

Oligarchs, Demagogues and Mass Revolts ... against Democracy

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In ancient Rome, especially during the late Republic, oligarchs resorted to mob violence to block, intimidate, assassinate or drive from power the dominant faction in the Senate. While neither the ruling or opposing factions represented the interests of the plebeians, wage workers, small farmers or slaves, the use of the 'mob' against the elected Senate, the principle of representative government and the republican form of government laid the groundwork for the rise of authoritarian "Caesars" (military rulers) and the transformation of the Roman republic into an imperial state.

Demagogues, in the pay of aspiring emperors, aroused the passions of a motley array of disaffected slum dwellers, loafers and petty thieves (ladrones) with promises, pay-offs and positions in a New Order. Professional mob organizers cultivated their ties with the oligarchs 'above' and with professional demonstrators 'below'. They voiced 'popular grievances' and articulated demands questioning the legitimacy of the incumbent rulers, while laying the groundwork for the rule by the few.

Usually, when the pay-master oligarchs came to power on a wave of demagogue-led mob violence, they quickly suppressed the demonstrations, paid off the demagogues with patronage jobs in the new regime or resorted to a discrete assassination for 'street leaders' unwilling to recognize the new order'. The new rulers purged the old Senators into exile, expulsion and dispossession, rigged new elections and proclaimed themselves 'saviors of the republic'. They proceeded to drive peasants from their land, renounce social obligations and stop food subsidies for poor urban families and funds for public works.

The use of mob violence and "mass revolts" to serve the interests of oligarchical and imperial powers against democratically-elected governments has been a common strategy in recent times.

Throughout the ages, the choreographed "mass revolt" played many roles: (1) it served to destabilize an electoral regime; (2) it provided a platform for its oligarch funders to depose an incumbent regime; (3) it disguised the fact that the oligarchic opposition had lost democratic elections; (4) it provided a political minority with a 'fig-leaf of legitimacy' when it was otherwise incapable of acting within a constitutional framework and (5) it allowed for the illegitimate seizure of power in the name of a pseudo 'majority', namely the "crowds in the central plaza".

Some leftist commentators have argued two contradictory positions: One the one hand,

some simply reduce the oligarchy's power grab to an 'inter-elite struggle' which has nothing to do with the 'interests of the working class', while others maintain the 'masses' in the street are protesting against an "elitist regime". A few even argue that with popular, democratic demands, these revolts are progressive, should be supported as "terrain for class struggle". In other words, the 'left' should join the uprising and contest the oligarchs for leadership within the stage-managed revolts!

What progressives are unwilling to recognize is that the oligarchs orchestrating the mass revolt are authoritarians who completely reject democratic procedures and electoral processes. Their aim is to establish a 'junta', which will eliminate all democratic political and social institutions and freedoms and impose harsher, more repressive and regressive policies and institutions than those they replace. Some leftists support the 'masses in revolt' simply because of their 'militancy', their numbers and street courage, without examining the underlying leaders, their interests and links to the elite beneficiaries of a 'regime change'.

All the color-coded "mass revolts" in Eastern Europe and the ex-USSR featured popular leaders who exhorted the masses in the name of 'independence and democracy' but were pro-NATO, pro-(Western) imperialists and linked to neo-liberal elites. Upon the fall of communism, the new oligarchs privatized and sold off the most lucrative sectors of the economy throwing millions out of work, dismantled the welfare state and handed over their military bases to NATO for the stationing of foreign troops and the placement of missiles aimed at Russia.

The entire 'anti-Stalinist' left in the US and Western Europe, with a few notable exceptions, celebrated these oligarch-controlled revolts in Eastern Europe and some even participated as minor accomplices in the post-revolt neo-liberal regimes. One clear reason for the demise of "Western Marxism" arose from its inability to distinguish a genuine popular democratic revolt from a mass uprising funded and stage-managed by rival oligarchs!

One of the clearest recent example of a manipulated 'people's power' revolution in the streets to replace an elected representative of one sector of the elite with an even more brutal, authoritarian 'president' occurred in early 2001 in the Philippines. The more popular and independent (but notoriously corrupt) President Joseph Estrada, who had challenged sectors of the Philippine elite and current US foreign policy (infuriating Washington by embracing Venezuela's Hugo Chavez), was replaced through street demonstrations of middle-class matrons with soldiers in civvies by Gloria Makapagal-Arroyo. Mrs. Makapagal-Arroyo, who had close links to the US and the Philippine military, unleashed a horrific wave of brutality dubbed the 'death-squad democracy'. The overthrow of Estrada was actively supported by the left, including sectors of the revolutionary left, who quickly found themselves the target of an unprecedented campaign of assassinations, disappearances, torture and imprisonment by their newly empowered 'Madame President'.

Past and Present Mass Revolts Against Democracy: Guatemala, Iran, and Chile

The use of mobs and mass uprisings by oligarchs and empire builders has a long and notorious history. Three of the bloodiest cases, which scarred their societies for decades, took place in Guatemala in 1954, Iran in 1953, and Chile in 1973.

Democratically-elected Jacobo Árbenz was the first Guatemalan President to initiate agrarian reform and legalize trade unions, especially among landless farm workers. Árbenz's reforms

included the expropriation of unused, fallow land owned by the United Fruit Company, a giant US agro-business conglomerate. The CIA used its ties to local oligarchs and right-wing generals and colonels to instigate and finance mass-protests against a phony 'communist-takeover' of Guatemala under President Arbenz. The military used the manipulated mob violence and the 'threat' of Guatemala becoming a "Soviet satellite", to stage a bloody coup. The coup leaders received air support from the CIA and slaughtered thousands of Arbenz supporters and turned the countryside into 'killing fields'. For the next 50 years political parties, trade unions and peasant organizations were banned, an estimated 200,000 Guatemalans were murdered and millions were displaced.

In 1952 Mohammed Mossadegh was elected president of Iran on a moderate nationalist platform, after the overthrow of the brutal monarch. Mossadegh announced the nationalization of the petroleum industry. The CIA, with the collaboration of the local oligarchs, monarchists and demagogues organized 'anti-communist' street mobs to stage violent demonstrations providing the pretext for a monarchist- military coup. The CIA-control Iranian generals brought Shah Reza Pahlavi back from Switzerland and for the next 26 years Iran was a monarchist-military dictatorship, whose population was terrorized by the Savak, the murderous secret police.

The US oil companies received the richest oil concessions; the Shah joined Israel and the US in an unholy alliance against progressive nationalist dissidents and worked hand-in-hand to undermine independent Arab states. Tens of thousands of Iranians were killed, tortured and driven into exile. In 1979, a mass popular uprising led by Islamic movements, nationalist and socialist parties and trade unions drove out the Shah-Savak dictatorship. The Islamists installed a radical nationalist clerical regime, which retains power to this day despite decades of a US-CIA-funded destabilization campaign which has funded both terrorist groups and dissident liberal movements.

Chile is the best-known case of CIA-financed mob violence leading to a military coup. In 1970, the democratic socialist Dr. Salvador Allende was elected president of Chile. Despite CIA efforts to buy votes to block Congressional approval of the electoral results and its manipulation of violent demonstrations and an assassination campaign to precipitate a military coup, Allende took office.

During Allende's tenure as president the CIA financed a variety of "direct actions" -from paying the corrupt leaders of a copper workers union to stage strikes and the truck owners associations to refuse to transport goods to the cities, to manipulating right-wing terrorist groups like the Patria y Libertad (Fatherland and Liberty) in their assassination campaigns. The CIA's destabilization program was specifically designed to provoke economic instability through artificial shortages and rationing, in order to incite middle class discontent.

This was made notorious by the street demonstrations of pot-banging housewives. The CIA sought to incite a military coup through economic chaos. Thousands of truck owners were paid not to drive their trucks leading to shortages in the cities, while right-wing terrorists blew up power stations plunging neighborhoods into darkness and shop owners who refused to join the 'strike' against Allende were vandalized.

On September 11, 1973, to the chants of 'Jakarta' (in celebration of a 1964 CIA coup in Indonesia), a junta of US-backed Chilean generals grabbed power from an elected government. Tens of thousands of activists and government supporters were arrested,

killed, tortured and forced into exile. The dictatorship denationalized and privatized its mining, banking and manufacturing sectors, following the free market dictates of Milton Friedman-trained economists (the so-call “Chicago Boys”). The dictatorship overturned 40 years of welfare, labor and land-reform legislation which had made Chile the most socially advanced country in Latin America. With the generals in power, Chile became the ‘neo-liberal model’ for Latin America. Mob violence and the so-called “middle class revolt”, led to the consolidation of oligarchic and imperial rule and a 17-year reign of terror under General Augusto Pinochet dictatorship. The whole society was brutalized and with the return of electoral politics, even former ‘leftist’ parties retained the dictatorship’s neo-liberal economic policies, its authoritarian constitution and the military high command. The ‘revolt of the middle class’ in Chile resulted in the greatest concentration of wealth in the hands of the oligarchs in Latin America to this day!

The Contemporary Use and Abuse of “Mass Revolts”: Egypt, Ukraine, Venezuela, Thailand, and Argentina

In recent years “mass revolt” has become the instrument of choice when oligarchs, generals and other empire builders seeking ‘regime change’. By enlisting an assortment of nationalist demagogues and imperial-funded NGO ‘leaders’, they set the conditions for the overthrow of democratically elected governments and stage-managed the installment of their own “free market” regimes with dubious “democratic” credentials.

Not all the elected regimes under siege are progressive. Many ‘democracies’, like the Ukraine, are ruled by one set of oligarchs. In Ukraine, the elite supporting President Viktor Yanukovich, decided that entering into a deep client-state relationship with the European Union was not in their interests, and sought to diversify their international trade partners while maintaining lucrative ties with Russia. Their opponents, who are currently behind the street demonstrations in Kiev, advocate a client relationship with the EU, stationing of NATO troops, and cutting ties with Russia. In Thailand, the democratically-elected Prime Minister, Yingluck Shinawatra, represents a section of the economic elite with ties and support in the rural areas, especially the North-East, as well as deep trade relations with China. The opponents are urban-based, closer to the military-monarchists and favor a straight neo-liberal agenda linked to the US against the rural patronage-populist agenda of Ms. Shinawatra.

Egypt’s democratically-elected Mohamed Morsi government pursued a moderate Islamist policy with some constraints on the military and a loosening of ties with Israel in support of the Palestinians in Gaza. In terms of the IMF, Morsi sought compromise. The Morsi regime was in flux when it was overthrown: not Islamist nor secular, not pro-worker but also not pro-military. Despite all of its different pressure groups and contradictions, the Morsi regime permitted labor strikes, demonstrations, opposition parties, freedom of the press and assembly. All of these democratic freedoms have disappeared after waves of ‘mass street revolts’, choreographed by the military, set the conditions for the generals to take power and establish their brutal dictatorship – jailing and torturing tens of thousands and outlawing all opposition parties.

Mass demonstrations and demagogue-led direct actions also actively target democratically elected progressive governments, like Venezuela and Argentina, in addition to the actions against conservative democracies cited above. Venezuela, under Presidents Hugo Chavez and Vicente Maduro advance an anti-imperialist, pro-socialist program. ‘Mob revolts’ are combined with waves of assassinations, sabotage of public utilities, artificial shortages of

essential commodities, vicious media slander and opposition election campaigns funded from the outside.

In 2002, Washington teamed up with its collaborator politicians, Miami and Caracas-based oligarchs and local armed gangs, to mount a “protest movement” as the pretext for a planned business-military coup. The generals and members of the elite seized power and deposed and arrested the democratically-elected President Chavez. All avenues of democratic expression and representation were closed and the constitution annulled. In response to the kidnapping of ‘their president’, over a million Venezuelans spontaneously mobilized and marched upon the Presidential palace to demand the restoration of democracy and Hugo Chavez to the presidency.

Backed by the large pro-democracy and pro-constitution sectors of the Venezuelan armed forces, the mass protests led to the coup’s defeat and the return of Chavez and democracy. All democratic governments facing manipulated imperial-oligarchic financed mob revolts should study the example of Venezuela’s defeat of the US-oligarch-generals’ coup. The best defense for democracy is found in the organization, mobilization and political education of the electoral majority. It is not enough to participate in free elections; an educated and politicized majority must also know how to defend their democracy in the streets as well as at the ballot box.

The lessons of the 2002 coup-debacle were very slowly absorbed by the Venezuelan oligarchy and their US patrons who continued to destabilize the economy in an attempt to undermine democracy and seize power. Between December 2002 and February 2003, corrupt senior oil executives of the nominally ‘public’ oil company PDVSA (Petróleos de Venezuela) organized a ‘bosses’ lockout stopping production, export and local distribution of oil and refined petroleum products. Corrupt trade union officials, linked to the US National Endowment for Democracy, mobilized oil workers and other employees to support the lockout, in their attempt to paralyze the economy. The government responded by mobilizing the other half of the oil workers who, together with a significant minority of middle management, engineers and technologists, called on the entire Venezuelan working class to take the oil fields and installations from the ‘bosses’. To counter the acute shortage of gasoline, President Chavez secured supplies from neighboring countries and overseas allies. The lockout was defeated. Several thousand supporters of the executive power grab were fired and replaced by pro-democracy managers and workers.

Having failed to overthrow the democratic government via “mass revolts”, the oligarchs turned toward a plebiscite on Chavez rule and later called for a nation-wide electoral boycott, both of which were defeated. These defeats served to strengthen Venezuela’s democratic institutions and decreased the presence of opposition legislators in the Congress. The repeated failures of the elite to grab power led to a new multi-pronged strategy using:

- (1) US-funded NGO’s to exploit local grievances and mobilize residents around community issues;
- (2) clandestine thugs to sabotage utilities, especially power, assassinate peasant recipients of land reform titles, as well as prominent officials and activists;
- (3) mass electoral campaign marches, and (4) economic destabilization via financial speculation, illegal foreign exchange trading, price gouging and hoarding of basic

consumer commodities.

The purpose of these measures is to incite mass discontent, using their control of the mass media to provoke another 'mass revolt' to set the stage for another US-backed 'power grab'. Violent street protests by middle class students from the elite Central University were organized by oligarch-financed demagogues. 'Demonstrations' included sectors of the middle class and urban poor angered by the artificial shortages and power outages.

The sources of popular discontent were rapidly and effectively addressed at the top by energetic government measures: business owners engaged in hoarding and price gouging were jailed; prices of essential staples were reduced; hoarded goods were seized from warehouses and distributed to the poor; the import of essential goods were increased and saboteurs were pursued. The Government's effective intervention resonated with the mass of the working class, the lower-middle class and the rural and urban poor and restored their support. Government supporters took to the streets and lined up at the ballot box to defeat the campaign of destabilization. The government won a resounding electoral mandate allowing it to move decisively against the oligarchs and their backers in Washington.

The Venezuelan experience shows how energetic government counter-measures can restore support and deepen progressive social changes for the majority. This is because forceful progressive government intervention against anti-democratic oligarchs, combined with the organization, political education and mobilization of the majority of voters can decisively defeat these stage-managed mass revolts.

Argentina is an example of a weakened democratic regime trying to straddle the fence between the oligarchs and the workers, between the combined force of the agro-business and mining elites and working and middle class constituencies dependent on social policies. The elected-Kirchner-Fernandez government has faced "mass revolts" in the a series of street demonstrations whipped up by conservative agricultural exporters over taxes; the Buenos Aires upper-middle class angered at 'crime, disorder and insecurity', a nationwide strike by police officials over 'salaries' who 'looked the other way' while gangs of 'lumpen' street thugs pillaged and destroyed stores. Taken altogether, these waves of mob action in Argentina appear to be part of a politically-directed destabilization campaign by the authoritarian Right who have instigated or, at least, exploited these events. Apart from calling on the military to restore order and conceding to the 'salary' demands of the striking police, the Fernandez government has been unable or unwilling to mobilize the democratic electorate in defense of democracy. The democratic regime remains in power but it is under siege and vulnerable to attack by domestic and imperial opponents.

Conclusion

Mass revolts are two-edged swords: they can be a positive force when they occur against military dictatorships like Pinochet or Mubarak, against authoritarian absolutist monarchies like Saudi Arabia, a colonial-racist state like Israel, and imperial occupations like against the US in Afghanistan. But they have to be directed and controlled by popular local leaders seeking to restore democratic majority rule.

History, from ancient times to the present, teaches us that not all 'mass revolts' achieve, or are even motivated by, democratic objectives. Many have served oligarchs seeking to overthrow democratic governments, totalitarian leaders seeking to install fascist and pro-imperial regimes, demagogues and authoritarians seeking to weaken shaky democratic

regimes and militarists seeking to start wars for imperial ambitions.

Today, “mass revolts” against democracy have become standard operational procedure for Western European and US rulers who seek to circumvent democratic procedures and install pro-imperial clients. The practice of democracy is denigrated while the mob is extolled in the imperial Western media. This is why armed Islamist terrorists and mercenaries are called “rebels” in Syria and the mobs in the streets of Kiev (Ukraine) attempting to forcibly depose a democratically-elected government are labeled “pro-Western democrats”.

The ideology informing the “mass revolts” varies from “anti-communist” and “anti-authoritarian” in democratic Venezuela, to “pro-democracy” in Libya (even as tribal bands and mercenaries slaughter whole communities), Egypt and the Ukraine.

Imperial strategists have systematized, codified and made operational “mass revolts” in favor of oligarchic rule. International experts, consultants, demagogues and NGO officials have carved out lucrative careers as they travel to ‘hot spots’ and organize ‘mass revolts’ dragging the target countries into deeper ‘colonization’ via European or US-centered ‘integration’. Most local leaders and demagogues accept the double agenda: ‘protest today and submit to new masters tomorrow’. The masses in the street are fooled and then sacrificed. They believe in a ‘New Dawn’ of Western consumerism, higher paid jobs and greater personal freedom ... only to be disillusioned when their new rulers fill the jails with opponents and many former protestors, raise prices, cut salaries, privatize state companies, sell off the most lucrative firms to foreigners and double the unemployment rate.

When the oligarchs ‘stage-manage’ mass revolts and takeover the regime, the big losers include the democratic electorate and most of the protestors. Leftists and progressives, in the West or in exile, who had mindlessly supported the ‘mass revolts’ will publish their scholarly essays on ‘the revolution (sic) betrayed’ without admitting to their own betrayal of democratic principles.

If and when the Ukraine enters into the European Union, the exuberant street demonstrators will join the millions of jobless workers in Greece, Portugal, and Spain, as well as millions of pensioners brutalized by “austerity programs” imposed by their new rulers, the ‘Troika’ in Brussels. If these former demonstrators take to the streets once more, in disillusionment at their leaders’ “betrayal”, they can enjoy their ‘victory’ under the batons of “NATO and European Union-trained police” while the Western mass media will have moved elsewhere in support of ‘democracy’.

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