

Trade Unions in Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Comparing Different Transitional Outcomes

Ciara McCorley¹

¹University of Limerick, Politics and Public Administration, Limerick, Ireland

ciara.mccorley@ul.ie

This paper will comparatively examine the impact of trade unions (TU) on transitions from authoritarian rule in South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe. It argues against elite centric notions of transition that have gained hegemony in the field and instead argues that transitions can be forged from below through the critical engagement of social movements in opposition to the state. It argues that TUs, as social movements, can impact a regime's legitimacy through political protest and contribute to the initiation, sustainment and conclusion of a transitional process.

TUs are of particular interest as an oppositional social movement in transitional periods due to the assertion that the organised working class are the strongest proponents of democracy in society, and thus their presence makes the emergence of democracy more likely in times of transition. TUs utilise strategies of social movement unionism that include traditional union methods like strikes in conjunction with confrontational methods in order to oppose a regime. With this in mind, TUs can threaten an authoritarian regime's dominance in two respects. Firstly, TUs occupy a critical space within a state structure, due to their potential to impact on a nation's economy. For this reason, states can spend vast resources trying to control labour movements; this is particularly true in authoritarian regimes. Secondly, TUs possess institutional longevity within states in comparison with other social movements that may sometimes be considered 'ephemeral'. This institutional legacy can equip them with resources and strategies that can threaten the dominance of a regime.

This paper will examine the impact of TUs in processes of transition in South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe and will comparatively explore the differing transitional outcomes in the case studies. All countries have experienced periods of transition where TUs played some role in the transitional process through social movement unionism, or through the formation of opposition political parties, yet all have had differing transitional outcomes. The paper will examine the role of TUs before, during and after a transition in order to ascertain the differing impacts of TUs in each country. It will comparatively examine the conditions under which TUs influence transitional politics, both positively and negatively.