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## Supporting revolutions



Photo by Jonathan Rashad.

The nonviolent revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt dominated international news in early 2011. Given their adherence to the principles of nonviolence and massive public participation, these revolutionary movements are *unique* and *extraordinary*, as we are told by the international media. The truth remains that they are in fact typical examples of the successful revolutions that took place over the last thirty years.

In these thirty years, almost every successful revolution or uprising that forced the old regime to step down was nonviolent. Massive mobilisation of ordinary people on the streets, strikes, demonstrations, and a wide variety of nonviolent techniques were employed to remove unpopular authoritarian regimes in country after country, while the many armed and violent guerilla movements of the time were mostly unsuccessful. This crucial fact is somewhat missing from the wide-ranging coverage of the events in Tunisia and Egypt. Also missing is a closer scrutiny of the influence (or the lack thereof) of external actors in these types of societal processes.

Here, I would like to [analyse these movements](#) and divide them into six groups, based on the types of international support received from a wide array of foreign actors. There is no denying that each of these cases is unique and has its own background and context. However, they have a level of kinship that makes it tempting and reasonable to group them.

The first wave of popular nonviolent uprisings started with Poland and Solidarity, the trade union. The fight against the one-party communist system that started in 1980, ended up in a victory in 1989. Bolivia, Uruguay, and the Philippines followed in 1982, 1984, and 1986. For those movements to succeed, support from the international network of trade unions and the

Catholic church was crucial.

In 1989-1991, we saw the next wave of peaceful revolutions in former Soviet republics and Eastern Europe. The fall of the Berlin wall became the symbol of those success stories. Relatively strong civil societies, access to Western media, and economic problems of the crumbling states enabled the dismantling of one-party communist systems.

During the the same period (1989-1991), a number of countries in the French-speaking Sub-Saharan Africa went through similar processes of nonviolent regime change. It started with Benin and then spread to a handful of other countries. A crucial element in those cases was the presence of broad-based coalitions in *national assemblies* to discuss and formulate the future of the states. Strong civil societies that cherished the ideals of the 1789 French revolution were key actors in those movements of change.

From 2000 onwards the *coloured revolutions* took place – starting in Serbia and then spreading to Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, and Lebanon, sparked by fraudulent national elections. Foreign support – monetary, strategical, and technical – played noteworthy roles in those revolutions.

In response to the recent financial crisis, many people across the globe reacted strongly and blamed their governments for lack of control. That was followed by successful demands for their resignation in Iceland, Latvia, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. In those cases, typically large crowds of people gathered outside the parliament and stayed until the ruling leaders stepped down. Those protest movements did not receive any foreign support.

The most recent wave of revolutions against authoritarian regimes started in Tunisia and then Egypt. As I am writing this, demonstrations calling for regime change are ongoing in Libya, Iraq, Iran, Morocco, Bahrain, Djibouti, Qatar, Algeria, Syria, Jordan, Yemen, Oman, and Kuwait, while Al Jazeera plays an important role as a source of information both inside and outside these countries. In most of these cases, little external support has been offered to opposition groups.

Western governments often boast that they are actively promoting democracy and freedom across the globe. Pro-democracy opposition groups in many places do receive overt and covert support from these governments. History gives us ample reasons to question the actual motivations behind some of such support.

In almost all cases, democracy promotion and support to opposition groups are exclusively targeted against regimes that have hostile relationships with Western governments. If the promotion and spreading of democracy was the goal (as advertised), then how do we explain this phenomenon?

In horrible dictatorships like Chile (in the 1980s), Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, or [Bahrain](#), no support was offered for opposition movements. [Democracy export](#) is only for unfriendly regimes hostile towards the United States or the European Union. Then, electoral episodes in Algeria in 1990 and Palestine in 2006 indicate that Western governments are ready to support democracy only when friendly or acceptable groups are voted to power.

The case of Egypt in this context is a curious one. In 2009, the Obama administration cut down 75% (\$50 million in 2008) of US funding for democracy promotion and civil society support in the country while pumping in \$1.7 billion as annual support to the Mubarak regime. Human

rights organisations and pro-democracy groups in Egypt were worst affected by those cuts. [Promoting democracy or pampering a US-friendly regime?](#)

In Tunisia and Egypt, public anger and frustration reached such a level where ordinary people had enough of poverty, emergency laws, censorship, police brutality, and corruption. That was when they decided to confront the regime. In both these countries, Western support for the civil society and opposition groups was too little or none. It might well be the case that the lack of support from the outside world actually pushed the people to take desperate actions on the streets of Cairo and Tunis.

In fact, Western support may sometimes function as a *safety valve*, steaming out public anger and frustration. If or when people under oppressive regimes are given false hope of freedom or change, their frustration and hopelessness will not reach the level necessary for daring tough confrontations with the police forces of the regime. In countries where Western actors are providing support in the form of monetary donations, training, or educational programs, public frustration may not reach the level we saw in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Libya, or Yemen.

With external support comes false hope that makes people more willing to wait for a better future; or, in some cases, work for change within the constitutional framework of the country with or without success. On the other hand, the absence of such foreign support can grant a level of independence for democracy activists, as their activism would be free from external dictates and policy choices, leaving room for more creative and courageous approaches in their struggle for democracy and human rights.

If that is the case then the solution is not suspending support to pro-democracy groups, but to evaluate and rethink the strategies, based on the lessons learned from the recent developments in the Middle East.

I would like to argue that these should include more practical and strategical training with the aim of building strong grassroots movements. Any civil society support should focus on preparations for large scale public demonstrations; how to handle riots; and, how to deal with police brutality.

This, of course, is not a new approach since [manuals and handbooks for nonviolent struggle](#) are already available in many languages and formats. Printed versions of these manuals are often smuggled into countries where pro-democracy groups are active. Also, PDF copies are downloaded from the web. In some countries, groups are even carrying out practical training sessions. In other cases, these trainings are taking place in *safe places* abroad.

Revolutions take time. And when repressive regimes are successfully removed, serious problems arise as soon as the celebrations are over. The difficult task of replacing the old system is a crucial one. There are enormous differences between being in the opposition and being in position. That is why those who toppled the old regime, may not be best prepared to run the country.

In my work with opposition groups, I always stress the need for preparations for the future, when they will be responsible for building a new state and running it to the satisfaction of the people. Enormous difficulties always wait for them. The economy is often in ruins, and old problems like unemployment and corruption are just as high as the expectations of the newly-liberated people.

Lack of training, absence of workable ideas on how to run a good society are often combined with the short supply of tolerance and patience of the masses. In the long run, a revolution is judged, not on how the people celebrated the departure of the despots, but on how the new society functions months and years after the takeover. That is why we will have to wait for sometime, for a full-blown analysis on Tunisia and Egypt.

Peaceful revolutions are not completely spontaneous. In every case, there are opposition groups who work years or months ahead of the public uprisings, for example the *April 6 youth movement* in Egypt. As was the case in Egypt, revolutions also take time. In Poland, it took nine years of struggle before the one-party communist regime gave in. In South Africa, it took at least forty years to end the apartheid.

Activists in Burma, Belarus, Kazakhstan and many other places – their time is yet to come. And, anyone eager to support their struggle need to note that good intentions are not enough, external actors must have good skills as well, based on serious and critical studies of the revolutions of our time.

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**Jørgen Johansen** is an academic, writer, and peace activist.

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