a fraudulent election before it had even taken place.\textsuperscript{12} When Shevardnadze refused to resign, claiming only he could maintain stability in the country, protestors almost immediately began to fill the streets. A standoff continued into November. At first, protests remained relatively peaceful, with people united behind a common cause. However, tensions heightened November 20, when Shevardnadze announced the clearly fraudulent final election results and declared himself the winner.

The seating of the new parliament on November 22 closed the window of opportunity for removing Shevardnadze from office, spurring both the protestors and opposition parties to immediate action. They stormed parliament, interrupting the session and further underlining the weakening of Shevardnadze’s power. Thirty hours later Shevardnadze stepped down. A loss of allies and respect left him with no other option.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{12} Bunce and Wolchik, \textit{Defeating Authoritarian Leaders}, 154–156.
New elections for president and parliament took place in March of the following year. Mikheil Saakashvili won the presidency by a large margin. These elections were free and fair, which augured well for Georgia. Although the opposition parties were not united during these elections, their combined efforts in the protests and elections proved to be invaluable.

The opposition party’s success and the elections that followed proved to be essential in the following months. Consisting of experienced administrators with records of governing, the party was not lacking members experienced in politics. The party desired a turnover of power, but only as long as this guaranteed political stability for Georgia. Party leaders implemented steps against corruption in all areas of society. The fight against corruption and the institution of free and fair elections were the direct results of the stability of the new party in power. Although some authoritarian traits of Georgian politics remained, the outcome of the Rose Revolution and the capacity of the opposition to remain stable offered hope for continued liberalization. Although it was not united in a specific coalition, the opposition managed to hold free and fair elections with no evidence of backsliding, underscoring its overall stability.

**A Case Study of Kenya**

The 1992 and 1997 elections in Kenya were riddled with political violence and fraud. Daniel arap Moi, the long-standing political leader of the ruling party, the Kenya African National Union [KANU], was forced by external actors to allow multiparty elections. When he was later obligated to step down because of term limitations, a new KANU candidate, Uhuru Kenyatta, took his place. In reaction to this change in leadership, opposition parties began negotiations and eventually formed the National Alliance of Rainbow Coalition [NARC].

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opposition group included all major candidates from the previous elections and promoted Mwai Kibaki as its candidate.¹⁵

Both foreign and domestic actors were present during the election process, helping to coordinate the opposition coalition and to sponsor civil society groups. International observers were involved in monitoring the elections. The Carter Center, for one, reported that the voting process was successful and free of violence.¹⁶

The 2002 election resulted in the first political turnover and was virtually transparent and free. The NARC secured 62.2 percent of votes, defeating Kenyatta. The coalition also managed to obtain 125 out of 210 seats in Parliament. But despite this triumphant outcome, the coalition was unstable from the beginning. An alliance created specifically for the purpose of removing the current party from power, the opposition coalition was a melting pot of parties that represented numerous regional affiliations and ethnic groups. Although members agreed on Kibaki as their representative, differences in the parties’ political backgrounds and goals led to constant tension.¹⁷

Although the opposition party was strong, it was not stable. Ultimately, this temporary alliance prevented liberalization, even after its electoral success. During his first term Kibaki succeeded in implementing some reforms, but there was a growing division within the party, stemming from its foundation as a rainbow coalition. After the success in elections, it was precisely the ethnic and ideological differences of the constituent parties that produced fractures in the coalition. The uncertain future of this type of coalition can thus result in a new leader’s

¹⁵ Wahman.
¹⁶ Carter Center.
¹⁷ Wahman.
fear of losing the next election, causing him to disregard changes that could threaten his position or make him unpopular. Liberalization suffers as a consequence.

This situation left no one to hold Kibaki accountable for his actions and little motivation for him to implement the reforms he promised during elections. Instead, Kibaki followed his own political agenda, appointing his friends to government positions and refusing to share power with rival parties. The various parties had become tools for political ambition and the appeal of authoritarian rule overshadowed the former goals of liberalization.

A slow backsliding began to occur, exemplified by the corruption and electoral fraud in Kenya’s 2007 elections, which threatened to undo what little progress had been made. International actors and the opposition concluded that the election results had been manipulated in Kibaki’s favor, fueling the violent aftermath of the elections. Despite a high number of actors involved in the 2002 elections, the lack of a stable, strong oppositional party proved detrimental to the integrity of the 2007 elections.

Although the general consensus is that Kenya experienced a liberalizing electoral outcome, this does not account for the backsliding that occurred while the opposition was still in control. After analyzing this case study, it is clear that Kenya’s 2002 elections were not liberalizing. As I have previously stated, liberalizing outcomes should be determined after observing the opposition party’s time in office to better understand the overall outcome. Although some liberalization may have taken place in Kenya, the instability of the party resulted in the continuation of complete authoritarian rule, stalling any significant improvements.

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18 Ibid.
19 Howard and Roessler, 50 and 365–381.
A Case Study of Iran

For the final case study I will analyze a more complex situation: the 1997 elections in Iran. Current literature on liberalization concludes that, because of its surrounding culture, Iran did not succeed in having a liberalizing election. However, this conclusion highlights the shortcomings of using data alone to determine the success of liberalization, which in this case fails to consider the variations in competitive authoritarian regimes.

The 1997 elections in Iran resulted in an unexpected upset by the dark horse candidate Mohammad Khatami. What was originally predicted to be an unchallenged victory for the conservative Ali Akbar Nateq Nouri turned into something altogether different. With the regime's hold over society weakening, various economic problems, and the growing isolation of the country, it was an opportune time to challenge the ruling party.

The openness of the elections was a function of the intense rivalry between the conservative party and the reform coalition. Although Nouri had the support of major media outlets and had connections throughout the government, Khatami appealed to the masses. Khatami’s newly formed coalition consisted of moderates and Islamic leftists. His views on the expansion of civil society, democracy, and economic development attracted a wide following, including women and youth. Khatami’s ideas garnered increasing support as the demand for a more open society grew. The outcome of the elections marked a turning point in Iranian politics. Khatami won with 69 percent of the vote after a surprisingly high turnout rate of 91 percent.

Khatami and his allies became known as the Second of Khordad Front, in honor of the day of his election. Although his coalition consisted of two different groups, he managed to keep it fairly stable with his non-confrontational, moderate approach to politics. His victory over the

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20 Gasiorowski.
21 Ibid.
ruling party, the Islamic Republic, proved pyrrhic: his attempts at reform were continually blocked.\textsuperscript{22} It also led to the formation of two main coalitions, the conservatives and the reformists, as well as a lesser coalition consisting of the remaining parties.

Khatami’s plan consisted of numerous reforms that were inevitably met with challenges, since the structure of Iran’s government meant the president was just one of several centers of power.\textsuperscript{23} Legislation was repeatedly turned by the Guardian Council, which was controlled by conservative Islamists. Khatami’s allies in the government were removed from their positions in order to weaken his power. However, Khatami’s ability to push for reforms and connect with the needs and emotions of the people was undeniable. This became even more evident when, despite the Guardian Council's objection to Khatami’s reform of voting for the municipal council, reformers gained an estimated 75 percent of the seats.\textsuperscript{24} The stability of Khatami’s party proved to be essential in his continued fight against Iran’s government entities and constituted a united front.

In an attempt to combat this obstructionism, Khatami sought out the support of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has the power to override the Guardian Council's decisions. Although he agreed with some of Khatami’s positions, he tended to agree more with the conservatives.\textsuperscript{25} Regardless of these setbacks, civil society became more open as more newspapers became available and media outlets less controlled. Khatami also turned his attention to foreign relations by holding a summit called the “Organization of the Islamic Conference.”

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\textsuperscript{22} Siddiqi.
\textsuperscript{23} Ehteshami.
\textsuperscript{24} Gasiorowski.
\textsuperscript{25} Siddiqi.
not only improved relations with the Arab world, but also expressed a desire to improve Iran's relations with other countries as well.\textsuperscript{26}

Unfortunately, Khatami’s attempts at reforming Iran met with resistance. The constant barriers to reform, including the murder of some reformists in the government, worried many supporters. When it came time for the 2001 elections, however, Khatami decided to run again.\textsuperscript{27} Increased control of the presidency and reforms in other areas gave hope for more reforms. Khatami won again, with around 77 percent of the vote. Nevertheless, two years after the election the Guardian Council decided to crack down on reforms, leading to a deadlock between it and Khatami's coalition.

Analyzing this case proved to be more difficult than the previous cases because of the nature of the authoritarian regime in Iran. Because Khatami’s party remained relatively stable despite the threats and dangers it faced, Khatami’s popularity grew and members were able to integrate themselves into the system. The reason this rainbow coalition remained stable following the elections was the continued presence of a common enemy. Current literature does not recognize the 1997 elections as liberalizing because little reform took place. I, however, disagree. Although no major reforms took effect, this was not because of Khatami, but rather because of the design of the political system. While popular support was the source of the reformists’ power, the conservatives drew their power from their control of various branches of the government, causing continuous conflict.

In spite of persistent conflict, Khatami’s reforms changed the people of Iran forever. Civil society was no longer as inhibited, and foreign relations and the economy slowly improved. More importantly, Iranians’ the way of thinking changed. Khatami and his reformists brought to

\textsuperscript{26} Ehteshami.
\textsuperscript{27} Kopstein and Lichbach, 449–452.
light the government’s defects and encouraged people to question the system. Free elections, as well as a more vibrant multi-party system, are now a main focus of Iranian voters.\textsuperscript{28} After analyzing the components of this case study, I conclude that, contrary to popular belief, Iran’s 1997 elections did lead to liberalization. The subtle changes in Iran’s society indicate a liberalized way of thinking, while the changes in the Iranian government prove that Khatami and the stability of his party made a difference.

\textbf{Conclusion}

The emergence of competitive authoritarian regimes has led to numerous studies of the effects of elections. Most commonly, the focus remains on determining when elections in these regimes lead to liberalization. Current literature concentrates on the victory of the opposition and various forms of data to analyze these outcomes.\textsuperscript{29} It does not, however, tend to take into account the long-term effects of the elections.

By taking a closer look at the makeup of opposition groups, this paper has examined why stability is such an important factor in the ultimate success or lack of success of opposition movements in authoritarian regimes. After analyzing each case individually, it is clear that the stability of the opposition is in fact an independent variable in predicting liberalization. I have shown that if the party is unstable, liberalization will not occur at all, or else it will end in backsliding.

Additionally, my findings have highlighted problems with current methods of determining liberalization. The time period often analyzed when studying liberalizing electoral outcomes does not account for the events that take place during the entirety of a new leader's

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\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{29} Howard and Roessler, 50; 365–381.
term. This can lead to incorrect labeling of a competitive authoritarian regime's electoral outcome.

As I have previously stated, the key question is, “When do elections in authoritarian regimes lead to liberalization?” not, “When do elections in authoritarian regimes lead to the opportunity for liberalization?” The difference is only one word, yet it changes the dynamic of the question dramatically. A stable opposition emerges as the deciding factor for actual liberalization. All other factors are constant, yet still remain crucial parts of the liberalization process. This suggests that one should consider a stable opposition to be an independent variable that can help predict the outcome of this phenomenon. Despite setbacks that often occur in authoritarian regimes, elections offer a chance to implement change. Identifying the stability of the opposition as an independent variable provides a way for oppositional parties to succeed. Awareness of this factor might therefore decrease instability and increase the number of elections that ultimately lead to liberalization.

Works Cited


