



PROTEST TO POLICY: A Framework for Supporting Democratic Transitions

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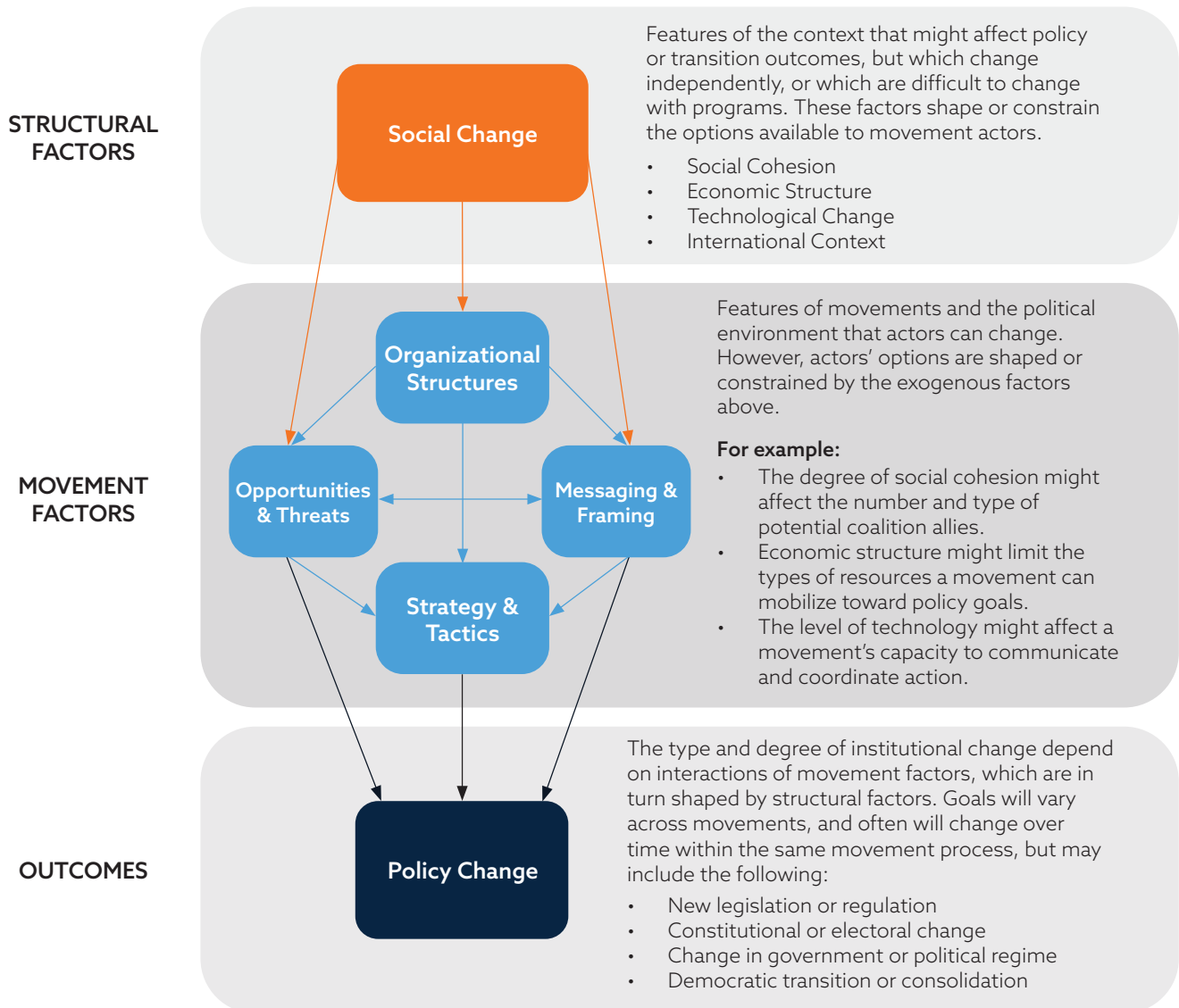
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Social movements are complex phenomena that depend on interactions of dozens of factors that vary across space and time. To simplify this complex process and facilitate policy and program recommendations, IRI developed an analytical framework based on several decades of scholarly research on social movements. This *Protest to Policy: A Framework for Supporting Democratic Transitions* posits that movement outcomes depend on factors at two levels. First, structural factors — including economic structure, technological change, social cleavages, and the international environment — change independently and are not easily manipulated either by movement actors or through development assistance. Second, these structural factors shape movement-level factors — including organizational structures, political opportunities and threats, messaging and framing, and strategy and tactics — by constraining the options available to movement actors. Most or all program levers exist at the movement level, but policymakers and program designers should be aware of how deeper structural factors constrain the options available to their local partners.

Figure 1: Visual Illustration of the Framework



This framework is adapted directly from Figure 1.2 (pp. 17) of McAdam, Doug, Sydney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly. 2001. *The Dynamics of Contention*. Cambridge University Press.

The following Framework focuses on the structural factors that shape the possibilities available to reform movements. Drawing on comparative research on protest-to-policy experiences across countries and secondary research on effects of foreign assistance on reform movements, this guide provides an analysis of the key structural factors that shape both movements and policy outcomes. It also provides a set of tools and exercises through which program implementers and local partners can work together to systematically analyze their country context to inform strategic planning within reform movements.

The Framework guides users through six steps via which they can develop their own priorities as they seek to influence democratic outcomes. Step one provides a structure through which users can assess a country's structural context and examine its democratic foundation. Step two offers a path to categorizing the country in a spectrum based on its democratic foundation. Step three helps users to map the actors and power dynamics in the country and assess the short-term tactical landscape. Step four guides users to identify where the country is in a transition cycle, and step five helps examine lessons from previous foreign assistance efforts. Step six allows users to synthesize their analysis and identify entry points.

The final Framework is intended for staff of funding agencies, implementing organizations, and their local partners in supporting reform and advocacy movements to achieve their policy goals. There are several potential applications within the lifecycle of a democracy support program, including strategic planning, context analysis, development of problem statements, program design, and in-cycle analysis (e.g., political economy analysis, landscape analysis, scenario planning, etc.). The Framework is intended to guide staff of funding and implementing organizations in ensuring that program expectations (objectives, theories of change, results chains, indicators, and activities) are sensitive to the local context and cognizant of the constraints facing local partners. The Framework may also be used as a guide to activities with local partners, to inform their own understanding of how their context shapes options for outreach, messaging and framing, and strategy and tactics.

INTRODUCTION: PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDE

Democracy activists and their international partners have a wide range of goals, including increasing democratic accountability by supporting the stakeholders who channel citizen interests into responsive policy. This challenge is especially pronounced during protests or social movements, when popular expressions of frustration can lead to conflict, instability, or even violence. While a fixed formula or linear process to translate protests to policy goals is often desirable, it will rarely be viable. Different countries can have varying conditions and possible trajectories. The purpose of this guide is to help democracy activists, and their policymaker and democracy and governance practitioner partners, before, during, and after transitions, and to do so in a way that is tailored to particular contexts.

Starting around 2006, the world began experiencing a “democratic recession,” wherein the number of democratic countries stagnated and even declined—despite protests in several places. While sustained pushback from authoritarian regimes has played a major role, a lack of understanding of context among international actors has also mattered. Whereas earlier transitions occurred in countries with relatively favorable conditions, today’s episodes often occur in places with more challenges to overcome, including weaker institutions, greater social divisions, poorer economic fundamentals, less supportive neighbors, and a domineering military.

Those using this guide will be equipped to address constraints and take advantage of opportunities that democratic activists face. These challenges require a deep understanding of local dynamics, which activists and those working on the frontline in countries can provide. Lessons from the transition experiences of other countries can help chart a path forward; the comparative framework here can help convert that local knowledge into practicable strategies and tactics that best fit the specific country in question. Information in this guide includes an assessment of what kind of foreign assistance has worked (or not) in comparable contexts, so that activists, policymakers, and democracy, rights, and governance (DRG) practitioners can devise priorities and recommendations for action. This guide builds on a wide-ranging study of the most important transitions since the end of the Cold War as well as the rich academic and practitioner literature on how to improve foreign assistance and better advance democracy (see Appendix for a list of sources).

Different Inceptions, Sequences, and Trajectories

Transitions can be triggered by social protests or a popular uprising that successfully pushes for reform (e.g., Tunisia in 2011, Gambia in 2017). But they don’t have to be, and often are not. Transitions are broader processes, and these mechanisms often play no role. Indeed, it is possible to undergo a transition without any protests or even a change in the leadership of a country (e.g., reform initiated by an authoritarian ruler, as in Ghana in 1992 and Mexico in the 1990s). Other **triggers of, or paths to, a transition** include the death of a ruler (e.g., Spain in 1975, Nigeria in 1998); the withdrawal of foreign support (e.g., Eastern Europe in 1989, many African countries in the early 1990s); a peace agreement (e.g., Mozambique in 1992, Nepal in 2006); outside intervention (e.g., Libya in 2011); and regime breakdown via defections (e.g., the Soviet Union in 1991).

Despite high expectations when transitions start, almost all countries face several obstacles that can easily lead to disappointment and even backlash. Clashing visions and priorities, sometimes on ethnic, religious, regional, clan, caste, class, or ideological lines, can prevent the formation of stable regimes that are widely viewed as legitimate. Weak governments can fail to act capably and equitably, encouraging groups to fight for power on winner-take-all terms.

Economies can stagnate or decline, hurting the lives of the very people whose high hopes of-ten ignited the transition in the first place, and making reform difficult to sustain. Violence in some form may be a danger.

Many countries, in fact, end up in an intermediate state—sometimes progressing, sometimes regressing—for extended periods. Change processes are open-ended rather than moving towards a fixed outcome, with oscillations through multiple transitions (e.g., Ukraine) or a return to authoritarianism (e.g., Algeria, Egypt) possible. Nevertheless, distinct stages in a transition can be identified, with each needing different actions to increase the chance that a positive outcome—the definition of which depends on context—is achieved.

At least three broad stages can be identified. **Protest or pre-transition** situations may include an ongoing negotiation, mediation, or dialogue processes (e.g., South Africa in the early 1990s) or significant movement among opposition actors or the general public to unify to increase the pressure on an existing regime (e.g., Tunisia in the years before 2011). **Early-transition** situations when risks are especially high from conflicting and rising demands, the precariousness of agreements among key groups or actors, and the power vacuum that a dramatic change in institutions can produce (e.g., Libya 2011–14). **Policy or post-transition** situations where the emphasis is on the difficult task of converting political change into the institutional and economic improvements necessary to produce stability and better countrywide outcomes going forward (e.g., Nepal, Kenya, Tunisia).

The Importance of Building a Foundation for Democracy

Each country has a “**democratic foundation**” of varying strength and makeup, requiring a substantially different strategic response customized to each context. This foundation depends on structural social, political, and economic factors that are unlikely to change except in the long-term. Depending on the degree of trust among key social groups, the strength of state institutions, the size of the middle class, the influence of neighboring countries, the extent and nature of the international context, and the dynamism of the economy, each place has significantly different possible futures which need to be realistically assessed and understood before strategic priorities are formulated. Some conditions—social cohesion and institutional dynamics—are more important because they determine how the interaction among major groups plays out.

This guidebook zeroes in on the key variables and then uses them to group countries into one of three zones along a continuum, depending on how sturdy their democratic foundation is. It should be noted that this foundation is not dependent on regime type or political opportunity structure and can only be changed gradually over time. For example, while Hong Kong is undemocratic, it has a sturdy foundation. Nigeria, on the other hand, is democratic but has a frail foundation. This then highlights how democracy activists and their international partners can shift their strategic priorities (and definitions of success—see below) depending on what zone a country is in. They can always find an opportunity to increase regime accountability, enhance the democratization of society, and work toward (or through) a transition, but the nature of the opportunity will differ.

Evaluating the Balance of Power

Once a country’s strategic context has been established, it is essential to understand the short-term tactical landscape (what some call the “political opportunity structure”) to determine which immediate moves are necessary to move a country forward. This involves evaluating the **balance of power** between democratic forces and their opponents (the existing regime pre-transition, spoilers early-or post-transition). This balance depends on both military and political factors—issues such as each side’s unity and leverage, as well as popular expectations. Activists, and their supporters, are more likely to gain traction when this balance is favorable, less likely when it is not. Of course, many individuals, institutions, and groups are not fully committed to either side, and the ability of democratic forces to alter their calculus may be essential to any change process.

What is Success?

Each context requires a different definition of a “positive outcome” and a different set of outcome-based measurement tools to evaluate progress. The country categorization and tactical landscape assessment processes frames what is possible. But no two places will be the same. Whereas in one country a negotiated transition to democracy and the implementation of a peaceful election would be a successful outcome, in another, it may be the strengthening of key institutions, and the improvement of the balance of power. Democratic opening is one manifestation of a transition, but it is not always the goal. In addition, there are typically multiple objectives that need to be balanced simultaneously, —and a tight fixation on one goal may undermine overall progress (e.g., holding too many regime insiders accountable may make the risk of violence greater).

While setting a clear set of goals is essential, it is important to avoid overly prescriptive formulas of how these might be achieved. Given that progress is rarely linear, and politics never static, success—however defined—will inevitably depend on agility, adaptability, and persistence in a fluid landscape. Project design should thus ensure that there is ample scope to monitor, evaluate, learn, adapt, and reformulate. Metrics should allow for small “experimental” or “incremental” steps toward a goal, rather than all-or-nothing scenarios. Funding mechanisms should be designed to respond rapidly to opportunities, with programming altered as needs evolve.

Outline of this Strategy Guidebook

This guidebook includes six steps to develop strategic and tactical priorities. It examines, in turn, the strategic landscape (incorporating both steps one and two), tactical opportunities, the country’s position in the transition cycle, and lessons from previous foreign assistance efforts. This step-by-step approach presents all the issues that should be considered and then synthesizes them into recommendations (in step six).

Step One	Assess Country Structural Context
Step Two	Categorize Country and Possible Pathways
Step Three	Assess Actors and Their Power Dynamics
Step Four	Identify Where the Country is in the Transition Cycle
Step Five	Incorporate Foreign Assistance Lessons Learned
Step Six	Synthesize Analysis to Create Recommendations

1.

STEP ONE Assess Country Structural Context

The first step is to analyze how strong a country's democratic foundation is in order to categorize it. The structural elements should be examined here in step one, beginning with the two elements that are most important to that foundation: social cohesion and institutional dynamics. A rubric is provided at the end of each element to guide the assessment. Rubric numerals are designed to guide the assessment but are not intended to be tallied. (While using country specific analyses to do this assessment is essential, the Appendix lists some sources that might be useful in any state.)

Social Cohesion

The extent of social cohesion—the relationships and norms that create a natural attachment and group allegiance to a community—matters tremendously as to whether a country can easily democratize or not. The stronger the overarching identity, social bond, and trust are the more likely key actors will come together to forge a common vision for the future and settle disputes among themselves in a way that is viewed as legitimate across ethnic groups or political factions. But where social cohesion is weak or nonexistent, leaders compete in ways that split society into parts (factions) yielding, at best, an unstable political order with low acceptance by at least some of these different factions (low legitimacy), and ongoing crises that are hard to manage. In such places, it is more difficult to garner unified action aimed at ousting an existing regime, forge a stable political agreement after it falls, and build robust institutions able to maintain momentum over the long term.

Factors to consider include:

- How strong is the overarching national **identity** (which can enhance cooperation and compromise across groups)? Does it matter more than ethnic, religious, tribal, clan, class, or regional identities (which can divide society in ways that make cooperation and compromise difficult to achieve)? Do **leaders** trust each other? Have they cooperated before?
- Are there **political narratives** particular to each group or overarching in a way that unites groups around common concerns? Is the **media** unified or separate for each group?
- Is a **political settlement** (an agreement or understanding among political elites) between the most important actors or groups possible? Are their demands likely to be reasonable and amenable to negotiation? Are they likely to use force if negotiations fail?
- Is there a long set of **complaints** between different groups? A history of violence and conflict between different parts of society? Do elites **favor** particular social groups at the expense of other groups with important political appointments, access to land, or language policy? What are the likely consequences of such actions?
- Does the state have a long **history** or is it a relatively recent creation? Did it form in a bottom-up way over time or was it formed by other countries (e.g., boundaries set by colonial powers)?

Compare Tunisia's and Libya's experiences since the 2010–11 Arab Spring (the sources for these case studies, as well as others noted, are available in the Appendix). Tunisia, which is relatively cohesive and boasts a large middle class greatly exposed to democratic norms from abroad, was the only successful transition to democracy in the region until Kais Saied's self-coup in May 2021.

After the fall of the previous regime, the major political forces came together quickly (they had been meeting to prepare since 2003) to work on the transition. Even though the country faced many problems since, these groups were still working together peacefully (if not always agreeably). The country’s cohesion contributed to two other factors that proved helpful: the government worked reasonably well (despite being bureaucratic and slow) and the military was quick to profess loyalty to the state, rather than any individual, turning against the old regime and pledging to stay out of politics. While consolidation of a new political order takes time even in a cohesive society, Tunisia’s cohesiveness and its other supporting elements until 2021 suggested that it could proceed relatively steadily and in an orderly way. Saied’s takeover amid multiple crisis (the COVID-19 pandemic, an economic downturn, and political stalemate) and the actions since then has led to reversal of Tunisia’s democratic gains. However, social cohesion enabled years of progress.

Libya, in contrast, is splintered tribally, ethnically, regionally, and ideologically into many competing groups. The middle class has limited exposure to democratic norms from abroad, and the country has little experience with democracy or modern statehood. Plagued by patronage and corruption, government bodies are weakly institutionalized and rarely apolitical. While opposition forces cooperated to oust the Muammar al-Gaddafi regime, once it fell different groups have mostly competed for resources on their own, frustrating every attempt to establish a stable unified national government. The proliferation of weapons and the intervention of multiple outside powers have not helped. The country has very limited cohesion and no institutions robust enough to funnel activity toward productive outcomes.

Social cohesion, it should be noted, does not necessarily depend on homogeneity. Countries such as India, Tanzania, and Indonesia all have crafted an overarching, unifying national identity that brings their various ethnic and religious groups together, making them more resilient in times of great stress. This stands in contrast to their neighbors who have not (Pakistan, South Sudan, Kenya, and Burma).

Social Cohesion Rubric

1	2	3	4	5
<i>Strong overarching national identity that the great majority of people subscribe to; unifying leaders, media, and education.</i>	<i>High degree of tolerance for differences; limited politicization of media and history curriculum.</i>	<i>Weak national identity; disagreement over distribution of power and resources but limited violence between groups.</i>	<i>Struggle for power and resources based on particular identities and yielding repeated clashes; history of conflict and mistrust.</i>	<i>Major political divisions and conflict among communities; efforts to unite or reconcile groups unsuccessful.</i>

If a strong national identity exists, activists can leverage it to promote their cause (e.g., Poland). But if significant social cleavages exist, they must be proactively addressed (e.g., Indonesia) or risk inflaming tensions between different groups (e.g., Libya). In places with weak social cohesion, stakeholders should prioritize mechanisms for improving decentralization, power sharing, alliances across groups, and better conflict-management. For example, funders, implementers, and local partners can invest in mechanisms that mitigate collective action problems by bringing together disparate groups in order to organize structured interaction between different group leaders.

Additionally, stakeholders can support organizations that can facilitate coalition building, invest in institutions that can mitigate disputes between groups, help build political parties and social identities that can transcend parochial interests, and bolster attempts to build consensus and set cross-cutting agendas.

Institutional Dynamics

The capacity of government institutions—and traditional or other forms of public authority—to work effectively and equitably across different parts of society is also crucial to determining how easy it will be for activists to promote democratization and where they should focus their efforts. The better government institutions are at maintaining security, providing public services, arbitrating disputes, running elections, providing justice, and responding to citizen demands, the more likely significant change can be introduced peacefully. Similarly, a stronger, more institutionalized civil society (e.g., political parties, unions, religious organizations, professional associations, advocacy groups, community groups, and charities) will better bridge social divides, and a country will be better prepared to introduce competitive politics. Where institutions are weak and biased, there may be a winner-take-all attitude toward power, it will be challenging to achieve broad legitimacy, and civil society is less likely to favor change.

Factors to consider include:

- If the regime changes or the ruling clique is removed, will public institutions be able to maintain **core functions** and the state maintain its **monopoly on violent force**? What will happen in the areas of the country where the state is weakest? What are the implications if public order weakens, or ungoverned spaces appear?
- How **robust, apolitical, uncorrupt, and equitable** are state institutions such as the security forces, electoral commission, national oil company, and judicial bodies? Are they likely to work well enough to gain broad legitimacy? Treat all factions equally? Distribute resources equitably? Reallocate resources and power if an agreement promises to do so? Arbitrate disputes without favoritism? Prevent political leaders from dispensing special favors?
- How vigorous and independent is **civil society**? Is it deeply embedded in society or beholden to the state? Does it work to bring together different parts of society, or does it simply replicate underlying divisions? How institutionalized is it? How able is civil society to catalyze collective and structured public action?
- What kinds of **norms** govern state institutions and the use of power (e.g., norms around the acceptability of a coup d'état, nepotism, corruption, use of public funds, and advancing public versus private goals)?
- How do **informal authority** (e.g., tribal leaders, elders, religious organizations, communal organizations, local self-defense forces, business elites, warlords, organized crime) and **norms** influence how the state works, how power is used, and how elite commitments are maintained? Do these discriminate against particular groups or classes or regions? Favor elite interests? Work to bridge or aggravate social tensions?

In assessing institutional dynamics, contrast Chile's and Guatemala's experiences during their transitions. In the former case, strong institutions directly contributed to a successful transformation of the country. Although the military was granted amnesty and a special political and economic dispensation after the restoration of civilian rule in 1990, the robust rule of law constrained its ability to maintain its previously dominant role. Meanwhile, strong political parties, government administration, the business community, and civil society all played a role in ensuring the transition to democracy went smoothly and that a strong economy delivered broad benefits for the population. In the decades that followed, Chile would become, arguably, the most successful country in Latin America, with annual growth of over five percent and regular rotations of political power.

In Guatemala, weak institutions greatly limited the gains from the 1996 peace accords that ended the country's civil war. Weak rule of law meant that corruption grew to such an extent that the state itself was, in effect, captured by politicians working with illicit groups. Guatemala had limited ability to implement changes, which was exacerbated by a lack of political leadership and funding of mandates, so many commitments in the accords have failed to achieve their goals. Meanwhile, violence continues, albeit in a different form from the war: the country has a major gang problem and one of the world's highest homicide rates. Severe impunity means that few criminals, corrupt political actors, or government officials are ever jailed. The indigenous population, which suffered the most from the war, continues to be substantially excluded from the political, economic, and social spheres, ensuring that dissatisfaction with the status quo will continue to threaten stability.

Institutional Dynamics Rubric

1	2	3	4	5
Institutions more or less work the same for everyone and effectively implement policies and deliver public services.	Independence and accountability of institutions are advancing; corruption still apparent but does not favor any group.	Some discrimination in public services across groups; mixed enforcement of laws and policy implementation.	Widespread corruption, politicization of public services and monetization of politics; state uneven across territory.	Public services highly inequitable across groups; government highly ineffective and corrupt; ungoverned spaces exist or likely.

If a country has robust institutions, activists can leverage them to promote their cause but, if they are weak, efforts must be made to enhance the ones most important to democracy (e.g., Ghana) or risk seeing them become a source of conflict (e.g., Kenya). In places with weak institutions, leveraging external anchors (e.g., the European Union), creating or expanding islands of excellence (robust institutions or parts of institutions within the country), strengthening the most important courts, and increasing the autonomy and capacity of electoral commissions should all be prioritized.

The social cohesion and institutional dynamics explored above are especially important for categorization because of how they influence everything else. Of course, there are additional elements that also influence a state’s trajectory. The three most important of these additional elements are the economy, security, and international context.

Economy

The nature of the economy, methods of wealth creation, class structure, distribution of resources, living conditions and so forth can have significant influence on how countries evolve. A higher degree of economic sophistication and diversification (including exports) and a larger middle class make a country more likely to have institutions, social norms, population expectation, and elite incentives that promote more peaceful, democratic outcomes. On the other hand, if a country is dependent on natural resources for its wealth, has a narrow economic base, and has a small middle class, it will be more likely that the competition for power will be seen as zero sum.

Factors to consider include:

- What are the primary sources of **government revenues**? How dependent is the state on revenue from the export of oil and gas and minerals, and foreign aid? Does it have an independent tax collection capacity and high rates of compliance? How does this affect elite and group behavior?
- Do a small number of **powerful players** or members of one social group dominate economic activity? Do they have preferential access to markets, regulators, government tenders, and dispute adjudicators? Does their personal wealth or security depend on winning political power? Will they gain or lose disproportionately from economic reform? How do these factors affect their behavior and the political dynamic in the country? Can the situation be ameliorated?
- How does the country’s **class structure** influence politics? How large and influential is the **middle class**? How much influence does it have over politics?
- How strong are **economic fundamentals** (e.g., quality of the education system, infrastructure, financial system, legal regime, and business community)? How diversified and **internationally competitive** is a country’s economy?

- If there is a period of instability during a transition, how will this affect the economy, investment, and employment opportunities? **Popular opinion** concerning the new regime?

Consider, for example, Ukraine. Despite democratizing further than several of its neighbors (e.g., Belarus, Russia), repeated attempts to fully transition—in 1990–91, 2004, and 2013–14—have come up short. Reforms have always achieved less than desired outcomes. Oligarchs (well-connected, wealthy business leaders who exert outsized influence) continue to dominate the economy, controlling and corrupting institutions in the process and preventing markets from working as they should. The rule of law remains weak as a result. Growth has disappointed, with average incomes still substantially below their Soviet levels, in contrast to both Russia and Ukraine’s EU neighbors to the west, where they have recovered and risen. In Ukraine, there may be a need to co-opt economic elites that are “on the outs” in order to shift the political dynamics amongst powerful oligarchs more in favor of reform than to simply count on popular sentiment to drive change. The ongoing war is bound to have a significant impact on Ukraine’s economic trajectory, nevertheless major reforms will be needed to strengthen its economic fundamentals. Poland, on the other hand, has been one of Europe’s success stories since its transition in 1989, at least partly because of its consistent focus on economic reform. The country has been the continent’s growth champion in recent years. Membership in the European Union, which anchored its institutions and provided a ready market for its products, certainly helped.

Economy Rubric

1	2	3	4	5
<p><i>Strong economic foundation; diversified economy; highly educated workforce; strong local businesses; open access to markets; objective regulation and dispute adjudication.</i></p>	<p><i>Significant diversification; large middle class and indigenous business sector; business climate relatively healthy.</i></p>	<p><i>Some diversification; some middle class; some robust indigenous companies; rule of law safeguards assets and wealth.</i></p>	<p><i>Weak economic fundamentals; elite domination; weak rule of law; regulations enforced unevenly; adjudication of disputes biased in favor of politically friendly individuals and firms; some reform and investment; limited diversification.</i></p>	<p><i>Low education levels; poor infrastructure; weak rule of law; corruption severe; depends on natural resources; market access limited to political insiders or those with the resources to corrupt officials.</i></p>

If a country has a robust economy, activists can both leverage the support it should create for democracy and assume economic resilience when change comes (e.g., Taiwan, South Korea). But, if it is weak, efforts should at least be made to ensure a transition does not produce a small number of winners or cause a downturn that can weaken support for change (e.g., Poland). In places with weak economies and a small middle class, greater effort may be necessary to build public support, ensure reforms benefit everyone, and improve the investment climate and entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Security

Whether a country stays secure or not during a transition greatly impacts other dynamics as well as the decisions political leaders make. The more secure a place is, the less likely tribal, ethnic, or religious social identities will predominate, the less tolerance there will be for any kind of violence, the stronger the economy is likely to be, and the more likely political actors will be able to compromise and work across divides for the common good. On the other hand, chronic violence makes it very difficult for groups across society to build the trust and cooperation necessary to manage a transition and hold competitive elections successfully.

Factors to consider include:

- Does the government have a **monopoly on the use of force**? If so, does it use that monopoly accountably and equitably? If not, are there militias or armed actors ready to take advantage of any power vacuum or weakening of territorial control?
- How secure are neighboring or **nearby countries**? Are they likely to be conduits for weapons, the movement of extremists across borders, or criminal activity? Are there any extremist groups in the country or in nearby countries?
- Are **ungoverned spaces** likely to appear? Will any armed groups take advantage?
- Do members of a **former ruling regime**, rebel group, paramilitary force, or warlord militia have an incentive or interest in joining the political process? If they feel disenfranchised, what are the likely consequences? Is violence possible?
- Is there a **history of using violence** to achieve political aims? Are all politicians equally safe? Is security an obstacle to representatives of any societal groups?

How might Libya's trajectory have differed if the country had been entirely secure from the time its transition started in 2011? Although it is impossible to know, at the least militias would have had much less or no power and regional and tribal divisions could have been less stark. This could have yielded a somewhat different political dynamic: compromise between groups would have been more likely; armed actors would have less influence; and elections would likely have not produced more than one government. Corruption would still have been severe, but the internationally recognized government would have had a greater chance to establish itself and restore public services. The oil industry would have gotten back on its feet quicker and possibly even expanded. Sentiment would have been much more positive, creating a more virtuous cycle of support for needed reforms. External actors would have become much less influential. Terrorist groups such as the Islamic State would have had a much harder time getting rooted and growing in influence. The number of migrants aiming to use Libya as a springboard to cross the Mediterranean would be much lower, relieving some of the pressure on Europe. Similarly, if a secure environment could have been maintained in South Sudan, its transition would have been less of a failure. Although the introduction of anything like multiparty democracy was unlikely, given the weakness of institutions, lack of social cohesion, and dependence on armed force and oil-engineered patronage to maintain power, at least some progress could have been achieved. The political struggle would have been peaceful, with agreements more likely to stick, and interethnic fighting—and the lingering tensions these have brought—avoided.

Ministries would have had the opportunity to better leverage the abundance of foreign assistance to improve operations, with foreign pressure focused on strengthening institutions rather than ending warfare. Decentralization could have advanced, with the devolution of power easing tensions between the warring groups, offering a chance that at least some of the states would become more democratically governed. Stability would also have enabled the economy to gradually develop and diversify, raising living standards off their very low base, and better linking the country to neighbors that are moving in fits and starts towards more inclusive politics.

In both cases, even if security did not bring democracy immediately, it would have allowed the countries to gradually improve their relatively weak democratic foundation, laying the groundwork for it over time. In the absence of security, the foundation has, instead, become weaker.

Security Rubric

1	2	3	4	5
Highly secure; no violence in politics or major role for gangs; all of territory safe; police and legal system easily tackles crime.	Government monopoly on force; neighbors mostly secure; some issues with gangs or inequitable use of force; politicians safe.	Government has close to monopoly on force; some history of political violence; risk of no-go areas or gangs.	Parts of country insecure/ungoverned; state lacks monopoly on violence; certain groups/leaders more vulnerable than others.	Country in conflict, with few wholly secure areas; proliferation of weapons; militias active; state forces weak.

If a country has few security concerns, activists can assume that rapid change poses little risk (e.g., Chile). But, if security may become an issue, efforts must be made to reduce the risks it poses (e.g., Liberia) or risk seeing it substantially reconfigure politics or even create the conditions for war (e.g., Yemen, Libya). In places with high security risks, leveraging international peacekeeping troops, securing weapons, disarming militias, and incorporating potential spoilers into the political settlement should all be prioritized.

International Context

Regional and global actors and ideas can dramatically change the trajectory a country takes during a transition. (Step two will explain trajectories) Important foreign powers can either play a highly constructive role (for example, the EU in Eastern Europe) or stand in the way of progress and even fund or arm local groups opposed to change (for example, Russia in the former Soviet states). In general, the more stable and developed nearby states are, and the more unified international actors are, the more likely they will constructively influence outcomes and encourage democratization. Regional norms—on everything from governance to the role of the military in politics to expectations of leaders—can also matter tremendously.

Factors to consider include:

- What are a country's **neighbors** like? Stable or conflict-affected? Democratic or authoritarian? Developed or poor? How strong are their institutions? What norms of governance predominate?
- Which **external states or groups** are deeply involved in the country? How do their interests and activities directly affect the choices of societal groups and state officials? Are they likely to want to support or disrupt a transition? Are they likely to favor one group over others?
- Does the state have relationships with **international actors** that can provide the resources to help it mitigate some of its largest challenges? Who are the main providers of international aid, advice, and assistance, and what issues are they prioritizing? Are they united or divided on the way forward for the country?
- How might **regional changes** in identity, narratives, expectations, political norms (e.g., regarding coups d'état, secession, or violence), economic conditions, and power dynamics affect different parts of society? Might these changes trigger or affect the evolution of a transition?

Regional norms can strongly influence what is acceptable in a particular context and thus what choices political actors make. For example, whereas military rule and coup d'états were once common across sub-Saharan Africa, in recent decades they have become unacceptable, constraining the armed forces in most of the region.

While instances of coups have spiked in recent years - most of them taking place in Africa - coups happen much less frequently as compared to last several decades, and when they do the military must hand over power to civilians relatively quickly. In contrast, the military plays a dominant role in North African politics as the leading actor in Egypt and Algeria, and as one of the leading actors in Libya, Sudan, and South Sudan. Similarly, the military has long played an important role in Southeast Asia: dominant in Burma, repeatedly assuming power through coups in Thailand, and influential in Bangladesh, Indonesia (where it once ruled), and elsewhere. The institution has high expectations for its role and little competition for its position in society. Another example: whereas in West Africa, competitive elections and term limits are increasingly the norm, in Central Africa fixed elections and rule without end are common.

As for the role of regional and global actors in a transition, consider Romania, North Macedonia, and Ukraine. Each has had its trajectory shaped by its relationship with two important regional actors—the EU and Russia. Although Romania has had problems with corruption and poor governance, first the attractiveness of joining the EU and then the anchor of being a member (and being held accountable for meeting certain standards) has played a pivotal role in its democratic path. This means there is less pressure on leaders to pass and implement reforms and ensure institutions work at a minimum standard (even if the potential for cooperation with the EU has always been a central focus of social mobilization in support of reform in the country). Meanwhile, its other neighbor, Russia, has used military, intelligence, economic, and media assets to invade Ukraine’s territory, divide its population, corrupt its state, and even to make its leaders beholden to Russian interests.

North Macedonia is a middle case, with prospects of joining the EU, having started accession negotiations with the EU in 2022 while still experiencing some influence from Russia. It has zigzagged between democratizing reform and more authoritarian governance, with reform advocates (within as well as across political parties) getting the upper hand during periods when EU membership seemed likely and their opponents getting the upper hand when it receded. In all three states it is impossible to consider how the transition might have evolved without considering these outside actors. This points to the importance of leveraging such actors—by, for example, raising awareness of activist goals and the opening of critical junctures (e.g., election, economic crisis, patronage shift)—in order to shift the incentives of existing leaders in the country.

International Context Rubric

1	2	3	4	5
<i>Stable, democratic, highly developed neighborhood, with broad consensus on how to assist the country and resources to do so.</i>	<i>International actors unified; regional norms mixed; neighbors stable but only some democratic; little threat of extremism.</i>	<i>International actors divided but not intervening; some neighborhood instability; some threat of extremist spillover.</i>	<i>International actors divided; regional picture mixed; norms do not encourage compromise.</i>	<i>Authoritarian, conflict-prone neighborhood; sectarian or extremist ideology influential; outsiders intervene on opposite sides.</i>

If a country has a supportive international context, activists can leverage a wide range of outside assistance to support their cause (e.g., Eastern Europe). But, if that context may work to undermine any attempts to democratize, efforts must be made to address the causes (e.g., Georgia) or risk seeing that influence block change or encourage conflict (e.g., Ukraine, Hong Kong). In places with a poor international context, forging greater internal unity, leveraging greater support from sympathetic international actors, boosting security, changing the incentives of negative international actors, and incorporating potential spoilers into the political settlement should all be prioritized.

2.

STEP TWO CATEGORIZE COUNTRY AND POSSIBLE PATHWAYS

A country can be grouped into one of three zones based on the analysis in step one. The range of possibilities can be mapped out along a continuum or spectrum. A country's place on the spectrum relies on how strong its democratic foundation is (see Figure 4). This can be determined by assessing the five elements introduced in step one. Tallying rubric scores can be helpful (with highest scores falling in Zone 3, as noted below) but they should not be relied upon too strongly for placement. Consider how well a country fits the profile of the various zones and consider your knowledge of the local context. (The Appendix provides some preliminary categorizations.) The zone descriptions below include examples of policy recommendations to aid categorization; see step six for a more thorough analysis.

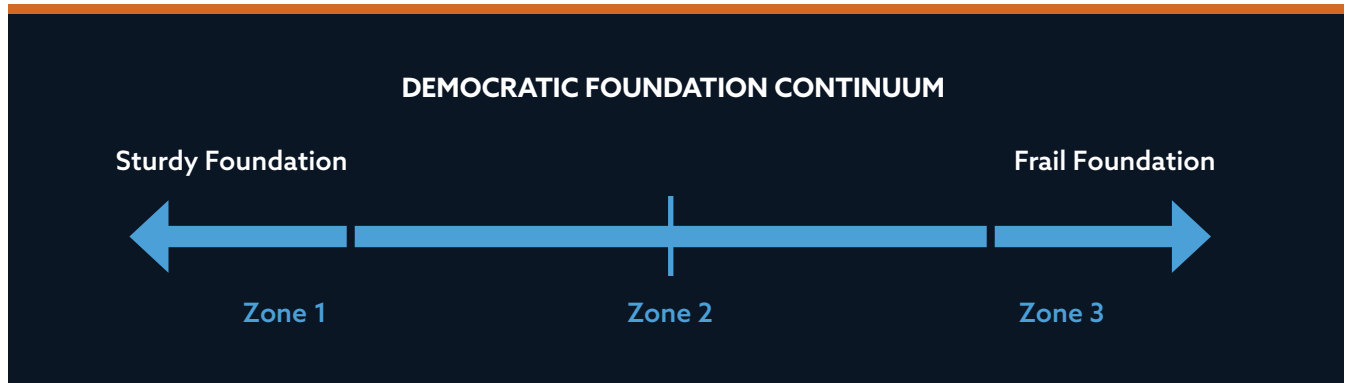
The continuum displays the results of sorting countries into three broad zones, from frail to sturdy (see Figure 2 below):

- **Zone 1**, on the left side of the continuum, includes those countries with the strongest foundation. They have more cohesion, more robust institutions, better security, stronger economic fundamentals, and so forth. These include almost all developed countries, as well as developing countries such as Poland, Tunisia, and Chile. This group is the most resilient. It has the best prospects for democratization and economic development. In these places, reformers can aggressively promote reform and a democratic opening. There will be more accountability levers to pull, more allies to leverage, and a stronger civil society in place. Elections can come quickly, with more actors and institutions supportive of changes in government, and less concern over electoral design and state capacity. Violent spoilers are less likely to appear.
- **Zone 2** lies in the middle of the spectrum, encompassing countries with middling foundations. States with weak but functioning institutions and some social fractures are typically held back by unstable or nonexistent political settlements, severe disagreements about the nature of the state, limited capacity, mixed economic conditions, a relatively poor regional context, occasional outbreaks of violence, and the inability of institutions to constrain elites and security forces. Countries in this middle zone include Nepal (which has weak institutions and numerous social divides), North Macedonia (which has festering ethnic divisions and weak democratic institutions), Kenya (which continues to suffer from ethnic divisions but has generally managed to limit violence), and Ukraine (which confronts a Russian-fueled insurgency, a corrupt state apparatus, and an ethnolinguistic divide). In these places, reformers should be opportunistic, prepared for change that is cyclical and inconsistent—sometimes forward, some-times backward—at least until the foundation is strengthened. Success depends on bolstering key institutions, addressing group-based inequalities, strengthening national identities, building a coalition across social cleavages and elite groups, and resolving conflicts over resources.
- **Zone 3**, on the right side of the continuum, includes the countries with highly fragmented political cultures, weakly institutionalized state structures, fragile neighbors, poor economic fundamentals, potentially high levels of negative foreign intervention, and so forth. These states are more easily controlled, corrupted, or influenced to favor a particular (ruling or powerful) group at the expense of everyone else, thus setting up a zero-sum power struggle among competing parts of society. This zone, which includes Somalia, Libya, Burma, South Sudan, and Afghanistan, is comprised of fundamentally weak and unstable states. Even if such countries happen to be free from violence for a time, the prospects for a speedy transition to democracy are still poor. Activists should be cautious about change in these places, investing in the foundation and seeking incremental, rather than rapid, change.

Success may involve establishing political settlements, leveraging external anchors, reducing the negative role of outsiders, reconfiguring incentives away from illicit activities, and creating or expanding islands of excellence.

Although all countries fit within one of the three zones, the template as a whole is best understood as a continuum; no two places have the same foundation or composite foundational strength. Many fall along the right side (in the case of zones 1 and 2) or left side (in the case of zones 2 and 3) of their groups and thus come relatively close to straddling two zones (e.g., Romania lies in zone 1 but is near the boundary with zone 2). These boundary-dwellers share some similarities with countries on the other side of the dividing line.

Figure 2: Country Categorization

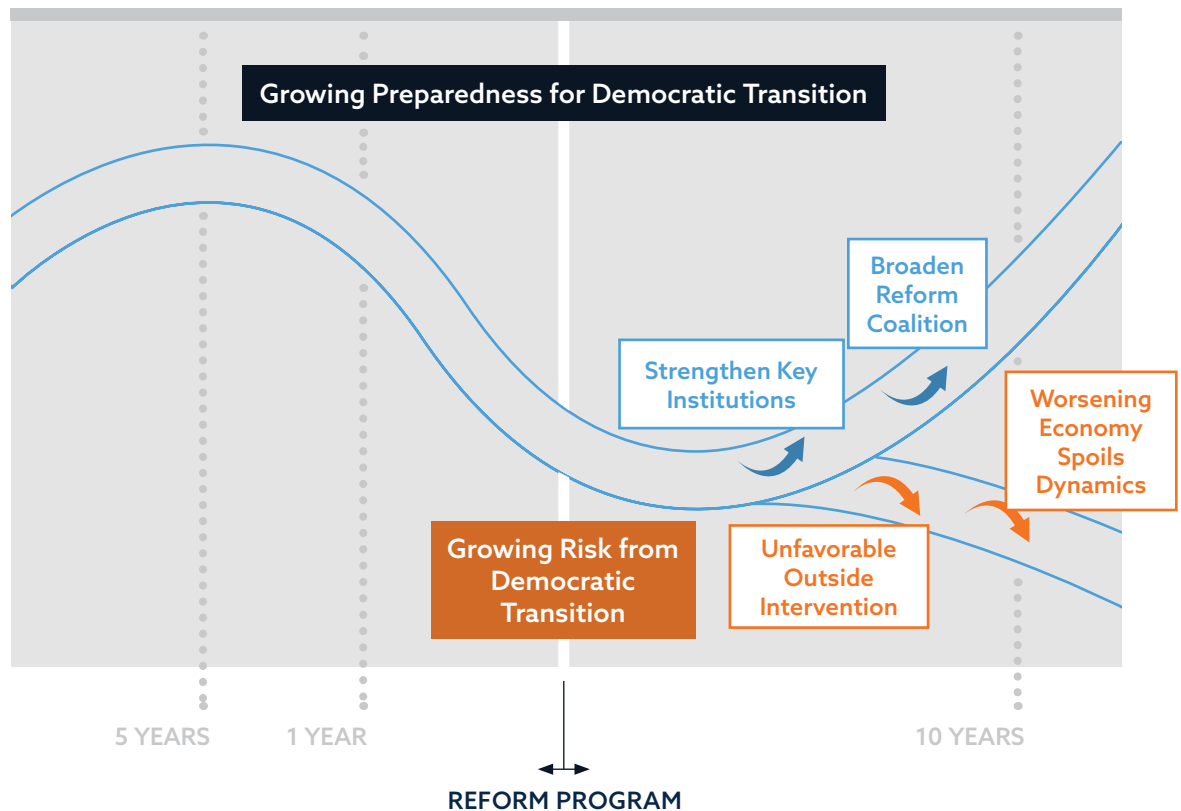


Every country has a **range of possible pathways** once it enters a transition, depending on the strength of its foundation (see Figure 3). Path dependency—the idea that the choices made in the past constrain the choices available for actors today—shapes the range of possible trajectories and outcomes going forward. The comparative framework, centered on the three zones above and provided in this strategy guidebook, offers a way to understand how a foundation affects a country's prospects. While there will be variation among countries in each zone, their place on the spectrum can still approximate possible pathways forward. The stronger the foundation, the faster a country can move forward and the more likely it will be successful if it does. A weak foundation, however, does not close the door for activists; it prompts a more cautious approach with different definitions for "success," as noted above.

Figure 3: Possible Pathways Forward

This figure illustrates how a reform program can shift the pathway of a country.

New leadership, policies, or political dynamics can either improve a country's prospects or worsen it.



These three zones represent three different sets of possible pathways forward and three different strategic paradigms. Step six examines the implications for activists and their international partners. Next, let's examine the tactical landscape.

3.

STEP THREE ASSESS ACTORS AND THEIR POWER DYNAMICS

Once a country has been categorized, it is important to assess the main elements influencing the short-term tactical context or political opportunity structure. Four stand out as being especially important: the existing regime, democratic activists, popular expectations, and potential spoilers.

Existing Regime

The strength of a nondemocratic government depends on the nature of the regime, as well as its unity and popular support. The more cohesive and institutionalized the power structure—typically in a dominant organization such as the military (e.g., Egypt, Burma, and Pakistan) or ruling political party (e.g., China, Nicaragua) but also possibly in a monarchy (e.g., Jordan, Thailand)—the more likely it will make necessary adaptations to maintain public support and resist efforts to undermine its position. But, depending on the context, powerful actors can also accept change, negotiate its terms and speed, maintain power from behind the scenes after the political leadership has been replaced (e.g., Pakistan), or act as spoilers after a transition commences (e.g., Egypt in 2013).

Factors to consider include:

- Is there a **political party** or well-organized clique that has long ruled and will work to maintain its position even at the cost of violence? What are its ties with armed actors (including paramilitaries, militias, etc.)?
- What are the **military's** thoughts on change? What is it likely to do during a transition? Does it have important political or economic interests to protect? Does it have a history of playing a leading role in government? What are its relationships with other elites like?
- Does any group have **control** over key institutions (intelligence agency, special police force, electoral commission, media, judiciary)? How willing would such a group be to give up control? If they retain it, how will they use it? What inducements or threats might encourage these institutions or groups away from their (active or passive) support of the regime such that they support or acquiesce to change? What actions (e.g., lobbying, linking issues to interests, setting narratives or agendas) might encourage them to better incorporate citizen input? What tactics might encourage or cement these shifts?
- Are there **elite divisions** to exploit (e.g., between hardliners and moderates or between regime insiders and those on the outs)? Have there been any recent developments, such as an election, shift in economic fortune, or event in a nearby country, that might have made some elites more sympathetic to reform? Where might there be leverage to exploit such opportunities? What kind of agreement and safeguards (e.g., of economic interests) might encourage compromise, defection, or at least, a change in behavior?
- How **popular** is the existing regime? Is this popularity deserved or does its control of the media play a significant role? What other mechanisms does the regime use to boost its support or at least gain the loyalty of key groups (e.g., identity, ideology, patronage, personal charisma)? How might these be undermined? Are there abuses or policy failures that can be identified and broadcast to the population?

Egypt, for example, has decent cohesion (excluding the Sinai Peninsula) and institutions, products of its long history as a state. But its dominant military was never going to allow a transition, such as the one that started in 2011, that threatened its core interests (access to re-sources and patronage) and identity (as a professional force and protector of the national interest). In recent years, the military's interests have expanded to include large parts of the economy. The presence of a relatively strong opposition group—the Muslim Brotherhood—ready to take advantage of any opening to supplant the military as the dominant actor (as well as other less organized opposition groups) certainly influenced the military's calculus. The small size of the middle class, limited exposure to, and experience with, democratic norms and undeveloped civil society reduced its constraints.

Burma exhibits even more difficult constraints. It is riven by ethnic and religious divisions, facing as many as 20 or more ethnic insurgencies at the same time. Significant parts of the country remain without any substantial formal state presence and have not had any for decades. The military, which sees its presence as the only way to save the country, has dominated politics and the economy for decades (it took over for good in 1962), killing thousands to keep power in 1988 and suppressing protestors seeking political change in 2007–08. Despite some changes on the surface and a veneer of democracy starting in 2012, the military never relinquished power, maintaining a tight grip on key economic resources (from which it profit-ably benefits) and important state institutions. Efforts by the opposition party, Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy, to leverage its popularity to gradually weak-en the military's hold meant that a showdown was perhaps inevitable. Given the regional context—most of its neighbors are undemocratic—the military probably assumed its 2021 aggression would be accepted, even if reluctantly.

A transition that introduced some reform was possible in both these countries, but only if it proceeded in a way that did not directly threaten the military's interests. The best case was something similar to what has happened in Pakistan since 2008. Pakistan now has regular elections and changes in ruling parties despite the military not relinquishing much power.

Democratic Activists

The ability of democratic activists to organize, build popular support for their cause, catalyze broad popular action, adapt to changing circumstances, identify and broadcast abuses, and negotiate with key elites determines the success of their efforts. Leadership matters a lot here. It can inspire, forge, and sustain the collective action necessary, as well as strategically shift efforts or compromise with potential partners or the existing government, when circumstances require it. In contrast, when activists are divided, inflexible, isolated, poorly led, or badly organized, they are greatly disadvantaged. In general, the more an opposition is prepared to govern before it has its chance, the more likely it will succeed when that chance arrives.

Factors to consider include:

- How **unified and organized** are activists? What mechanisms or causes might bring people together and energize collective action aimed at change? What might improve their organization and cohesion? Incorporate key leaders or parts of the population currently standing on the sidelines? What institutions or incentives might help activists catalyze collective action and overcome free rider problems (attempts by actors or groups to reap the benefits of action while limiting their own costs and contributions)?
- Where do major social and economic leaders stand? How strong is the activists' **leadership**? Can it catalyze a population to take the risks necessary to make change possible? Sustain that effort in the face of great challenges? Ensure that potential coalition partners are not co-opted by the regime? Adapt or make compromises when necessary? Does it have the relationships and trust necessary to negotiate with other key actors, including members of the existing regime?
- What organizations are identifying **regime abuses**? Are there media that can broadcast these to the general population? What might strengthen these channels?
- How **prepared are activists** to govern? What might enhance their preparation?
- How **secure** are activists? What might enhance their communications and physical security?

Citizen activists played key roles in both the 1990 and 2006 revolutions in Nepal. In both cases, a peaceful People's Movement (also known as Jana Andolan I and II) spurred change, first from an absolute monarchy with only one legal political party, to a multiparty democracy in 1990, and then to democracy's reinstatement in 2006 (following a royal coup in 2005) and abolishment of the monarchy. In the earlier revolution, the combination of a coalition among major political parties and factions and protests led by students, human rights organizations, and unions played a critical role. In the more recent revolution, a series of actions culminated in drastic change. Civil society organizations, which were working in many parts of the country despite restrictions on them, formed a coalition. The main political parties put aside their differences and joined in a Seven Party Alliance. After fighting the government for a decade and then responding to the coup with strikes and blockades, the Maoists decided to suspend violence.

These three groups negotiated a 12-point agreement, committing everyone to a common and transformative agenda. As part of the agreement, representatives from each movement came together to form the Jana Andolan Coordination Committees. Combined, these groups galvanized widespread protests estimated to encompass as many as five million people in cities and villages across the country. After an attempted crackdown by the government, a second wave of demonstrations extending over weeks eventually forced the King's hand. In all, 25 people were killed, 5,000 wounded, and about 15,000 arrested.

Popular Expectations

Popular opinion plays a substantial role in the success or failure of any effort to democratize a country. In general, the more a population desires political change, acts on that desire, and sustains support for it during difficult times (whether before or after a transition), the more likely it is to occur. But this desire needs to be carefully examined—in some cases, there is unity about the need for change, but little impetus to take the difficult steps to achieve it and/or little agreement on what should happen once an existing regime is removed (as in many Arab Spring countries). Civil society and various types of media can play a major role in shaping aspirations and actions.

Factors to consider include:

- What is the **dominant sentiment** among the population? How sturdy is it? Likely to swing back and forth depending on fluctuations in conditions? Can the sentiment be influenced in a constructive way? Leveraged to **mobilize** the population in a campaign for change? What might have an impact?
- What is the role of **social leaders** and **political** entrepreneurs in shaping public opinion? How will change affect their messaging?
- Are **expectations** for change realistic? Able to withstand the difficulty in bringing it about? What might strengthen the population's ability to sustain a change process over time?
- Is popular opinion **unified** on a vision for how to move a country forward? Will it remain so after the existing regime exits?
- What is the **media landscape**? How do various media affect popular opinion? Are there avenues for influence? What is the relationship between democratic activists and the media? What might strengthen the independence and general capacity of the media in the country?
- Kenya shows how popular sentiment can both advance a transition and hold it back. In the early 1990s, backed by a more assertive international effort to promote democracy in the aftermath of the Cold War and triggered by concerns over the economy, opposition leaders were able to rally widespread support to press the Daniel arap Moi regime to open up the political system. Political parties were legalized. Fair and free elections were held. However, ethnic divisions enabled the incumbent to win the elections in both 1992 and 1997 with a plurality of the votes (opposition votes were split by ethnic group). In more recent years, popular pressure has continued to play a prominent role shaping the country's politics, but the ethnic divisions have held back democracy. Votes are based on ethnicity, not policy. The legitimacy of polls is seen through the same lens, with one's perspective dependent on whether a co-ethnic emerged victorious or not. And leaders' abuse of institutions—such as continuing intimidation of the judiciary by the president—are too easily excused by supporters.

Potential Spoilers

Even if democracy activists trigger a transition, there are spoilers who might try to hijack it, hamper it, or hold veto power over its trajectory. These include the military (see above), members of the former regime (e.g., Iraq, Afghanistan), a non-state militia (e.g., Hezbollah in Lebanon), a religious group (e.g., the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Ayatollah Khomeini's supporters in Iran in 1979), extremists (e.g., the Islamic State in Syria), or external actors (e.g., Russia, sometimes in conjunction with domestic economic elites, in the former Soviet Union countries). Spoilers are likely to be more of a problem in states where government is weak, society is divided, and the spoilers are well-organized and/or armed and lacking any stake in the new political arrangement. Even when there are no obvious spoilers, the security forces' unique capacity for violence makes their choices especially important.

Factors to consider include:

- Is there any major state or non-state entity (e.g., military, intelligence, or political, religious, or armed group) that is far more organized than any other? Is such a group likely to step into the vacuum a transition might bring, or take advantage of an opening to advance its own agenda at the expense of other actors? Alternatively, are there any major actors or institutions that might, individually or as a group, veto or substantially constrain change?
- If there is an election, who is most likely to win it (whether by fair or unfair means)? What would be the implications of a victory for an opposition party and leadership transition? How will others react?
- What is the relative strength of political parties or groups competing for power? Is there a strong balance of forces, or is one group likely to emerge dominant with few constraints on its power?
- Who are the biggest political and economic losers from a transition? Are there ways for them to adapt to reforms (e.g., economic losses may be offset elsewhere)? If not, what are they likely to do? How organized are they? Do they have access to weapons?
- If the transition does not deliver its promised benefits, or if the changes create unhappiness among large groups of people, how likely is a backlash? Who will benefit from a backlash? What will those who benefit, or seek to benefit, do?

In recent decades, armed groups have repeatedly emerged as spoilers during transitions in the Middle East and North Africa. In Libya, for example, there are dozens of different armed militias, some part of specific social groups (and working to safeguard the group's myriad interests), others more or less autonomous (and working to advance their own narrow interests and thus less controllable and more corrupt). In contrast, the internationally recognized national government has no independent force, even to safeguard its own ministries. In Yemen, the Houthis emerged as the strongest force in the country after the collapse of the political process in 2014; they routed the government and took over the capital and north of the country. In Lebanon, reforms have been consistently held back by Hezbollah and other unarmed sectarian groups that gain from the existing political system. Hezbollah can veto any major government decision, and it regularly uses state institutions and resources to advance its own interests. It operates like a state within a state, conducting its own foreign policy and sending troops to help prop up its ally, the Syrian government. Meanwhile, Lebanon has gone from crisis to crisis and is on the verge of bankruptcy.

While the structural conditions discussed in steps one and two frame what is possible in any context (pathways), these four elements in step three determine the likelihood that there will be movement toward democracy in the near term. The greater the collective capacity of democratic forces to set narratives, disrupt the existing governance arrangement, and garner influence through elections or institutions, the more likely they will have the leverage to overcome their opponents (see Figure 4)—whether an existing regime or potential spoilers. Similarly, the stronger an existing regime or spoilers are and the more they can apply force and maintain support, the more likely they will have the strength to defeat their challengers or competitors for power. Although it is often difficult to do, given how limited and imperfect information often is, assessing the balance of power and how it might be altered is essential for democratic activists to strategize the way forward.

Figure 4: Political Opportunity Structure



Of course, this division of actors into two groups is partially artificial. Many players reside in a gray zone, sometimes supporting and sometimes opposing change depending on the context and how it affects their interests and beliefs. Many will support what appears to be the winning side, hedging their investment if a situation is in flux, and only committing when it becomes clear which choices will best advance their interests. Others will attempt to free ride, seeking to collect the benefits of any reform drive but refusing to take the risks necessary to achieve it. While collective action is always difficult, such challenges are especially acute in countries where social cohesion is low, and the costs of repression are high.

Accordingly, democratic activists will need to make **clear-headed and ongoing assessments** of two key variables before knowing how to act. Those variables are the combined political and military strength of their opponents and the countervailing unity and depth of political, social, and institutional support of those committed to their side.

Coalition building, compromise, and outreach (including to potentially sympathetic elements within an existing regime or spoiler) that strengthen the balance of power in the democratic activists' favor are all essential. When the balance of power is not especially favorable, some of activists' goals may need to be sacrificed in the short-term in order for progress to be made, or time spent building up the strength of the coalition in favor of change before con-fronting opponents.

Democratic activists must balance building a long-term foundation for democracy (which improves the strategic landscape) with short-term tactics to gain leverage. Both are essential to democratic success, and priorities should differ depending on the country zone and balance of forces. Step six will show how this can be done in more detail. In the next step, we examine how a country's location in the transition cycle affects priorities.

4.

STEP FOUR *Identify Where the Country is in the Transition Cycle*

The nature of democracy assistance depends on where in the transition cycle a country lies. Is it at the protest stage (with activists seeking change, but none occurring yet), the high-risk early transition stage (the period when political institutions are in maximum flux, typically the first months or even year or two after a transition starts), or the policy stage (from the time a routine sets in until the momentum of the transition completely dies out)?

Of course, these stages are somewhat artificial. A linear protest-to-policy transitions framework does not consider the strength of a country's democratic foundation (which constrain its evolution) or the fact that many countries experience multiple transitions in a cyclical pattern because of a weak foundation. It also does not assume a regime change is required at a given point. The stages, however, help set priorities.

Each of the four transition situations offer different challenges and opportunities:

1 PROTEST OR PRE-TRANSITION

- ▶ **Opportunities:** Encouraging democratic activists to develop organizational capacity, forge coalitions, and garner influence through elections or key institutions; investing in understanding popular opinion and the issues that might galvanize it in favor of change; engaging with a wide range of different actors across society, including those currently supporting the existing regime; taking early action to reduce risks if a transition occurs; establishing narratives that can catalyze popular opinion and weaken government support; investing in democratic foundation, especially social cohesion and institutions; seeking out windows of opportunity to promote change.
- ▶ **Challenges:** Democratic foundation weak and not easy to strengthen; inadequate recognition of the need or desire to undertake the arduous work of building organizational capacity and forging coalitions; democratic activists too far removed from the general population to build broad support and understand popular mood; insufficient agility in the face of changing risks and opportunities; dearth of incentives and institutions to catalyze collective action, overcome free rider problems, and overcome regime inducements and threats; crafting appropriate incentives for existing regime to cede some power; despite aspiring to be long-term, policy that only emphasizes short-term concerns; intervention that is technical, not political, and too siloed.
- ▶ **Blind Spots:** Assuming that all countries have the foundation to democratize; assuming that mechanisms of accountability short of regime change do not exist (even in highly repressive states); not recognizing breadth of tools available to an incumbent regime to divide its opponents (e.g. cooptation, selective incentives, targeted repression); wasting the opportunity to invest in the foundation and to make incremental gains before a transition occurs; not considering the full scope of risks that a situation presents; focusing on developing the skills of individuals rather than on building collective action; not understanding the nature of social cleavages and how they might affect a transition; failing to reach out to government or military actors that might be persuaded to support change; not sufficiently understanding political and institutional obstacles to change.
- ▶ **Key Questions:** What policy levers currently exist that could be strategically targeted to increase accountability? How can democratic activists disrupt or destabilize the existing governance arrangement? Are there enticements, safeguards, and/or sanctions that would encourage political change or splinter the ruling coalition? Are democratic actors sufficiently prepared technically and politically to take power? If a country risks violence from a transition, are there alternative ways for

opposition actors to increase accountability? Are there ways to incrementally improve the strategic or tactical landscape? What might build trust and a common vision of the future across disparate opposition groups? Is there a single leader or set of leaders everyone can rally around?

2 EARLY TRANSITION

- ▶ **Opportunities:** Delivering some quick wins to build momentum (e.g., recognize minority group holidays and languages and create jobs); building consensus among democratic activists and their supporters on the way forward; strengthening political parties, key state institutions, and civil society; ensuring that transitional justice issues are carefully addressed; installing technocrats into key positions in government; proactively managing popular expectations; addressing issues that might divide society before they become too important to any particular group; establishing an office or entity under new leader to craft an integrated cross-sector strategy going forward and coordinate all external assistance; ensuring the momentum driving progress is sustained through the first election and beyond.
- ▶ **Challenges:** Preserving state institutions, even if they have contributed to a country's problems (which was not done in Iraq); building broad support for democratic norms in a country with limited experience with them; ensuring electoral and judicial institutions work as advertised, especially in the first election after a transition; addressing long-festered grievances in a way that does not encourage a backlash from those who currently benefit from the system; ensuring key social and political leaders are protected and that no ungoverned spaces or autonomous armed groups emerge; unifying international actors who are divided, and who have conflicting interests; working with a state that has limited capacity and effectiveness; communicating clearly and managing expectations on how quickly citizen priorities can be and will be addressed.
- ▶ **Blind Spots:** Assuming a change in leadership is a change in regime and indicative that democracy has arrived; not following changes in popular expectations and the differences that may lie within the population; trying to do too much too soon and assuming that tradeoffs do not need to be made among competing priorities; having too much optimism over a variety of decisions and outcomes (e.g., Arab Spring); assuming groups with shared interests in ensuring the transition succeeds will work well with each other; creating losers who subsequently have little interest in supporting the transition; rushing to elections too fast (e.g., Egypt); ignoring the need to invest in the weakest parts of the democratic foundation; assuming a country's social divisions will not lead to violence.
- ▶ **Key Questions:** What can ensure that new leaders are adequately supported in making key decisions? How can gaps in the democratic foundation be addressed or planned for? How can broad support for the transition be sustained in the face of the inevitable setbacks? What actions or policies can head off the emergence of spoilers? Maintain widespread support for democracy? Ensure security? If insecurity grows, what steps can be undertaken to immediately stabilize the situation? What steps can stabilize the economic situation? Encourage confidence in the investment climate?

3 POLICY OR POST-TRANSITION

- ▶ **Opportunities:** Pushing for reform by identifying allies or vulnerable actors in the new government and lobbying, horse trading, or linking issues with their interests; leveraging transnational movements or international actors to press for change in specific areas; working within a broader reform coalition to promote particular goals; strengthening policy making, coordination, and implementation capacity at the top of the government; investing in innovative mechanisms to improve public services; ensuring that all major social groups are represented in the national political leadership; gradually reducing the role of the military or any militarized group in politics; bolstering key institutions (political parties, judicial systems, electoral, commissions, anti-corruption agencies); solidifying the democratic foundation; ensuring corruption is readily addressed; creatively boosting economic growth and ensuring it reaches all segments of the population.

- ▶ **Challenges:** Institutional reform is crucial to many other objectives but typically remains elusive, setting the stage for pre-transition patterns to reassert themselves even if the actors have changed (e.g., Ukraine, Colombia, Guatemala); economy worsening in the first years of a transition, sapping support for new actors; not meeting expectations that surged after the transition, yielding growing tensions between groups (e.g., Iraq); actors who dominated previous regime reasserting themselves; international support declining as memory of the transition fades; self-interested leaders lacking the interest to promote necessary reforms or compromise with rivals.
- ▶ **Blind Spots:** Marginalizing social groups or classes, leading to spike in dissatisfaction; deteriorating economic situation; not recognizing importance of subnational or local governments; not leveraging most robust parts of government sufficiently; stagnant or declining quality of public services; assuming that the problems that caused a transition won't reoccur even if the actors have all changed (e.g., Ukraine); assuming that all good things go together and not making crucial trade-offs; allowing corruption to get out of hand; ignoring the influence of outside actors or nefarious groups within a country; missing rising frustration before it boils over.
- ▶ **Key Questions:** How can the transition momentum be maintained once the initial excitement has worn off and politics reasserts itself? What can promote democratic norms and the acceptance of changes in power? What is the risk that oligarchs monopolize the benefits from reform? What can break the cycle of partial or unimplemented reform? What can prevent a backlash if the economy worsens, or expectations go unmet? What can boost the quality of public services? Increase investment (especially among small- to medium-sized companies) and employment (especially among youth)? How can foreign assistance be leveraged to enhance the democratic foundation?

The post-transition period can theoretically go on for years or longer depending on what progress is made. Institutions take time to build. Elections take time to organize. Political dynamics and norms take time to settle into a new paradigm. If momentum lags, and the burst of energy driving change stalls, a transition can be considered at an end. However, if it delivers far less than expected or demanded, the pattern that produced it may reassert itself in another form, and protests seeking **another transition** may reappear, sometimes only a decade or so afterwards. Ukraine, for example, has experienced two protests-to-policy transitions within a generation—in 2004 and 2014. Macedonia transitioned in 1991 (becoming independent from Yugoslavia), 2001 (resolving an internal armed ethnic conflict), and 2017 (with the collapse of a pseudo-autocratic government). Such patterns highlight the difficulty of achieving systemic change if a country's democratic foundation is not strengthened, even if a regime and set of actors is completely overturned.

Of course, the **strategic and tactical priorities in each transition stage depend on what we learned in steps one, two, and three.** In step five, we turn to lessons learned from past international efforts to assist countries in transition before bringing everything together in step six.

5.

STEP FIVE
Incorporate Foreign Assistance Lessons Learned

Given the growing difficulties that organizations promoting democracy, rights, and governance (DRG) around the world face, it is essential that more effort is invested in learning lessons from past experiences. What can be learned from previous efforts? What kind of assistance is most (and least) useful? How should that assistance be allocated and managed? What strategies and tactics are most effective?

Looking at the most important transitions since the end of the Cold War, as well as the rich literature on how to improve foreign assistance, yields five overarching principles (in italics below), and related best practices on how to carry them out (see bullets). The more organizations and program managers incorporate these principles into their way of working, and the more democracy activists push for these lessons to be incorporated in how aid delivered to them, the more likely foreign assistance will have a substantial impact. Sources for this study are listed in the Appendix.

Priorities: Political understanding and local insight

- Invest in high quality, ongoing political economic analysis (e.g., USAID, *Thinking and Working Politically Through Applied Political Economy Analysis*); use an understanding of history, culture, institutions, political settlements, and local leadership to ensure programming is sensitive to context.
- Avoid the temptation to oversimplify how change might occur; reality is messy and dependent on the past, constraining what is possible in what time frame (as the country categorization highlights).
- Pay attention to time scales required for different kinds of change. For example, structural conditions can take a generation or more to change, large-established institutions many years, and even popular expectations a significant period of time; be realistic about what is possible given the context and adjust goals appropriately.
- Be aware of past sociopolitical patterns, such as in previous transition attempts, as they tend to repeat themselves.
- Empower those closest to the context to decide how money should be spent and ensure their participation in program monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL); incorporate local actors into strategizing and timing decisions; let them guide problem identification and prioritization; let them determine what is considered “success”—assuming they will know what is salient locally; maximize opportunity for local actors to run programs.
- Sharpen political intelligence in order to successfully ascertain the nature of different leaders and groups, their interests, and how they might act in the future; invest in building relationships with a wide range of stakeholders to understand their motivations as well as seek out opportunities to forge coalitions and shift positions.
- Recruit high-quality staff and ensure that they stay focused on a specific country for an extended period of time to maximize knowledge of context and relationship building.
- Recognize that gains may be long-term and the need for short-term results may be self-defeating; some of the best programs (e.g., organization building, long-term fellowships) will not show short-term results.

Programming: Flexibility and adaptability in design and implementation

- Encourage ingenuity by setting a clear goal but without an overly prescriptive formula of how it is achieved; ensure design, implementation, and evaluation provide scope to weather non-linear processes involving learning and adapting over time.
- Prioritize monitoring, evaluating, and reflecting on lessons learned; ensure the right metrics and goals are established to fit the context; leverage local actors in defining and designing these.
- Use a series of small experimental or incremental steps towards a goal, monitor results, and adapt; aim for efficacy, not efficiency.
- Ensure funding mechanisms can rapidly respond to opportunities and that programs can be altered as a context changes or learning takes place; develop risk assessments, contingency plans, and flexible metrics of performance that work across funders, implementers, and local partners to maximize flexibility; incorporate an understanding that politics is not static and whatever assumptions drive strategy and tactics at a point in time may change.
- Work with a wide range of different institutions and partnerships, including some that may be outside the donor comfort zone—unions, faith-based groups, universities, traditional leaders, and political parties.
- Use microgrants with limited paperwork requirements to reach a wider range of actors, including underserved communities; reduce quarterly reporting requirements for beneficiaries receiving grants below a threshold to ensure that these do not privilege large organizations.
- Harmonize goals within and across funders and implementers to ensure consistency and coherence in programming. (Local partners will likely have to balance competing goals.)
- Make long-term commitments to a country and ensure programming is sustainable over time even without donor funding.
- Be cautious about advertising support to avoid any kind of backlash.
- Understand the donor's own political economy and what can be negotiated and changed and what cannot.

Context: Enhancing structural conditions

- Invest extensively in democracy foundation before a transition and in filling gaps once a transition starts; bolster key institutions early on and ensure electoral and judicial institutions work as advertised—especially during the first election.
- Encourage collective action before a transition, and reduce polarization after a transition, by incentivizing cooperation, trust building, and partnerships.
- Incorporate conflict prevention lessons (e.g., importance of decentralization, bridging institutions, inclusive leadership, and equitable allocation of resources) into programming decisions; address potential social cleavages (e.g., ethnic identity) as early in a transition as possible by reforming the electoral design, decentralizing power, and strengthening institutions.
- Maintain or reinvigorate the economy and limit corruption and money in politics; ensure economy produces gains for the population and that any new government responds to critical socioeconomic needs; don't let consideration of these issues be postponed in lieu of other pressing concerns until it is too late because they are crucial to sustaining a transition once it gets underway.
- Leverage external pressure to promote regime concessions before/during a transition and promote an external anchor (e.g., EU or other regional organization) or external linkages (e.g., economic, social, intergovernmental, informational) afterwards; but be sure to use the right tool to pressure (e.g., involvement of the International Criminal Court can backfire) and anchor (e.g., instruments such as an anti-corruption agency can be abused or misdirected by local politicians).

- Ensure foreign assistance is more extensive and effective when compared with the efforts of other foreign countries or actors working to subvert the transition.
- Invest in security and ensuring that any concerns over it do not limit the ability of some politicians and groups to participate in politics, create incentives for clamping down on opposition actors, or encourage polarization.

People: Empowering leaders and organizations

- Encourage leaders to compromise, accept democratic norms, and invest in key institutions; proactively manage expectations (and recognize the challenges and difficulties they will face).
- Establish and consistently offer a broad, hopeful, forward-looking vision that captures the spirit of citizens.
- Signal to different factions that they would have a stake in new regime; proactively reach out to moderate elements within the existing regime and offer assurances that their interests will be safeguarded; flexibly balance concerns related to peace, democratization, and justice; and consistently act inclusively, including with regard to pretransition regime members.
- Enhance the strength of the opposition through organization building, coalition building, and calls for national unity, while working to weaken the hold on power of the government (see just above); broaden, deepen, and scale up opposition forces by incorporating unions, youth, religious actors, women, and creatively using a wide variety of institutions (e.g., faith-based organizations) to reach and organize people; reduce government restrictions on political and social activities wherever possible.
- Strengthen political parties, old and new, so that they mobilize and consolidate the opposition into a few main groups through their institutions, networks, and ties to social movements and civil society organizations; enhance their ability to mediate conflict, train potential civil servants, develop policy platforms, incorporate various parts of society, filter candidates, and play constructive roles in competitive politics.
- Prepare opposition elites, technically and politically, for power before they take it.
- Influence or counteract any countries, institutions, or groups blocking change or seeking to act as spoilers, both within and outside the country.
- Shape the incentives for local leaders or groups such that they encourage inclusive rather than exclusive behavior (e.g., offer greater stature or more resources).
- Augment the regime abuse and misgovernance identification and information dissemination capacity of opposition groups before a transition; counter disinformation campaigns by supporting organizations and networks working to monitor and expose.
- Strengthen independent, sometimes underground, media through education, development of professional associations, investment in individual journalists, and internal governance capacity building.
- Provide the necessary technical know-how—on organization building, political party development, communications, electoral systems, constitution making, and coalition building—at the right time; limit sit-down training as these proliferate and replicate across donors; focus instead on coaching, mentoring, accompaniment, and facilitating access to a wide range of comparative experiences, questions, and perspectives.

Strategies: Timing, trade-offs, and trust building

- Balance the urge for change with the need for patience and incremental change when conditions don't allow more; recognize the importance of strengthening the democratic foundation and using small victories (e.g., electoral gains, reforms) as a stage for larger gains by providing a platform to organize for the opposition; commit for the long term, recognizing that democratization is an extended process, not a single event, and that zigzagging advances and setbacks are normal.
- Leverage critical junctures (e.g., election, economic crisis, patronage shift) and issues (e.g., land ownership) and adapt to rapidly changing (often unexpected) circumstances and opportunities; develop contingency plans, track warning signals, and be prepared for risks (e.g., electoral violence).
- Get the balance between different elements of a transition right (e.g., need to leverage previous regime's expertise against need to limit their influence, need to respond to victims of abuse and hold perpetrators accountable against need to ensure peace and support of military for change); sequence reforms and the electoral process (design as well as timetable) in a way that maximizes the chance of success.
- Play critical convening and trust-building role among various actors, including between opposition and government.
- Ensure that the right assurances are made to an existing or former regime to maximize the chance that a transition will occur and be maintained peacefully; seek a negotiated exit wherever possible.
- Strategically recognize different groups' legitimacy, claim on resources, and concerns over potential military reprisals while ensuring that they support a transition and come under civilian control; enhance the professionalism of the military and help them focus on their role as external defender rather than as a tool for domestic security.
- Address issues that may have an outsized impact on some groups with care. These are, most notably, language and culture policies but also including the distribution of power and decentralization and anything that reduces the security and dignity of parts of the population; these may galvanize or limit support at critical junctures.
- Invest in getting out the vote and ensuring the independence and capacity of electoral institutions, especially during the first competitive poll.
- Coordinate aid with other donors to maximize effectiveness and reduce duplication and unnecessary paperwork for recipients; divide responsibilities across donors if possible.

Although new technologies and actors have brought novel challenges and opportunities in recent years, these principles and practices are likely to remain just as important in the future as they have been in the past. Every donor organization or program manager should consider how they affect their activities and operations. In some cases, they may just mean rethinking a handful of policies and priorities. In other cases, they may need to examine larger issues—such as whether the organizational culture and institutional incentives make them hard to implement.

Step six will explore how strategic and tactical priorities vary and suggest entry points for action.

6.

STEP SIX
Synthesize Analysis to Create Recommendations

In this step, we will synthesize the above analysis into a set of long-term priorities and short-term actionable items as well as obstacles and risks. The country zone (step two, using step one) and transition phase (step four) frame the context in which overarching goals are set, while an analysis of the tactical landscape (step three) frames the political opportunity structure in which funders, implementers, or their partners operate. Meanwhile, the lessons learned (step five) from previous efforts to promote DRG should shape program design. Below, we examine how to identify actors, issues, and junctures to establish possible entry points for action.

The final product depends on context and need, but it can vary from a few pages' summary of the main conclusions and recommendations to a longer, 10-15 page document that also encompasses more detailed analysis (see Appendix for a sample report structure). In some cases, such as a looming, emerging, or ongoing crisis, a more focused document that zeroes in on possible trigger events, the role of key actors, or controversy over a particular nettlesome issue may be more helpful, especially for organizations that can immediately act on the information. Working to embed the recommendations within a broad swathe of donors, implementers, and partners can ensure the ideas are fully incorporated into everyone's decision making.

Strategize by Country Zone

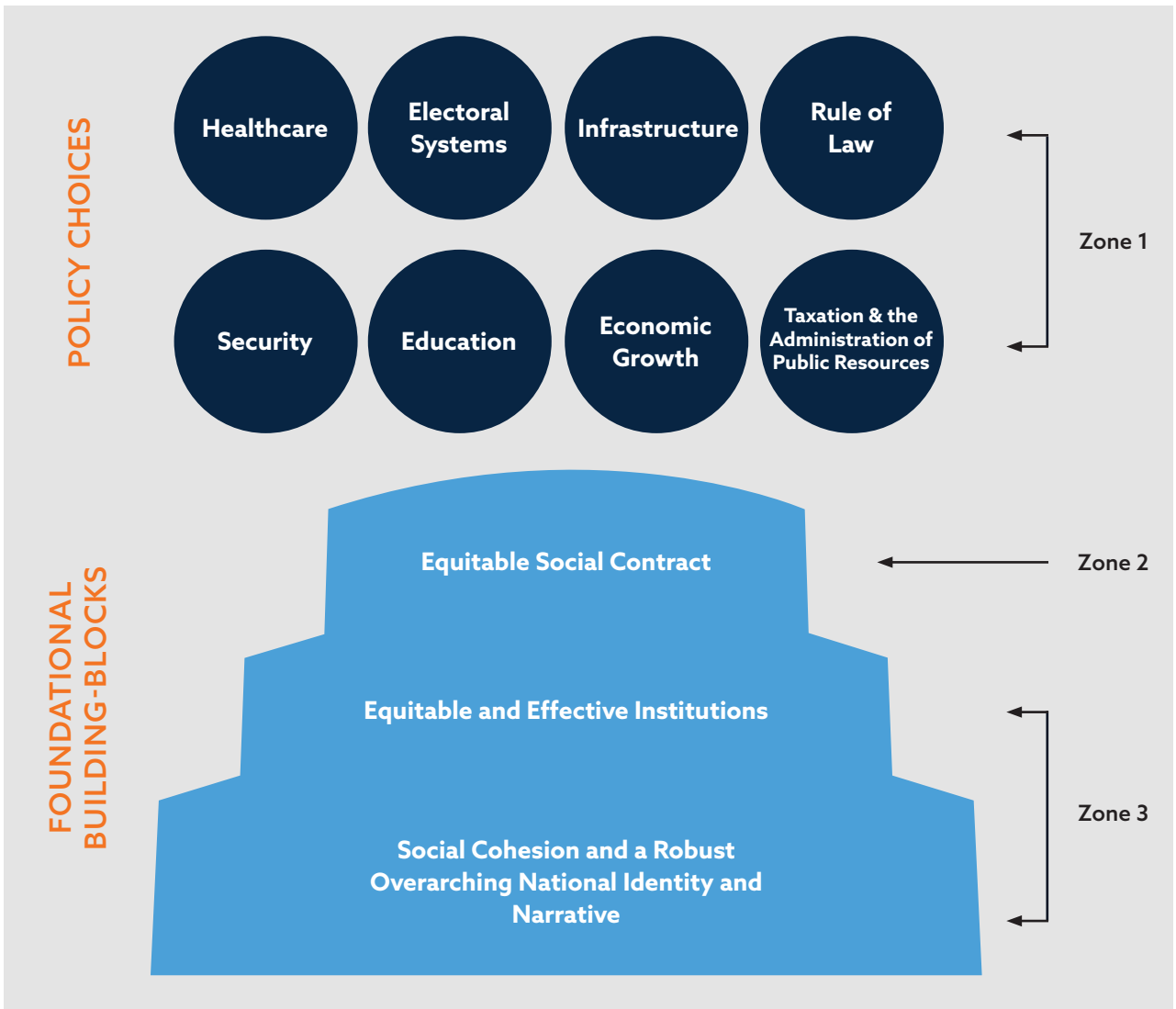
The three different types of states face different challenges and therefore require different strategies in order to maximize the chance that they will transition to a stable, inclusive, widely supported democracy (see Table 1):

- **Zone 1** countries can handle a more traditional playbook, emphasizing a **rapid move toward elections and the introduction of robust economic reforms** because their democratic foundation is firmly in place. Political order is more robust, less dependent on a particular constellation of actors and institutions, and more inherent to the system itself. Most zone 1 countries, in fact, have already successfully navigated the changeover to democracy in one of the democratization waves that took place before 2000. There are thus few pre-transition zone 1 country situations left, unless they are regions that will someday secede from a larger state (such as Kurdistan and Somaliland). On the other hand, there may be many post-transition zone 1 states in need of greater accountability and reform.
- **Zone 2** countries can **move forward but more cautiously**, incorporating policies from the **peacemaking or conflict management field** that take into account their social fragmentation and weak institutions. Democratic activists and their partners should emphasize inclusiveness across groups as much as possible. Existing or potential social cleavages need to be actively managed and, ideally, ameliorated. Reducing inequalities between ethnic, religious, and clan groups and regions needs to be prioritized, possibly by pushing for substantial decentralization and the reallocation of funds such that historically marginalized or disadvantaged groups feel that they have a greater stake in the country (e.g., Sri Lanka). Such reforms should be done carefully, so as to avoid a backlash from historically dominant groups and accompanied by an effort to strengthen national social cohesion (e.g., overarching national identity) and institutions that bring groups together and manage their conflict peacefully. But lack of administrative capacity, infrastructure, education, and other factors may hinder many transitions from countries in this group: Even if elections are introduced, change on the ground may be limited; powerful actors may not be held to account; and attempts to make the state more accountable and inclusive may come up short or fail altogether. Significant, difficult work will therefore remain, with many opportunities to incrementally strengthen the foundation and advance democratization.

- **Zone 3** countries, on the other hand, can easily be imperiled by any transition because the glue, whether social or institutional, that holds them together is brittle. As such, transitions need to be undertaken with **extreme caution** because the risks are great. It may be better for funders, implementers, and their local partners to focus on **incremental progress**—for example, to enhance regime responsiveness to citizen concerns, improve opportunity, decentralize decision-making, and strengthen the rule of law and other aspects of the democratic foundation—than to work on overturning a regime or rapidly introducing elections in the short term. In the worst cases, the lack of any autonomous institution robust enough to equitably adjudicate between groups makes it hard to promote democratization peacefully, as Syria and Yemen show. Activists need to think longer term in these contexts, working beyond the typical transition framework. The guidance in this document should provide ideas for change.

Figure 5 visualizes the differences in approach. The less sturdy the democratic foundation, the more essential it is that strengthening its elements (outlined in step one) be emphasized in order to ensure that the best possible positive outcome is achieved. Zone 3 countries need to strengthen the social ties and conflict-management mechanisms that bring different groups together, ensure they can peacefully settle their disputes and, first and foremost, ensure political competition is kept within bounds. Zone 2 countries have accomplished at least some of this, putting the emphasis more on the establishment of a more equitable and inclusive social contract which is a combination of both horizontal and vertical measures to make society and government more inclusive as well as responsive and accountable. Elections should be seen as one important element in a broader strategy. Zone 1 countries have moved past most of these issues and can therefore focus more on rapid democratization and sectoral reform. The foundation elements are, however, always important, even in more developed countries. They need to be continuously invested in.

Figure 5: Countries with a Frailer Democratic Foundation Have More Foundational Challenges



Now, let's break it down to see how this is best accomplished in each zone. See Table 1.

Table 1: Different Strategies for Different Contexts*

	Zone 1	Zone 2	Zone 3
Characteristics	Cohesive, good institutions, good neighbor-hood, strong economic fundamentals	Weak but functioning institutions, some social fractures, fragile political settlements, limited capacity, mixed economic conditions	Highly fragmented, weakly institutionalized, fragile neighbors, poor economic fundamentals, negative foreign intervention
What is success?	Full democratization	Simultaneously strengthen democratic foundation and gradually democratize	Stability with increased accountability

	Zone 1	Zone 2	Zone 3
Possible measure of progress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • V-Dem indicators • Public service performance measures • Perceptions of economic performance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perceptions of legitimacy of elections across groups • Popular support for transition or reform agenda • Measures of horizontal inequalities (especially in political sphere) • Corruption indicators • Whether budgets are allocated to support reforms adopted • Perceptions of economic performance across groups and geography 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Breadth and depth of elite coalition supporting change • Progress in developing mechanisms to build trust and manage conflict across groups • Whether balance of forces influencing the country from the outside tilts more positive • Level of violence
Key short-term priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agreement on electoral design and timeline • Boost capacity of key institutions • Strengthen political parties 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure first election is managed effectively • Monitor and manage popular sentiment • Ensure balance of power in favor of reform is maintained, even strengthened • Ensure divisions are carefully managed • Introduce quick wins to build momentum 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build trust and common agenda across different actors and between opposition and regime reformers • Strengthen collective action institutions that work across groups and can manage disagreements • Advance incremental reforms that increase accountability, responsiveness, and opportunity • Ensure security is maintained
Key long-term priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure economy delivers for citizens • Sectoral reforms • Reduce cleavages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boost key institutions • Reduce horizontal inequalities by rebalancing distribution of power and wealth • Enhance political agreement underpinning reform • Strengthen cohesion • Ensure economy delivers broad based gains 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen democratic foundation, especially cohesion and institutions • Sidetrack or reduce importance of potential spoilers • Reduce negative role of outsiders • Reconfigure incentives away from illicit or potentially polarizing activities • Leverage external anchors

	Zone 1	Zone 2	Zone 3
Key constraints	Lack of capacity, infrastructure, education, etc.	Disagreements on distribution of resources, priorities, and rules for elections; unwillingness to compromise; weak implementation capacity; negative economic fundamentals	Little exposure to democratic norms; fragility of institutions and ties between groups; history of mistrust; no mechanism to secure intergroup or opposition-regime agreements; negative intervention
Protest (pre-transition) priorities	Consider how to get negotiations moving faster; unify social forces; plan interim government; examine international aid requirements	Bring actors together to develop trust and a joint vision for the future; strengthen balance of power by targeting vulnerable or sympathetic actors; look at incentives blocking progress on negotiations; consider interim arrangements or reforms that can secure broad political support; ensure social mobilization unites people and strengthens institutions; prepare for success before it occurs	Consider risks from rapid change and whether an incremental reform pathway is a better way forward; plan for the inevitable divisions, including among opposition; seek reformist allies in existing regime; look for ways to limit any risks of violence; ensure social mobilization does not seek to replace existing institutions and completely exclude groups in power
Early-transition priorities	Move toward elections relatively quickly; strengthen political parties; introduce economic and institutional reforms relatively quickly; establish government-led mechanism to better take advantage of aid; invest in mechanisms that incorporate those left behind by rapid changes; empower women by reducing gender inequalities	Manage expectations and balance of power; seek quick wins to build momentum; think carefully about electoral design; build unifying national identity and narrative; ensure political parties are not group- or region-based; give interim government time before elections; ensure first election is managed effectively; boost institutions that manage disagreements across groups; jumpstart economy and create jobs; create mechanisms to reduce corruption; strengthen institutions and public services in outlying areas	Build trust and bridging institutions across groups; move cautiously on elections; boost capacity and autonomy of key institutions; make every effort to avoid polarization establish mechanism to resolve disputes between groups; try to maintain coalition supporting transition; try to incorporate spoilers including representatives of former regime; keep a tight lid on security; leverage international help on security; try to maintain existing state institutions; limit the political vacuum

	Zone 1	Zone 2	Zone 3
Policy (post-transition) priorities	Invest in governance ecosystem (think tanks, public administration academies, media); improve education and workforce skills; improve business climate; reduce marginalization and discrimination (gender, race, etc.)	Strengthen institutions (especially those related to political competition and accountability—rule of law, anti-corruption, and electoral bodies); manage or address cleavages so they don't become a factor; consider decentralization and other measures; strengthen national identity and cohesion; strengthen political parties and ensure they work across groups; undertake push to address systemic challenges; ensure corruption does not discredit reforms	Introduce reform but incrementally and in ways that don't divide the population on ethnic/religious lines; strengthen cohesion and key institutions; avoid marginalizing/excluding any important actor; promote compromise across groups; emphasize inclusion or equitable division of resources; consider decentralization; make use of broad coalitions in government; continue to prioritize security; consider how international anchors can help improve governance

Devise Entry Points for Influence by Tactical Landscape

Once these broad strategic and tactical decisions have been made, funders, implementers, and their partners need to look for possible **entry points** from certain **actors**, on specific **issues**, and at crucial **junctions** and then strategize how to influence actors.

The following questions can guide the process. Some of them will be familiar; our analysis from earlier steps will inform how we answer these questions.

First, map the actors, their relationship to one another, and their relative strengths:

- Who are the most important political, social, and business **organizations, groups, and leaders**? What is the role of **religious actors** and social networks in shaping the dynamics in the country?
 - Possible answers: Ethnic or religious groups, political faction or faction within ruling party, incumbent elites, religious leader, supreme court, head of minority group, media, security forces, youth group, external country, terrorist leader, criminal group.
- How strong politically and militarily are groups in favor of reform? How strong are those opposed to it? Which set of actors has the **upper hand**?
 - Possible answers: Forces aligned with reform weak but getting stronger; opponents in weak position but have enough financial and military resources to block change; reformers lack the leverage to push for change or dislodge existing power holders; two sides relatively balanced, producing a stalemate.
- Where are opportunities to **strengthen the balance of power** more in favor of reform?
 - Possible answers: Electorally vulnerable party or legislator, relatively autonomous regulatory bureaucracy, elites outside the current power structure, part of security services.
- Who are the most significant potential **spoilers**?
 - Possible answers: Marginalized social groups, former elites, military, regional powerhouse, terrorist group.

- If early in a change process (e.g., early-transition), how strong is the **political agreement or coalition** driving the effort? How likely is the agreement to fall apart? Is the agreement so exclusionary that it will engender new tensions that will threaten the effort or transition later?
 - Possible answers: Weak, likely to fail after regime changes; mediocre, needs constant nurturing to sustain; exclusionary, likely to create significant opposition over time; stable and backed by enough support and force to work.
- How apolitical and capable are **public institutions**? Do they have interests favorable to or opposed to a particular group? How capable will they be of improving public services? Holding actors accountable?
 - Possible answers: Public institutions can equitably arbitrate differences and hold ruling groups accountable; public institutions are easily corruptible and likely to favor one group over another; public institutions are so weak they are unlikely to improve public services even after regime change.
- How are **previously important actors** (e.g., Sunnis in Iraq, Qaddafi clan in Libya) being treated? If unsatisfied, how might they respond?
 - Possible answers: Attempts being made to include them in the reform effort or transition; reformists or new regime acting too exclusively, creating the potential for a violent reaction.
- Are **international actors unified** on the way forward? If not, who are they likely to support? How will this affect local power dynamics?
 - Possible answers: International actors willing to trust UN-sponsored efforts; international actors likely to take opposing sides and support their favored group(s) in the country with weapons.
- What are the most important **media**? What role are they likely to play in reform?
 - Possible answers: Satellite television; social media; media are promoting exclusionary narrative favoring one group; media are promoting subnational narratives that divide rather than unite.

Second, identify the issues that matter most to these actors:

- What **issues are of particular importance**? Are there interests and/or grievances that will affect the actor's perception?
 - Possible answers: Security; justice and resolution of conflicts; equality of economic opportunity; corruption; preference access to public services, government contracts, or markets; cultural and language policies; political representation.
- What issues may be of great importance to **minority groups** but generally ignored by influential actors?
 - Possible answers: Cultural and language policies; perceived inequality in the political or economic spheres; security and opportunity in regions far from the capital; decentralization; how leaders of minority groups are treated and whether they are able to gain at least symbolic stature and, ideally, some real influence.
- How do **regional dynamics** and trends affect political dynamics and the behavior of key actors?
 - Possible answers: Regional powers support particular actors; regional norms affect how elites behave; regional rivalries spill into the country; regional in-stability or economic dynamics affect political and economic prospects; regional terrorist groups use transition to recruit members and set up cells.
- How will deteriorating **economic conditions**—always a possibility in the first few years after substantial reform or a transition—affect dynamics and the behavior of the main actors?
 - Possible answers: Less room for compromise; greater interest in appealing to identity and cultural issues for support; less money to provide quick wins for population, sapping support; backlash against reform advocates.
- Post-reform or transition, are policies promised to address concerns of a particular group being postponed, **undermined**, and/or under resourced?
 - Possible answers: Elites pass legislation but work against its implementation; promised anti-corruption or transitional justice measures don't appear or are substantially watered down; mandates are approved but never funded, ensuring they end up toothless.

Third, look for crucial junctures. These can be critical events, decisions, and debates with an outsized impact on political dynamics, and examine what their influence is likely to be:

- Which **decisions or events** are likely to be highly contentious? Exacerbate social divisions? Create losers or a backlash? Escalate conflict between key actors?
 - Possible answers: Elections, debate over how much to clear institutions of members from a previous regime, coalition talks, negotiations, national dialogue, dramatic changes in prices, large-scale layoffs, decision over a particularly contentious issue.
- Which **government decisions** or policies are likely to be perceived negatively by key social groups and major actors? What might they do in response?
 - Possible answers: Changes to national language policies; changes to history textbooks; decisions to decentralize (or not); anything related to transitional justice after a conflict; policies that redistribute wealth or power from one social group to another; attempts to penalize foot soldiers of a previous regime.

Fourth, strategize how to best influence actors to achieve the desired outcome:

- What are the best **channels** to influence actors?
 - Possible answers: Outreach and trust building; leverage over their interests (e.g., political patronage, business ties to the real estate sector); strength-en/weaken sources of guidance; appeal to interests or conscience (or both); appeal to beliefs or ideas (e.g., religious views, ideological preferences); longstanding ongoing relationships; creative use of media to set agenda or push certain issues; linking reform to other issues; lobbying; indirect, through other actors.
- If pre-reform or transition, what might **advance reform or a transition**? How effective are **sanctions** likely to be?
 - Possible answers: Provide safeguards and incentives for at least some of those in power (e.g., military); strengthen the domestic coalition in favor of change; reduce the capacity of other countries to support a regime; sanctions may apply pressure but are unlikely to force regime change by themselves.
- What actions might **substitute for a transition** if the risks are too high?
 - Possible answers: Bring opposition actors into government, redistribute power or resources, pass much needed reforms, decentralize.
- What might strengthen the **coalition** leading reform efforts during a crucial time period?
 - Possible answers: Broaden the coalition to include more key actors; provide stronger international backing; convince opponents to switch sides; offer incentives to losers of any reform or transition; improve communications and media strategy.
- What might strengthen the **collective action** of the reform movement?
 - Possible answers: Establish common institutions that can bridge different groups and make each feel that it has a stake in the common effort; ensure key groups have leadership roles in joint initiatives and institutions; invest the time to build relationships and trust; negotiate common agendas or platforms for change; compromise on certain issues to achieve stronger support for main re-form; set aside controversial issues that may weaken support; use wide variety of media to broadcast abuses; leverage traditional or religious leaders.
- What might **strengthen the state institutions or agreements** underpinning a reform effort or transition?
 - Possible answers: Link them to external anchors or arbitrators (regional organizations, a robust and impartial country), appoint highly legitimate administrators, enhance the autonomy of institutions, craft a more equitable or inclusive power sharing arrangement.

- What might **shore up the economy** or create some quick economic gains?
 - Possible answers: Lock in reforms through an international agreement (e.g., free trade agreement), launch road building and infrastructure development projects that employ local workers, introduce international arbitration, boost tax incentives, establish well-managed and well-maintained economic zone, boost skills development.

Lastly, *remember to ask what assumptions you—the analyst—are making* that may be incorrect and limiting the effectiveness of your analysis.

Indonesia offers a case study in using targeted entry points to effect change. Central government leaders proactively sought ways to end the separatist civil wars, communal violence, and sporadic rioting that erupted after the fall of the Suharto regime in 1998, overcoming many deficiencies in East Timor and working with a foreign mediator to negotiate a formal peace agreement to settle the long-running dispute in Aceh.

The multiple processes involved many false starts (especially in Aceh), highly unpopular decisions (East Timor cost the head of state his presidency), overcoming much discontent in the military (in both Aceh and East Timor), conflict fatigue (in the case of communal violence), increasing concern about terrorism after 9/11, a new radically decentralized program (which allowed for greater resource transfer), democratization, an amnesty (or lack of prosecution) for combatants, local power-sharing arrangements, better performance by security forces, durable bureaucratic structures, international pressure and support, a gradually improving economic and political climate, and an influx of large amounts of recovery funds (which helped buy off combatants and possible spoilers).

Manage Term Tradeoffs

In the end, funders, implementers, and partners will have to manage a **three-fold challenge** that may vary place to place:

- 1 In the **short-term**, they need to build up popular sentiment and any coalition in support of reform, while minimizing the risks interventions may bring (e.g., violence, backlash) by shaping the incentives and perceptions (and thus behavior) of key actors.
- 2 In the **medium-term**, they need to ensure that popular sentiment is managed; social, economic, and political gains are maximized (e.g., social reforms are implemented effectively, jobs are more readily available, politics becomes more open); and risks are reduced by ensuring the balance of power is maintained and resources are seen to be distributed equitably across groups.
- 3 In the **long-term**, they need to build social cohesion, enhance the effectiveness of institutions, and improve other elements of the democratic foundation affecting a country's trajectory (which both shifts the span of pathways in a positive direction and improves outcomes over time).

Too often, what is possible only in the long term is conflated with what is possible in the short term, leading to confused policymaking and anger from the population, whose expectations were set unrealistically high.

When making priority or policy choices, it is important to remember that **tradeoffs** are inevitable. Indeed, in some cases, the steps taken to achieve short-term goals preclude or increase the difficulty of achieving long-term goals. For example, shifting from military to civilian rule may only be achievable through compromises that limit the power of elected officials, as has occurred in Pakistan. In many places, the steps necessary to transform a situation may only have an impact in 10 or 15 years, providing no incentive for today's actors to invest in them when they will not be around to benefit.

Categorizing countries can help calibrate policies. But in each particular context there will be tensions between preferences. Trying to do everything can easily be self-defeating. Getting the most important things right is essential.

APPENDIX

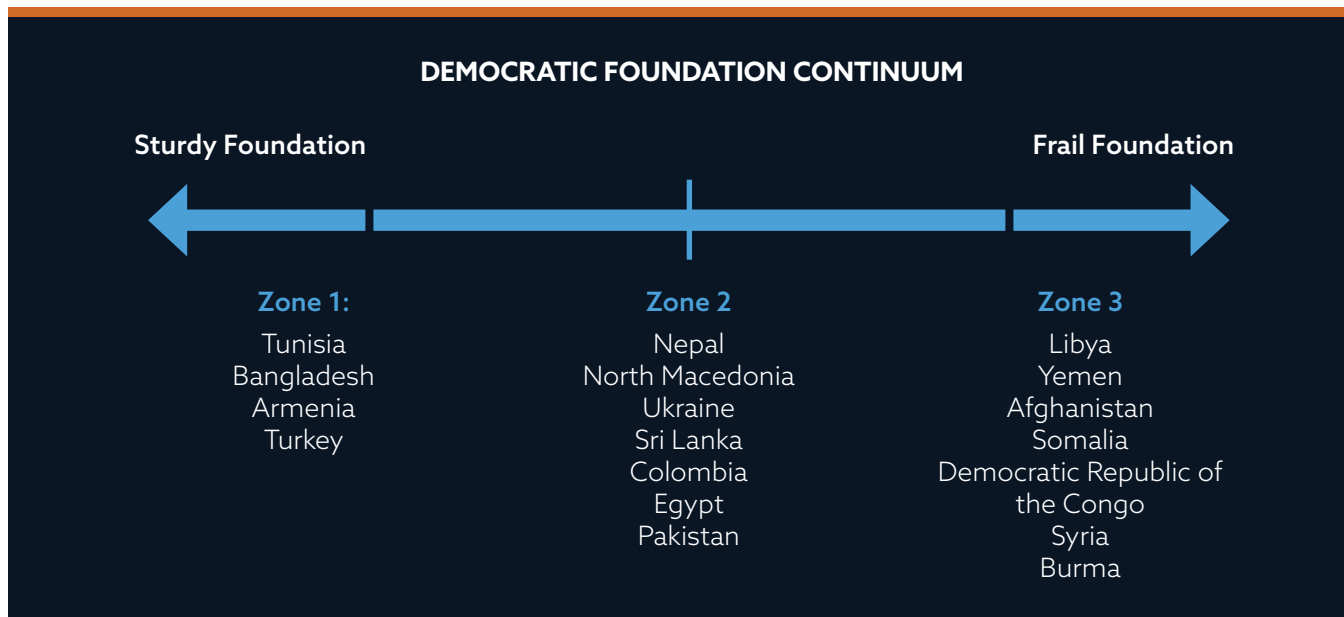
Countries Studied

Although a wide variety of cross-country studies and country experiences (see references) were consulted in crafting this guide, four regional pairings of cases were examined for positive and negative lessons. For each pairing we examined what has worked reasonably well, what has not, and what drivers and factors account for the differences. The goal was to develop hands-on comparative lessons. The countries studied: Ukraine, North Macedonia, and Romania (Eastern Europe); Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt (North Africa); Burma and Nepal (South/Southeast Asia); and South Sudan and Kenya (East Africa).

Preliminary Country Categorization

The figure below presents a preliminary categorization. It is suggestive and not meant to be definitive. It is recommended that democracy activists and their international partners undertake their own assessment and place a country on the continuum and not just into zones (although a country's position within each zone and its relationship to other categories are useful in terms of strategic thinking and programming). Although all countries fit within one of the three zones, no two states have the same structural context or democratic foundation, and therefore they do not fall on the same place on the continuum. Many fall along the right side (in the case of categories 1 and 2) or left side (in the case of category 2 and 3) of their groups, and thus come relatively close to straddling two categories. (For example, Nigeria is probably category 2 but close to straddling the line with category 3.) These boundary-dwellers share some similarities with countries on the other side of the dividing line. A country's location can shift, albeit gradually, over time.

Figure 6: Democratic Foundation Continuum



Sample Report Structure

While every organization and context will have different needs, here is one possible structure for the final product:

1. Introduction/background
2. Long-term country structural context
3. Country placement on continuum
4. Short-term tactical context
5. Country placement on transition cycle
6. Recommendations for strategy, tactics, entry points, and foreign assistance policies

Data Sources

Every country will have its own unique sources of information and knowledge. These may include history books, newspapers, websites, think tank reports, social media, interviews, surveys, novels, and other cultural touchstones. In addition, there are a number of important international qualitative and quantitative data sources. These include:

- [International Crisis Group](#)
- [Journal of Democracy](#)
- [International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance](#)
- [World Bank Indicators](#)
- [BTI \(Bertelsmann Stiftung\) Transformation Index](#)
- [Varieties of Democracy \(V-Dem\)](#)
- [AfroBarometer](#)
- [AmericasBarometer](#)
- [Arab Barometer](#)
- [Asian Barometer Survey](#)
- [Washington Office on Latin America](#)
- [Freedom House](#)
- [Center for International Private Enterprise](#)
- [Brenthurst Foundation](#)
- [African Center for Economic Transformation](#)
- [The Economist](#)
- [Foreign Policy](#)
- [Economist Intelligence Unit](#)
- [Thinking and Working Politically Community of Practice](#)
- [Governance and Social Development Resource Centre](#)

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PROTEST TO POLICY: A DEMOCRATIC TRANSITIONS RUBRIC

1. STEP ONE Assess Country Structural Context

Each country has a **democratic foundation** of varying strength and makeup, requiring a substantially different strategic response customized to each context. This foundation depends on structural elements that are unlikely to change in anything but the long-term. The two most important are social cohesion and institutional dynamics. A rubric is provided at the end of each element to guide the assessment. Rubric numerals are designed to guide the assessment but are not intended to be tallied.

Social Cohesion

- Main allegiance to a common national identity or to subnational ethnic, religious, tribal, and regional identities
- Level of trust and history of relations between major social and political groups
- Political, economic, or cultural group-based inequalities
- Extent that political leaders, narratives, and discourse unify or divide / political settlement possibilities
- Extent of violence in the past and existing complaints or disagreements between different parts of society

1	2	3	4	5
<i>Strong overarching national identity that the great majority of people subscribe to; unifying leaders, media, and education.</i>	<i>High degree of tolerance for differences; limited politicization of media and history curriculum.</i>	<i>Weak national identity; disagreement over distribution of power and resources but limited violence between groups.</i>	<i>Struggle for power and resources based on particular identities and yielding to repeated clashes; history of conflict and mistrust.</i>	<i>Major political divisions and conflict among communities; efforts to unite or reconcile groups unsuccessful.</i>

Institutional Dynamics

- Capacity of government institutions to work effectively/equitably across groups
- Likelihood that institutions will favor or be captured by one group or part of society / strength of civil society
- Legitimacy of public authority across different ethnic, religious, and regional groups
- Likelihood that institutions will be able to maintain core functions and public order
- Extent that informal authority and norms influence state institutions and use of power

1	2	3	4	5
<i>Institutions more or less work the same for everyone and effectively implement policies and deliver public services.</i>	<i>Independence and accountability of institutions advancing; corruption still apparent but does not favor any group.</i>	<i>Some discrimination in public services across groups; mixed enforcement of laws and implementation of policies.</i>	<i>Widespread corruption, politicization of public services and monetization of politics; state uneven across territory.</i>	<i>Public services highly inequitable across groups; government highly ineffective and corrupt; ungoverned spaces exist or likely.</i>

Economy

- Size and influence of middle class
- Link between political power and ability to gain personal wealth and security
- Economy’s and government’s dependence on natural resource exports and/or foreign aid
- Strength of economic foundations (education, infrastructure, legal regime, business)

1	2	3	4	5
<i>Strong economic foundations; diversified economy; highly educated workforce; strong local businesses.</i>	<i>Significant diversification; large middle class and indigenous business sector; business climate healthy.</i>	<i>Some diversification; some middle class; some robust indigenous companies; rule of law safeguards assets and wealth.</i>	<i>Weak economic foundations; elite domination; weak rule of law; some reform and investment; limited diversification.</i>	<i>Low education levels; poor infrastructure; weak rule of law; corruption severe; depends on natural resources.</i>

Security

- State’s monopoly on violence / likelihood ungoverned spaces exist or will appear
- Capacity to disarm and reintegrate soldiers, militias, and other violent actors
- History of using violence to achieve political aims
- Likely actions of members of a former ruling regime, rebel group, or warlord militia

1	2	3	4	5
<i>Highly secure; no violence in politics or major role for gangs; all of territory safe; police and legal system easily tackles crime.</i>	<i>Government monopoly on force; neighbors mostly secure; some issues with gangs or inequitable use of force; politicians safe.</i>	<i>Government has close to monopoly on force; some history of political violence; risk of no-go areas or gangs.</i>	<i>Parts of country insecure/ ungoverned; state lacks monopoly on violence; certain groups/leaders more vulnerable than others.</i>	<i>Country in conflict, with few wholly secure areas; proliferation of weapons; militias active; state forces weak.</i>

International Influences

- How stable/conflict-affected and democratic/authoritarian are neighboring countries
- How constructive/obstructionist and unified/divided are foreign powers and groups
- Nature/influence of regional norms on governance, military, identity, and leadership
- Likely role for transnational ideological movements

1	2	3	4	5
<p><i>Stable, democratic, highly developed neighborhood, with broad consensus on how and resources to assist country.</i></p>	<p><i>International actors unified; regional norms mixed; neighbors stable but only some democratic; little threat of extremism.</i></p>	<p><i>International actors divided but not intervening; some neighborhood instability; some threat of extremist spillover.</i></p>	<p><i>International actors divided; regional picture mixed; norms do not encourage compromise.</i></p>	<p><i>Authoritarian, conflict-prone neighborhood; sectarian or extremist ideology influential; outsiders intervene on opposite sides.</i></p>

2. STEP TWO Categorize Country and Possible Pathways

Categorizing requires mapping the country along a **democratic foundation continuum** or spectrum, from frail to sturdy. (See page 15 for visual.) Its place relies heavily on **how cohesive and institutionalized** the country is, though the other factors should also be considered. Tallying rubric scores can be helpful, but it is better to see how well a country fits the profile of the various zones.

- **Zone 1** countries have more cohesion, more robust institutions, more stable and constructive neighbors, stronger economic fundamentals, and so forth. They have the best prospects for democratization and can reform rapidly.
- **Zone 2** states have weak but functioning institutions, some social fractures, unstable political settlements, limited capacity, mixed economic conditions, occasional outbreaks of violence, poor regional context, and no mechanism to constrain elites/security forces. Reformers should be opportunistic, prepared for cyclical and inconsistent change.
- **Zone 3** countries have highly fragmented political cultures, weakly institutionalized state structures, fragile neighbors, poor economic fundamentals, and potentially high levels of negative foreign intervention. Activists should be cautious, seeking incremental rather than rapid change.

3. **STEP THREE** **Assess Actors and Their Power Dynamics**

While the structural conditions discussed above frame what is possible in any context (pathways), four elements determine the likelihood that there will be movement toward democracy in the near term. Assessing the **short-term tactical landscape** — including the balance of power — and how it might be enhanced is essential to moving forward.

Existing Regime (How unified, institutionalized, and popular is the government?)

- **Military's role** in regime / likelihood it will act to protect interests / safeguards that might shift behavior
- Likely action of whatever actor or group controls **key institutions** / inducements for change
- **Elite divisions** and how these might evolve or be exploited given recent developments
- **Existing regime's popularity** / its capacity to gain loyalty of key groups / opportunities to undermine

Democratic Activists (What is the collective action capacity of activists?)

- **Unity, organization, and capacity** to bring together different groups, including those on sidelines
- Strength of **leadership** / capacity to adapt, compromise, catalyze risk taking, build relationships
- Capacity to identify and broadcast **regime abuses**
- **Preparedness** to govern / security

Popular Expectations (How desirous of change is the population?)

- Population's **dominant sentiment** and whether it can be constructively influenced and mobilized
- Role and messaging of **social leaders and political entrepreneurs** / unity of popular vision
- **Expectations** for change and the public's capacity to withstand difficulties in achieving it
- **Media** landscape and avenues for activist influence

Potential Spoilers (How well organized, armed, and motivated are potential spoilers?)

- Likelihood major **state or non-state actor** will veto change or step into vacuum during transition
- Likely actions of **winners and losers** from an election
- Likely actions of **biggest political and economic losers** from change
- Likelihood of **backlash** if reform doesn't produce promised benefits / likely actions of those who benefit

4. **STEP FOUR** **Identify Where the Country is in the Transition Cycle**

Is the country in **protest or pre-transition** (with activists seeking change, but none occurring yet), high risk **early transition** (when the political institutions are in maximum flux, typically the first months or even year or two after a transition starts), or **policy or post-transition** (when a routine sets in until the momentum of the transition fades)? See page 23, for opportunities, challenges, and key questions of each stage.

5. **STEP FIVE** ***Incorporate Foreign Assistance Lessons Learned***

Looking at the most important transitions since the end of the Cold War, as well as the rich literature on how to improve foreign assistance and better advance democracy yields **five overarching principles and best practices** on how to carry them out.

1 **Priorities: Political understanding and local insight**

Invest in ongoing political economic analysis, balance short- with long-term, keep staff focused on a specific country, and empower those closest to the context for program spending, monitoring, and evaluation.

2 **Programming: Flexibility and adaptability in design and implementation**

Encourage ingenuity by setting a clear goal without an overly prescriptive formula to achieve it. Use a series of small experimental or incremental steps toward a goal, monitor results, and adapt. Aim for efficacy, not efficiency. Work with a wide range of institutions and partnerships, employing microgrants and limited paperwork to reach more actors.

3 **Context: Enhancing structural conditions**

Invest in democracy foundation, bolster key institutions early on, and ensure electoral and judicial institutions work as advertised. Encourage collective action (and reduce polarization) by incentivizing cooperation, trust building, and partnerships; incorporate conflict prevention lessons.

4 **People: Empowering leaders and organizations**

Encourage leaders to compromise, accept democratic norms, and invest in key institutions. Strengthen opposition through building organizations, parties, and coalitions, and reach out to moderate elements within existing regime and offer assurances.

5 **Strategies: Timing, trade-offs, and trust building**

Balance the urge for change with incrementalism when conditions don't allow more. Small victories are important and democratization an extended process. Leverage critical junctures and issues and adapt to rapidly changing circumstances and opportunities. Recognize legitimate concerns of military and former regime and seek negotiated exit.

At this point, the assessment is complete. Now let's turn to policy formulation.

6. **STEP SIX** ***Synthesize Analysis and Identify Entry Points***

The zones (which exist along a continuum) determine the **range of possible pathways** forward for any particular transition. Activists and their international partners can help a country achieve the best possible outcome given its particular constraints if they **define success based on the zone** it lies in, and develop tactics based on the **political opportunity structure** and **transition phase**.

	Zone 1	Zone 2	Zone 3
Characteristics	Cohesive; good institutions/ neighbors/ economy	Social cleavages; weak but functioning state; fragile agreement	Highly fragmented; fragile institutions; negative foreign role
What is success?	Democratization	Simultaneously strengthen democratic foundation and gradually democratize	Stability with increased accountability
Possible measure of progress (examples)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • V-Dem indicators • Public service performance measures • Perceptions of economic performance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perceptions of legitimacy of elections across groups • Popular support for reform • Measures of horizontal inequalities • Corruption indicators 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Breadth and depth of elite coalition supporting change • Level of trust and conflict across groups • Balance of forces influencing the country from the outside • Level of violence
Key short-term priorities (examples)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agree on electoral design/ timeline • Boost institutional capacity • Strengthen political parties 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make first election a success • Maintain popular support • Strengthen reform coalition • Manage cleavages • Introduce quick wins 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish trust/ agreement across actors in/out of power • Strengthen collective action institutions • Advance incremental reforms • Ensure security is maintained
Key long-term priorities (examples)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure economy delivers • Sectoral reforms • Reduce cleavages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce intergroup inequities • Boost key institutions • Enhance political agreement • Strengthen cohesion • Ensure broad economic gains 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen democratic foundation • Sidetrack potential spoilers • Weaken negative outsiders • Reconfigure incentives • Leverage external anchors
Key constraints (examples)	Lack of capacity, infrastructure, education, etc.	Disagreement on key issues; no compromise; weak capacity, economy; neighbors	No trust; fragility of institutions; outsider role; undemocratic norms; weak agreements

	Zone 1	Zone 2	Zone 3
Protest (pre-transition) priorities	Negotiations; unify social forces; amplify grievances	Build trust and joint vision; incentives; sympathetic actors	Consider risks; plan for divisions; go incremental
Early-transition priorities	Rapid elections and economic reform	Slow elections; institutional design; quick wins; economy	Avoid polarization; security; shore up core institutions
Policy (post-transition) priorities	Governance; reduce discrimination; skills	Political parties; cleavages; cohesion; decentralization	Emphasize inclusion; security; compromise; manage conflict

Once the country zone and place in the transition cycle are determined, look for possible **entry points** with certain **actors**, on specific **issues**, and at crucial **junctions**.

Key Actors: The most important organizations, groups, and leaders, including ethnic or religious groups, political factions, incumbent elites, religious leaders, supreme court, media, security forces, youth group, regional powerhouse, terrorist leader, criminal group.

Key Issues: The most important issues/grievances/interests as perceived by the key actors, including security, justice and resolution of conflicts, equality of economic opportunity, cultural/language policies, distribution of resources, political representation.

Crucial Junctions: Critical events, decisions, and debates that have an outsized impact on political dynamics, including elections, coalition talks, negotiations, national dialogue, dramatic changes in prices, large-scale layoffs, a decision over a contentious issue.

Ways to Influence Actors: Leverage interests; strengthen/weaken actor capacity to influence; appeal to interests/ beliefs/ideas; use longstanding ongoing relationships; work indirectly, through other actors.



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