

Democratisation, Colour Revolutions and the Role of the NGOs: Catalysts or Saboteurs?

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"...power does its work by stealth, and the powerful can subsequently deny that their strength was ever used at all." -Salman Rushdie, Shalimar the Clown (2005)

Introduction

Summarising the mix of primary causes for the 'third wave' of democratisation that began in 1974, Samuel Huntington listed a new but not decisive factor that had been absent in the preceding two waves: "Changes in the policies of external actors...a major shift in US policies toward the promotion of human rights and democracy in other countries..."¹ American international NGOs (INGOs) were prominent mechanisms through which this causal link between superpower foreign policy interests and regime change worked out in many transitions from authoritarian rule in the twenty-one-year-long 'third wave'.² This essay purports to extend the analysis on INGO instrumentality and democratisation to the geopolitical storms popularised as Colour or Flower Revolutions that have been sweeping the post-communist world since 1999. It sets out to assess the strength of the impact of transnational actors on recent international political events of great consequence, with the parasitic relationship between INGOs and a hegemonic state serving as the backdrop, and realism as the theoretical basis. The intention is to bring the state back in into a field predominated by constructivist renderings of transnational activism. The principal claim made is that US foreign policy interests- strategic expansion, energy security and the war on terrorism- serviced by INGOs, were the main and direct causes for the Colour Revolutions. Without the intervention of these US-sponsored INGOs, the political landscapes of the case studies we undertake would not have been repainted in new colours.

The first section of the essay takes a *tour d'horizon* of external causes of democratisation. It then discusses the origin and rise of these INGOs from a realist international relations theory lens by arguing that rhetorical homage to democratic ideals and values mask their utilitarian handiness in the superpower's quest to install friendly regimes in high priority areas of the world.

The choice of studying the causation of Colour Revolutions is justified by the well-established practice of paying attention to historically important outcomes that merit social scientific explanation. Revolution is "a theoretical category with considerable cultural and political significance- a phenomenon demanding the special attention of social scientists."³ Three Colour Revolutions have occurred so far- 'Rose Revolution' in Georgia (2003), 'Orange Revolution' in Ukraine (January 2005) and 'Tulip Revolution' in Kyrgyzstan (April 2005) ⁴- all following a near identical course trajectory and all spearheaded by the American democratisation INGOs working at the behest of the US foreign policy establishment. In the

second section of this essay, we will focus on the latest two episodes and briefly compare them to roughly similar cases of Uzbekistan (May 2005) and Azerbaijan (November 2005) which did not suffer Colour Revolutions due to variation in our independent variable, US foreign policy priorities.

Owing to the limited number of Colour Revolutions, a small-N comparative approach is the only option for the researcher⁵, even though it may raise concerns about bias in the findings. Thoughts on the generalisability of the main hypothesis will be addressed in the third section of the essay. Whether the Colour Revolutions qualify as ‘revolutions’ in the rarefied sense or not and whether they are landmarks in the path of ‘democratisation’ or not are judgements that will be made in the third section. The essay concludes by proposing that genuine transformative political change cannot be imported through politicised INGOs that serve as Trojan Horses of powerful states.

I External Actors and Contexts of Democratisation

Existing democratisation works recognise the international context in which regime change occurs but never go to the extent of giving external causes prime place. The overall take has been that exogenous factors “are difficult to apply in a sustained manner over the long term.”⁶ International organisations (IOs) and Western economic aid are counted as catalysts for democratisation in the former communist bloc⁷ and so is the Catholic Church.⁸ Scholarship has accepted that changes in the “international system-level forces” propelled the ‘third wave.’⁹ Constructivists claim that international human rights norms triggered fundamental political changes leading to the demise of communism.¹⁰ Transnational actors, comprising INGOs at the hub of advocacy networks, are viewed as capitalising on opportunity structures offered by “internationalism”¹¹, acting as “ideational vectors of influence”¹², and maintaining constant criticism of vulnerable ‘target states’ that are repressive in nature.¹³ Portrayals of advocacy networks as autonomous entities that skilfully manoeuvre states and IOs for achieving their own principled ends suggest that democratisation was “both a contributing cause and an effect of the expanding role of transnational civil society.”¹⁴

On the question of how transnational actors ‘penetrate’ target states, which is of seminal interest for our Colour Revolutions quest, constructivist theory harps on norm institutionalisation in issue-areas like human rights that enable coalitions with powerful state actors who favour such norms.¹⁵ The manner in which American democratisation INGOs penetrated Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, however, did not follow this route, as shall be demonstrated in the second section of the essay. Another pathway for penetration is presented by the “boomerang pattern”, wherein international contacts “amplify the demands of domestic groups, pry open space for new issues and then echo back these demands into the domestic arena.”¹⁶ Though campaign strategies and pressurising tactics of the INGOs do approximate to what happened before the Colour Revolutions in Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, the *origin* of American INGO involvement in these states was not as straightforward as an invitation from local civil society to global civil society. Former communist countries are characterised by weak local civil societies and embryonic homebred intermediate organisations. Nor were the *dynamics* of INGO intervention in these states as simple as domestic grievances being resolved by coalitions with principled external networks “motivated by values rather than by material or professional norms.”¹⁷ For the most apposite theoretical framework that fits the story of INGOs and Colour Revolutions, we must leave constructivism and turn to the revolving applications of realism in world politics.

INGO as Vehicles for Strategic Penetration

Realism asserts that transnational actors can punch above their weight and have disproportionate impact on world affairs only if they lobby and change the preferences, practices and policies of powerful states.¹⁸ The Helsinki Network in Europe followed this game plan to great effect by winning over the US government to its side in the struggle against communism. Norm-driven theorists fail to concede that superpowers have minds and agency of their own and only give in to transnational 'pressures' when the issue area serves larger geo-strategic purposes.¹⁹ Rarely has the US promoted human rights and democracy in a region when they did not suit its grander foreign policy objectives. Thomas Carothers, a leading authority on US democracy promotion, has decried the instrumentalisation of democratisation by recent American administrations:

"The United States has close, even intimate relations with many undemocratic regimes for the sake of American security and economic interests...and struggles very imperfectly to balance its ideals with the realist imperatives it faces."²⁰

The flip side of this reality is the fact that when undemocratic regimes prove to be thorns in the flesh, the US sees great merit in their overthrow by a range of diverse methods. In the Cold War era, selectivity in democracy promotion was best reflected by Jeane Kirkpatrick's distinction between 'totalitarian' and 'authoritarian' regimes, the latter being states which can be supported in the scheme of bigger US interests.²¹ As we delve into the case studies of Colour Revolutions, the same 'good despot-bad despot' patchiness of superpower attitudes to democratisation in the post-communist world will resurface in the new context of the 'war on terrorism'.

Geoffrey Pridham divides geo-strategic impact over regime changes into the two dimensions of space and time. The Mediterranean had turned into an area of intense superpower rivalry in the mid-1970s due to the enhanced Soviet naval presence and instability in the Middle East. Regime transitions in that hotspot, therefore, sharpened US and Western interests in the outcomes. As a corollary, at sensitive world historical moments, American inclinations to intervene in regime politics of countries tend to be greater. Early Cold War economic instability in Italy and Greece in the 1970s was one juncture where the outcome stakes were felt to be so high in Washington that it took an active interventionist role.²² As shall be unveiled, the spatial and temporal importance of Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan in the geo-strategic sweepstakes was ripe for Colour Revolutions orchestrated from outside. Laurence Whitehead has deepened understanding of democratisation as a geopolitical strategy that redistributes global power and control with the metaphor of a vaccine, not of a contagion or virus. US military and other modes of destabilising interventions in Central America were meant to inoculate polities from contamination by Castroism and this treatment was labelled 'democracy'. "Two-thirds of the democracies existing in 1990 owed their origins to deliberate acts of imposition or intervention from without...It is not contiguity but the policy of a third power that explains the spread of democracy from one country to the next."²³ The Colour Revolutions under our bioscope were integral to this power politics tradition motoring dominant states in international relations.

Realist views on transnational actors as instruments of powerful states date back to debates about multinational corporations (MNCs) and their entanglement with American hegemony. Robert Gilpin was the first to explain the rise of MNCs as a function of hegemonic stability, i.e. that the leadership of a powerful political state actor is essential for the creation and maintenance of a liberal world economy in which MNCs thrive.²⁴ Robert Keohane and

Joseph Nye also warned in the seventies that “transnational relations may redistribute control from one state to another and benefit those governments at the centre of transnational networks to the disadvantage of those in the periphery.”²⁵ INGOs had not burst onto the global notice board during these early reviews on transnationalism. However, the usage of INGOs as foreign policy instruments was not unknown right from the start of the Cold War. Humanitarian INGOs like the International Rescue Committee (founded in 1933 to assist anti-Nazi opponents of Hitler) and democratisation INGOs like Freedom House (founded in 1941; an important component of the Marshall Plan to prevent communist takeover of Western Europe) are two high-profile cases that represented US governmental interests while maintaining INGO legal status. Inducing defectors and refugees from behind the Iron Curtain to cross over, public diplomacy, propaganda and funding of electoral candidates in foreign countries by charities and INGOs existed long before the voluntary sector attained an overtly pivotal position in the annals of US foreign policy.²⁶ More recently, humanitarian (not human rights) INGOs heavily dependent on US finances have been found to be consciously or subconsciously extending US governmental interests. “It’s not the NGOs driving the government’s agenda; it’s the US government driving the NGO agenda.”²⁷

Doctrinal developments in foreign policy kept pace with the growing potential of INGOs as valuable assets for promoting US national interests. Andrew Scott’s (1965) “informal penetration” theory tied US foreign aid, technical assistance and international organisations together as a toolkit that can be used to increase the porosity and penetrability of rival states. Permeability of national borders was both a precondition for the emergence of transnational entities like MNCs, INGOs and IOs, as well as the end result of increasing transnationalism with the US as metropole. “The greater the variety, depth and geographical extent of a nation’s interests, the greater is likely to be the variety, depth and extent of its informal operations.”²⁸ Richard Cottam (1967) theorised that the *zeitgeist* of world politics had changed from the ultimate recourse of “shooting warfare” to political, economic and psychological warfare. The arenas at which critical international battles took place were increasingly the domestic politics of weaker target states that are vulnerable to foreign influence and interference. Cottam was disappointed with the “ad hoc” nature of US foreign policy and its neglect of a long-term strategic plan based on “tactical interference.”²⁹ The contemporary blueprint for co-opting transnational actors as active wings of foreign policy was laid by Joseph Nye’s liberal ‘soft power’ idea that called for harnessing the US’s tremendous reserve of intangible resources such as culture, ideology and institutions for preserving world dominance. ‘Soft power’ at the end of the Cold War would be less costly and more effective to Nye because of its subtlety and seductive quality. The prohibitive costs of direct military action in modern times ensures that “other instruments such as communications, organisational and institutional skills, and manipulation of interdependence have become important instruments of power.”³⁰ To manage the challenges of “transnational interdependence”, Nye urges greater US investment in international institutions and regimes on issue-areas that can perpetuate the American lead in global power. His emphasis on private actors operating across international borders as a key category that has to be managed by the hegemonic state aims at the heart of our discussion on democratisation INGOs as pawns. Among practitioners of US diplomacy too, soft power’s utility in furthering strategic ends has been toasted after the end of the Cold War. Warren Christopher, President Clinton’s first Secretary of State, proposed a strategic approach based on “new realism” to promoting democracy: “By enlisting international and regional institutions in the work, the US can leverage our own limited resources and avoid the appearance of trying to dominate others.”³¹

Democratisation GONGOs

The watershed that brought INGOs to the forefront of global democracy promotion was the Reagan administration's decision to create the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) in 1983 to roll back Soviet influence. With a stated *raison d'être* of "strengthening democratic institutions around the world through nongovernmental efforts", NED was conceived as a quasi-governmental foundation that funnelled US government funding through INGOs like the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI), the International Republican Institute (IRI), International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), and Freedom House. These INGOs in turn 'targeted' authoritarian states through a plethora of programmatic activities. NED's first President, Allen Weinstein, admitted openly that "a lot of what we do today was done covertly 25 years ago by the CIA."³² The organisation was a *deus ex machina* in the face of scandalous Congressional investigations into the CIA's "soft side" operations to destabilise and topple unfriendly regimes that embarrassed the government in the late 1970s. "An NGO helps to maintain a certain credibility abroad that an official US government agency might not have."³³ 97 percent of NED's funding comes from the US State Department (through USAID and before 1999, the USIA), the rest being allocations made by right-wing donors like the Bradley Foundation, the Whitehead Foundation and the Olin Foundation.³⁴ Since its conception, and despite the bipartisan structure, "neoconservatives have held tight control over NED's agenda and institutional structure."³⁵ Senior George W. Bush administration figures who are signatories to the Project for a New American Century (PNAC), which wears aggressive US foreign interventions on its sleeve, have officiated in NED. Notwithstanding its claims to "independence" and "nongovernmental status"³⁶, the US State Department and other executive agencies regularly appoint NED's programme personnel. As one 'Project Democracy' (codename for NED in the Iran-Contra scandal) advocate put it, "These 'private' agencies are really just fronts for the departments they serve; the agency may prepare a report or a research project that it then gives to the private firm to attach its letterhead to, as if it were really a private activity or initiative."³⁷ A survey of NED's partner INGOs reveals a similar pattern of public priorities forwarded by private agents. Freedom House, a neocon hub which succoured the Colour Revolutions, has a history of being headed and staffed by ex-CIA high-level planners and personnel.³⁸ NDI is dominated by 'liberal hawks' or right-wing Democrats who find their way to prime foreign policy slots when their party is in power. IRI comprises a herd of far-right Republican politicians and representatives of major financial, oil, and defence corporations.³⁹ IFES top brass belong to conservative Republican ranks, the CIA or military intelligence.⁴⁰ IREX, the training school for Colour Revolution elite protagonists, is peopled by political warfare, public diplomacy and propaganda specialists from the news media, US Foreign Service and the US military.

For our purpose, it is interesting to note that compared to humanitarian and development INGOs, which have often promoted US foreign policy objectives,⁴¹ democratisation and human rights INGOs boast of a far greater preponderance of US government and intelligence operatives. This owes to the fact that democratisation is a sensitive political minefield with direct bearings on international relations. It is too important a foreign policy subject for the US government to hand over reins to the voluntary sector. Armed with the luxury of a sea of democratisation GONGOs (governmental NGOs) and QUANGOs (quasi-governmental NGOs), William DeMars says,

"The US government has a greater capacity than any other single actor in the world to keep track of them, channel them, thwart them, or ride them in a chosen direction."⁴²

USAID's avowal that democracy can be promoted around the world without "being political" is totally fictional, because the onus of NED and its family is on altering the balance of political forces in the target country in the pretext of "civil society assistance." Criticising the brazen politicisation of democratisation INGOs, Elizabeth Cohn recommends:

"Close consultation between the U.S. government and nongovernmental groups should stop. NGOs should set their own goals and not be servants of U.S. national interests, as NED is by congressional mandate."[43](#)

That such relinquishment would appear foolhardy for the realists in US government goes without saying, for it is tantamount to killing the goose that lays golden eggs. To its supporters, the NED family has numerous successes to show off- interventions "to protect the integrity of elections in the Philippines, Pakistan, Taiwan, Chile, Nicaragua, Namibia, Eastern Europe and elsewhere."[44](#) Neutral assessments would rate these as electoral manipulations. Left out of the above count are victorious overthrows of democratically elected governments in Bulgaria (1990), Albania (1992) and Haiti (late 90s) and destabilisation in Panama, Cuba and Venezuela.[45](#) The next section will prove that the latest feathers in NED's cap are the Colour Revolutions.

II Operation Orange in Ukraine

Ukraine epitomises habitual American "instrumentalisation of value-based policies-

"Wrapping security goals in the language of democracy promotion and then confusing democracy promotion with the search for particular political outcomes that enhance those security goals."[46](#)

Identified by the Clinton administration as a priority country for democratisation[47](#) and the lynchpin of US post-Soviet foreign policy, Ukraine's importance for NATO's eastward expansion is second to none. Clinton's special adviser on the former USSR, Richard Morningstar, confirmed during the 1997 Ukraine-NATO pact that "Ukraine's security is a key element in the security policy of the United States."[48](#) For Zbigniew Brzezinski, the liberal hawk who influences the Democratic party's foreign policy:

"Ukraine, a new and important space on the Eurasian chessboard, is a geopolitical pivot because its very existence as an independent country helps to transform Russia. Without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be a Eurasian empire ... if Moscow regains control over Ukraine, with its 52 million people and major resources, as well as access to the Black Sea, Russia automatically again regains the wherewithal to become a powerful imperial state."[49](#)

With the ascension of Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland to NATO by 1999, Ukraine remained the last frontier, the single largest buffer on the Russia-NATO 'border'. The Orange Revolution has to be viewed in the context of a defensive Russia attempting to hold on to its sphere of influence in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)[50](#) and an aggressive Euro-Atlantic eastward push by the EU and NATO.[51](#) The line-up of foreign backing for the two Presidential candidates on the eve of the Revolution unambiguously unravels this background tug of war. Viktor Yanukovich, the candidate of outgoing President Leonid Kuchma,[52](#) received strong verbal and financial support from the Kremlin before, during and after the disputed 2004 election. In a personal meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin just before the election, Yanukovich promised "that he would end Ukraine's policy of seeking membership in NATO."[53](#) Viktor Yushchenko, the pro-market challenger who

benefited from American diplomatic, intelligence and INGO assistance for the Orange Revolution, put his eggs entirely in the EU and NATO basket.[54](#)

Energy politics also figured in Washington's regime change calculus for Ukraine. In July 2004, much to the consternation of the Bush administration and Brussels, Kuchma's government reversed an earlier decision to extend the Odessa-Brody pipeline to Gdansk in Poland. Had the extension occurred, it would have carried enormous Caspian oil flows to the EU, independent of Russia, and weakened Ukraine's overwhelming dependence on Russia for its energy needs. Jettisoning a project that would have cemented Kiev's westward trajectory, Kuchma decided to open an unused pipeline that would transport oil from the Russian Urals to Odessa. The fallout on US interests was not negligible:

"Washington policy is aimed at direct control over the oil and gas flows from the Caspian, including Turkmenistan, and to counter Russian regional influence from Georgia to Ukraine to Azerbaijan and Iran. The background issue is Washington's unspoken recognition of the looming exhaustion of the world's major sources of cheap high-quality oil, the problem of global oil depletion."[55](#)

The US Ambassador to Ukraine, Carlos Pascual, repeatedly beseeched Kuchma to give up the reversal, arguing that the Polish plan would be more attractive for investors and more profitable for Ukraine in the long-term, particularly by attenuating Russian monopoly control and diversifying Ukraine's energy inventory.[56](#) It was no coincidence that Yushchenko's government, after the Orange Revolution, restored status quo ante on Odessa-Brody, announcing "positive talks with Chevron, the former company of US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, for the project."[57](#)

The install-Yushchenko operation in Ukraine had several components. Important power-brokers like the Ukrainian army, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Security Service and senior intelligence officials (*silovki*) worked against Kuchma's crackdown orders and passed critical inside information to Yushchenko's camp.[58](#) Though these Praetorians claimed to have disobeyed executive commands altruistically, there was a pro-US tilt in many vital state agencies. Their communication channel with Yushchenko's aide, Yevyen Marchuk, a NATO favourite and former defence minister who discussed the upcoming elections with US Defence Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, in August 2004, suggests a well planned *coup d'état*.[59](#) Yushchenko's wife, Kateryna Chumachenko, a former Reagan and George H. Bush administration official and émigré Ukrainian heavyweight, is alleged to have played a key backdoor part. None of the above machinations would have mattered without the disputed election result, the amassing of people power on the streets and the engineering of democracy through civil disobedience. It is here that NED and its family of INGOs were most needed. Having penetrated Ukraine in 1990 at the behest of the George H. Bush administration with the assent of the pro-American Kravchuk, the effective leader of the Republic, these INGOs had the power to finance and create the local NGO sector from scratch, controlling its agenda and direction. The neo-liberal Pora organisation, for instance, was an offshoot of the groundwork done by the 'Freedom of Choice Coalition' that was put together in 1999 by the US embassy, the World Bank, NED and the Soros Foundation. On the eve of the Orange Revolution, NED GONGOs hired American pollsters and professional consultants to mine psephological data and unite the opposition under Yushchenko's electoral coalition, months before the poll; trained thousands of local and international election monitors partisan to Yushchenko; organised exit polls in collaboration with Western embassies that predicted Yushchenko's victory; and imported "consultants" who had

experience in the Serbian overthrow of Milosevic and the Georgian Rose Revolution.⁶⁰ The mass mobilisation in Kiev was handpicked from Yushchenko's western Ukraine bastions and did not reflect nationwide sentiments. "A few tens of thousands in central Kiev were proclaimed to be "the people", notwithstanding the fact that many demonstrators nursed violent and anti-democratic viewpoints.⁶¹ The NGO monitors, teamed up with Western media outlets, deliberately exaggerated electoral fraud involving Yanukovich's party, ignoring serious violations by Yushchenko's.⁶²

US government expenditure on the Orange Revolution has been put at \$14 million⁶³, while the overall civil society promotion budget set by Washington for Ukraine (2003-2004) was between \$57.8 to 65 million.⁶⁴ The Soros Foundation and Freedom House pumped in a steady flow of funds through INGOs and local NGOs for "elections-related projects." Massing of pro-Yushchenko crowds in Kiev's Independence Square was a meticulous operation of "careful, secret planning by Yushchenko's inner circle over a period of years" that oversaw distribution of thousands of cameras, backup teams of therapists and psychologists, transportation, heaters, sleeping bags, gas canisters, toilets, soup kitchens, tents, TV and radio coverage, all of which needed "large sums of cash, in this case, much of it American."⁶⁵ Local oligarchs and US-based émigré Ukrainian businesspersons also chipped in with sizable contributions to the neo-liberal Yushchenko. The shadowy and fungible ties between the US government and democratisation GONGOs elaborated in Section 1 of this essay leave little doubt that the latter were purveyors of large amounts of money in Ukraine that will not appear in audits or annual reports.⁶⁶ Public acknowledgements of spending are understatements akin to official casualty figures given by governments during counter-insurgencies. According to Congressman Ron Paul (R), the US allocated \$60 million for financing the Orange Revolution "through a series of cut-out NGOs – both American and Ukrainian – in support of Yushchenko." The figure happens to be "just the tip of the iceberg."⁶⁷ Claims that "Russia gave Yanukovich far more money than the United States (gave to Yushchenko)" rest on the myth that US government financing through the NED family "is publicly accountable and transparent."⁶⁸

The NED family's role in first following the Bush administration's lead and anointing Yushchenko's outfit as the only valid manifestation of 'civil society' (at the expense of non-neo-liberal anti-authoritarian parties) and then consistently bolstering it with funds and regime toppling expertise completely blurs lines between impartial democracy promotion and meddling in Ukraine's political process. It tinkers with Robert Dahl's basic dimension of democratisation- contestation- i.e. the playing field of political competition and the relative strengths of contenders.⁶⁹ Much that was done by the INGOs in the name of democratisation in Ukraine was outright biased, including voter education that is supposed to neutrally inform citizens to make free choices rather than to campaign for a particular candidate.

"Yushchenko got the western nod, and floods of money poured in to groups which support him, ranging from the youth organisation, Pora, to various opposition websites."⁷⁰

The sinuous route taken by western money can be illustrated with an example. The Poland-America-Ukraine Cooperation Initiative (PAUCI), a prominent grantee of USAID and Freedom House, funded NGOs active in the Orange Revolution like the International Centre for Policy Studies, which had Yushchenko on its Supervisory Board. To conclude this part of the essay, American INGOs constricted the Ukrainian political space by plumping for the interests of the neo-liberal candidate before the 2004 elections, and partook in a multi-pronged regime change operation orchestrated in Washington.

Tulip Implantation in Kyrgyzstan

Central Asia has long been in the crosshairs of great power competition games. After the fall of communism, the George H. Bush and Clinton administrations defined a set of geo-strategic goals for this heavily meddled region:

“To secure an alternative source for energy, help Central Asia gain autonomy from Russia’s hegemony, block Iran’s influence, and promote political and economic freedoms.”[71](#)

From 1993, goals of diversifying long-term energy reserves (finding alternatives to Persian Gulf sources) and pressures from the oil and gas private sectors “began to take centre stage” in Washington’s policy toward Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan.[72](#) The Pentagon pressed for increasing US military presence in the region and succeeded in securing membership for four of the five Central Asian states, including Kyrgyzstan, in NATO’s Partnership for Peace in 1994. Frequent joint military exercises and “interoperability” training in the Clinton years were expected to yield American bases in the region from which to counter Russian and Chinese hegemonic ambitions. With limited oil and natural gas reserves, Kyrgyzstan’s weak economy was heavily dependent on Russia, a vulnerability that the Clinton Administration sought to counteract by deepening the US defence interests and nudging the IMF and World Bank to lend voluminous amounts of development aid to Askar Akayev’s relatively democratic government. IMF technical assistance was critical to Kyrgyzstan becoming the first state in the region to leave the Russian rouble zone. Despite the 1999 extension of the CIS Collective Security Treaty that boosted Russian military leverage in Kyrgyzstan, kidnappings and effortless incursions into Kyrgyz territory by the fundamentalist Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) exposed chinks in the security apparatus of Akayev’s “Switzerland of Central Asia.” As Kyrgyzstan got dragged into Central Asia’s Islamist tangle by geography, narcotics trade and border conflicts, the subterranean US-Russian race for military bases came into the open, paving the road to the Tulip Revolution.

After September 11, 2001, the Pentagon ventured on an epic journey,

“The greatest shake-up in America’s overseas military deployments since the end of the second World War- to position U.S. forces along an ‘arc of instability’ that runs through the Caribbean, Africa, the Middle East, the Caucasus, Central Asia and southern Asia.”[73](#)

Cash-Strapped Akayev offered the largest American military base in the region at Manas, outside Bishkek, an installation that was not taken lightly in Moscow.[74](#) China, which shares a border with Kyrgyzstan was equally alarmed and, together with Russia, steered the Shanghai Cooperation Forum toward opposing and ending US military bases in Central Asia. The expectation that Manas base would “reduce Kyrgyz dependence on Russia”[75](#), besides being a logistic hub for the war in Afghanistan, was belied when President Putin negotiated with Akayev to open up a Russian airbase at Kant in 2003, 30 KM from the American “lily pad.” China was also reported to be engaged in secret parleys for its own base in Kyrgyzstan and for border adjustments that kicked up a political storm against Akayev in March 2002. Russia’s Ministry of Internal Affairs, “Akayev’s new friends”, helped defuse the demonstrations.[76](#) Akayev’s moves to align Kyrgyzstan with China through ‘Slik Road Diplomacy’ and suppression of the Uyghur guerrillas, explained mainly by his desperate need of finances to stem the tail spinning domestic economy, upset Washington, which saw Beijing as a thorn in its strategic expansion agenda.[77](#) The American perspective on this dangerous development went as follows:

“Given the 1,100-kilometer border between Kyrgyzstan and China- and Washington’s already considerable foothold in nearby Uzbekistan and Tajikistan – the fall of the China-friendly government of disgraced president Askar Akayev would be no small victory for the “containment policy.”[78](#)

Prior to the Sino-Russian counter-offensive that found receptive ears in Bishkek, Akayev’s progressively autocratic tendencies had not ruffled many feathers in Washington. His rigged Presidential election in 2000 went largely unnoticed by the US government, even though NDI observers termed it unfair and laden with illegal subornment of the state machinery.[79](#) In fact, Eric McGlinchey’s study of the reasons for Akayev’s slide into anti-democratic politics puts the blame squarely on US-inspired IMF doles that allowed him to “rein in political contestation and rebuild authoritarian rule.”[80](#) Having cosseted Akayev for more than a decade, the volte-face done by the Bush administration before the Tulip Revolution was not an overnight realisation of how despotic he had become but a hard-nosed calculation that its vital interests were no longer being served. The visible consequences of Washington’s displeasure with “the news from Kant” (opening of the Russian base) were recorded by observers:

“The IMF office in Bishkek has become tougher towards Kyrgyzstan. And the State Department has opened its own independent printing house – which means opposition newspapers will be back in full force.”[81](#)

Diplomatic sources are on record that as soon as the Kant deal fructified, Akayev was “on the American watch list” and “the U.S. began supporting all conceivable elements arrayed against him.”[82](#)

Democratisation of Kyrgyzstan, a footnote in American policy, suddenly acquired an aura and urgency. We should add that there was also a generic strategic rationale mooted in the Bush administration for democratisation in Central Asia after September 11. Since anti-US popular feelings in the region are not as high as in other Muslim parts of the world, “the risk of democratisation in the region is relatively small.” Winning the hearts and minds of Central Asian Muslims through democratisation “will not only facilitate the process of liberalising the economy, but also, as a by-product, increase support for the United States.” September 11 opened a classic realist “window of opportunity through which “an ‘arc of stability’ can be established in the strategically important area between the Caspian Sea and the northwestern border of China.”[83](#) Wildly inconsistent in application, the notion that democracy promotion can soften the Islamist challenge to *pax Americana* fitted well with rising discontent in Washington with Akayev’s usefulness. Kyrgyzstan, with a population of barely 5 million (4th smallest in the region) received a sum-total of \$26.5 million for “Democratic Reform” from the State Department in 2003-2004, second only to the much more populous Uzbekistan.[84](#) As with Ukraine, the official figures shroud a fortune.

From 2003, the NED family of INGOs got into the act of securing regime change at the next parliamentary elections, turning against the Akayev who had initially allowed them access to the country during the heyday of IMF and USAID conditional lending. Even more than in Ukraine, American dominance of the local NGO sector is complete in Kyrgyzstan. One author describes the monopolisation of local civil society thus:

“Practically everything that passes for civil society in Kyrgyzstan is financed by US foundations, or by the US Agency for International Development (USAID). At least 170 non-governmental organizations charged with development or promotion of democracy have

been created or sponsored by the Americans.”[85](#)

The absolute control of Kyrgyz civil society by the NED family GONGOs is compounded by the donor-driven nature of ‘civil society building’ carried out in the region. Fiona Adamson’s field research of democratisation aid in Kyrgyzstan finds,

“Local NGOs receive almost 100 percent of their funds from international actors and can easily become almost 100 percent donor driven. International donors implicitly or explicitly expect local NGOs to administer programmes that do not necessarily match local needs.”[86](#)

Among the strategies adopted by the INGOs in the name of democratisation was winning over local elites to Western ideas and models, a time-tested Cold War tactic of psychological warfare. IREX organised conferences, seminars, ‘technical assistance’ and exchange programmes with Kyrgyz elites, believing that domestic political change comes from exposure to western ideas. That this tactic worked was evident by the trend among the Kyrgyz business and political elites to endorse closer security and economic relationships with the US.[87](#) Kurmanbak Bakiyev of the National Movement of Kyrgyzstan, the man who replaced Akayev as Prime Minister after the Tulip Revolution, was himself sent to the US on an exchange programme. Felix Kulov, the new head of security, and Omurbek Tekebayev, the new Speaker of the Parliament after the Tulip Revolution, were also beneficiaries of State Department-sponsored visitors programmes. The latter disclosed what he learnt on the Washington jaunt candidly:

“I found that the Americans know how to choose people, know how to make an accurate evaluation of what is happening and prognosticate the future development and political changes.”[88](#)

Top opposition leaders in the 2005 parliamentary elections like Roza Otunbayeva had reputations as “Washington’s favourite”, though not as across-the-board as in Ukraine. They were quick to see potential in the NED’s arsenal for regime change and utilised INGO-funded projects for publishing anti-government newspapers, training youth “infected” with the democracy virus through US-financed trips to Kiev for a glimpse of the Orange Revolution, and mobilising fairly large crowds in Bishkek who stormed Akayev’s Presidential palace and in the southern towns of Osh and Jalalabad. USAID “invested at least \$2 million prior to the elections”[89](#) for local activists to monitor government-sponsored malpractices but did not do anything to prohibit these “independent observers” from actually working for opposition candidates.[90](#) The Coalition for Democracy and Civil Society (CDCS) and Civil Society Against Corruption (CSAC), key local NGO partners of the NED, worked in tandem with the anti-Akayev parties without any pretence of impartiality. The US Embassy in Bishkek, continuing the murky tradition of interventionist behaviour in crises, worked closely with GONGOs like Freedom House and the Soros Foundation, supplying generators, printing presses and money to keep the protests boiling until Akayev fled. Information about where protesters should gather and what they should bring spread through State Department funded radio and TV stations, especially in the southern region of Osh. CDCS head, Edil Baisolov, admitted that the uprising would have been “absolutely impossible” without this coordinated American effort.[91](#) On the utility of the NED GONGOs to the entire exercise of the Tulip Revolution, Philip Shishkin noted:

“To avoid provoking Russia and violating diplomatic norms, the U.S. can’t directly back opposition political parties. But it underwrites a web of influential NGOs.”[92](#)

We can conclude this part of the essay by adding that the clan structure of Kyrgyz society, ethnic tensions with Uzbeks, and incipient Islamism in the Ferghana valley intervened on the ground to alter the revolutionary script charted in Washington. Russia too had learnt its lessons from Ukraine and cultivated some anti-figures, making it impossible for the US to monopolise the opposition as was the case in the previous two Colour Revolutions. The element of surprise, the slick media packaged proclamation of democracy's relentless march, the legitimisation by Western capitals in lightning speed- all had become predictable by the time the democratisation caravan reached Bishkek.⁹³ The ambivalent attitude of the new order in Kyrgyzstan- in sharp contrast to the euphoric pro-Western policies in Georgia and Ukraine- owes to this variation between our two case studies.

'Good' Versus 'Bad' Authoritarians

Before drawing final lessons from this analysis, it is worth knowing why questionable elections by semi-dictatorial rulers in other post-communist states did not end up in Colour Revolutions. The main reason why Ilham Aliyev, the heir to Geidar Aliyev's autocracy in Azerbaijan, could fix the just-concluded November 2005 parliamentary elections and not have to run the gauntlet from Washington's public relations machinery and NED GONGOs was his regime's loyalty to immense American (and British) energy interests in the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline.⁹⁴ This was the second time Ilham Aliyev grossly manipulated an election and got away without repercussions. His succession façade in the notorious October 2003 presidential election was not only condoned in Washington but met with congratulatory messages from the Pentagon.⁹⁵ Uzbekistan's Stalinist strongman, Islam Karimov, brutally clamped down on a mass demonstration in Andijan against corruption and arbitrary detentions in May 2005, killing 500 and wounding 2000, but Washington echoed the Uzbek government's claim that it was the handiwork of "Islamic terrorists."⁹⁶ Karimov, at the time of the Tulip Revolution-inspired stirrings, had been the US' staunchest ally in the war on terrorism in Central Asia, an insurance policy against democratisation pressures. His pre-emptive moves before the December 2004 parliamentary elections and after the Tulip Revolution to expel and constrict the activities of NED family INGOs did not meet with any criticism from the US government. Comparing Uzbekistan to the other Colour Revolutions, one perceptive journalist wrote:

"The former strongmen of colour-coded "revolutionary" Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan were monsters who had to be removed for "freedom and democracy" to prevail. So is the dictator of Belarus. Not Karimov. He's "our" dictator."⁹⁷

III Necessary Causation for Regime Change

Our case studies have upheld the realist paradigm by showing that American democratisation GONGOs are necessary, but not sufficient, causes for the Colour Revolutions. Unless US foreign policymakers decide to field the full panoply of their intelligence, economic and military resources alongside the GONGOs, the spectacle of yet another orchestrated Colour Revolution is unimaginable. Lacking strong US condemnation and proactive directions, the NED GONGOs cannot manage to stage regime changes on their own in conjunction with local activists. It is the push factor from Washington that galvanises the GONGOs into a war footing for regime toppling. The Orange and Tulip Revolutions are cases of 'regime change', not 'regime type change', for they did not democratise Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan. By their very nature, these episodes were replacements of anti-Western elites with pro-Western ones, not far-reaching changes that remodelled polities. Even a minimalist definition of democracy- free and fair elections- was

not unambiguously achieved in the two cases we explored. So narrow was the base of these regime changes that it is a travesty to call them 'revolutions', a term propagated by the US government and western media. The replacements of Kuchma by Yushchenko and of Akayev by Bakiyev are no more 'revolutionary' than the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, which has been christened by the Bush administration as a 'Purple Revolution'. The difference in methods- GONGOs and backroom intrigue in post-communist states and direct military occupation in Iraq- does not nullify the similarity of the independent variable- US strategic ambitions.

Predictions for future regime changes on the lines of the Colour Revolutions will need to carefully track how this independent variable evolves vis-à-vis undemocratic states in the post-Soviet space and how it shapes the concatenation of hard and soft power instruments. American strategy would also depend on domestic political peculiarities in individual states, factors that could not be fully covered in our essay due to the methodological problem of degrees of freedom.⁹⁸ American GONGOs are highly effective in certain domestic milieus and moments and less so in others. Sabotage can suffice in some countries while full-scale military offensives may be needed in others. As Peter Gourevitch points out, purely international causation for domestic causes is "not totally convincing" except in the case of complete military occupation by a foreign power.⁹⁹ A full range of necessary causation for regime change would have to include internal political and socio-economic variables, besides the NED brand of interposing.

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