

North Africa through the Lens of the Color Revolutions

Submitted by k_kumkova on February 4, 2011 - 2:40pm

EurasiaNet Commentary
February 4, 2011 - 1:39pm

In the last few weeks thousands, possibly millions, of demonstrators on the streets of Cairo and Tunis have called for the ouster of aging, authoritarian leaders, just as crowds gathered a few years ago in Tbilisi, Bishkek and Kyiv. While some similarities between the events in Egypt and Tunisia this year and the Color Revolutions of 2003-2005 are evident, there are key differences as well.

Perhaps the most significant difference between 2011 in Egypt and Tunisia and the Color Revolutions in the former Soviet Union is that the Egyptian and Tunisian leaderships, headed by Hosni Mubarak and Zine el Abidine Ben Ali respectively, were far more authoritarian and brutal than their counterparts in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine. The Color Revolutions occurred in more semi-democratic contexts, in which the regimes led by Eduard Shevardnadze in Georgia, Askar Akayev in Kyrgyzstan and Leonid Kuchma in Ukraine allowed for more media and political freedom, and were generally less repressive, than authorities in Egypt or Tunisia.

The Color Revolutions led to a model for regime change that was based on an electoral breakthrough in which ballot fraud became the focal point around which the civic and political opposition could rally. In Egypt and Tunisia, however events were not precipitated by stolen elections, but by more ordinary occurrences, suggesting that the electoral breakthrough model is only possible in countries where there is some degree of political pluralism.

There was also a geopolitical element to the Color Revolutions that is largely lacking in today's events in North Africa. The Color Revolutions were tied to the Bush-era "freedom agenda" and occurred in countries that had been the beneficiaries of ample US democracy assistance. Additionally, governments in Russia and other non-democratic regimes in that region sought to characterize the Color Revolutions as American plots, while the Bush administration sought credit for its role in bringing democracy to the region.

In the Color Revolutions, the United States was viewed as being on the side of the revolutionaries, and was widely believed to have an almost magical role in organizing the opposition, spreading democracy, funding various organizations and the like. These days, social networking technology has displaced the United States as the apparent catalyst for protest. It is Twitter, Facebook and similar platforms, rightfully or not, that are perceived as the magic explanatory variable, working behind-the-scenes to foster political change in both Egypt and Tunisia.

The lack of mention of the Color Revolutions in discussions about events in Egypt and Tunisia is due in part to the fate of the Color Revolutions themselves. Democratic

backsliding in Georgia, the implosion of the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan and the defeat of the Orange Revolution at the polls in Ukraine all suggest that the Color Revolution phenomenon was not as powerful as it originally seemed in the early years of the 21st century. Today the story of the Color Revolutions is defined at least as much by the resilience of undemocratic regimes and institutions, as it is by democratic breakthroughs. The euphoria and excitement that greeted the revolutionary events a few years ago in the former Soviet sphere seem irrelevant today.

Nonetheless, the central lessons of the Color Revolutions have direct bearing on Tunisia and Egypt. The Color Revolutions demonstrated that when a leader has been too corrupt, unresponsive, dishonest and undemocratic for too long, getting rid of that leader is not only possible, but appears almost unstoppable once popular frustrations pass a certain point. The sense of inevitability about Mubarak's tenure as Egypt's leader coming to an end is not dissimilar, for example, to what was felt on the streets of Tbilisi in November of 2003.

The period following the Color Revolutions showed that driving an authoritarian-minded leader from power is far easier to accomplish than the task of building a new, stable political order — one that is open and not rotten to the core with corruption. Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine have all struggled greatly and encountered only limited success in their respective democratization efforts. A similar challenge now confronts Tunisia, and will almost certainly face Egypt in the near future.

While civil society advocates all over the world should be happy to see Ben Ali and Mubarak depart from power, celebrating recent events in North Africa as a democratic breakthrough is premature. There is still a lot of hard work to be done. For the United States, viewed as the *deus ex machina* in the Color Revolutions and as the dictators' patron in North Africa, the challenge will be to find a way to become part of this process, and to become relevant to political development in post-Mubarak Egypt and post-Ben Ali Tunisia.

Editor's note:

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