

The Mousavi campaign in Iran and the lessons of past “color revolutions”

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The political movement of defeated Iranian presidential candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi, named the “Green Wave” due to its campaign color, has striking parallels with the US-backed “color revolutions” in the former Soviet republics of Georgia and Ukraine.

Like the campaigns to bring to power pro-US regimes in Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004), the campaign around Mousavi has been backed by powerful sections of the Iranian establishment and supported by Washington, the US media and the European powers. As in Tehran, better-off layers of the urban middle classes dominated the large opposition protests in Tbilisi and Kiev.

In the absence of a socialist alternative, the masses of Iranian workers and poor voted for the incumbent president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who has built a base of support among them by adopting a populist persona, denouncing corruption within the clerical elite, and providing a measure of social welfare assistance. The working class remained aloof from the anti-Ahmadinejad protests, seeing nothing to support in the pro-market policies of Mousavi.

As with the opposition movement headed by Mousavi, the opposition movements in Georgia and Ukraine styled themselves as democratic, while promoting pro-market economic policies and the opening of the countries to Western investment.

Mousavi is a longstanding figure within the existing regime and is a proven defender of the interests of the Iranian bourgeoisie. Considered a protégé of Iran’s first supreme leader, Ruhollah Khomeini, Mousavi was prime minister from 1981 to 1989, overseeing the suppression of left-wing movements and presiding over the slaughter of hundreds of thousands in the devastating war with Iraq.

Mousavi’s 2009 presidential campaign and the subsequent protests were backed by sections of Iran’s business and religious elite, such as former president and billionaire Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and former president Mohammad Khatami.

To the extent that students and others sincerely opposed to the repressive Ahmadinejad regime became involved in the “green revolution” demonstrations, they were channeled behind a section of the Iranian ruling class. It is critical for Iranian workers and youth to make a political assessment of the experiences of the international working class, especially in those countries where pro-US governments have been brought to power under the guise of a democratic revolution.

Georgia

The “Rose Revolution” in Georgia saw a pro-US faction of the country’s ruling elite break away from the then-president, Eduard Shevardnadze, to assume the leadership of a supposedly democratic opposition.

A former top Stalinist bureaucrat and the Soviet Union’s foreign minister under Mikhail Gorbachev, Shevardnadze had been president of Georgia since 1995. During his tenure, Shevardnadze had attempted to offset strained relations with Russia, Georgia’s main trading partner, by courting Washington. For the US, a foothold in Georgia was crucial to expanding its influence in the Caucasus region, through which it sought to gain control of oil and gas pipeline routes from the Caspian Basin to Europe. To this end, during the 1990s Georgia became a major recipient of aid from Washington and entered into partnership with the US-led military alliance, NATO.

During this period of friendly relations between Shevardnadze and the United States, the frequent allegations within Georgia of vote-rigging and police violence against oppositionists was met with deafening silence from Washington and the US media.

However, the economic recovery of Russia from its financial crisis of the late 1990s, largely based on high oil and gas prices, allowed Moscow to assume a more assertive role in its “near abroad.” The Caucasus region is vital to the energy and defense interests of the Russian ruling elite, and the administration of Vladimir Putin was able to strong-arm Shevardnadze into developing closer relations with Moscow.

This attempt at rapprochement with the Kremlin meant that the regime in Tbilisi fell foul of the increasingly belligerent stance towards Russia taken by the Bush administration. In 2003, following parliamentary elections, a section of the Georgian elite who recognized that Shevardnadze’s days were numbered coalesced around opposition leader Mikheil Saakashvili.

A US educated lawyer, Saakashvili had been a loyalist in Shevardnadze’s government until breaking from his old boss in 2001, founding the rightwing nationalist opposition party, the United National Movement.

Among Saakashvili’s US backers were the Liberty Institute (funded by the United States Agency for International Development), the National Endowment for Democracy (supported by the American AFL-CIO union bureaucracy), and the Democratic Party’s overseas agency, the National Democratic Institute. A number of activists involved in the US-funded Serbian youth group Otpor, which had participated in a pro-Washington coup in Serbia, also worked on Saakashvili’s campaign.

Following the November 2003 elections, thousands of mainly young Georgians demonstrated against the official results, which gave a win to Shevardnadze’s party. On November 22, Saakashvili led a crowd of several hundred protesters from the US-backed student group Kmara into the parliament building in Tbilisi, forcing Shevardnadze to flee. The president subsequently declared a state of emergency and sought to mobilize troops. However, elite military units refused to support his government, and on November 23, after receiving at least two phone calls from US Secretary of State Colin Powell, Shevardnadze resigned.

Once in power, Saakashvili rapidly abandoned his democratic pretenses. The same level of corruption and suppression of opposition groups as under Shevardnadze has characterized Saakashvili's time in office, while he has pursued aggressive Georgian chauvinist campaigns against the autonomous regions of South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Adjara.

One of Saakashvili's first acts was to hire Republican Party operative Randy Scheunemann, now a senior foreign policy adviser to defeated US presidential candidate John McCain, to help ingratiate the new regime with the Bush administration. US military personnel are active in training Georgian security forces and the country's economy has been opened up to transnational corporations. The pro-US policy in Tbilisi has included efforts to join NATO, greatly heightening tensions with Russia.

In August of 2008 this culminated in the Georgian military, backed by Washington, bombing the Russian-controlled province of South Ossetia, legally part of Georgia but de facto independent from Tbilisi since 1992. A brief war between Russia and Georgia followed, threatening a full military confrontation between Russia and the United States, both of which moved warships off the Georgian coast.

Ukraine

Following on from its successful coup in Tbilisi, Washington moved to bring about a similar changing of the guard in Ukraine. In presidential elections held in late 2004, pro-US candidate Viktor Yushchenko lost in the second round to Viktor Yanukovich, a lieutenant of outgoing president Leonid Kuchma and the favored candidate of Moscow. Claiming that Yanukovich's backers had rigged the election to ensure his victory, Yushchenko led a protest movement against the results that garnered support from large numbers of youth.

Like Saakashvili, Yushchenko was an insider from the previous regime who had been forced out by internecine feuds. Yushchenko had been Kuchma's prime minister from 1999 to 2001, before that serving as head of Ukraine's central bank during the fire sale of nationalized property during the 1990s.

After falling out of favor with Kuchma in 2001, Yushchenko offered his services to US foreign policy interests, setting up a rival party committed to free market capitalism and forging close links to America.

His "orange revolution" was a stage-managed affair modeled on events in Georgia and funded and staffed by American NGOs and quasi-US government organizations like the International Republican Institute. Yushchenko himself is married to a former special adviser to the US State Department.

Those workers and young people who were genuinely disgusted by the corrupt Kuchma regime and who rallied under the orange banner were used as camouflage for what amounted to a transfer of power from one clan of oligarchs to another. One of Yushchenko's main allies was Yulia Tymoshenko, another former Kuchma regime insider. She and her husband are two of the richest people in Ukraine, having made a fortune from their control over energy exports in the 1990s.

Since becoming president, Yushchenko has become even more hated than Kuchma. Opinion polls have put support for the president in the single digits for the past three years. Living standards for Ukrainians have deteriorated, while state corruption remains rife. Yushchenko has pushed ahead with his plans to bring Ukraine into NATO, a policy opposed by the

overwhelming majority of the population and one that is destabilizing already strained relations with Russia.

Lacking a shred of political principle, the alliance of Yushchenko with Tymoshenko during the “orange revolution” quickly fell apart, with each vying for political dominance over the other, including by means of alliances with defeated presidential candidate Yanukovich—the very man they accused of stealing the 2004 election.

In the run-up to the planned January 2010 presidential election, both Yushchenko and Tymoshenko have accused the other of plotting to establish a tyrannical government.

In Georgia and Ukraine, US foreign policy demanded a change of personnel at the top in order to advance US interests against those of Russia. Complaints about “stolen elections” and invocations of democratic rights provided a political cover for these aims.

Similarly, the intervention of US and European imperialism, spearheaded by the American media, into the Iranian elections has nothing to do with support for democracy against authoritarianism. What is involved is the confluence of deep divisions within the Iranian clerical establishment and the geo-strategic interests of US imperialism, centered on the importance of Iran as one of the world’s great oil and gas producers and its location at the crossroads of the Middle East and Central Asia, bordering America’s three war zones of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq.

The counterrevolutionary history of US imperialism’s involvement in Iran, from the CIA-backed overthrow in 1953 of the elected government of Mohammed Mossadegh, to its support for the brutal dictatorship of Shah Reza Pahlavi, to its sanctions regime against the Islamic Republic, has prevented the Obama administration from adopting as open a position of support for Mousavi as it did in previous “color revolutions.”

This necessity for a somewhat more subtle US government intervention that would not undermine popular support for Mousavi has been reflected in President Obama’s more muted rhetoric on the election outcome and protests. However, Washington does not play a passive role in Iranian politics. US Special Forces have operated deep within Iran for several years, according to veteran American investigative journalist Seymour Hersh, and only the most naïve would believe that US intelligence agencies do not have extensive contacts in Iran, including within ruling circles.

The main role in backing the opposition around Mousavi has fallen to the US media, and to a lesser extent the governments of Europe. The New York Times, CNN, the Nation magazine, etc. have utilized allegations of voter fraud in an effort to bring about a change of government in a country seen as vital to the interests of their national bourgeoisie.

While some vote rigging may have taken place, no evidence has been presented to support Mousavi’s claim, uncritically taken up by the US media, that he defeated Ahmadinejad, while for Mousavi and his powerful Iranian backers, claims of a rigged election serve as a means to advance their position in a policy struggle within the Iranian bourgeoisie.

The first point of dispute is not democracy in Iran, but the clerical regime’s relations with Washington. Even here, the differences are of a tactical, rather than a principled, nature. Ahmadinejad and his main backer, supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei, also seek to strike a deal with US imperialism. The Iranian regime has cooperated with Washington in its wars in

Iraq and Afghanistan, using anti-American and anti-Israeli rhetoric primarily to boost its “anti-imperialist” credentials domestically.

Mousavi and the sections of the elite behind him see this rhetoric as a stumbling block to normalized relations with Washington. They also seek to open up the Iranian economy to Western capital by privatizing state-owned industries and ending subsidies, a policy that threatens the interests of weaker sections of Iranian business, such as the bazaar merchants who formed a major base of support for the 1979 revolution and who remain a strong constituency for the Islamic Republic.

Faced with severe difficulties in the Iranian and world economy, both Ahmadinejad and Mousavi would support the imposition of austerity measures on the working class. The “reformer” Mousavi no less than the “hardliner” Ahmadinejad would meet with utmost brutality an upsurge in the struggles of the Iranian working class, who are struggling under rampant inflation, shortages, unemployment and restrictions on democratic rights. No section of the bourgeoisie can realize the social and democratic aspirations of the Iranian masses. That can be achieved only by a politically independent movement of the Iranian working class on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective.

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