

Authoritarian Learning: Lessons from the Colored Revolutions

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Brown Journal of World Affairs: Looking back, how would you assess the democratic wave that transformed Lebanon, Ukraine, and various central Asian countries over the summer? What lessons are being drawn from those revolutions by illiberal governments and advocates of democratization?

Larry Diamond: The regimes in the Arab world are starting to use the example of instability in Iraq to dampen aspirations for democracy. In the most recent issue of the *Journal of Democracy*, my colleague Michael McFaul at Stanford wrote about the conjunction of factors that led to the democratic breakthroughs in Serbia in 2000, then more recently in Georgia and Ukraine, and, partially, in Kyrgyzstan. One of the important factors was that these regimes were not purely authoritarian. They had elections; they wanted them to look democratic enough to be minimally acceptable to the rest of the world. The fact that they allowed space for opposition to organize and for civil society to mobilize, that there was at least partial freedom of the press, and that there was a means for the opposition to coordinate and

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communicate with each other, underlies these democratic breakthroughs. What is theoretically interesting is that it was a semi-authoritarian regime that was brought down in each of these instances—a regime that might in some ways have been quite repressive, but which still had plenty of space for opposition to coalesce. We call this a hybrid regime or an electoral-authoritarian regime.

The unfortunate aspect of what has happened in these cases is that authoritarian rulers have watched these developments and learned from them. In Belarus, the dictator Lukashenko is tightening up and deciding that if a semi-authoritarian situation and the provision of some space to mobilize can lead to democratic breakthroughs, he will close civil society down and not let Belarus get to that point. In Belarus, in Zimbabwe, and, to some extent, in Venezuela and Russia, regimes are becoming more repressive, trying to preempt this fate. Now we have to deal with the problem of authoritarian learning.

Journal: Is there any way to get around that?

Diamond: Democrats have to learn and adjust as well. It is a cat and mouse game in which everybody needs to be flexible and adjust. The one way to get around authoritarian learning is to put massive, sustained, and innovative pressure on these authoritarian regimes to open up—even if they are going to be taking risks in doing so—because the costs of not doing so will be even greater. Unless the West and the international institutions hang together on this, and unless we develop new and effective sanctions that target the elites, their bank accounts, and their personal family and financial interests, we may not be effective. Targeted sanctions can play a role. For example, if Robert Mugabe is going to insist on clinging to power and dragging his country further and further into desperation, poverty, and despair, his ruling elite needs to know they're not going to be able to travel to the West. They need to know that we are going to hunt down their stolen assets, that their kids are not going to be able to go to colleges in the West, that they aren't going to be able to vacation in any of these countries. Pretty soon the elite get the message and they start thinking about defecting from the regime to save their own personal and group interests.

Journal: Do developments in Russia and in China's foreign policy have effects on the possibility of democratization?

Diamond: Yes, and obviously negative ones. In Russia, Putin himself doesn't want to wind up overtaken by reformers or see his regime wind up like this, so he is

trying to tighten his grip. He is also giving support to non-democratic actors in the former Soviet Union who are resisting against Western pressure. There is a warm relationship between Putin and President Lukashenko of Belarus, which I think is unfortunate. You see the Russian regime warming up to central Asian dictators as well. All of this is very worrisome. China is doing the same. China and Russia have created the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which includes the central Asian countries, to try and counterbalance U.S. pressure on and penetration in central Asia. And China is very cleverly, with visibly growing self-confidence, using its economic muscle and its rising diplomatic and political stature to ally with, support, and give confidence to authoritarian states worldwide. It is increasingly casting a political shadow over all of Asia so that authoritarian states have a rising power, which is becoming the next superpower, to play off against the only existing superpower's calls to become more democratic.

This is a very significant development that people are not paying enough attention to. China is becoming an increasingly global actor, which is one of the definitions of a superpower. It is active in Africa, it is entering Latin America, it is gobbling up commitments for natural resources at a fantastic rate as its economy booms and it needs ever more oil; meanwhile, the global production of oil may possibly have peaked. So it's a different world that we're in now. The immediate post-cold war world that followed the collapse of the Berlin Wall and then of the Soviet Union in 1989–91, when we thought we had more than just a moment of unchallenged, unipolar U.S. hegemony is over. We've now got the threat of Islamic terrorism, on the one hand, and the rise of China to superpower status, on the other as very important new phenomena to contend with.

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Journal: You mention Russia and China bolstering authoritarian regimes against democratic changes in central Asia. Considering the geopolitical interests and natural resources at play in the region, is the struggle between political systems part of larger "Great Game" for access to these resources, with democracy promotion simply included as part of the geopolitical strategy of the United States?

Diamond: That is an interesting question. The Bush administration and President Bush personally have made the point that the promotion of democracy is always in the U.S. national interest. More countries will be free, more will move to a market economy, more will share U.S. values, will be transparent, more responsible in terms of weapons proliferation, terrorism, and so forth. Bush has argued that if a country has a democratic government it will have more political legitimacy among its own people and be less likely victimized by terrorism and insurgency. Broadly,

I think that is true, but not necessarily everywhere at every moment. The Bush administration is finding that out and that is why the United States has been quite limited in its protest against authoritarian regression or authoritarian persistence in a lot of places where the United States is theoretically trying to promote democracy.

We are now trying to cultivate Kazakhstan. This is a big part of the "Great Game" for control of Caspian and central Asian resources. If you're comparing Nazarbayev, the only man Kazakhstan has had as its president since the collapse of the Soviet Union—we're now talking 14 years—with Islam Karimov in Uzbekistan, Nazarbayev looks like the moderate, restrained, relatively enlightened leader that Condoleezza Rice portrayed on her recent visit to central Asia. But against any kind of absolute standard of human rights and democracy, this is not the case. They are about to have a parliamentary election in Kazakhstan and the government is busy arresting the opposition. They are learning from the mistakes of Kyrgyzstan, Georgia, Ukraine, and Serbia as well. They don't want an accident on the road to managed elections, and the United States has been relatively mute about that so far because we have other interests.

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Even I have to recognize that democracy is not the only interest we have. But human rights and democracy were not the only interests we had in dealing with the Soviet Union when we were trying to campaign for human rights there. We also had practical business to do on arms control and a variety of other issues. I think we learned during the 1980s, particularly when George Shultz was Secretary of State, that you could pursue simultaneous tracks; you can speak up for your principles, meet dissidents, make a point, urge political reform—if maybe not immediate democratic transformation—and at the same time do practical business on other issues. I think the Bush administration has done a lot and President Bush himself has embraced democracy promotion as a central pillar of U. S. foreign policy, symbolically and rhetorically. He has never done this more forcefully and with greater single-mindedness of purpose than in his second inaugural address. But there's a huge gap between the rhetoric of the president and his key policy-makers and their actual policies, and this is noticed in the world and undermines our credibility.

Journal: In this environment, what does a future democratic map of the world look like? Are there spots where democracy is more likely to be maintained or developed, and spots where it looks unlikely?

Diamond: Of the 16 states in the Middle East, there are no democracies. But even if Iraqi democratization goes badly, I do not completely dismiss the prospects for

democracy in the Arab world, because there is a strong indigenous desire among the peoples of these countries for human rights, political accountability, and openness. That will exist no matter what happens. Obviously, the autocrats will be aided in their warnings against the dangers of democracy if Iraq completely implodes. But if the situation there can be contained to some extent, then I do think there are a number of possibilities for democratic evolution, the most advanced of which is Morocco. The question becomes how to manage the process of political opening in a way that strengthens moderate, if not entirely secular, forces and prevents conquest through the ballot box by Islamist radicals who would use the democratic process, like the Nazis did, in order to liquidate it. That is what a lot of people worry about and that is one of the central challenges in the Arab world. If you can manage that, then I think it is possible to imagine the Arab world at least becoming more democratic in the next decade, if not very democratic.

In 10 years, I think that China will still be an authoritarian regime, but one in a serious state of crisis if it doesn't begin to liberalize much more than it has. China cannot remain a completely closed political monopoly and remain stable. Something is going to have to give. It may not be in 10 years, but I am pretty confident it is going to be within 25, maybe in 10 to 15. They are already talking about possible successors to Hu Jintao, who just took over a few years ago. That tells you something.

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Elsewhere in Asia, I think that democracy is pretty much consolidated in Korea and Taiwan. A big challenge will be whether Indonesia can consolidate democracy. It has done surprisingly well if you consider the vacuum that was left by Suharto and the obstacles to the new democratic regime and the sheer physical challenges of governing a country that is spread out over so many islands.

One of the most difficult parts of the world is central Asia: Pakistan, Afghanistan, the Muslim countries on the edge of the Middle East. Strong Islamist mobilization is a serious problem in a large number of countries now. Marxist parties are dead, so people see the only alternative to a corrupt, repressive, and decadent political order—the only alternative that is able to mobilize a lot of grassroots support, using its powerful utopian ideology—in Islamic radical parties. If we don't pressure regimes for gradual change, strengthen civil society, and support moderate, democratically oriented political parties, then the only alternative will be absolute repression or Islamist, fascist dictatorship, neither of which can be consistent with our interests or values.

Now this raises the issue of Iran itself where, ironically enough, the people are fed up with the regime and want democracy, and the regime is becoming more hard-line trying to resist. It doesn't have any answers for the exploding youth popu-

lation that's coming into the job market and wants jobs. Probably over a million young people are addicted to heroin in Iran, and the regime doesn't seem to mind that too much because it keeps them from protesting politically. The regime really is ridiculed and despised, it appears, by most young people in Iran. The Islamic Republic's legitimacy has run its course the same way that the communist regime in the Soviet Union had after two or three decades. So it is sustained by control over burgeoning oil resources and a vast state security apparatus. But that will not sustain it forever. Within 10 or 15 years, something in that time range, Iran will be a democracy.

The problem is that the Iranian hard-liners have been strengthened by the debacle in Iraq. They were very nervous when we invaded. They wanted to strike all sorts of deals with the United States to hold it at bay. Then they settled on a strategy of just trying to undermine what we were doing and strengthen their own allies—different, competing sets of them in Iraq—and keeping Iraq on a low boil of instability. They have executed their strategy absolutely brilliantly. They have heavily penetrated Shiite politics and the Iraqi government and state security establishment. The place is a mess. The United States is on the defensive. We cannot even think about the possibility, which some neoconservatives were talking about, of carrying the battle next to Syria and Iran. I mean, that's just a joke! At the same time, there is still the possibility that the United States will use preemptive force to try to set back Iran's program to build nuclear weapons. If that were to happen, it may be the one thing that could unite the Islamic people in at least temporary support of the regime.

The next 10 years are going to see a huge struggle from Indonesia to Morocco, very consequential to the West and the United States, between three options: continued vicious dictatorship becoming even more so; Islamist reactionary mass mobilization, which could be strengthened and emboldened in some ways by a hardening of dictatorship; or democratic reform, not necessarily instantaneous, but serious and sustained. Those are the three options, and it is obvious which one we should be pressing. But it is not obvious how we can do so, or with what consequences. It is a very delicate thing. Pressing too hard, too fast could result in something like the 1979 Iranian revolution in any one of several dozen countries, and then you have got 20 or 30 years of Islamic dictatorship masquerading as the popular regime.

In Latin America, most of the region is democratic, but the problem is that a lot of new democracies are not really consolidated. If you look at the public opinion survey data, people are uneasy and ambivalent about democracy because it really has not delivered for them. It is very important that we not get sanguine

about what is happening there. Yes, most of these regimes are democracies, but with a lot of problems of corruption, misrule, public cynicism, and so on. If we do not figure out a better strategy for trying to improve the quality of governance in Latin America and generate sustained and broadly distributed economic growth, these regimes could be at some risk. Look what happened in Venezuela. It had a stable democracy for several decades, but the elite was corrupt, the people were not benefiting, and ultimately you have Hugo Chavez, this would-be military dictator who tried to stage two military coups in the early 1990s, fashioning himself as a new populist leader and getting elected president. Nevertheless, I am cautiously optimistic about Latin America.

Africa is a mixed situation. About two of every five regimes in sub-Saharan Africa right now are formally democratic. But most of them are only thinly so. And there are a lot of regimes, again, that are electoral autocracies that try to parade as democracies, but they are not. There are very deep ethnic divisions and not much sustained economic growth. There is a huge agenda for democracy there.

Journal: How much has Iran, as a precedent, affected modern approaches to Islamic democracy? As its influence in the Middle East increases, will it seek to export its form of government? Does it have enough credibility to embark upon such a policy?

Diamond: Iran has been trying for a quarter century to export its revolution, but it has not had great success. In part this is because the Islamic Republic has been a disaster at governance. Look at the shocking rates of unemployment, drug abuse, corruption, thuggery, and public disenchantment with the regime. Even with the price of oil at \$60 a barrel, the regime is floundering economically and people are angry. Without question, the people would vote this system out if they were given the chance to do so in a truly free, fair, open, and unfettered vote. Because they are clearly not given such an opportunity, and because of all the profound contradictions in the regime, I don't think it will emerge as any kind of model. It lacks credibility. And it is not democratic. The Turkish government of the AKP [Justice and Development Party] may in the end prove a more influential model because it shows how a party that takes Islam as a religion seriously can govern democratically in a way that affirms certain religious values but recognizes significant separation between mosque and state.

Journal: What are the implications of Hamas's election for the development of

democracy in Iraq and the Middle East? Does history show that democratic institutions will act as a moderating influence on Hamas's brand of Islamic Radicalism?

Diamond: The implications for the Middle East are unclear. On the one hand, it is a blow to the peace process (not that it was very vibrant at the time) and a further step in the polarization of politics in the region. I do not think Hamas is likely to govern in a very democratic spirit, and there is the danger that they will try to conquer all the instruments of state power and use them to crush opposition and gradually impose a new authoritarian agenda. Certainly the rights of women and religious minorities are likely to suffer. Yet I don't think this will have much impact on developments in Iraq, which are driven now by their own logic, as well as the direct intervention of neighbors like Iran.

It is possible that some Islamist movements will moderate as they have to come to grips with the challenges and difficulties of governance, but it is impossible to know if Hamas will be one of those. Every time an Islamist movement takes power, it will represent a huge experiment, an entry into the unknown, and I think it would be naïve to assume that power will always moderate such movements.

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Journal: We are witnessing a hybridization of democratic institutions and radical Islam in Palestine, where Hamas must now govern democratically; in Iraq; and in Europe, where governments are being forced to retune their approaches to civil liberties in response to the demands of Islamic morality. How will this play out?

Diamond: Hamas must somehow govern, but there is no guarantee that they will govern democratically. It is important that the international community hold them to basic norms of democratic governance and to the binding commitments the Palestinian authority has made to recognize the right of Israel to exist and to continue the peace process. The same is true in Iraq. The United States and other international actors should not simply look the other way if a new Islamist-dominated government violates human rights and democratic procedures. Fortunately, the United States has already spoken out strongly against the death squads and torture chambers that appear to have been organized or sanctioned by the Iraqi Interior Ministry, led by a senior member of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq.

Finally, I don't believe we should ever "retune" our approach to civil liberties. Everyone is entitled to basic human rights, and they should not be waived in the name of cultural relativism. 

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