"Democratic Transitions" : Conversations with World Leaders, Edited by Sergio Bitar and Abraham F. Lowenthal. Reviewed by: Nehad Ismail

Dethroning dictators is only a first step in a much longer path toward making real change, asserted Mohamed Moncef Marzouki Former President of Tunisia in his forward to the book. Political leaders who played key roles in transitions to democratic governance revealed to Bitar and Lowenthal how these were accomplished in Brazil, Chile, Ghana, Indonesia, Mexico, the Philippines, Poland, South Africa, and Spain.

This ambitious and unique project was commissioned by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA).
In probing conversations with Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Patricio Aylwin, Ricardo Lagos, John Kufuor, Jerry Rawlings, B. J. Habibie, Ernesto Zedillo, Fidel V. Ramos, Aleksander Kwaśniewski, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, F. W. de Klerk, Thabo Mbeki, and Felipe González, editors Sergio Bitar and Abraham F. Lowenthal focused on the obstacles and challenges each leader faced as well as their strategies to achieve their goals of ending authoritarian rule.
In this monumental book, we find context-setting introductions by country experts who highlight each nation's unique experience as well as recurrent challenges all transitions faced.
The group of contributors are: Frances Hagopian (Brazil), Genaro Arriagada (Chile), Kwame A. Ninsin (Ghana), Bahtiar Effendy and Mutiara Pertiwi (Indonesia), Soledad Loazea (Mexico), Mark R Thompson (The Philippines), Jane L. Curry (Poland), Steven Friedman (South Africa), Charles Powell (Spain), and Georgina Waylen (Women activists).
The interviews are the heart of this book. It is not possible to quote excerpts from the 13 interviews due to space limitations. Despite the complexity of the processes involved in the transition from dictatorship and the uniqueness of each country, there are common themes that apply to all. It is important to note that there is no "one-size fits all."
The experience of Poland is different from that of South Africa and the processes that took place in Chile are not the same as those in Ghana and so on.
Fernando Henrique Cardoso (President of Brazil 1995-2003) noted that the transition would not take place via frontal assault on the regime's fortress but by laying siege to it. He spoke of building a coalition and a consensus for change and to defeat the authoritarian system from within whilst making sure the armed forces are under civilian control. Following from this, are constitutional reforms, and social mobilisation. Such themes are common to most countries.
As for Chile another country that successfully introduced democracy after 25 years of Pinochet's brutal rule, tensions continued regarding the issue of human rights until the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It is worth remembering that in 1973 Head of the army Augusto Pinochet staged a coup and assumed power. It took some 25 years of struggle to make Pinochet steps down as army head in March 1998. Pinochet lost an October 1988 referendum to extend his term by seven years, so stepped down in 1990 in favour of Patricio Alwyn (president, 1990-94).

Pinochet remained army commander until September 1998, thereafter becoming senator-for-life.
As we all know, he was held under house arrest in the UK between October 1998-March 2000.
In the interview with President Patricio Aylwin (President of Chile 1990-94) emphasized the importance of working in teams and forging good human relationships, building trust among the opposition and building a coalition.
In Poland the transition from authoritarian communism to free market democracy was long, arduous, complex and gradual. In his interview with Bitar and Lowenthal, Polish President Aleksander Kwasniewski: (President of Poland 1995-2005) said: "You should have a strategy and a vision. The vision should be freedom, democracy, social justice and the rule of law".
In Poland the struggle began in 1970 and after 20 years, Solidarity candidates won overwhelmingly. Lech Walesa became a President of a free democratic Poland from 1990-1995.
This monumental work explores the processes to end authoritarian regimes and introduce democracy. We must support these countries aspiring for democracy with soft intervention and help them to set goals like ending poverty.
Some 5 years ago the so-called Arab Spring erupted. There was euphoria, challenges, failures, blood baths and refugees. Here, there are echoes of Koert Debeuf's book "Inside the Arab Revolution" which analyses the challenges, frustrations and failure of the Arab spring.
Bitar and Lowenthal stressed that democracy cannot be imposed from outside. You must have strategic actors in the inside.
Lessons and recommendations which are common to most countries seeking freedom and democracy include the need to move incrementally, build a hopeful vision by focusing on important issues and solutions. Initiating dialogue and agreement to build a constitution are vital to achieving a stable democracy. An essential component of the democratic process is the creation of political parties and linking them to social movements. Issues such as transitional justice, truth and reconciliation, role of women and mobilisation of social movements are essential for ending authoritarian regimes.
No women leaders were interviewed for this book, but chapter 10 by Georgina Waylen focuses on women activists in democratic transitions.
Some might find the book a 'heavy reading' in the sense that the book is demanding and requires a lot of thought and concentration. It's a complex book, rich in details and anecdotes which you will not easily find elsewhere. The book can be slow to get through. Having said that it is a worthwhile rewarding read and a treasure of rare and fascinating information.
This great book makes a huge contribution to the subject of democracy, freedoms and human rights. The book should be valuable for political leaders, civil society activists, journalists, scholars, and all who want to support democratic transitions.