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Bloodless regime change

A rainbow of revolutions

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If outsiders make such a mess of getting rid of despots, why not encourage the locals to have a go?

Reuters

THE Iranian government is annoying. Despite its denials, it seems determined to make a nuclear bomb. It is neither persuaded by diplomacy, nor cowed by the threat of sanctions, nor worried by the possibility of attack. And in truth outsiders are pretty powerless. But don't worry: their easiest option—to wait—may not be such a bad one. With luck, it is only a matter of time before decent, sensible Iranians rise up and overthrow the religious zealots and incompetent populists who rule them. As frequent protests show, discontent is widespread: women publicly campaigned for their rights during the presidential campaign last June, Tehran's bus drivers struck last month. The old are fed up, and feel betrayed. The young want jobs and fun. In fact, Iran is ready for revolution. Surely it will be the next country to see a magnificently non-violent, colour-coded, do-it-yourself regime change?

It is certainly a beguiling thought. Iraq has proved a sobering experience for those who thought a small war was all that was needed to replace an unpopular tyranny cheaply and painlessly with a friendly democracy. The removal of Saddam Hussein has certainly not been the exemplary exercise that would, some Americans believed, serve as a model across the ripe-for-reform Middle East. Meanwhile, however, the world has marvelled at the way one stinker after another has been almost elegantly thrown out of office—most recently in Georgia, Ukraine and Kirgizstan—with scarcely any trouble or expense on the part of outsiders. How nice if the Iranians would now oblige, too.

People power has actually been around for a while. The 20th century was so horribly bloody that it has been easy to overlook the potency of peaceful boycotts, strikes, civil disobedience and public protests in many of the greatest upheavals of the past hundred years. In their book, “A Force More Powerful”, Peter Ackerman and Jack Duvall chronicle some of those events: the popular uprising in Russia in 1905, Mohandas Gandhi's campaign for Indian independence, the Danes' resistance to the Nazis, Martin Luther King's civil-rights campaign in America, Solidarity's triumph in Poland, the noisy clattering of pots and pans in Chile in 1983 that sounded the beginning of the end for Augusto Pinochet, the demonstrations that eventually drove Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines from office in 1986, the first Palestinian *intifada*, the Tiananmen protests in 1989, and others. Few of these brought about an instant change of regime, but all of them proved seminal: that is, they planted the seeds of change.

The secret of people power's success is simple: a tyranny can cut off one head or even 1,000, but 10,000 or 100,000 is much more difficult—and becoming more so with time. Stalin and Mao got away with it, because nobody dared risk a world war by taking them on, and Pol Pot and the Rwandan *génocidaires* got away with it because nobody cared enough to stop them. But the last Soviet dinosaurs shied away from it, and even Erich Honecker's East German thugs decided not to use force to stop the mass migration of their citizens through Hungary to the West, thus ensuring the collapse of European communism. In East Germany, small civil-rights, environmentalist and women's groups that had quietly been incubating in the Lutheran church suddenly and confidently emerged. Then came mass rallies in East Berlin, Dresden, Leipzig and other cities, from which arose the cry, “We are the people!” It was all too much, even for an apparently ruthless and monolithic system of control.

That communism could be thus brought down, gloriously and bloodlessly, sent shivers of fear through the world's despots, and of exhilaration through their subjects. The implacable white South Africans who sustained fortress apartheid now realised that they could not hold out indefinitely: more than ever, the use of force, their traditional response to peaceful boycotts, rent strikes, demonstrations and the country's range of civil movements, made them look desperate, and robbed them of any claim to be respectable, still less democratic. By February 1990, Nelson Mandela was out of prison, and by 1994 the rascals had been thrown out in a democratic election. People power had not alone been responsible for changing the regime, nor had it all been done non-violently: the main movement, the African National Congress, had a guerrilla army. But non-violent action had surely played a large part in ending apartheid.

Though the ground was rocky and the plant has proved weak, democratisation moved through Africa in the 1990s like feathergrass. Such countries as Benin, Cape Verde, Ethiopia, the Gambia, Ghana, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Senegal, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia all got rid of dictators, moved to a multi-party system or cleaned up their act in other pro-democracy ways, and several were moved to do so only after strikes, demonstrations and other, usually peaceful protests. Something similar happened in countries as far afield as Bangladesh, Guatemala, Indonesia, Mexico, Nepal, Nicaragua, Peru, South Korea and Taiwan.

In Europe, once the most closely controlled satellites of the Soviet Union had been set on a democratic course, Yugoslavia was the next place to be weaned off authoritarianism, and Slobodan Milosevic the next big casualty of popular action. The great demagogue of the Balkans, who had risen to power by putting the fear of St Vitus into the Serb masses, was in October 2000 brought down by the same masses as they turned against him. After 13 years in which he had impoverished his people and led them to defeat in two wars, he tried to ignore the election victory of his opponent. That brought half a million or more Serbs on to the streets of Belgrade, and quite a lot of them storming through the doors of the Yugoslav parliament. Crucially, elements within the police and armed forces changed sides.

The rose revives...

The ripples from that upheaval were soon felt as far away as Côte d'Ivoire, where in 2000 street protesters, openly invoking the example of Yugoslavia, drove General Robert Guei from the presidency that he had seized a year earlier. Bigger tyrannies were soon to totter. Georgia's authoritarian government fell in 2003 in a “rose” revolution brought about, at least in part, by three weeks of protests with tens of thousands on the streets. The next year Ukraine's post-Soviet regime came to a similar dramatic end in an “orange” revolution involving thousands of Ukrainians camped patiently in the December snow.

Reuters

Boo, a million times boo, to Syria

Then, in March 2005, came the collapse of Lebanon's puppet government after nearly 1m demonstrators had defied a ban on protest against the Syrian masters who pulled its strings. By the end of April, Syria's troops were out and a 29-year military involvement was over. By that time Kirgizstan's unpopular president of 15 years had also been put to flight, after a month of demonstrations that culminated in an exhilarating surge through several government buildings. After that “tulip” revolution, all eyes were on the other Central Asian nasties—in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and especially Uzbekistan, whose president, Islam Karimov, was soon to tell his troops to

shoot hundreds of civilians after an uprising that he blamed on Islamist terrorists. But perhaps Iran's rulers should have been just as worried: in Iran, the tulip is the symbol of martyrdom.

Don't bank on their early departure. Don't even assume that popular revolutions are always for the good. Some can be bad from the start. In Bolivia, for example, mass uprisings have tended to look rather like mob rule. A country with a long tradition of coups (nearly 200 between 1825 and 1980), it has struggled to adopt the democratic habit, running through five presidents in the past five years (a sixth is sworn in on Sunday). One, Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, was driven from office in 2003, just 15 months after his election, by violent clashes over his plan to sell natural gas to the United States via Chile. "Gas wars", mostly in the form of protests by indigenous Indians, returned last year, forcing out another president, Carlos Mesa. Bolivia does now have a ruler, Evo Morales, who has been properly elected in a fair election, so the nationalist, left-wing policies of the protesters have won a retrospective endorsement (see article). But that hardly excuses the earlier uprisings.

Many more popular overthrows that at first seemed splendid have turned out badly. To their credit, the Philippines and Indonesia have confounded critics, but optimists have been disappointed in several African countries, and Nepal looks awful. Perhaps the most disillusioned revolutionaries, though, are the orange-clad Ukrainians, who last September saw their former hero, Viktor Yushchenko, sack his government amid feuds, splits and charges of corruption, and last week saw their parliament sack its successor. A poll taken in November by Freedom House, an American lobby group, said 60% of Ukrainians, including 44% of those who supported the 2004 protests, thought the country was heading in the wrong direction.

More worrying for some of those Americans who believe that democracy will serve the United States' interests is the possibility that it will be destabilising, or result in the election of hostile governments. It is clear that elections often return to power the people who previously held it undemocratically. That is how virtually all the Central Asian autocrats managed to hold on to office after the Soviet Union broke up in 1991, and the pattern has been slow to change: the tulip-waving demonstrators who denounced President Askar Akaev in Kirgizstan last March are now ruled by his former comrades.

...the hazards, too

Elections are not necessarily free, of course, and even free elections, on their own, do not constitute a democratic system. "As a rule, 'electocracy' should not be confused with democracy," rightly avers Richard Haass, head of policy planning in the State Department in 2001-03, in his book "The Opportunity". But even free elections in a truly democratic system might well, in some places, produce an Islamist government.

Is that a risk worth taking? The dissident Mr Haass counsels caution. "It is neither desirable nor practical to make democracy promotion a foreign-policy doctrine," he says. Too many "pressing threats" get in the way of beautifying the way other countries govern themselves. And America's record seems to bear him out, especially when the war on terror or western energy supplies enter the picture. Central Asia is close to Afghanistan, so the United States maintains a base in

Kirgizstan and had one in Uzbekistan too, until it was thrown out last July. Uzbekistan is also one of the countries to which it has "rendered" terrorist suspects. Similarly, in the interests of energy security, it has supported Ilham Aliev, the incumbent despot in Azerbaijan, welcoming the pipeline that now runs through his country. And the politics of oil might also make it difficult to support people power in Saudi Arabia, just as the politics of the entire Middle East has stopped America pressing the democratic case too hard in Egypt.

Still, George Bush often says, as in his inaugural address last year, that "it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world." And the promotion of democracy is now an official objective of countries like Britain, Canada, Germany and the Netherlands. So can people power become an instrument of foreign policy?

Several organisations believe so. America has groups such as the National Endowment for Democracy, the International Republican Institute, the Middle East Partnership Initiative and the National Democratic Institute, all financed by the government. Britain has the Westminster Foundation, also government-backed, and so on. These are not specifically charged with promoting people power, but they sometimes do, as, for instance, in Kirgizstan. The trouble is that, try as they may to present themselves as neutral agents removed from government—the National Endowment for Democracy often describes its activities as "technical assistance"—they are usually seen as arms of the CIA or its equivalent. Genuinely independent NGOs, which were active in the Georgian upheaval and several others, are often similarly tarred.

Even so, it is tempting to think that outsiders can help. It is clear that a successful popular change of regime—one, that is, that results in a reasonably democratic and enduringly free system—is much more likely to emerge if it has certain characteristics. What is needed, according to an analysis by Freedom House of 67 overthrown dictatorships, is "broad-based, non-violent civic resistance—which employs tactics such as boycotts, mass protests, blockades, strikes and civil disobedience to delegitimate authoritarian rulers and erode their sources of support, including the loyalty of armed defenders." Such people power can be decisive. And if it is a significant feature of the change of regime, the emergence of a free society is much more likely than in a top-down change of power brought about by elites or others close to power. Moreover, the most important factor in contributing to the emergence of a freer society is the presence of strong and cohesive non-violent civic coalitions.

So, if outsiders can encourage any of these features, they may succeed not just in spreading democracy but in state-building. Accordingly, Freedom House suggests donors should support local NGOs, and offer training in coalition-building and non-violent resistance. It and others advocate efforts to help the local media, with training or money for computers, mobile phones or even a printing press: such assistance proved crucial in Kirgizstan.

The International Centre on Nonviolent Conflict, based in Washington, DC, is perhaps more involved in the promotion of peaceful people power than any other organisation. Financed entirely by its own officers, members and employees, it neither takes money from governments nor works with them. It aims to do good by

spreading the word. One method is to distribute videos of a documentary series of "A Force More Powerful", which shows how non-violent resistance can be used to effect change. The videos, translated into Arabic, Chinese, French, Persian, Russian and Spanish, have gone to over 60 countries, greatly displeasing the authorities in Cuba, Iran and Zimbabwe, among others.

The centre will not help anyone directly to overthrow a government. It does, however, run workshops for activists seeking the peaceful promotion of democracy or human rights. These often draw on the experience of those who have successfully used non-violence: a group of Serbs, for example, now travel the world telling the story of Mr Milosevic's downfall and thus giving confidence to those who want to be rid of their own local tyrant. The centre has also developed a conflict-simulation game that shows the effect of different tactics—strikes, demos, boycotts, etc—which can be tailored to particular circumstances.

All politics is local

Success has many fathers, and when people power turns out well many will claim the credit. Reasonably enough: the pressure of foreign governments, the activities of outside NGOs, moral support, financial help, the foreign press, the use of e-mails and so on have all contributed to the downfall of various dictators. But all the evidence is that people power, if it is to bring about a lasting change that increases freedom, must bubble up from below. It must be indigenous, broad-based and, ideally, non-violent. In practice, that means it must be organised, and led by people who could be plausible politicians after the revolt. And they must be on the spot: exiles carry little weight if they have sat out the struggle at a safe distance—a truth well understood by the Cubans, who fear a United States-shunning dissident like Oswaldo Payá far more than any ranter in Miami.

AFP

Iranians mustered but not quorate

Countries with few local NGOs, civic groups, trade unions, churches, student organisations or other independent sources of influence are unlikely to produce the necessary leaders. And if they do, the sensible autocrat will squelch them as soon as possible. That is what happens in Iran, where opponents of the regime, especially

students, are given no chance to organise, and where television is always censored and newspapers often closed.

Yet people power still worries the world's authoritarians. The Chinese sent 10,000 policemen to a southern town last week to crush a demonstration that involved barely half as many participants. Thousands of similar protests have erupted across China recently, and the country's chief press regulator, Shi Zongyuan, unblushingly admitted in November: “When I think of the colour revolutions, I feel afraid.” Russia, too, is concerned: NGOs, says the head of its security service, are plotting to destabilise the country. A new law now restricts domestic ones and gives the government power to close down their foreign counterparts. Russia also harasses the American-backed agencies promoting democracy in Central Asia.

Plenty of other governments, from Belarus to Myanmar to Zimbabwe, are frightened. They are probably right to be. It may take years to develop, and it may not always turn out quite as is hoped, but people power is catching: the more often it works, the more often it will be used.

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