

# Egypt, Serbia, Georgia... The History of US Sponsored “Democratization”

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Global Research, March 03, 2011

3 March 2011

Region: [Europe, Middle East & North Africa](#)

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There is a Russian proverb: only a fool learns from his own mistakes. As Georgia’s foreign minister visits his Egyptian counterpart, there are lessons for Egypt in similar revolutions in eastern Europe and the ex-Soviet Union, notes

Central to Egypt’s revolution was a tiny group of Serbian activists *Otpor* (resistance), who adapted nonviolent tactics of in the late 1990s and successfully forced Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic to resign in 2000. Egyptian youth in the 6 April Youth Movement even adopted their clenched fist symbol, bringing *Otpor* once again into world headlines and TV screens.

It was the 2008 strike El-Mahalla El-Kubra to protest high food prices and low wages that brought about this unforeseen Serbian-Egyptian alliance. A group of tech-savvy young Cairenes decided to start a Facebook group to organise solidarity actions around the country, attracting a surprising 70,000 supporters. The results of the strike were mixed, with police attacking strikers and killing two demonstrators, and solidarity protests quickly dispersed.

Determined to build on their networking success, writes Tina Rosenberg in *Foreign Policy* magazine, Mohamed Adel, a 20-year-old blogger and 6 April activist, went to Belgrade in 2009 and took a week-long course in the strategies of nonviolent revolution with *Otpor* veterans, who had established the Center for Applied Non-Violent Action and Strategies (CANVAS) in 2003 for just such activists. He learned how to translate “Internetworking” into street protests, and passed on his skills to others in the 6 April Youth Movement and Kefaya (Enough).

The rest is history. A relatively peaceful overthrow of the Egyptian regime has made Egyptian youth the darlings of the world — Egyptian-American scientist Faruq El-Baz even suggested they be nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

The nonviolent revolutionary tactics made famous by *Otpor* and used to such remarkable success by Egyptians are an outgrowth of soft power strategies developed most famously by Mohandas Gandhi in the anticolonial struggle in the 1920-30s, and also by the US government during the Cold War to undermine the socialist bloc; in both cases, where direct military action against the enemy was not feasible.

Most directly relevant in the case of *Otpor* is Reagan’s National Endowment for Democracy (NED, 1983), which was instrumental in bringing about the collapse of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, funding all opposition groups left and right intent on undermining the

socialist regimes. Warren Christopher, president Bill Clinton's first secretary of state, argued, "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." NED's first president, Allen Weinstein, admitted that "a lot of what we do today was done covertly 25 years ago by the CIA."

The socialist bloc collapsed just as the Internet was taking off in the early 1990s. The tactics work well in soft dictatorships which are open to Western penetration, and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring) were the vehicles for introducing them in East Europe and the Soviet Union, as the degree of repression by the state had eased from the days of Cold War paranoia.

The techniques involved continued to be honed through the 1990s by Gene Sharp (*From Dictatorship to Democracy*, 1993) dubbed oxymoronically "the Clausewitz of nonviolence", and Robert Helvey, a former US Army colonel and defense attaché at the US Embassy in Burma in the 1980s. Given economic stagnation (hardly unique to dictatorships), using a combination of defiance and ridicule of an aging autocratic regime, and seduction of a large, poorly paid, young army and police security apparatus, the young revolutionaries are able to mobilise mass support for change and convince the security apparatus to step aside.

Though the details are slightly different, a scenario similar to events in Cairo in 2011 took place throughout Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in 1989-91. In the latter case, Boris Yeltsin's charisma pushing the military to his side after the putsch in August 1991, bringing an end to Communist Party hegemony.

The collapse of Yugoslavia was more traumatic. It had also been blessed by a charismatic leader Josip Tito who had used his monopoly on political power to build a prosperous, relatively open socialist society. However, the pressures for disintegration built after its socialist neighbours had collapsed. Financed by the US and Germany, power-hungry ethnic leaders declared independence and civil war ensued, with the Serbian heartland under Milosevic trying desperately to hold together what had been a peaceful and popular union. By 1999, the writing was on the wall — with the West sanctioning, bombing and otherwise subverting the rump Yugoslavia, a restless people turned against an aging dictator, with a media-savvy core of activists the catalyst.

As did all opposition groups in the former Yugoslavia, *Otpor* took money from NED, though it denied it at the time, disillusioning many *Otpor* members who quit after helping to overthrow Milosevic, "feeling betrayed" according to Rosenberg. CANVAS participates in workshops financed by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the United Nations Development Program, and Freedom House, an American group financed by NED.

The results of *Otpor*-inspired revolutions have been mixed to say the least. Activists from Zimbabwe, Burma, Belarus and Iran — over 50 countries — have taken CANVAS's training. The only attributable "successes" until Egypt were in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004) and Kyrgyzstan (2005) — the so-called colour revolutions, all of which have been a bitter disappointment, and along with Serbia, clearly manipulated by the US to serve its geopolitical ends.

In the case of Georgia, a boyish 37-year-old Mikheil Saakashvili was catapulted to power on the wave of a youth movement *Kmara* (Enough) modelled on *Otpor*, winning the 2004

presidential elections with 97 per cent of the vote. He invited in thousands of US and Israeli advisers, launched a disastrous war in 2008 against Russia, and quickly assumed dictatorial powers himself. Most of the Israelis scurried home after the war, and even his US patron is balking at supporting his plans to take on Russia again.

The Georgian opposition has been trying to oust Saakashvili ever since he launched war against Russia, but he is using his media smarts (and beefed-up security forces) to hold on to power, slavishly sending thousands of troops to Iraq and Afghanistan in hopes of earning enough points to join NATO. A fractious opposition must unite around an equally charismatic figure and future elections must be rigorously monitored if it expects to oust him.

The rule-of-thumb is if you play your cards extremely well, you may be allowed one *Otpor*-style revolution, so you better make good use of it. A second one is hard to pull off, and if it happens, as in 2010 in Kyrgyzstan, it is more a sign of political dysfunction than something to cheer about. And Western-style electoral democracy rarely leads to social justice, especially when the country in question is central to US geopolitical schemes, as is the case with both Serbia and Egypt.

The strategy worked well for small ethnic groups wanting their own state, like the Estonians, Slovenians and other eastern Europeans, ironically with the exception of Serbians, who experienced severe economic hardship as a result of their “revolution” and continue to resent the role of Europe and the US in their political affairs. As Egyptians massed in Tahrir Square, on 5 February, 70,000 Serbs marched in Belgrade protesting unemployment and poverty, charging that the government (in typical democratic style, a razor-thin coalition majority) is pursuing policies dictated by Europe. It is the NATO invasion and the loss of Kosovo that Serbs remember with bitterness now, rather than the dictatorship of Milosevic. *Otpor* tried to enter the political arena in 2003 but got only 1.6 per cent of the vote and gave up, joining the Serbian President Boris Tadic’s centrist pro-Europe Democratic Party.

Egyptians should keep the experience of Russia, Serbia and the colour revolutions in mind as they navigate the perilous waters of US-style democracy. Interestingly, Georgia’s Foreign Minister Grigol Vashadze is visiting Egypt 1-2 March to share his experience in post-revolution transition — not with the 6 April Youth Movement and the other revolutionaries, but with ex-Arab League head Amr Moussa and Egypt’s Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul-Gheit, both intimately connected with the Mubarak regime.

There is little to cheer Egypt’s idealistic revolutionaries in such confabs or in general in the state of politics in Georgia or any of the other colour revolutions today. It would be a tragedy if a few years down the line, Egyptians look back wistfully at pre-revolutionary times, as do many Serbs, Georgians, east Europeans and Russians.

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### **About the author:**

Canadian Eric Walberg is known worldwide as a journalist specializing in the Middle East, Central Asia and Russia. A graduate of University of Toronto and Cambridge in economics, he has been writing on East-West relations since the 1980s. He has lived in both the Soviet Union and Russia, and then Uzbekistan, as a UN adviser, writer, translator and lecturer. Presently a writer for the foremost Cairo newspaper, Al Ahram, he is also a regular contributor to Counterpunch, Dissident Voice, Global Research, Al-Jazeera and Turkish Weekly, and is a commentator on Voice of the Cape radio. Eric Walberg was a moderator and speaker at the Leaders for Change Summit in Istanbul in 2011.

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