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The Orange Revolution Betrayed

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From snowy Kiev, I have watched the revolutions in Cairo and Tunis with joy and admiration. Egyptians and Tunisians are right to be proud of their desire to peacefully overthrow despotic governments. But as someone who led a peaceful revolution, I hope that pride is tempered by pragmatism because a change of regime is only the first step in establishing a democracy backed by the rule of law. Indeed as Ukraine is now demonstrating, after revolutionary euphoria fades and normality returns, democratic revolutions can be betrayed and reversed.

The first of Ukraine's lessons for Egyptian and Tunisian democrats is that elections alone do not make a democracy. After all, what if the enemies of freedom use elections to entrench their anti-

democratic agendas? What if elements of the old regime or the cadres of militant minorities only pretend to embrace democratic norms in order to hijack the new democracy?

In Ukraine today, these are not abstract questions. Six years after the Orange Revolution, not only is Ukraine's democracy under threat, but the rule of law is being systematically perverted and its national independence bartered away. Indeed, the hybrid presidential-parliamentary

system that the country established as part of the settlement that brought a peaceful end to the Orange Revolution is being hollowed out to concentrate all political power in the hands of a supposedly democratically elected president.

Of course, Ukraine's plight does not mean that the people of Egypt and Tunisia should spurn the call for free elections. Determining the will of the people does require expression through the ballot box. But elections alone cannot solve the fundamental political problems confronting Egypt and Tunisia. In particular, they cannot create a liberal order and open society.

To be effective, elections must be preceded by an extensive debate, in which political arguments are made, attacked, defended and ultimately embodied in ideologically coherent party organizations. Democratic consent can truly be given only when voters know what they are consenting to. Whoever refuses to make a public case for what he or she intends to do when in power — as Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych did during his election campaign — is no supporter of the democracy that citizens risked their lives to establish.

Moreover, democracy must be rooted in the rule of law. There must be accepted rules that are binding on everyone in politics so that whoever does not accept or obey them is disqualified. Yanukovych's naked attempt to hijack the election that precipitated the Orange Revolution should have resulted in his being banned from running in future elections. Yet he was not.

Now as president, Yanukovych's crude instinct is to treat the law and constitution as Karl Marx thought of them: as a mixture of sentimentality, superstition and the unconscious rationalization of private interests. Stealing elections, suppressing the vote and behaving in contempt of the rule of law are negations of democracy. Those who engage in them must be seen as democracy's enemies and treated as such.

A second lesson follows from this. The fact that a government has been democratically elected does not mean that the cause of freedom has prevailed. The rest of the world must not turn a blind eye to authoritarian backsliding. Yet today, not only are many of Ukraine's neighbors silent about Yanukovych's strangulation of Ukraine's democracy, but some openly celebrate the supposed "stability" that his regime has imposed. For decades, Egyptians and Tunisians paid a high a price in freedom for the stability of others. They must never be asked, or forced, to pay it again.

One way to help prevent a democratic revolution from being betrayed from within is by building a genuine civil society. We in Ukraine learned this truth from harsh experience in the Communist era. Although communism could, every now and then, coexist with private property and with private enterprise, it could never coexist with civil society. The most fateful attack to accompany the installation of any dictatorship is an attack on civil society.

In Ukraine after the Soviet collapse, freedom of speech was restored overnight. But reviving civil society is a complicated task, as the peoples of Egypt and Tunisia will soon find out. The reason is self-evident: Civil society is an intricate, fragile and even mysterious entity that evolves over decades, if not centuries. Its pillars — private, voluntary associations, decentralization of the state and delegation of political power to independent bodies — must be nurtured patiently and from below.

Where civil society remains underdeveloped, every problem filters up to the Big Man squatting at the top. So the more power is concentrated at the center, the more it becomes possible for anti-democratic forces to gain — or regain — control over a country.

As the people around the world encourage the coming of democracy to Tunisia — and hopefully to Egypt as well — let us not be beguiled by its formal trappings. Let us celebrate the arrival in North Africa of the spirit of liberty and of solidarity, which brought Ukraine its liberty once and will do so again. And let us pledge that our solidarity does not end at the borders of our nations. Freedom — true freedom — is indivisible.

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