

# Putin Tells West Not to Meddle in North Africa

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BRUSSELS — Prime Minister Vladimir Putin cautioned the West on Thursday that attempts to meddle in the rebellions of the Arab world might sweep extremists to power.

"You have to give people the chance to choose their own fates and their own futures," Putin said at a news conference with European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso.

"Give them the opportunity to determine their own fate through natural means and not with any kind of outside interference," he said.

Putin warned that previous attempts to "impose democracy" had fostered Iran's Islamic revolution and triggered election victories for radicals that the West is now fighting to contain.

Russian officials have long rejected Western criticism of its own democratic credentials and treatment of political opponents.

"Not long ago at all, our partners came out actively for honest democratic elections in the Palestinian territories," Putin said.

With heavy sarcasm, he added: "Wonderful! Well done, lads! And it turns out Hamas wins, the same people you are calling a terrorist organization and have started to fight against."

Hamas — which does not recognize Israel and won U.S. and European Union-backed Palestinian territory elections in 2006 — seized control of Gaza 18 months later after fighting allies of Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas.

Russia also supported the elections, which were part of a Middle East road map for peace in the region.

Hamas has so far benefited from the wave of anti-government revolt sweeping Arab countries, strengthening its position while Israel and the Palestinian Authority have lost their key Arab ally, former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

Putin said Iranian revolutionary leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini had used the support of the West while living near Paris for a few months before he flew into Tehran in 1979 to lead the revolution that overthrew the Shah.

Putin and President Dmitry Medvedev have warned of the dangers of radical Islam gaining a grip in one of the most unstable and oil-rich regions of the world.

"Regardless of the calming theories that radical groups coming to power in Northern Africa is unlikely, if it happens it cannot but spread to other areas of the world, including the North Caucasus," Putin said in Brussels.

The Kremlin is struggling to contain an Islamist insurgency in the North Caucasus a decade after Moscow drove separatists from power in the second of two Chechen wars since the Soviet collapse.

Unlike the relatively bloodless revolutions of Tunisia and Egypt, an uprising in Libya has sparked fierce fighting between pro-government forces and rebels. The unrest has driven world oil prices up to about \$120 a barrel, stoking concern about the economic recovery.

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