It is widely known that most post-Communist countries have chosen semi-presidential regimes in their political transformations. Robert Elgie and Sophia Moestrup’s *Semi-Presidentialism Outside Europe: A Comparative Study* reveals that this largely holds true for other components of the “third wave of democratization”—Francophone and Lusophone Africa, Timor-Leste, and Taiwan. Based on case studies of these countries, this collection describes three constitutional traditions in which semi-presidential regimes emerged during the last fifteen years: post-Communist (Kyrgyzstan and Mongolia), French (Madagascar and Niger) and Portuguese (Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, and Timor-Leste). Although it might appear paradoxical, Taiwan’s semi-presidentialism resembles the post-Communist model, perhaps because dual executives already existed under the KMT (Chinese Nationalist Party) one-party regime (203). Authors François Frison-Roche and Gérard Conac overview post-Communist and French contexts of semi-presidentialism. Elisabete Azevedo and Lia Nijzink play a similar role for semi-presidentialism of Portuguese origin in their long chapter dedicated to Guinea-Bissau. Nevertheless, what this book refers to as Lusophone tradition remains obscure; it does not have descriptions of the Portuguese constitution.

The authors find tangible continuity between present semi-presidentialism and that of previous Communist regimes, since the latter had dual executives, the most important attribute of semi-presidentialism—that is, the central committees of the Communist parties of socialist countries and governments, and the governments in charge of strategic and managerial affairs of governance. In the post-Communist era, this traditional system of dual executives has been reinforced by presidents’ instincts toward self-preservation (i.e. using the prime minister as scapegoat for unpopular policies, 162). Moreover, semi-presidentialism has allowed presidents to avoid the harsh challenges of parliamentary elections (which, for example, U.S. “full” presidents inevitably face) by using political tactics in the nomination of prime ministers (168).

In contrast, although French colonies granted the population limited participation in colonial governance (137), post-French colonial countries’ imitation of Prime Minister Charles de Gaulle’s semi-presidential constitution turned out to be ephemeral (p. 80). As was the case with their Portuguese counterparts, the former French colonies shifted toward presidentialism, consolidating personal and one-party power. Perhaps the French tradition of executive dualism been lost before democratization started in the 1990s, since the period of post-colonial authoritarianism was longer (almost 30 years) than that of the former Portuguese colonies (about fifteen years). In contrast to traditionalism, characteristic for post-Communist Eurasia, political actors in Francophone and Lusophone countries consciously chose semi-presidentialism to integrate political and ethno-confessional oppositions into their regimes, using the dual executive for power-sharing. Therefore, the opposition’s desire to win elections sometimes nullified the option of modifying “highly presidentialized semi-presidentialism” in favor of of typical
semi-presidentialism, as was the case with Mozambique (128). In this sense, Africa’s choice of semi-presidentialism appears similar to the model in Poland and Lithuania, which was a result of compromise between post-Communists and democrats. Perhaps it is unfair to judge the positive or negative effect of semi-presidentialism in the democratization of Francophone and Lusophone Africa according to its performance alone, since any regime choice cannot fully overcome the formidable challenges caused by international and socioeconomic factors.

In this sense, the main question raised by the editors—that is, whether or not semi-presidentialism is effective in nascent democracies—would appear too far-fetched. Most chapters ask a more realistic question of whether this type of regime helps to avoid the fate of failed states, quite plausible due to the extremely low income-levels and human-development parameters in many of these countries. The same question can be raised in regard to Kyrgyzstan, Georgia, and Ukraine, since their Colored Revolutions largely took place not as a push toward democratization, but as a stop-gap against becoming failed states. In this sense, Mozambique’s “success story” (chapter 8) is suggestive. The atrocities of that country’s civil war alienated both the ruling party and the opposition from the population. The opposition was conscious of its lack of resources to seize power, and thus able to be negotiated with. A pragmatic prime minister gained the trust of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, which played the role that should have been played by civil society. This interpretation, cynical but plausible, provides the possibility of examining semi-presidentialism in comparison with consociational or other types of delegative democracy.

Several authors choose to use the subcategory of “highly presidentialized semi-presidentialism” proposed by Robert Elgie. This contributor has previously proposed a similar concept of “almost full presidential semi-presidentialism” (Demokratizatsiya 14 (3), 2006), a concept that seems particularly applicable to endangered democracies on the brink of becoming failed states. Perhaps Eurasian semi-presidentialism is exceptional in this regard; the Communist tradition requires the disguise of respect to parliament.

Constitutional traditions can be borrowed and combined eclectically. Elgie cites the unexpectedly strong influence of de Gaulle’s model on post-Communist Poland, Lithuania, Armenia, and Moldova. Contributor Dennis Shoesmith notes the impact of the exile of Timor-Lestean liberation leaders to Mozambique on institutional “learning.” This interpretation would perhaps become more complete were Shoesmith to supplement it with an analysis of how the tradition of parliamentary oligarchy in Southeast Asia modified the Lusophone semi-presidentialism.

Abundant empirical data provided in Semi-Presidentialism Outside Europe demonstrate the theoretical potential that the study of “semi-presidentialism outside Europe” might have. Though the collection reveals weak methodological integrity and the editors take few theoretical initiatives, it seems the readers’ responsibility to use the text for further deliberation of these political theories.

KIMITAKA MATSUZADO
Hokkaido University
Copyright © 2010 World Affairs Institute
Erratum

In the masthead of Demokratizatsiya’s Winter 2010 issue, we neglected to list the name of Venelin I. Ganev, who provided immeasurable assistance as Guest Editor for articles in that issue and in this current one.

Additionally, the biography of William Partlett, author of “Enforcing Oil and Gas Contracts Without Courts: Reputational Constraints on Resource Nationalism in Russia and Azerbaijan,” should have read: “William Partlett holds a law degree from Stanford University and a master’s and doctorate in Russian studies from Oxford University.”

Demokratizatsiya regrets these errors.