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A tyrant's overthrow is not a sure end to oppression

By Mark Mazower

Organisation is crucial if a common purpose is to succeed, writes Mark Mazower



First Tahrir Square, then last year's Gezi protests in Istanbul, and now Kiev, Caracas, Sarajevo and Bangkok – people have been taking to the streets and holding their governments accountable. A wave of popular mobilisation is gathering pace and in an age of falling voter rolls and political apathy you would have to be stony-hearted not to feel a thrill at the sight. Nothing reveals the essence of popular politics more sharply than that moment when the vast distance that separates those who have power from those in whose name they rule is annihilated. The trappings of office count for nothing, the security forces melt away and the dictator is left alone and impotent. Nicolae Ceausescu's uncertain wave to the booing crowds in December 1989 presaged his ignoble flight and eventual death.

The epic struggle in 2011 for Tahrir, played out in front of the world press, marked the moment in which Hosni Mubarak ceded control of downtown Cairo and the beginning of the end for his regime. There were similar scenes over the past week from Kiev, where President Viktor Yanukovich has now been ousted, after the police opened fire on demonstrators.

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But once the tyrant has left the scene, what then? Visitors have streamed to gawp at the “Ukrainian Disneyland” – complete with private zoo, full-size replica galleon and neoclassical schlock – that the ex-president constructed behind the fences of his opulent estate. Meanwhile, Susan Rice, the US national security adviser, has declared that her government stands “on the side of the Ukrainian people”. But who exactly are “the people”? Do they include the extreme rightwingers of the Svoboda party whose flags were visible throughout the Maidan demonstrations and who glorify the memory of Stepan Bandera, the wartime fascist? Arseny Yatseniuk, a central banker, is now in charge of the new government but with Crimea in turmoil and the economy in a nosedive, his work is just beginning.

Cynics ever since the French Revolution have liked to predict that nothing good can come of street violence. They point to the Terror as an example of what can happen when the legitimate ruler is overthrown in the name of a greater legitimacy, and cite Napoleon as an example of the tyranny that generally emerges out of attempts to engineer democracy by force. Are those crowds, they ask, really heroic assemblies of potentially self-governing individuals or are they mindless and misguided pawns in power struggles they know little about? What, if anything, lies between dismissing street protest as mob rule and glamorising it as the will of the people?

If democracy has any meaning left, then the right to protest surely lies at its heart. To deprive protesters of the right to aspire to make serious political changes would be to turn protest itself into nothing more than an act of empty symbolism. Occupy Wall Street, for instance, had a symbolic importance, but the inability of its activists to effect any larger or more enduring change in how banks work was a sign of its failure. Yet when street protest produces real political effects, it has to reckon with the consequences.

How many of the anti-Yanukovich protesters over the past weeks thought much beyond getting rid of the man? Anger at corruption has fuelled numerous rallies over the past couple of years, especially as austerity and high unemployment have sharpened the divide between haves and have-nots. Demonstrations, however, are an ineffective means of ending corruption. That takes institutional transformation, a long, slow slog, mostly invisible and untheatrical; it is the opposite of street protest, whose power lies in being as public, dramatic and instantaneous as possible. What the crowds in downtown Cairo and Kiev had in common was their extraordinary diversity. But this very quality also explains why they have been incapable of sustaining a political future. The fundamental Leninist insight still holds: nothing can be done without organisation. If Solidarity was able to transform itself into a long-term force in Polish politics, it was because its leaders understood the need to organise themselves, and because its roots in union activism gave it an inherent structure to begin with. Once Mr Mubarak was ousted, it was the Muslim Brotherhood, not any of the leaders of the Tahrir Square occupations, who knew how to profit in the new phase of Egyptian politics.

This is why empty talk of “the Ukrainian people” is worse than useless and why the west needs to rethink its old assumptions about what it used to call “the transition to democracy”. The very phrase suggests that we only need to wait for the happy ending to arrive eventually. But some transitions go in the wrong direction, and others never result in much change at all. Many years ago, Michael Oakeshott, the conservative British theorist, decried what he called the besetting sin of liberal political thought – the belief that you only had to remove the tyrant for freedom to flourish. The despondent aftermath of the Arab spring shows how vacuous that belief really is.

Removing tyrants sometimes does indeed lead to freedom. At other times it merely leads to new kinds of tyranny. Happy the revolution where the revolutionaries are both freedom-loving and effectively organised for the long haul of political struggle. Happier still the revolution whose people can express their views without having meddling outsiders to contend with. Where both conditions are absent, one cannot really expect anything other than a long, hard, messy struggle to follow the kind of moments of euphoria that we have witnessed in Kiev recently.

The writer is professor of history at Columbia and author of ‘Governing the World: The History of an Idea’

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