

Syria and the Other Lessons from 1989

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It is difficult not to think of 1989, the year the Berlin Wall came down and Communist regimes throughout Eastern Europe collapsed, when watching the events in North Africa in 2011. Countries such as Egypt and Tunisia still have a long way to go before they complete successful democratic transitions like those in Poland, the Czech Republic or Hungary, but those Eastern European countries can be good models, and 1989 a good touchstone.

Unfortunately, the Syrian regime's response to citizens calling for greater freedom and democracy brings to mind other events from 1989. Not all of the demonstrations 22 years ago were successful. Those that occurred in 1989 in China, primarily in Tiananmen Square in the heart of Beijing, did not lead to greater freedom. Instead, the Chinese government viciously cracked down on demonstrators. The military fired indiscriminately into crowds, tanks rolled through the streets of Beijing and hundreds were killed. Following those killings other democracy activists were imprisoned or otherwise suffered at the hands of the Chinese Communist regime. The Chinese Communist Party which perpetuated those brutalities is still in power, and not meaningfully more democratic, today.

It appears that Tiananmen Square is the model toward which the Syrian government is now looking. The Chinese government achieved their goals in 1989. Their actions cost them some international prestige and some bad coverage in international media, but it also kept them in power to this day. China remains one of the strongest authoritarian regimes today not least because citizens in China have no doubt about the violent capacities of their government, and of their government's ability to get away with this violence.

The Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria is taking a similar approach with the hope of achieving a similar goal. Violent responses to demonstrations have occurred elsewhere in the region, such as Libya and Bahrain and have been as much a part of the story in North Africa as the relatively peaceful transitions in Egypt and Tunisia. Syria stands out because the government has been more violent than, for example, the Bahraini regime, and more stable than the Libyan government. In Libya, the country was beginning to fracture and tilt toward civil war even before the western intervention.

The Chinese government in 1989 was able to literally get away with murder and remain in power, but their actions did not set a precedent for other countries. This was partially due to the other events of 1989-1991 where peaceful demonstrators triumphed over authoritarian regimes, but is also due to the changes in the world since that time. When Tiananmen Square happened, China was a strong state that was of massive strategic import to the U.S. because at that time the Cold War was still going on.

The west was unable to intervene in China, but also had strategic reasons why they did not want to create a rift with China or contribute to instability there. The technology and media environment was also different making information less accessible both before and during those events. The Chinese case was somewhat sui generis because it occurred in a huge and powerful country that, even in 1989, was growing more powerful and had a strong military, making it less of a precedent for the rest of the world.

Since 1989, most authoritarian leaders have probably thought that the consequences for blithely killing hundreds of demonstrators in the main square of the capital, including being cut off from foreign assistance, facing massive civil unrest facilitated by better communication technology, trade sanctions or foreign intervention outweigh the short term gains those actions would bring. The Syrian government is currently challenging this received wisdom of the last two decades. Ironically, because Syria is a much smaller, less powerful and more ordinary country than China what happens there may be more important for other countries than what happened in China 22 years ago. Therefore, if the al-Assad regime remains in power after killing and torturing hundreds of its own people, it is likely that will set a more powerful precedent than the Chinese government set in 1989.