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What Russia Can Learn From Tunisia and Egypt

By Anders Aslund

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After decades of authoritarianism, the Arab world is finally seeing political change. The Arab countries have stood out for their pervasive corruption concentrated at the top of the state strengthened by an authoritarian rule that served to defend the corruption. These regimes were weakened as their prior socialist ideology withered away to become barren statism. They could be financed with large rents, mainly from oil. Their sclerotic political systems could not be reformed; they could only collapse. The main questions were when that collapse would come, which regime would fall first, and what group would overthrow the rulers.

The only other part of the world that corresponds to this description is the post-Soviet world with Russia in the lead. Therefore, the current events in the Middle East are of great significance for Russia and the other former Soviet republics. There is a wealth of comparative studies of revolutions and democratic breakthroughs that can help us discern Russia's possible prospects.

The first unrest did not occur in the poorest or most underdeveloped Arab states, but in Tunisia and Egypt, which in many ways were the most-developed ones, though not the richest. These two countries have carried out significant market economic reforms in recent years that have resulted in a decent growth rate. Their economies were outgrowing their political systems amid a popular sense that the economic potential was not fully realized and that its fruits misdirected by corruption.

All this could also be said about Russia, only that it is much richer and more corrupt according to Transparency International. Similarly, Alexis de Tocqueville noted that the French Revolution occurred when economic conditions were improving. The Orange Revolution erupted in 2004, when Ukraine recorded a stunning official economic growth of 12 percent.

Much has been made of the role that the young, uneducated and unemployed played in the revolts, but media reports indicate that the well-educated middle class were the main actors in the revolutions. In Russia, the well-educated middle class is larger. Today, many of them emigrate when they see that their country does not allow them to realize their full potential, but suddenly they may stay if they see real opportunity for change in Russia.

So far, the Arab revolutions of 2011 look as if they will go down in history as one of the great liberal, middle-class revolutions, such as the European revolutions of 1848, the East European democratization of 1989 and the color revolutions of Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan from 2000 until 2005. The slogans in Cairo as in Kiev in 2004 were freedom, an end to corruption and regime change. What is most worrisome about the Arab revolutions is that they have been much bloodier.

Many thought that these revolutions were unthinkable in North Africa, mainly because of the cultural idiosyncrasy that Arabs accept their system and rulers and have no tradition of popular revolutions. The same has been said so many times about Russians, although this is a nation of a rich history of both liberal thinking and revolutions.

The other argument was that Islamist fundamentalists were so dominant that a liberal middle class could never play a political role. The case in point was the Islamic Salvation Front's victory in parliamentary elections in Algeria in December 1991, leading the military, with Western approval, to clamp down on the fundamentalists.

A useful myth was that the Muslim Brotherhood had a good chance of winning an election in Egypt because fundamentalists could justify military dictatorship and therefore were less suppressed than the liberal opposition. Similarly, the current Russian regime tries to play up the nationalists as a potential threat, but that has been a miserable failure.

A third argument was that no nations have a stronger tradition of counterintelligence and secrete police than the Arab world and that these forces would stamp out any popular unrest with their impressive record of ruthless repression. The same is true of Russia, but in Tunisia and Egypt the security forces split with some troops joining the revolutionaries, as is usually the case in revolutions or democratic breakthroughs.

A fourth idea has more potency. Many Arab states have severe ethnic divisions, with a privileged minority ruling over the majority. Each case is specific, but in Russia no such problem exists. Four-fifths of the population is ethnically Russian and overwhelmingly

Orthodox.

Revolutions often occur around a rigged or manipulated election, as was the case in Egypt and in all the color revolutions. In March 2012, Russia faces a presidential election that is not expected to be free or fair. A widespread fear among the intelligentsia is that it will lead to 12 years of political stagnation with continued pervasive corruption and repression to prop up the regime. This threat, together with the illustrative revolutionary lessons from the Arab world, may be sufficient to shake up the Russian regime.

While the preconditions for an eventual regime collapse are evident in Russia, timing is always a moot point, and the big question is whether the public is morally ripe. Russia's democratic revolution of 1991 is only two decades old, and it doesn't inspire Russians to renew this revolutionary spirit. After all, former President Boris Yeltsin put Vladimir Putin into power. Russians are keenly aware of the Orange Revolution of 2004 because it occurred so recently and is widely perceived as a political, economic and social failure.

Russia's economic record looked so convincing until the crisis hit the country hard in 2008. Even so, my hunch is that the threat of 12 years of stagnation will wake Russians up, but timing of a regime collapse is exceedingly difficult to predict.

The good news is that when Russia eventually experiences its next democratic breakthrough, it is likely to become a democracy for good, unlike after the Soviet collapse in 1991. Samuel Huntington's concretization of modernization theory provides a good argument for this prediction. No country that has had even half of Russia's per capita gross domestic product during a democratic breakthrough has relapsed into authoritarianism. Russia is simply too wealthy for the next attempt at democracy not to be successful.

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