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## The Fading Colors of Pseudo-Revolutions

The violent overthrow of Kyrgyzstan's president Kurmanbek Bakiyev by opposition forces this week was just the latest sign that the political changes that had taken place in several countries in the former Soviet Union and the Middle East during the first decade of the twenty-first century -- aka the "color" or "velvet" revolutions" -- were not part of a historic revolutionary wave that was going to do away with the old corrupt and authoritarian regimes and usher a new dawn of liberal democracy.

The leaders of these mostly non-violent and youthful movements that adopted certain colors (or flowers) as their symbols were expected to launch political and economic reforms and align their new governments with the values and interests of the west. If the collapse of the Soviet Union and the freeing of its satellites in Eastern and Central Europe, the Baltic and Central Asia could be described as the first act in a process of democratization and liberalization facilitated by the U.S.-led globalization, the color revolutions were seen in Washington as the second act in this historical epoch. Hence, the tendency among American political and intellectual elites to frame these developments in ideological terms that recall the binary terminology of the Cold War: the Good Guys versus the Bad Guys.

We were told that Bakiyev was the Good Guy. He took power in 2005 after what the media referred to as the Tulip Revolution (or the Pink Revolution), a series of protests by opponents of the regime which followed a disputed parliamentary election. But since then, the human rights situation has deteriorated under a repressive regime headed by Bakiyev who won another term as president last year in an election tainted by fraud. And Bakiyev refrained from aligning Kyrgyzstan with the Americans and allowed both the U.S. and neighboring Russia to maintain military bases in his country in exchange for generous financial assistance pocketed by members of the Bakiyev clan. The Good Guy was apparently not so goody good.

The narrative of the Tulip Revolution and its final chapter sounds familiar since it resembles the story-lines of the first two celebrated color revolutions of the decade. Indeed, like in Kyrgyzstan in 2005, Georgia's Rose Revolution in 2003 and Ukraine's Orange Revolution in 2004 seemed to

follow a familiar script. A disputed election followed by protests by students, intellectuals and other cool guys and gals that lead to the overthrow of a reviled old-guard type and to a new election of a young and westernized figure. In Georgia, ex-communist boss Eduard Shevardnadze was replaced with the energetic modernizer Mikhail Saakashvili who had studied and worked as a lawyer in New York; in Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovich, a corrupt apparatchik with close ties to Moscow was defeated by Viktor Yushchenko, a charismatic political figure advocating partnership with the U.S. and the European Union (EU) who was joined by sexy reformer and tycoon Yulia Tymoshenko, a cross between Margaret Thatcher and Snezana Onopka.

On one level, the color-revolution narrative reflected the same kind of very neat Manichean categories applied by American pop sociologists and journalists parachuting to this or that international "hot spot," not to mention the global crusaders managing U.S. foreign policy. According to this interpretation, the Good Guys are usually referred to as "Westernized," "modernized," "reformist," "secular," and "democratic," which also means that they are "pro-American." And they are usually under attack by Evil, represented by those who can be identified by the antonyms of the aforementioned adjectives. This was the grand narrative of an America standing up to ideological monsters abroad by supporting people "like us" evolved during the 20th century under the influence of Wilsonian fantasies and against the backdrop of World War II and the Cold War.

But President George W. Bush and his neoconservative ideologues have succeeded in turning this fantasy into a nightmare when they decided to export their Freedom Agenda into the Broader Middle East as part of a strategic plan to invade Iraq and impose American hegemony on the region. You're probably familiar with the intellectual Axel and toe loop jumps: Drawing the parallels between "Islamofascism" and Nazism: envisaging the rise of a liberal democracy on the banks of the Euphrates; marketing Ahmed Chalabi as Iraq's Charles De Gaulle. The Good Guys who are in the process of spreading democracy and liberalism in the Middle East who were allied with America, and the Bad Guys opposing them were the anti-Western radical Islamist terrorists linked to Iran, Syria and Al-Qaeda.

So it was not surprising that the neocons succeeded in spinning the 2005 Iraqi legislative election as another color revolution by drawing the parallel with the Orange and Rose revolutions. The Purple Revolution named after the color that voters' index fingers were stained to prevent multiple voting was marketed as the first stage of building democracy in Mesopotamia and the rest of the Middle East.

Indeed, the extensive media coverage of the Cedar Revolution in Lebanon that followed the assassination of pro-Saudi opposition leader Rafik Hariri in 2005, as protesters allied with the moderate Christian and Sunni-Muslim political parties succeeded in forcing the pullout of Syrian troops from the country, seemed to be providing a certain momentum to the Bush Administration's notion that the Good Guys were on the march in the Middle East.

It was a great storyline; too bad that it had nothing to do with reality. The American military adventure didn't produce a democratic revolution that was going to lead to the spread of American-style freedom in the Middle East. Instead, it helped unleash the destructive forces of nationalism which have taken many forms: religious identity and ethnic particularism as well as a variety of local, tribal and family feuds, all of which were interlinked to corresponding national rivalries in the region. If anything, the main winners were the pro-Iranian Shiites movements in Iraq and Lebanon (Hizbollah) and Hamas.

Indeed, the U.S.-led campaign to promote democracy in the former Soviet Bloc after the collapse of communism, and American encouragement of the color revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia, Iraq and Lebanon, were based on the assumption that the drive by individuals and groups in these nations and societies to oust their ruling elites was motivated primarily by universal ideals of democracy and liberalism and by the appeal of joining the West. But this narrative seemed to

disregard a critical element in these developments. These revolutions were impelled by powerful nationalist, ethnic, and religious forces, like the anti-Russian sentiments found in Georgia or among the Ukrainian majority in Ukraine; not surprisingly, members of the Russian minority in Ukraine opposed the Orange Revolution. Similarly, the Cedar Revolution in Lebanon pitted Maronite Christians and Sunni Muslims against Shiites backed by Iran, while the political changes in Iraq in the aftermath of Saddam's ouster empowered the Arab Shiites and the Kurds while weakening the former Sunni controlled elites. To make the story line even more complex, what many Americans see as a linear process of democratization and liberalization could be seen as the playing out of intra-elite rivalries over power and money.

Hence, "our" Good Guys -- Mikhail Saakashvili in Georgia, Viktor Yushchenko and Yulia Tymoshenko in Ukraine, Kurmanbek Bakiyev in Kyrgyzstan, or for that matter, Ahmed Chalabi in Iraq - proved to be to be as power hungry and greedy as their predecessors, disregarding democratic principles and employing ultra-nationalism and chauvinism in order to cling to power, and exploiting American diplomatic and economic support as part of effort to contain domestic and outside threats and win financial assistance. And when being "pro-American" became less cost-effective, they hedged their bets by allying with, say, Russia or Iran. What was construed as an ideological love affair with American turns out to be a diplomatic one night stand.

"First there was Georgia, and then Ukraine, followed by Lebanon, and now Kyrgyzstan. Add to that the election in Iraq, and we had no choice but to agree that George W. Bush's call for spreading political freedom had been winning the hearts and minds of democracy enthusiasts everywhere, including in Kyrgyzstan," I had written immediately after the Tulip Revolution in 2005. "The 'Democracy Narrative' that dominated media chatter for at least a few hours was creating the impression that the 'Good Guys' were winning." But that of course didn't happen. And once again the new political convulsions in Kyrgyzstan are leading pundits are heralding the and urging American intervention on the side of the "democrats." Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me.

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