

Lessons for Authoritarians from the Arab Spring

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It is still too early to know whether or not the extraordinary events earlier this year in Egypt, Tunisia and elsewhere in North Africa will lead to meaningful and enduring advances for democracy, but the resignations of Hosni Mubarak and Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali and the threats to the leadership of other autocrats in the region have not been lost on authoritarian and semi-authoritarian leaders seeking to remain in power in other parts of the world.

In this respect, what has come to be called the Arab Spring is not unlike the Color Revolutions in the former Soviet Union from 2003-2005. Following the Color Revolutions in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004-5) and Kyrgyzstan (2005), which led to the resignations of three presidents in the former Soviet Union, non-democratic regimes in that region and elsewhere passed more restrictive laws regarding freedom of speech and assembly and made it considerably more difficult for western democracy oriented NGOs to function. Not surprisingly, these policies were pursued because western NGOs were viewed as having played a major role in the Color Revolutions and because the Color Revolutions had occurred in some of the more liberal corners of the former Soviet Union. Thus cracking down in this manner was a natural authoritarian reaction.

Authoritarian leaders looking at the Arab Spring are learning different lessons from those of the Color Revolutions and will likely begin, and in some cases have already begun, to pursue different policies, to ensure that they remain in power. Egypt and Tunisia were not countries where western democracy organizations were strong; nor were the regimes of Ben Ali or Mubarak as liberal as those of Leonid Kuchma in Ukraine or Eduard Shevardnadze in Georgia in the years leading up to the Orange and Rose Revolutions respectively. Accordingly, the post Color Revolution strategy is no inoculation against Arab Spring type uprisings in authoritarian countries in Asia, the former Soviet Union or elsewhere.

The causes of the Arab Spring were not just political but were also economic as many of the young demonstrators were angry at the lack of good jobs, widespread corruption and crony capitalism. These are problems of governance which can be addressed by authoritarian governments by fighting corruption and improving government delivery of services. This is precisely what some authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes have already begun to do in the months since the Arab Spring. If the regimes in countries such as Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan can use oil revenue to build infrastructure and create jobs, they can make it easier to stay in office without liberalizing the political system or giving up any power.

The primary lessons that, at least at first, authoritarian regimes seem to be taking away from the Arab Spring is that governance is important and that good governance can make

democratic reform unnecessary and reduce the demand for it. This is not exactly a new observation as there are several examples of well governed authoritarian regimes that are quite stable. Singapore is probably the most well known of these regimes. Authoritarian regimes may or may not make governance easier, but that is less relevant than good governance making it easier to be in power as an authoritarian.

If non-democratic regimes continue to respond to the Arab Spring by reforming their governance but not political structures, it will make the work of democratic reformers more difficult. The appeal of democracy is that it leads to better governance. This can still be true, but if a non-democratic regime is well-governed, that appeal is far less potent. This also has several policy implications for those seeking to support democracy around the world. The first is the strong need to disaggregate democracy from governance work. Most assistance and multi-lateral organizations link democracy and governance seeing them as almost two sides of the same coin. This approach makes sense in many cases, but is vulnerable to exploitation by non-democratic regimes who see better governance as a means to stay in power. These countries can take advantage of governance support to achieve better governance, but can also do this at the expense of democratic development.

Second, supporting democratic development is a lot more appealing to domestic constituencies and budget makers if it is linked to better governance and stability, but supporting democracy in states that appear stable and well-governed, particularly if they are friendly to the donor countries in question, is a considerably more difficult proposal around which to rally support. For many policy makers in the west, democracy is shorthand for good government with no widespread human rights abuses. If more non-democratic countries are able to meet these criteria, the rationale for supporting democracy will be undermined.

It would be a real and unfortunate irony if the legacy of the Arab Spring was smarter and better run authoritarian regimes, but that remains a possibility. Of course, it will not be easy for regimes that are built on widespread kleptocracy and neglect of citizens' needs to simply start governing better. Governing well and reducing corruption in undemocratic systems with limited feedback and participation from citizens is difficult, but this may be the challenge of the post-Arab Spring era for non-democratic regimes trying to remain in power.