



Will There Be Any More Democratic Revolutions?

by Mark N. Katz

The first half of the 21st century's first decade witnessed the extension of the transnational democratic revolutionary wave that burst forth at the end of the Cold War into countries that had earlier seemed immune to it. The 2000 democratic revolution in Serbia overthrew the strongman Slobodan Milosevic who had dominated that country for over a decade. The 2003 "Rose Revolution" dispatched the authoritarian Eduard Shevardnadze who had ruled Georgia for many years in the Soviet era before becoming Mikhail Gorbachev's foreign minister, and then again for most of the post-Soviet period until his ouster. In Ukraine, the 2004 "Orange Revolution" thwarted an effort to manipulate election results in order to transfer power from one pro-Russian authoritarian president to another. The 2005 "Tulip Revolution" in Kyrgyzstan ousted President Askar Akayev who had seemed democratic when he first came to power at the time the USSR was collapsing, but later became increasingly authoritarian. Also in 2005, the "Cedar Revolution" in Lebanon resulted in the departure of Syrian troops that had been occupying it since the 1970's.

These revolutions occurring in such rapid succession raised hopes in many (and fears in many others) that democratic, or color, revolutions would occur elsewhere in the former Soviet Union—such as in Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, the Central Asian republics, and even Russia. Similarly, Lebanon's Cedar Revolution raised hopes and fears that democratic revolution might also occur in Syria, Iran, and other Middle Eastern countries.

By the end of 2007, though, the impetus for additional democratic revolutions appears to have stalled. In June 2005, Uzbekistani security forces killed many people in the town of Andijon to cut short what might have been the beginning of a democratic revolution inspired by neighboring Kyrgyzstan's Tulip Revolution. Although a greater or lesser number of people protested election results in other former Soviet republics (including Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Belarus), their authoritarian governments were able to face them down and continue ruling in their accustomed manner without much difficulty. The surprise election of the mercurial Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president of Iran in 2005 has certainly set back the prospects for democratization in that country. A renewed effort at democratic revolution did break out in Burma (Myanmar) in the latter part of 2007, but the military regime there has apparently succeeded in suppressing (if not eliminating) its opponents.

Further, there have been some dismaying trends in those countries that recently experienced democratic revolution. Serbia's democratically elected but increasingly nationalist government has remained stubbornly unwilling to grant independence to Kosovo—even though this is what the overwhelming majority of the people living there clearly want. Despite democratization, Georgia has remained poor and corrupt. Its elected president, Mikhail Saakashvili, seems to be more focused on regaining control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia—two small regions that, with Russian support, have effectively seceded—than on improving conditions in the territory he does control. Shortly after the Orange Revolution, Ukraine's two principal democratic leaders—President Viktor Yushchenko and his first prime minister, Yulia Timoshenko—fell out with each other and the man whom the

Orange Revolution prevented from stealing the 2004 presidential elections, Viktor Yanukovich, was able to become prime minister. (The 2007 Ukrainian parliamentary elections, though, have allowed democratic forces to—just barely—regain control of parliament.) In impoverished Kyrgyzstan, the new “democratic” president, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, quickly began ruling in a manner similar to the ousted authoritarian one. Bakiyev, though, appears more adept than his predecessor was in undermining his democratic opponents. Finally, Syria has actively sought to regain influence in Lebanon—and has met with considerable, if not complete, success in this endeavor.

What do these developments imply for the future of democratic revolution? It will be argued here that four important obstacles have emerged that serve to make successful democratic revolution more difficult at present: 1) authoritarian regimes are now on alert to the prospect of democratic revolution; 2) disillusionment has arisen after the democratic revolutions in some states resulted in something short of democracy; 3) strong external support—especially from Russia and China—to authoritarian regimes resisting democratic revolution; and 4) weak external support for democratic revolution from the U.S. due to its being bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan. Yet while they appear strong now, each of these obstacles could in the future either diminish or even disappear. Their doing so would set the stage for the resumption of the transnational democratic revolutionary wave.

Authoritarians on Alert

One of the greatest obstacles that democratic revolution now faces is the result of its own success: authoritarian regimes are now on alert that democratic revolution can occur, and are determined to prevent it from doing so. The impetus for many (if not all) recent democratic revolutions has been a contested election result which dictatorships either thought they could manipulate the results of, or believed (quite amazingly) they could win legitimately. These regimes, in short, were undermined not just by the rise of democratic opposition against them, but also by their own overweening self-confidence. The recent series of color revolutions that occurred in rapid succession has severely undermined that self-confidence.

Many authoritarian regimes, though, claim to be democracies, and want Western governments either to acknowledge them as such or, at minimum, not to contradict them too strenuously on this point. Thus, they allow some degree of freedom inside the country and openness to the outside, including permission for opposition figures to run for election—just so long as they lose. As Michael McFaul has observed, it is these semi-authoritarian regimes that have proven more vulnerable to democratic revolution than full-fledged dictatorships either where elections produce a 99.+% majority in favor of the regime or are not held at all.

McFaul identified seven factors needed for a successful democratic revolution: 1) a semi-autocratic regime; 2) an unpopular incumbent ruler; 3) a united, organized opposition; 4) effective election monitoring; 5) media capacity to inform citizens about falsified election results; 6) opposition ability to mobilize tens of thousands, or more, to protest election fraud; and 7) differences within the regime’s security services (McFaul 2005, 7).

Semi-autocratic regimes alert to the possibility of democratic revolution and desirous of thwarting it can do little to make the incumbent ruler more popular. However, they can do much to prevent McFaul’s last five factors from coalescing. Divisions within the democratic opposition can be created or exacerbated by treating some of its leaders more favorably than others. Election monitoring both by external and internal observers can either be

strictly limited or prevented altogether. The presence of the international press corps can also be kept limited at election time while negative coverage by the local press can be minimized both through co-optation and coercion.

If these three steps are successful, then the mobilization of tens of thousands to protest election fraud may never occur. Even if it does, denying them the logistical support needed to remain mobilized, discrediting them (as "terrorists," for example), or simply arresting and intimidating them may end the protest. Keeping the security services loyal to the regime is, of course, absolutely vital to its preservation. This is a task, though, that authoritarian regimes have a lot of experience with. It is easier to continue doing this if a mass protest does not emerge which security service elements can defect to, but vigilant oversight can allow authoritarian regimes to prevent such defections even if it does.

If McFaul's analysis is correct, then conditions need to be just right in order for democratic revolution to occur. It is obviously much easier for authoritarian regimes that are alert to the conditions needed for democratic revolution to prevent them from occurring and coalescing than it is for regimes that are not.

Disillusion with Democracy

Another obstacle both to further democratic revolution and the consolidation of successful democratic revolution is the disillusion that often results after the euphoric expectations emerging from its occurrence are not met. This can happen (indeed, has happened) for one or more of several reasons.

Disillusion can result when the leader raised to power by a democratic revolution turns out not to be democratic, but authoritarian. This, as mentioned earlier, is what has happened in Kyrgyzstan after the 2005 Tulip Revolution. This can have an extremely disheartening effect on those who took the risk of participating in a democratic revolution that had this result. What was the point if it merely led to one authoritarian ruler replacing another? And why go to the bother if it seems likely that the same thing will just occur again? People in neighboring countries initially inspired by a color revolution next door may reach the same conclusion if, to put it metaphorically, they believe that the rose has wilted, the orange has turned out to be a lemon, or the tulip has simply died.

A variation on this theme occurs when the leaders of a democratic revolution fall out with each other, as took place both in Ukraine and in Kyrgyzstan. In Ukraine, as was mentioned earlier, the conflict between the democrats Yushchenko and Timoshenko allowed the less than democratic Yanukovich whom the Orange Revolution prevented from stealing the 2004 presidential elections to later become prime minister. In Kyrgyzstan, continued poverty and the conflict between President Bakiyev and the democrats who initially supported him (including his first prime minister, Felix Kulov) has contributed to the general collapse of that country's democratization efforts.

Disillusionment with democracy can also occur when there is a sharp ethnic or religious division in a country experiencing democratic revolution, especially when the democratic revolution was primarily supported by one group and not the other. This is what happened in Ukraine where the Orange Revolution was primarily supported by the country's Ukrainian citizens, but not its Russian ones. To the latter, the Orange Revolution and the increased ties with the West that its leaders enthused about appeared highly threatening. Even with the 2007 parliamentary elections resulting in the democratic forces once more controlling both the presidency and the premiership, the skepticism and suspicion that Ukraine's

Russian population harbors toward democratization could yet threaten the achievements of the Orange Revolution.

In addition, disillusionment can arise when popular expectations about the standard of living improving dramatically after democratization are not met—especially when it actually declines. Disillusionment with democracy in one's own country can easily be extended into disillusionment with the West when (perhaps unrealistically) high expectations for economic assistance from it do not materialize.

Similarly, disillusionment can set in when a disagreement between an authoritarian government and the Western democracies persists after the former is replaced by a democratic government. In Serbia, for example, not only did the Milosevic government not want to grant independence to Kosovo, but the democratic government that replaced him and Serbian public opinion do not want this either. Most Western governments, by contrast, are now prepared to allow this since it is what the overwhelming majority of Kosovo's population wants. Serbian disillusionment is not so much over democracy as it is with the West. But the rise of nationalist forces in Serbia, its increasing isolation from the West, and its drawing closer to authoritarian Russia all have negative implications for the continued strength of democracy in Serbia.

Any given country, of course, can experience more than one—or even all four—forms of disillusionment after a democratic revolution. This is arguably what happened in Russia after what was regarded both internally and externally as its democratic revolution of August 1991. And as the Russian case shows, this compounded disillusionment can have long-term negative consequences. Continued strong Russian public support for Vladimir Putin despite his increasing authoritarianism seems to be explained by the strength of the Russian belief that Russia tried democracy and free market capitalism under Yeltsin (even though it really didn't), and that they failed.

Strong External Opposition

Preventing democratic revolution is a task not undertaken alone by authoritarian regimes in their own countries. Some authoritarian regimes seek to prevent—or reverse—it in other countries as well. As mentioned earlier, Syria's authoritarian regime is trying hard to reverse the Cedar Revolution and regain influence in Lebanon. More importantly, the world's two most powerful authoritarian regimes—Russia and China—are actively helping other authoritarian governments prevent or face down democratic revolution.

Russia under Putin has been particularly active in this regard. While America and the West have criticized, to varying degrees, the lack of democracy in several former Soviet republics (Belarus, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the Central Asian states), Moscow has not. Putin defended the Uzbekistani government's violent crackdown in Andijon which the West criticized. Moscow has also stoutly defended the other former Soviet regimes against Western criticism about the fairness of the various elections that they have stage-managed in their favor. Further, Putin has befriended President Bakiyev of Kyrgyzstan who has become increasingly authoritarian after the Tulip Revolution which brought him to power. By contrast, Putin has had adversarial relations with—and even sought to undermine—the more genuinely democratic leaders that came to power through the color revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine.

Similarly, China has continued to support the extreme dictatorial regime of Kim Jong-il in North Korea for fear that its collapse could lead to the absorption of the North by the

democratic South. In addition, Beijing is now supporting the Burmese military's crackdown on democratic activists—just as it did in 1988-91. Russia and China are even acting together to prevent democratic (as well as Islamic) revolution and to limit Western influence in Central Asia through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (which was formed in 2001 and consists of Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan).

Stephen Walt has noted that when revolution occurs, a dramatic change in alliance patterns can also occur (Walt 1996, 1). Indeed, an important motivation for Russia and China to resist democratic revolutions elsewhere so stoutly is the perceptions of these two governments that countries experiencing democratic revolution also become allies of the United States. Indeed, they appear to have convinced themselves that the U.S. actually instigates these revolutions just for this purpose. This viewpoint is not only somewhat paranoid, but can also prove inaccurate as Serbian and Kyrgyzstani relations with the U.S. after their democratic revolutions have shown. A common fear of democratic revolution, though, has helped Moscow and China cement their relations with several authoritarian regimes—as well as with each other. This increased fear of supposedly U.S.-backed democratic revolution has actually helped Moscow overcome the strained relations it had with most of the authoritarian former Soviet republics in the Yeltsin and early Putin eras.

Weak External Support

The U.S., of course, does support democratization and democratic revolution. The American-led military interventions in both Afghanistan (beginning in 2001) and Iraq (beginning in 2003) were intended, among other things, to establish democratic governments in these countries after overthrowing their dictatorial regimes. There was initially hope (or, for some, fear) that the U.S. would be successful in this regard. Nor did it appear that American involvement in these two countries would preclude local democratic forces from successfully carrying out democratic revolution elsewhere. Of the five 21st century democratic revolutions discussed here, four of them—Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, and Lebanon—occurred after the American-led intervention in Iraq had begun.

By now, however, the U.S. and its few remaining Coalition partners appear to be bogged down in a quagmire in Iraq. The various Iraqi political factions have also proven unable to cooperate on much. The prospects for democracy in Iraq, then, seem dim. American public support for continued U.S. involvement there has dropped dramatically. While there is greater American (and Western) public support for the war in Afghanistan, prospects for stable democracy there also seem poor. Ousted from power by the U.S. and its allies at the end of 2001, the Taliban has staged an impressive comeback. The elected Afghan government, by contrast, appears weak, ineffectual, and unlikely to survive without massive external support.

In its first term, the George W. Bush administration was optimistic about the prospects for democratization in the Middle East and elsewhere in the Muslim world. Especially after the strong electoral showing of the unrepentantly anti-American and anti-democratic Hamas in the January 2006 Palestinian parliamentary elections, however, the Bush administration became more fearful that free elections in the Muslim world could well result in the victory of anti-democratic Islamist forces elsewhere.

Outside the Muslim world, the U.S. and others no longer seem to be pushing strongly for democratization. In October 2007, President Bush expressed uncharacteristic pessimism about the prospects for democratization in Russia when he (somewhat awkwardly) questioned, "whether or not it's possible to reprogram the kind of basic Russian DNA, which is a centralized authority, that's hard to do" (Baker 2007). This pessimism about Russia is

understandable when there not only appears to be little opposition to Putin's growing authoritarianism, but strong public support for it instead.

Burma, though, is another matter. Here there clearly is a strong democratic movement, but the U.S. does not appear willing or able to take any active, concrete steps to help it. The U.S. and the EU have instead only decried the Burmese government's actions and imposed sanctions on its leaders that are unlikely to change their behavior. It is impossible to know whether Washington's reaction to the events in Burma would have been different if American forces had not been bogged down in Iraq. The large, on-going American military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, though, serve to limit what the U.S. can do in Burma as well as to distract American attention from it. And while some of America's Western allies would not join in any active U.S. effort to support the democratic forces in Burma, none are likely to launch their own without such an American leadership.

How Strong Are These Obstacles?

Each of the four obstacles to democratic revolution discussed here is significant. All four of them together pose a formidable barrier to further democratic revolution. There is reason to believe, though, that the strength of each of these obstacles may diminish over time.

It is true that authoritarian regimes are very much on the alert to prevent democratic revolution. Each parliamentary or presidential election that a semi-authoritarian regime holds, however, presents an opportunity for democratic forces. Merely because they try and fail—or do not try at all—on any given occasion does not preclude them from trying and succeeding on a later occasion. The sacrifices made by those who tried and failed on earlier occasions may serve not only to inspire others to attempt democratic revolution later, but also to provide them with important lessons on what not to do.

Further, since the elections run by semi-autocratic regimes do not actually determine the top leadership, these regimes can face the same sort of succession crises that often confront full-fledged authoritarian regimes when the top leader becomes old or dies. A succession struggle can cause serious divisions within an authoritarian regime. Such a struggle inside the regime combined with elections where some contestation as well as election monitoring and reporting are allowed, however, may boost the strength of the democratic forces as well as provide a greater option for the defection of disgruntled elements of the security services to them. And since authoritarian rulers do grow old and die, opportunities for this scenario to unfold are highly likely to arise.

Disillusionment with the results of a previous democratic revolution is something that is serious and can be difficult to overcome. Those who attempt a democratic revolution but do not come to power are often regarded as heroes. But those who succeed at leading a democratic revolution but then become authoritarian and/or corrupt often discredit not just themselves, but the idea that democracy can succeed in that particular country. Those who are so disillusioned with failed democratization may even be pleased initially with a populist "authoritarian-democrat," as most Russians seem to be with Putin. But the longer he continues in office, the more likely his democratic pretensions are to wear thin and disillusionment with him to grow. Especially as he ages and the regime approaches a succession crisis, opportunities for democratic forces—perhaps under newer, more effective leadership—may well arise.

Russian and Chinese support for authoritarian regimes elsewhere undoubtedly plays an important role in helping prevent democratic revolution in them. Neither Russian nor Chinese support for such regimes, however, can fully immunize them against this—as the

recent color revolutions have shown. Indeed, it can backfire. Far from discouraging democratic revolution, the perception that Moscow backed the authoritarian regimes of Georgia and Ukraine only bolstered support for democratic forces in these two countries. This could also happen elsewhere.

Further, Moscow in particular often has poor relations not just with democratic governments, but with authoritarian ones as well. Despite their common antipathy toward democratic revolution, relations between Putin and Belarus's Aleksandr Lukashenko have recently soured. It is not clear whether an authoritarian leader who fears Russia as much as democratic revolution would call upon Moscow (either in time or at all) to help him quell it.

In addition, while it may seem highly unlikely at present, the possibility of a democratic transformation in Russia, China, or both, at some point in the future should not be discounted. Whether this occurs through a democratic revolution or some slower transformation cannot be foretold. If, however, Russia or China (and especially if both) do become democratic, this could seriously undermine many of the authoritarian regimes they are now supporting and contribute toward their democratic transformation as well.

Finally, the U.S. will not always be bogged down in Iraq the way it is now. With its presence there ended (or even significantly reduced), a different American president could devote more attention and resources to helping democratic revolution than the Bush administration has with regard to Burma. Just the knowledge that American support might be more forthcoming in the future could serve to encourage democratic revolution.

Thus, while the obstacles to democratic revolution are strong at present, they may not remain so in the future. And to the extent that these obstacles to it decline, democratic revolution may well resume. This may not occur as soon as the proponents of democratic revolution would like. But whenever it does will be too soon for its opponents.

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