

ILLIBERAL DEMOCRACIES AND THE FUTURE OF REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENTS

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Abstract

This paper seeks to explore the key points surrounding revolutions, with a special focus on revolutions that occur under illiberal democracies. This is achieved through a comparative analysis between the Orange Revolution of Ukraine and the South African Revolution.

Keywords: Comparative analysis, South African Revolution, Orange Revolution, literature review, illiberal democracy, democracy, electoral fraud

Many revolutions have occurred over the span of time. While the French, American, and Russian revolutions are most widely discussed across historical and political discourses as having a profound effect on the history of the world, the more recent revolutions need further analysis to contend the impacts they are having on the current society. The fabric of the global political world is constantly being shaped and influenced by the results of rebellions and revolutions across the globe. While the concept of revolutions has continued to be the topic of discussion in the academic world of political science, there are many extenuating factors that need further research in order to corroborate causes and effects. With the rise of illiberal democracies throughout the world, the factors surrounding revolutions need to be readdressed to fit the current global political climate.

Political scientists have concluded that there are five factors which help create the political atmosphere for a revolution to transpire: “1. Mass frustration resulting in popular uprisings among urban or rural populations...2. Dissident elite political movements...3. Unifying motivations...4. A severe political crisis paralyzing the administrative and coercive capabilities of the state...5. A permissive or tolerant world context” (DeFronzo, 2022, pp. 12-13). These factors, especially in conjunction with each other, help a revolution to take place. In newer revolutions, the last criterion seems to have an especially critical impact on the survival or extinction of a revolution.

In evaluating the current literature surrounding revolutions, there are many viewpoints on what causes a revolution to succeed or fail. Dix (1984) performed a comparative analysis of the revolutions in Latin America and concluded that poor economic conditions and widespread discontent with the government do not substantiate a revolutionary success, however “without the regime behavior which thrusts key nonrevolutionary actors and strata into a negative coalition, revolution is unlikely to succeed” (p. 443). This key combination of combining the nonrevolutionary and revolutionary actors into a cohesive block against the current regime pushes the energy towards the regime from a few rebellious groups into a unified revolutionary front against the government. Goldstone (1982) also highlights the impact this has on the aftermath of the revolution, as the period after the collapse of the old regime is characterized as after “a brief euphoria over the fall of the old regime, divisions grow rapidly” (p.190). While the revolutionaries and other key actors are united during the revolutionary phase, this is short-lived following the collapse of the previous regime. The actions taken during this time can impact the longevity of the impact of the revolution itself. Furthermore, Zimmermann (1990) argues that it is difficult to assess the outcome of a revolution during the aftermath phase of the revolutionary movement and claims that assessing the impacts of a revolution is best analyzed through the scope of its effects

on the first, second, and third generations following the revolution as “anything beyond seventy-five years or three generations...would introduce too much variation” (p. 36). This is due to the fact that the political instability introduced to the nation state during the revolutionary process can take at least a generation to restabilize and produce long-term outcomes that are easier to analyze from a scientific standpoint.

As seen through the previous research of political scientists who explore the idea of revolutions, the outcome of a revolution can be defined in two ways: (a) whether the revolutionary movement successfully toppled the existing regime and attempted to implement reforms to the governmental structure or (b) whether the revolution itself installed a new regime which produced beneficial results for the citizenry of the nation. For most revolutions, it is easy to categorize them as successful or unsuccessful based on the first definition, but long-term effects of the regime on the citizenry can be harder to define as beneficial for the people based on perspective and philosophies. As governments attempt to maintain a tighter hold on their power, there has been a rise in illiberal democracies. This occurs when government leaders are careful to maintain “democratic facades by holding regular elections” (p. 15), while erasing “institutional checks and balances, making real turnovers in power increasingly difficult” (Müller, 2014, p. 15). It will be very interesting to see if these types of political tactics will increase or decrease the number of revolutionary movements in the future. However, the underlying concern in this situation is that the government will survive by going around the issues described in the five criteria for a revolution addressed above. By removing the institutional barriers to their control of the regime and eliminating a true democracy with fraudulent elections, the government is able to reduce the unifying motivations of the people. Voters blame their peers for perpetuating the regime in power which reduces the need for mass uprisings, binds the political elite together

in an effort to hold on to power, and eliminates the possibility of a crisis caused by the citizens that would paralyze the capabilities of the state. Meanwhile, fraudulent elections create a permissive world context as other nations have no reason to initially doubt the election results of another nation. Therefore, the core question is whether an illiberal democracy is harder to remove through the means of a revolutionary movement? How would the success of a revolutionary movement against an illiberal democracy be measured?

To answer these questions, a comparative analysis would provide the context for discussion. In this paper, the focus will be on the Orange Revolution in Ukraine and the South African Revolution. These two revolutions are important to analyze for this purpose because the Orange Revolution in Ukraine dealt with a lack of transparency from the government and the South African Revolution which dismantled the apartheid state mimics the political entrenchment that would undoubtedly need to occur in the disintegration of an illiberal democracy from a revolutionary movement.

The Orange Revolution in Ukraine occurred because of the results of a rigged election between Yanukovich and Yushchenko in 2004. The two were in a runoff election in which the second round of elections were "marked by wide-spread instances of voter fraud-including the illegal expulsion of opposition representatives from election commissions, multiple voting by busloads of people, absentee ballot abuse, and an extraordinary high number of mobile ballot box votes as well as dramatic changes in turnout figures in eastern Ukraine, where Yanukovich's support was stronger" (Tucker, 2007, p. 538). This level of electoral fraud cause massive protests. Afterwards, the Supreme Court of Ukraine deemed the second round of elections invalid, and a new round of elections began "with over 12,000 international observers present, and Yushchenko won by a 52.0 percent to 44.2 percent margin" (Tucker, 2007, p. 538). This triggered a series of upheavals in future elections and instability within the Ukrainian government.

Foreign involvement was a common theme in this revolution due to external pressure to have a fair and free election. Additionally, the West and Russia were involved in supporting opposing candidates. For example, “to help Yanukovich, Putin personally traveled twice to Ukraine in the fall of 2004” (McFaul, 2007, p. 70). Nongovernmental organizations also stepped in to support Yushchenko and “helped to increase the respectability of Yushchenko in Washington” (McFaul, 2007, p. 74). This increased the international visibility on the election period in 2004 as well as foreign involvement.

Ukraine remained in flux between the power of Russia and the West as a result. This increased tension in the area instead of pacifying Russia with another pro-Russian leader in power. Issues like Ukraine becoming a part of NATO transpired. This created the political atmosphere and justification for future conflict in the area, such as the annexation of the Crimea region of Ukraine into Russia and the eventual military conflict between Russia and the Ukraine that we see today. Therefore, while the Orange Revolution itself was mainly peaceful, the aftermath is not.

On the other hand, the South African Revolution took quite a long time to resolve itself. While the opposition to the apartheid state began in the early 1900s, the actual revolutionary action of modifying the South African constitution to end apartheid happened in 1996. The revolutionary movement was powered by the idea that the white regime should not have power simply because of race. Racial tension caused the mass discontent among the mostly African citizenry and allowed them to become a unified front against the white regime. Over this span of time from 1903 to 1996, there were many different rebellions and protests that resulted in loss of life. In the 1980s alone, the “white regime arrested hundreds of suspected protest leaders, dozens of whom died in police custody from supposed suicides, hunger strikes, and unexplained causes” (DeFronzo, 2022, p. 398). The brutality of the apartheid regime was condemned outwardly by

Western nations. However, foreign involvement was also one reason why the white regime remained in power as throughout “most of the twentieth century Britain and the US continued to trade with South Africa and overtly or covertly supply weapons to the white regime” (DeFronzo, 2022, p. 421). This allowed the regime to stay in power for longer, even though it was not the will of the people.

As the apartheid state was dismantled, democratization began. This allowed South Africa to grow and expand in a less controlled manner, as the apartheid regime was no longer in control of the exports of the country in exchange for political benefits. However, due to lack of industrialization and poor economic conditions, the ANC-led governments focused mainly on expanding “electrical and sanitation services and the availability of education, health care, and housing” (DeFronzo, 2022, p. 422). Despite their efforts, “even after the sixth post-apartheid election, much of the population lived in poverty, about one-quarter lacked jobs, and economic inequality was enormous” (DeFronzo, 2022, p. 422). The social impact on the South African revolution has not achieved the high hopes its revolutionary leaders initially desired after the removal of the racially dividing apartheid state.

On the surface, in comparison, the Orange Revolution and the South African Revolution are drastically different. The Orange Revolution lasted a much shorter time. The Orange Revolution was mostly peaceful, with the exclusion of the aftermath of the Russian-Ukrainian war, while the South African Revolution was much more violent during the revolutionary process. While foreign involvement was a common theme in both revolutions, it impacted each revolution in much different ways. The Orange Revolution would be considered successful by the first definition mentioned above, but can be reflected as unsuccessful by the second due to the fact that the nation is now engaged in a military conflict with Russia. The South African Revolution would also be considered a success in terms of dismantling the

previous regime and instituting a new governmental structure, but it may be seen as unsuccessful when considering the current status of its citizens who are still living in an impoverished state due to the complications of the inequality sustained during the apartheid regime.

However, these two revolutions provide key information in understanding the possibility of what may occur if an illiberal democracy were to be dismantled through a revolutionary movement. When considering the Orange Revolution, it shows that an illiberal democracy needs to hold on to power with more ways than just a rigged election. The regime needs to keep the people pacified in another way to reduce the mass frustration of the people. Without foreign intervention, the Orange Revolution may not have been successful as the foreign powers and NGOs helped to mobilize the people into one united front to overturn the fraudulent election results. Magaloni (2010) is quick to point out that one factor of success in the Orange Revolution was that “despite the presence of military capacity, citizens were able to overpower the autocrats because their protesting in the streets induced the armed forces and other regime insiders to switch sides” (p. 752). Kuntz and Thompson (2009) contribute to this idea by arguing that “even when its legitimacy is low, a regime can hold onto power by retaining the loyalty of key civilian officials and military elites” (p. 260). Without the support of the military and other elites, their hold on a fraudulent election is nonexistent. Additionally, in the case of the Orange Revolution, the mass protests happened while the Ukrainian Supreme Court was attempting to decide on whether the election results were valid. This could have had external pressure on the Supreme Court’s final decision. To dismantle an illiberal democracy from a revolutionary standpoint, internal and external pressure, unifying motivations, and cooperating political and military elites has the greatest influence of the success or failure of the movement.

When considering the South African Revolution, there are also some key details to address. Because the apartheid state was a

“comprehensive social policy, it touches upon every sphere of social life in South Africa: politics, education, economics, religion, and so forth” (Tiryakian, 1960, p. 682). The entrenchment of the apartheid state is similar to that of an illiberal democracy because the rulers in both situations adapt the laws to fit their own political agenda. This causes the regime’s policies to touch on many areas outside of the traditional scope of general politics in order to keep their hold on power. However, it is important to note that when the apartheid state was dismantled in South Africa, the citizens saw little social change with the exception of discrimination on race being made illegal. The poverty levels, economic conditions, and economic inequality still remained even after six election cycles after the dismantling of the apartheid state (DeFronzo, 2022, p. 422). This shows that even with the removal of certain systemic barriers laid by the regime to keep a hold of power, the new regime may not be able to overcome all the issues caused by the initial system. In the case of an illiberal democracy being overturned, the damage may already be done within the political system that the idea putting the system of checks and balances that were altered by the previous regime will not be enough to reverse the course of the nation.

As outlined above through the discussion of the Orange Revolution and the South African revolution, an illiberal democracy would be harder to overthrow through a revolutionary movement due to systemic barriers that the regime will install to keep power. However, it is not impossible. The façade of an election process will eventually be revealed as fraudulent, and this will fuel the resistance movement against the regime in place. The success of a revolutionary movement against an illiberal democracy would have to be measured by the long term effects that the new regime would impress upon the citizenry and the stability of the new regime. As shown by the removal of apartheid, this is not an easy task to accomplish as the simple removal of the previous regime does not necessarily constitute a brighter future for the nation’s people. More research needs to be done in this area to

determine the factors for why the dismantling of the apartheid state did not translate into more beneficial effects on the citizens. Illiberal democracies present challenges to previous research surrounding revolutions as none have yet to be overthrown by a revolutionary movement. Therefore, as illiberal democracies begin to spread across the globe, the criteria that leads to a successful revolution may adapt as well. The future of revolutions against illiberal democracies is highly uncertain and only time will tell how drastically different the revolutions of the future will be in response to the shifting global political climate. ■

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