

Examining likelihoods in 2012: autocratic & democratic regime change

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Events throughout 2011 have demonstrated that terrorism remains a high priority for nation-states through the world. Regime and nation-state stability have played an influential role, particularly in the Middle East and Africa in affecting global terrorism. In an attempt to map out what 2012 may bring, examining regime political stability is a useful starting point for a look at global terrorism in 2012. Here Jay Ulfelder provides an engaging and thought-provoking examination into the likelihood of transitions in 2012 of autocracies into democracies.



2011 was a year of remarkable democratic ferment, as citizens in an unusually large and diverse set of countries took to public spaces to demand more dignity in their lives and more accountability from their governments.

In nearly all cases, the democratization those protesters are demanding remains incomplete. While Occupy participants in the United States rightly decry the occasional act of police brutality against them, the gap yawns widest in countries ruled by authoritarian regimes, which still “occupy” more than two of every five countries, including some of the richest and most populous.

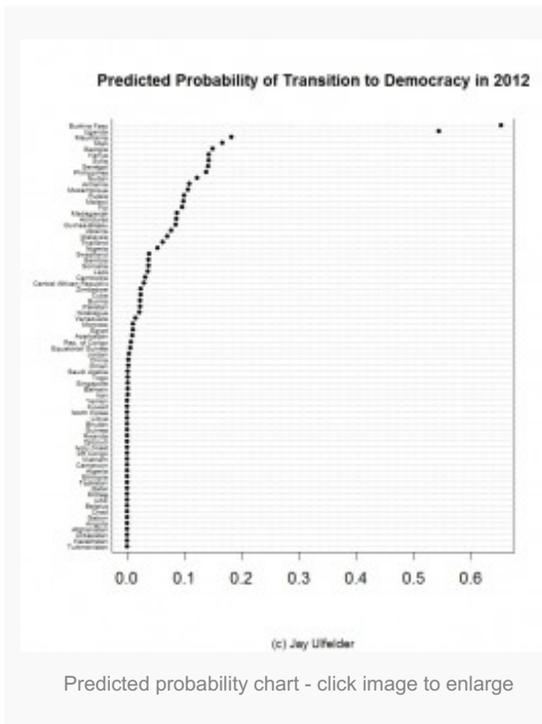
Which of those authoritarian regimes are “ripest” for transitions to democracy in 2012? To help answer that question, I used a statistical technique called [Bayesian model averaging](#) to identify and weight a number of risk factors and then applied those weights to the most recent data available. The result is a set of probabilistic forecasts of democratic transition for all countries worldwide currently under authoritarian rule.

For purposes of this forecasting exercise, political regimes are categorized in “either/or” fashion. A regime is considered to be a democracy when it meets all of the four conditions enumerated below. A regime that fails to satisfy any of these conditions is considered to be an autocracy.

1. **Elected officials rule.** No unelected individuals (say, a king, like Abdullah II of Jordan or Mohammed VI of Morocco) or organization (say, a military junta, like Egypt’s SCAF) determine or direct policy outcomes.
2. **Elections are fair and competitive.** Elections offer voters a meaningful choice between candidates and are free of widespread fraud and abuse.
3. **Politics is inclusive.** All adult citizens—male and female, without regard to racial or communal identity—have equal rights to vote and participate in politics.
4. **Civil liberties are respected.** The government generally recognizes and protects freedoms of speech, association, and assembly.

A transition to democracy occurs when a government chosen by fair, competitive, and inclusive elections takes office (assuming the other conditions enumerated above hold as well). The transition is dated to the installation of the new government, not the elections. This rule avoids treating aborted transitions, such as the one that occurred in Algeria in 1991, as equivalent to the establishment of democracy. Conceptually, the idea is that the authoritarian regime remains in place until a new government is actually installed, and as such, that authoritarian government may veto the transition at any moment until that handover of power.

The chart adjacent plots the estimated likelihood of transition in 2012 for all autocracies worldwide, based on preliminary data from 2011. One thing that’s immediately noticeable about these scores is that they are all pretty



low. If you check the scale on the bottom axis, you'll see that most scores are under 10%, and many are approximately zero. To some extent, that's an [artifact of the rarity](#) of these events. On average, only a few democratic transitions happen worldwide each year, so the easiest way to make a forecast that's about 95% accurate is simply to say they won't happen anywhere. The point of an exercise like this one is not to identify precisely which countries will transition when, a task that's still well beyond the reach of current data and methods (and will probably remain so forever). Instead, it's better to think of the list as an attempt to identify which of the world's authoritarian regimes are most likely to experience the few transitions we might expect to see over the course of 2012.

I hope the forecasts stand on their own, but I'll offer comments on some the results that I found most surprising or intriguing.

Most surprising to me, Syria ranks among the 10 countries most likely to transition in 2012, while Egypt lands much farther down the list, barely cracking into the top 40. Beyond the nonviolent movements that arose in both countries in 2011, those estimates don't account for recent events, and any subjective assessment

would probably flag Egypt as the more likely case. Nevertheless, I think these estimates do hint at near-term potential for political transformation in Syria while reinforcing the need for caution and concern on the prospects for democratic government in Egypt. (Note: the Egypt forecast assumes that civil liberties improved in 2011 to a 4 on the Freedom House scale. The estimated probability would be slightly higher if that score were a 3, and it would be noticeably lower if that score were a 5 or worse.)

The forecasts suggest that prospects for a democratic transition in 2012 in Russia improved substantially with the emergence of a nonviolent protest movement after fraudulent legislative elections earlier this month. It ranks 13th on the list, in the same neighborhood as Armenia and (surprising to me) Sudan.

For China, the analysis confirms the prevailing view that the structural potential for a democratic transition remains low, but it also underscores the point that China's transition prospects will improve if and when the regime expands protections for civil liberties or the economy suffers a sharp downturn.

Many of the countries found to be most likely to transition soon are in sub-Saharan Africa: Burkina Faso, Uganda, Mali, Kenya, and Senegal represent five of the top 10, while Mozambique, Malawi, Madagascar, and Guinea-Bissau can also be found in the top 20. Also notable is Nigeria's presence just a few notches further down the list, in the 23rd spot. These forecasts suggest that the [good-news story](#) of accelerating economic growth on that continent may coincide with another regional wave of fresh attempts at democracy.

Where sub-Saharan Africa looks especially promising, Central Asia looks especially bleak. Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan land at the bottom of the list, and Tajikistan perches just a few notches higher. These grim forecasts are driven by those countries' lack of democratic experience, their exceptionally repressive regimes, and their oil and gas wealth.

For readers who want a peek under the hood, I can tell you that these estimates are generated by an algorithm that accounts for just a few things. (Of course, all of the parenthetical statements about relative risk get the caveat, "Other things being equal.")

- Whether or not the country has ever had a democratic regime (a transition is more likely if so).
- The age of the current authoritarian regime (the effect depends on prior democracy; risk increases over time

for countries without democratic experience, but it's more or less constant over time for countries with democratic experience).

- The scope of civil liberties the previous year, per [Freedom House's index](#) (a transition is more likely with more liberties, but the association is non-linear).
- The share of the country's gross national income generated from oil & gas extraction, per the World Bank's [World Development Indicators](#) (a transition is less likely with more oil).
- Whether or not the country had a [nonviolent popular movement](#) the previous year, according to [Erica Chenoweth's NAVCO data set](#) (more likely if so).
- The annual rate of economic growth, according to the IMF's [September 2011 World Economic Outlook](#) (more likely when growth is slower).

That list isn't short because I lacked ideas about what else might help predict these events. Many other factors were also considered but were found to be poor predictors, while still others were left out of the analysis because there simply wasn't enough data for enough countries or years (sometimes historical, sometimes current) to use them. Some of the factors I included in the call to BMA but found to be poor predictors of democratic transitions include:

- Per capita income (ditto for infant mortality rates)
- Literacy rates (normalized to the annual global median)
- Percent of the population in urban areas
- Youth bulge
- Trade openness (imports plus exports as a share of GDP)
- Mobile phone subscriptions per capita (normalized to the annual global mean)
- Ethnic or cultural diversity
- Ongoing civil war

I'd love to have readers use the Comments field to offer their own views on prospects for democratic transitions in 2012 and the factors and forces that will drive those events. Meanwhile, I'll close with a wish: I hope I'm wrong and every one of these countries gets a democratic government very soon.

Jay Ulfelder is a political scientist and freelance consultant. This article was first published on his [personal blog](#).