SYMPOSIUM

conceptualising civil-military relations in emerging democracies

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Abstract

Establishing civilian control of the military is an important challenge for new democracies. Surprisingly, however, there is no established conceptual framework for understanding what civilian control entails and how exactly weak or absent civilian control impinges upon democratic quality. This article addresses these lacunae, developing a new concept of civilian control for emerging democracies. It proposes to understand civilian control as the situation in which civilians have decision-making power in all relevant political matters. Differentiating civilian control as consisting of five decision-making areas, this new concept allows for a nuanced analysis of civilian control and comparative analysis. It also provides a comprehensive framework for systematically assessing the impact of incomplete civilian control on the various dimensions of liberal democracy.

Keywords military; democratisation; civilian control; strategic choices; democracy

Civilian control of the military[1] has long been considered a necessary condition for democratic rule (O'Donnell *et al*, 1986; Dahl, 1989; Schmitter and Karl, 1991). As Richard H. Kohn (1997: 142) aptly notes, 'the purpose of the military is to defend society, not to define it'. Although all armed forces are political to some degree (McAlister, 1964), for liberal democracy to persist, the armed forces must be subordinated to the democratically elected civilian authorities (Linz and Stepan, 1996; Desch, 1999; Burk, 2002).

Most surveys of political regime types around the world demonstrate that after

more than three decades of the so-called 'third wave of democratisation' (Huntington, 1991) few countries remain under direct military rule (Siaroff, 2009: 92–93). Moreover, the numbers of military coup d'états have dramatically decreased since the 1980s (Clark, 2007; Croissant and Kuehn, 2007).

However, several studies also demonstrate that in many newly democratised nations in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa and Pacific Asia, the degree of institutionalised civilian oversight on military affairs is low, and the military enjoys considerable political prerogatives and a great deal of institutional autonomy. (Alagappa, 2001; Smith, 2005; Beeson and Bellamy, 2008; Basedau, 2008; Pion-Berlin, 2009).

The ambiguity of civil-military relations in many third wave democracies – the decline of direct forms of military intervention and control on the one hand, and the persistence of military tutelage, prerogatives and contestation of civilian authority on the other – confronts comparative politics and democratisation research with three major challenges. First of all, a concept of civilian control is needed which systematically delineates different dimensions of civil-military interaction, is able to capture the many forms of political influence exerted by the military, and allows for assessing the degree of civilian authority in different areas of civil-military relations. Second, in order to gain a better understanding of the relationship between civil-military relations and democratisation we need to think more thoroughly about the consequences of incomplete or weak civilian control for the 'quality' of democracy. The third challenge is to explain institutional change in civil-military relations in emerging democracies.

The voluminous literature on civil-military relations offers many explanations for the occurrence of military coups and military regimes (O'Kane, 1987; Acemoglu *et al*, 2009). Furthermore,

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there is a rich tradition of structuralist, culturalist, rationalist and institutionalist approaches which aim to explain the success (or failure) of civilian control (Pion-Berlin, 2001). So far, however, most contributions have not adequately addressed the question of how civilians attempt to control the armed forces, which strategies they choose and how the contingent choices and strategies of civilian actors are structured by different macro-structural, institutional and ideational factors.

This contribution, which proceeds in three parts, addresses the first two challenges.[2] Part one presents a multi-dimensional concept of civilian control. Next, we discuss the relevance of civilian control and the consequences of limited or absent civilian control for democracy. Part three summarises the discussion and demonstrates the implications of our approach for the empirical study of civil-military relations in emerging democracies.

CIVILIAN CONTROL OF THE MILITARY

Traditionally, civilian control has been implicitly defined as the lack of military

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coups and military rule (Nordlinger, 1977). However, the problems with such an understanding of civilian control are numerous. First, the coup/no-coup dichotomy reduces the complexity of civil-military relations to only one extreme and partial aspect (Luckham, 1971). Second, an even more serious fallacy is the logical inference that necessarily follows from a negative definition of civilian control as absence of coups. If open military intervention is the definitorial threshold for civilian control, all other forms, states, and patterns of civil-military relations necessarily need to be considered as civilian control. This includes other forms of military involvement in domestic politics that are potentially no less dangerous for democracy than the military coup (Edmonds, 1988). Furthermore, as Feaver (1996) has pointed out, the absence of military coups could also be read as an indicator for the high degree of political influence *vis-à-vis* civilians since the armed forces are able to assert their interests in other less outspoken ways.

In contrast to the dichotomist perspective, we propose to describe civil-military relations as a continuum with a polarisation between 'civilian control' on one side and 'military rule' on the other. (cf. Welch, 1976). Civilian control is thus defined as *civilians having exclusive authority to decide on national politics and their implementation. Under civilian control, civilians can freely choose to delegate decision-making power and the implementation of certain policies to the military while the military has no autonomous decision-making power outside those areas specifically defined by civilians. Furthermore, it is civilians alone who determine which particular policies, or policy aspects, the military implements, and civilians also define the boundaries between policy-making and policy-implementation. Moreover, civilian authorities must possess sanctioning power vis-à-vis*

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the military, and they can – in principle – revise their decisions at any time.[3]

Consequently civilian control and complete military dominance over all political structures, processes, and policies are the endpoints of the scale, whereas cases in which political decision-making power is divided between civilians and the military are positioned somewhere along the spectrum of the continuum. In order to analytically capture all possible distributions of decision-making power between civilians and the military, and to avoid the fallacy of coup-ism outlined above, we delineate five different decision-making areas in civil-military relations (see also Colton, 1979; Trinkunas, 2005) (Figure 1).

The area of Elite Recruitment defines the rules, criteria and processes of recruiting, selecting and legitimising political office holders, which means the degree of openness of the political processes to competition, and the degree of participation,
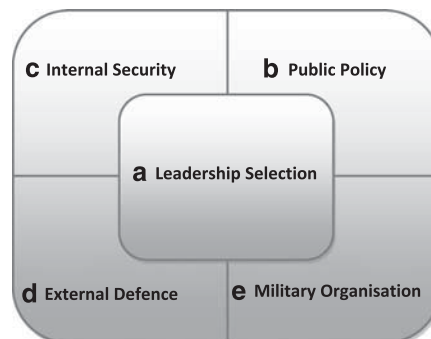

Figure 1 Decision-making areas of civil-military relations.

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the inclusiveness of political competition (Dahl, 1971: 4–6). Civilian control over rules of competition is undermined when public offices are excluded from open competition and if the military influences electoral procedures. Civilian control over the rules of participation is constrained if active military personnel are eligible for public office and soldiers influence the formation and dissolution of government.

Public Policy comprises the rules and procedures of the processes of policy-making ('agenda-setting', 'policy-formulation', 'policy-adoption') and policy-implementation regarding all national policies except the narrowly understood aspects of security and defence policy. To determine civilian control over policy-making, the extent to which the armed forces can assert their interests in the processes of agenda setting, policy formulation and policy adoption must be analysed. While all policy issues are important to gauge the degree of civilian control over this area, it is particularly relevant if the military has any influence, formal or informal, on the national budget. Regarding control over policy implementation, it must be analysed to what extent the military is able to exert influence on state administrative agencies charged with implementing political decisions.

Internal Security entails the decisions and concrete actions regarding the preservation and restoration of domestic law and order, including counterinsurgency operations, counterterrorism and domestic intelligence-gathering, daily law enforcement and border control (Collier, 1999; Trinkunas, 2005). Measures of the degree of civilian control over this area are the extent to which civilians formulate the goals and decide on the methods for upholding internal security, and the degree of military control over the agencies of domestic security and law-enforcement.

National Defence includes all aspects of defence policy, ranging from the development of security doctrines to the deployment of troops abroad and conduct of war (Alagappa, 2001; Trinkunas, 2005). Civilian control over this area can be gauged by analysing to which degree civilians can effectively devise and decide on defence policy; and to what extent they are able to effectively oversee the military's implementation of defence policies.

The area of Military Organisation comprises decisions regarding all organisational aspects of the military institution, including the 'hardware', that is, the military's institutional, financial and technological resources, and the 'software' of military organisation, for instance, decisions on military doctrine, education, and personnel selection (Bland, 2001; Cottey et al, 2002). Measures of the degree of civilian control over this area are the extent of civilians' authority to decide on the 'hardware' and 'software' of military organisation, and the degree to which civilians can establish the boundaries of military autonomy in deciding on these military-internal affairs.

By evaluating who has the power to make decisions in each of these areas, a comprehensive assessment of civil-military relations in new democracies can be developed: full-fledged civilian control requires that civilian authorities enjoy uncontested decision-making power in all five areas while in the ideal-type military regime soldiers rule over all five areas. Military challenges to civilian decision-making power can take two analytically distinct shapes (Stepan, 1988; Valenzuela, 1992):

(1) *Institutionalised prerogatives* describe formal rights by which the military is able 'to structure relationships between the state and political or social society' (Stepan, 1988: 93).

(2) *Contestation*, by contrast, encompasses informal behaviour by which the military challenges civilian

decision-making power. The implications of these challenges on democratic governance will be discussed in the following section.

CIVILIAN CONTROL AND DEMOCRACY

Democracy is a form of government in which political power exclusively derives from the 'freely expressed will of the people whereby all individuals are to be treated as equals' (Hadenius, 1992: 9). Most current research on the consolidation of democracy departs from a procedural conception of 'liberal democracy' which expands upon Robert Dahl's classic institutional minima of *polyarchy* to include the provisions of horizontal accountability and civilian control over the military (cf. Diamond, 2008).

Translating the notion of 'liberal democracy' into a systematic framework for empirical analysis, Merkel *et al* (2003) developed the multidimensional concept of 'embedded democracy', which differentiates the institutional setup of democracy into five 'partial regimes': (A) the electoral regime, (B) the system of political liberties, (C) the regime of civil rights, (D) a system of horizontal accountability, and (E) a set of institutions which guarantee that it is elected representatives alone who possess decision-making power in all relevant political matters.

In this framework, the problem of civilian control is situated in partial regime E, which prevents 'extra-constitutional actors not subject to democratic accountability, like the military or other powerful actors, from holding (final) decision-making power in certain policy fields' (Merkel, 2004: 41).

The failure of civilians to govern without interference, from being overridden by military officers, is particularly relevant for those emerging democracies where the military, as a segment of the authoritarian regime coalition, was more or less involved in domestic politics and has enjoyed considerable political influence and autonomy in internal affairs. Here, civilians must institutionalise control against a military with a long history of political involvement who might have the disposition and ability to prevent civilians from expanding their influence into core areas of military interest. This challenge makes the robust institutionalisation of civilian control crucial for entrenching democracy (Diamond and Plattner, 1996; Linz and Stepan, 1996).

While it is a truism that the lack of civilian control of the military, in extreme situations of civil-military conflict, can lead to the breakdown of democratic rule, the effects of weak civilian control on the quality and consolidation of democratic rule below the level of this 'worst case scenario', have thus far not been adequately theorised. We address these shortcomings by discussing the implications of fragile civilian control in partial regime (E) of 'embedded democracy' on the remaining four partial regimes – the electoral regime (A), political rights (B), civil rights (C), and horizontal accountability (D).

(A) *Electoral regime*: The functioning of the electoral regime depends heavily on the degree of civilian control over the area of *elite recruitment*. If the military enjoys privileges of reserved representation in decision-making agencies, controls the channels of political recruitment, or manipulates elections to safeguard its political prerogatives, the role of elections as institutions of political legitimisation and control is undermined and democracy is at stake.

(B) *Political rights*: Weakly institutionalised or absent civilian control might also severely infringe on the political rights of association and information,

with the military suppressing civil society and curtailing the freedom of the media. Such attempts to curb political rights are prone to occur when parties or civil society associations openly and directly criticise the military. Hence, military violations of political rights will be more likely, the more decision-making areas are under military control: where the armed forces are directly involved in day-to-day politics, political criticism directly addresses them and therefore poses a threat to their corporate and political interests, increasing their incentives to curtail the liberties of association and information.

(C) *Civil rights*: Insufficient civilian control of the military also has negative effects on the realisation of fundamental individual liberties. This is particularly the case if internal security decision-making is under the control of the military. Not only will the military have at its disposal the necessary means to enforce its will, without being checked by the civilian police or the judiciary, but furthermore, military internal security operations are likely to be more violent than those by the civilian police as the military tends to apply the rationale of warfare, the logic of destroying the enemy, to internal security operations (Rasmussen, 2001; Lutterbeck, 2004).

(D) *Horizontal accountability*: Weak civilian control will similarly undermine the institutional checks-and-balances which combine into the partial regime of 'horizontal accountability'. Per definition, military dominance over certain decision-making areas shields those policy matters from being overseen and reined in by civilian agencies. The civilians' lack of influence over the decision-making areas controlled by the military necessarily limits their possibilities to pose as

institutional counterweights and effective boundaries for political action. Again, these defects and their impact on democratic quality will be more severe the larger the political prerogatives of the military: the more decision-making areas are controlled by the military, the less non-military state agencies will be able to limit possible misappropriations of military power.

In summary, weak civilian control not only thwarts elected authorities' effective power to govern (which corresponds to partial regime (E) of 'embedded democracy'), but threatens the workings of all other partial regimes. In this regard, three important points need to be highlighted. First, the gravity of these implications depends upon the extent to which the military has usurped the political decision-making areas. The further the military's political power expands, the more severe will be the consequences for 'embedded democracy'. Military dominance over the political core areas of public policy and elite recruitment is especially crucial as this undermines the democratic logic of all four partial regimes of 'embedded democracy'.

From this follows a second issue, that of conceptual thresholds. While a political regime cannot be categorised as democratic if the military has authority over public policy and elite recruitment, the situation is more ambiguous with regard to military influence in other areas of civil-military relations. In fact, military dominance in the areas of military organisation, external defence and internal security might be compatible with what Merkel has termed the 'domain' type of defective democracy (Merkel, 2004).

Third and last, it is worth mentioning that the relationship between weak civilian control and democratic quality is

asymmetric. Civilian control is an integral part of liberal democracy and its fragility degrades the quality of democracy – although the concrete degree of degradation depends upon the specific deficits of civilian control and the affected partial regimes of 'embedded democracy'. However, a military challenge to civilian control is not the only possible source for the deficits of liberal democracy in newly democratised countries. Even the most robust civilian control over the military is not sufficient for liberal democracy, as research about illiberal democracies in the third wave of democratisation demonstrates. (Merkel *et al*, 2003; Diamond, 2008)

CONCLUSION

Although it is widely understood that civilian control is a *sine qua non* for democratic rule, the literature on democratic transition and consolidation lacks a solid understanding of the core contents of the concept, often implicitly equating civilian control with the absence of military coups. In this contribution, we have argued that such dichotomous conceptions are inadequate for capturing the core problems of civil-military relations in emerging democracies, and cannot provide sufficient analytical leverage to understand the impact of insufficient civilian control on the quality of democracy. Instead, civilian control must be understood as one pole on the continuous distribution of decision-making power between civilians and the military; more specifically, civilian control refers to that situation in which civilians decide on all relevant political matters. In order to analytically capture the possible civil-military distributions of decision-making power, we distinguished five decision-making areas. Identifying whether the authority (formal or informal) to decide in each of the areas rests with civilians or

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the military yields a nuanced analysis of civil-military relations in emerging democracies. Thus, our framework offers a heuristic tool for empirically assessing the concrete state of civil-military relations at one point in time as well as for longitudinal, cross-sectional and combined longitudinal/cross-sectional comparisons. Finally, the five-dimensional framework also proves itself valuable for theorising about how insufficient civilian control impacts upon democratic quality. The consequences of weak civilian control for democratic governance will depend upon which, and how many, areas of civil-military relations are controlled by the military: the less areas are under firm civilian control, the more likely is the decay or breakdown of democratic rule.

Notes

1 The terms 'armed forces' and the 'military' are used interchangeably in this paper. By 'military' we mean all permanent state organisations and their members, authorised by law, to apply coercive power in order to provide security for society and state primarily against external threats. 'Civilians' are all organisations and individuals of the state apparatus that are not attached to the military which have the authority to formulate, implement and oversee political decisions (Edmonds, 1988).

2 Owing to the lack of space, this paper cannot address the challenge of the 'agency-structure' problem in the study of institutional change in civil-military relations. A preliminary proposal is offered in Croissant *et al* (2010).

3 See also Kemp and Hudlin (1992), Pion-Berlin (1992), Bland (2001); Feaver (1996), Welch (1976).

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