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The Soldier and the Changing State: Building Democratic Armies in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas - Book review by Harold Trinkunas



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BOOKS IN
REVIEW

BUILDING DEMOCRATIC MILITARIES

Harold Trinkunas

The Soldier and the Changing State: Building Democratic Armies in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas. By Zoltan Barany. Princeton University Press, 2012. 472 pp.

By titling his new book as he has, Zoltan Barany consciously evokes Samuel P. Huntington's seminal 1957 study on civil-military relations, *The Soldier and the State*. Whereas Huntington focused on great powers and had in view militarism and the role that it played in the twentieth century's two world wars, Barany aims to explain civil-military relations following democratization. His goal as an investigator—to examine the conditions that are most likely to produce democratic civil-military relations across a wide range of transitional settings—is ambitious. As a theorist of civil-military relations and democratization, however, Barany's aims are more modest. Eschewing a general theory of how new democracies achieve control over their militaries, he instead offers to scholars and practitioners of democracy the wisdom that can be gained from his case studies.

Barany forcefully argues that no democracy can be called consolidated unless and until its armed forces are firmly under the control of duly constituted civilian authorities. Throughout history, states have usually had coercive institutions for the purpose of defense, and thus the problem of realizing civilian control of the military has been a perennial one. If elected officials are to fully exercise their mandates, it will always be necessary to limit and define the roles, missions, and prerogatives of the armed forces. With all their power, militaries are

particularly well positioned not only to defend the state but also to choose who will control it.

One of this book's major contributions is its clear definition of what civilian control of the military means. First, the executive and legislative branches should share responsibility for the supervision of the defense sector, including financial and personnel decisions. Second, a civilian minister should come between the chief executive and the armed forces in the chain of command—advice that some new democracies have yet to heed. Third, in order to accept a new democratic regime, the armed forces must undergo an internal transformation (a point articulated by former Spanish minister of defense Narcis Serra [1982–91]). And finally, the armed forces' internal norms regarding social issues such as gender and ethnicity should mirror those of society at large, which indicates a need for independent civilian defense expertise.

Barany is particularly ambitious in his case selection, examining 27 transitions from autocracy in order to identify the settings and variables that lead to civilian control of the armed forces. The book is organized by transition type: postwar, postdictatorship, and post-state transformation. This last category lumps together the experiences of many postcolonial states in the developing world with reunified Germany and postapartheid South Africa, making it a little awkward. Nonetheless, the book's cross-regional comparisons of cases from Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Europe are both valuable and unusual in this field of study. It would be difficult to identify another book on democratizing civil-military relations that provides such a broad perspective. Moreover, based on a close examination of the cases that I know best, Barany is fair in his characterization and explanation of each of the transitions. The book clearly benefits from the author's extensive fieldwork, including a number of personal interviews with key officials and policy makers. Free from an overarching theory of democratic civil-military relations, Barany is able to listen more closely to the experts and practitioners on the ground in each country.

Barany's conclusions will not surprise experts on civil-military relations. Rather, they confirm the general findings in the field and thus are valuable for scholars of democratization. Barany shows that the setting which holds the greatest promise for elected officials to gain control is when that military has just lost a foreign war. In defeat's wake, the armed forces' prestige and their ability to defend their institutional prerogatives will be at their lowest. Yet, Barany wisely observes, these are also the cases in which civilian officials most frequently overreach, hamstringing their defense establishment from the point of view of military effectiveness and constraining the ability of future elected officials to pursue national objectives. Particularly important in this context are international great powers, as they are able to influence outcomes and defend newly elected officials. They also may make critical errors,

however; Barany points to the dissolution of the Iraqi army in 2003 as a case in point. International participation also is often crucial in resolving civil wars, because the parties negotiating a transition may be fairly evenly matched.

Like other experts on civil-military relations, including Felipe Agüero, Craig Arceneaux, and David Pion-Berlin, Barany finds that the balance of power between civilians and the military matters greatly in transitions from autocracy. This balance depends on the military's record during the previous regime and the degree to which it controls the pace and timing of the transition. Newly elected officials should expect militaries to push for as many prerogatives as they can get. Moreover, if the democratizers wish to remain in power, they should be ready to counter a coup attempt. While international actors can try to influence militaries with carrots such as promises of aid or NATO membership, they can do little else. In such constrained transitions, there is less scope to rapidly set in train democratic civilian control of the military. Most of Barany's case studies, however, do eventually achieve democratic consolidation.

In cases of postcolonial or postreunification state transformation, civilian leadership is key. Not only are the civilians in the outgoing and incoming governments doing most of the bargaining, but often at least some elements of the military are discredited by their association with the old regime. Even in successful cases of democratization, the strong executive leadership that brought about state transformation may overshadow the legislature and civil society when it comes to civil-military issues. Barany argues that this dynamic could prevent future democratic leaders from gaining much-needed expertise in this area.

Unfortunately, this book misses an opportunity to normalize the study of democratic civil-military relations by relating it to broader arguments about politics and policy making in new democracies. The book assumes that politicians will make it a top priority to establish civilian control over the armed forces. While this is plausible, it does not always happen. The incentive structure faced by elected officials in new democracies may well lead them to establish façade institutions that do not actually provide for civilian control over the military while they address other pressing—or more electorally consequential—matters. Some elected officials instead focus on merely “coup-proofing” the military (rendering it incapable of mounting or supporting a putsch) as a lower-cost alternative to actually controlling the military. Or officials may even politicize the military in order to gain its backing for new political projects. These methods may be outside what Barany defines as the realm of democratic civil-military relations, yet they occur in new regimes just the same. Finally, the book would also have benefited from going beyond a focus on the “carrots and sticks” of international politics (such as foreign aid or sanctions) to consider other methods

(such as emulation and learning) that can influence newly elected officials in democratizing countries.

In sum, *The Soldier and the Changing State* is very useful reading for democracy scholars and practitioners. It lives up to its title, and it may even displace Huntington's classic as the first stop for those seeking to understand democratic civil-military relations today. Barany outlines the problem of democratic civil-military relations and explains how they should look in a consolidated democracy. The volume is comprehensive, both in its review of the most recent scholarship and in the breadth of the cases that it considers. Barany's inductive procedures allow his findings to emerge organically, with no violence done to case studies along the way. His conclusions affirm the findings of other recent studies of civil-military relations, which is both reassuring and a service to the field. Still, some scholars may find the book somewhat frustrating, because it does not offer an answer to a key question: Why are some regimes that are otherwise making good progress toward consolidating democracy still plagued by poorly institutionalized civilian control of the military?

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