

Policy Watch: Key to democratic revolution

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There have been several attempts at democratic revolution in recent years. Some of these have succeeded, but others have failed. Why?

A key factor in determining the success or failure of attempts at democratic revolution is the role played by the old regime's security services. If the security services defend the old regime, then the largely unarmed democratic opposition cannot come to power. But if the security services defect to the democratic opposition, then the old regime cannot survive. Further, the defection of the security services in democratic revolutions often begins with the defection of just a few officers that then cascades into a large-scale defection in just a very short period of time.

Why have defections to the democratic opposition taken place in some cases but not in others? The incentives and disincentives that security force personnel face in deciding whether to defend the old regime or defect to the democratic opposition clearly play a crucial role in this. Further, there appear to be different incentives and disincentives faced by those contemplating becoming "first defectors" and those considering becoming "follow-on defectors" (assuming that an initial defection to the democratic opposition has been made).

It is obvious what the disincentives for becoming a "first defector" might be: defection to a democratic revolutionary movement that ends up being defeated is likely to lead to severe punishment, or even death. Other disincentives include fear of how the opposition might behave when it comes to power either generally or toward the security forces in particular.

There can, though, be powerful incentives to be a "first defector." These include: 1) opposition to the dictatorship and sympathy with the opposition (the security services, after all, are not necessarily immune to trends in the larger society); 2) personal and organizational ambition (if you defect early to the democratic opposition you might get a big promotion); 3) a conviction that the downfall of the old regime is inevitable; 4) fear of punishment for firing upon an opposition that might soon come to power; and 5) the conviction that one's own defection will be rapidly followed by the defection of others.

"Follow-on defectors" face similar incentives and disincentives, but the relative strength of these can be very different from those that "first defectors" confront. The more defections to the democratic opposition that have occurred, the less likely it is that a follow-on defector will face punishment for following suit. Indeed, after a certain point, not defecting may risk incurring greater punishment than defecting since hesitancy about this will arouse suspicion.

What this means is that even large-scale democratic opposition movements cannot succeed if an authoritarian regime's security services continue to defend it. Even small scale defections to the democratic opposition, though, can result in most of the security services also defecting. When this happens, the authoritarian regime can collapse very quickly.

For those who wish to promote democratic revolution, then, it is important to somehow signal to the security services that they will not be destroyed -- either individually or organizationally -- by democratization. This is a compromise, though, that some democratic revolutionaries will not want to make. And with good reason: It is often very difficult for a new democratic

government to manage the holdover security forces it inherits from the old regime. But unless this compromise is made, it may be impossible for a new democratic government to emerge and face this challenge.

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