

## Pandemic Revolutions, the Bewildered West, and the Friendly Autocrats

*Editorial*

While finalizing this issue of the IdPS, changes seem to happen in previously frozen regimes of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Revolutions, protests, and civil wars are happening in more than fifteen countries. Will this wave of protests bring democracy, human rights, prosperity, and freedoms? We do not know yet. What we know is that this answer and the way it is addressed is of primary concern for the international stake-holders that wish to maintain and possibly foster their influence on the area.

The first half of 2011 has become the bloodier *déjà vu* of the events happening several years ago. It is a *déjà vu* with another difference: in 2011 pro-Western autocrats in MENA have been under popular attack. Popular uprisings and protests jubilantly dubbed revolutions hit their peak by replacing incumbents—sometimes through civil wars—in some countries and merely creating uproar in the others.

The peaceful Georgian Rose Revolution of 2003 managed to overthrow Eduard Shevardnadze and install EU and NATO enthusiast Mikheil Saakashvili. Similarly peaceful Ukrainian Orange Revolution of 2004 has succeeded in replacing the official winner of the presidential elections Viktor Yanukovich with pro-western and apparently less pro-Russian Viktor Yushchenko. These were followed by the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan, the Cedar Revolution in Lebanon, less “revolutionary” Purple Revolution in Iraq, Blue Revolution in Kuwait and Green Revolution in Iran. Ironically, the Georgian president has faced numerous protests himself; Yushchenko lost elections to previously ousted Yanukovich; the vic-

tor of the Kyrgyz revolution, Bakiyev, fled the country after another uprising, this time against him; and the Lebanese pro-democracy March 14 alliance is experiencing difficulties with the reform process.

These “spillover revolutions” may not have had a lasting effect on the subsequent democratization of the countries but they did create a hopeful euphoria among western observers and politicians. EU and US officials did not spare praiseful words for the protesters and their leaders *inter alia* hoping to decrease Russia’s influence. Keeping with traditions, the 2011 events in Tunisia and Egypt have also been called revolutions, the Tunisian one getting jasmine as its flowery symbol. However, there are some substantial differences between the earlier colour revolutions and the ones of 2011.

### Colours Gone Bloody

The self-immolation and death of a street vendor are believed to trigger the Tunisian uprising and to start a snow-ball process that affected the whole area. The Tunisian masses—initially without any visible leadership—started protesting in the provincial town of Sidi Bouzid and spread over the country and most importantly to the capital Tunis. Violent clashes with police left at least 219 (as per UN) people dead. The president Ben Ali and his family fled to Saudi Arabia, while masses clashed with police, looted on the streets of Tunis, and torched the main train station. While members of the ruling Constitutional Democratic Rally (CDR), though not supported by protesters, quickly seized the pow-

er, the pan-Islamic organization Hizb ut-Tahrir did not cease the opportunity to call for the formation of an ideal caliphate. Following the first chaotic days, the ad-interim Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi, also a CDR member, reshuffled the government, removing all the figures connected to the former ruling party, as a consequence of the hard reaction of the protesters.

The protests against the government and the cases of self-immolation spilled over to Algeria, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Yemen, Mauritania, Iran and even the autocratic Saudi Arabia, the safe haven of the ousted Ben Ali. The most anticipated and massive protests happened in Egypt, where protesters went out to streets after calls on social networking websites. The Egyptian uprising has not avoided casualties either and took longer to oust Mubarak, who skipping the speaker of the parliament handed the power over to the military. Yemenis, Syrians, and Algerians (like Egyptians constrained by the state of emergency), also went out to the streets in mass protests against the government, although, so far, less successful.

Following the beginning of the civil war in March, Libya found itself split into two areas: Cyrenaica and part of the Fezzan under the provisional authority of the National Transitional Council and Tripolitania turned into the loyalist stronghold of Muammar Gaddafi. After months of armed pressures, the long-deciding Western leaders backed by most of the Arab league members

and of the Organization of the Islamic Conference managed to break the impasse, seemingly paving the way to a fast collapse of the regime.

Unlike most of the "original" colour revolutions, none of the current events result from rigged elections and were not initially supported by the West, which appeared quite abashed at the beginning. They have rather become the culmination of the population's accumulated anger with the policies of the everlasting incumbent. The same rage has been then successfully conveyed, backed, and driven by a number of opposition parties, where "available". Alternatively, as some media and pundits prefer to put it: the events are due to the natural strive of humans for democracy. In addition, unlike the "original" color revolutions, current events have not received wide media coverage until the first fatalities in Tunisia, the president of which was fairly supportive of EU and US policies. Due to the friendly policies towards the EU and the US and unfriendly policies towards the opposition (often represented by Islamic groups), protests against Ben Ali and Mubarak were unexpected by the West. Unlike the current events, which seem to topple West-friendly autocrats, Rose and Orange revolutions were widely regarded as openly orchestrated by the West. On the other hand, openly anti-western regimes like in the case of Syria prove far more successful in the repression of opposition revolts (Table 1).

Country	Democracy status (2011 Freedom House)	International stance	Type of protest	The immediate outcome
Tunisia	Not Free	Pro-western	Demonstrations with occasional hostilities	Regime change
Egypt	Not Free	Pro-western	Demonstrations with occasional hostilities	Regime change
Libya	Not Free	Anti-western	Civil war / External support	Possible regime collapse
Yemen	Not Free	Anti-western	Civil disorders	Governmental changes / Status quo
Syria	Not Free	Anti-western	Civil disorders	Governmental changes / Status quo

Table 1

## Premature Jubilation

The jubilation after the first colour revolutions has subsequently proved to be premature. With virtually no improvements in democracy, the “brightest” and most eager student of the West in the South Caucasus on behalf of president Saakashvili, worsened its democratic performance and went on suppressing critical media. Saakashvili faced a political crisis in 2007 and accusations in overusing power. His former revolutionary partner Nino Burjanadze went into opposition. However, the US, hastily assuming that the planned bottom-up democratization had taken place and civil society through its watchdog media is thriving, completed its media projects without any follow-up activities. The EU on the other hand rushed to reward Georgia and included it in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). In addition, Armenia and Azerbaijan had not shown even a glimpse of improved democracy since the European Commission stated that concrete improvements would be needed by each South Caucasus countries to be included in the ENP. However, conveniently benefiting from their inalienable regional status they also appeared in the ENP.

The Ukrainian president Yushchenko did not keep up with Western hopes either. His relations with his revolutionary colleague Yulia Tymoshenko became strained and less than a year after the Orange Revolution he dismissed her from the position of prime minister in favour of the former opponent Viktor Yanukovich. The US was disappointed in Yushchenko as bribery and cronyism bloomed during his presidency. Besides, his anti-Russian policies supported by the West received only embarrassing 5% in the last presidential elections. The US bet on Yushchenko to reduce Russian influence over the Eastern Europe and the Caucasus and it apparently lost. The EU on its part put its most enthusiastic admirer in the pile with worse performing countries and constantly delayed the longed association agreement. As a result, the newly elected president Yanukovich, who remarkably received the same percentage of votes this time in free elections, announced relations with Russia and the CIS a priority. Bakiyev, after-revolution president of Kyrgyzstan, did not become a US-supporter and allowed financial flow from and military bases of both the US and Russia. Though he was eventually overthrown, time was wasted. Though hard to believe the US and the EU have not done their homework of brief background check of their new democratizing neighbours. Alternatively, they preferred to ignore it hoping the wildcard might win.

Instead of developing grounded policies to help the local society build democracy and check on the new political elite, the US administration opted for “revolutionizing” every possible corner of the world. Especially the ones that had oil like in the case of Iraqi legislative elections that were pompously called Purple Revolution. Similarly, the Cedar Revolution in Lebanon after the murder of Prime Minister Hariri was regarded by the US a token of its democracy promotion success. Maybe, this was true at the time, but that momentum is gone. Iraq is still struggling with its state building, and Lebanon has just got a Hezbollah-backed prime minister.

## Post-revolution

The protests against governments went pandemic in mid 2000s and were regarded as a panacea to the maladies of democracy. However, the panacea did not work even if it was partially injected by the ever-hopeful American and European professionals. The risks of the side effects are even higher in the cases of the 2011 uprisings that seem to mushroom in politically volatile regions without any additional western interference. 2011 gives an opportunity for the EU and the US to restore its influence in MENA. The initially confused responses to the events in Tunisia and Egypt went in sharp contrast to the delighted reactions to the Rose and Orange Revolutions. There is a need to develop an approach that is neither blindly enthusiastic-turned-ignoring like in mid 2000s nor confused as in 2011. In addition, there is a need to understand that mass protests without a clearly defined and democratically agreed political and social agenda risk leaving the country in a revolutionary limbo.

The persistence and somewhat disbelief of Egyptians after Mubarak’s resignation shows that the transition of power from military should become the priority of US and EU talks with the Egyptian authorities, without striking another “friendly” but autocratic deal. After an initial confusion, both the EU and the US realized that the risk was to lose their influence on their previous allied countries in MENA, while still facing the adversary regimes of Syria and Iran, where the opposition proved too weak or the repression too strong. The new strategy of the West to support the prevailing opposition (even with military means as in the case of Libya) and to play a role in the following political developments does not grant the West the same influence that it had in the past, but may contribute to prevent the emergence of openly hostile regimes. On the other hand, it is clear

that the open (although belated) support for the rebels has positively influenced part of the Arab and North African masses that—as in the case of Libya—wave the western flags instead of burning them as many Cassandras predicted at the beginning of the Arab Spring. Regardless the EU's habit of retreating when dealing with Russia, grouping Ukraine with its enormous membership aspirations and frontrunner position in comparison to the other ENP countries has not served well to the EU's credibility. Thus, the promises should be kept otherwise the credibility will be lost. Alternatively, no unrealistic promises should be made. When dealing with the events in post-Soviet "colorants" Georgia and Ukraine, Russia's superpower ambitions were ignored and that strategy backfired at the West by Russia's more authoritarian and "backyard" approach to its neighbours. The practitioner-favourite tool of "lessons learnt" should be put into practice and complemented by the one of "mistakes acknowledged". Ignoring the potential influence of radical Islamists in these events and the possibility of their filling the power vacuum Tunisia and in Egypt, may substantially damage American and European interests in the region. American and European

strategists should not assume that mere presence of protests is a token of a developed and vibrant civil society. However, instead of handpicking single individuals to elevate them to the power, they should contribute to the development of civil society, and assist institutions in organization of free and fair elections. Constructive involvement and interest in the country's pressing issues will also help to restore the positive image of the West, which is now marred with double standards and its autocratic cronies.

Most importantly the EU and the US finally need to further coordinate their actions (both in peace and war) at least due to their varied influence in MENA countries. Cooperation rather than competition between the two on current matters has the potential of producing more effective strategies. Given that the American and European interests do not greatly diverge and cooperation is practically possible, combining the efforts would give them better opportunities to meet the challenges of power vacuum, radical Islamists and popular demands meanwhile serving their own economic and security interests together with the legitimate democratic aspirations of MENA nations.