

A Thread Links Unrest in Turkey, Russia and U.S.

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Supporters of the demonstrations in Turkey like to claim that their standoff with the government largely concerns Turkish issues, driven by the polarization between a relatively secular urban elite and a conservative majority buoyed by rising wealth and power. Nevertheless, common threads almost inevitably connect the unrest to other recent and current protest movements around the world, from the Arab Spring to Occupy Wall Street.

In addition to the depressingly near-universal spectacle of crack-downs by baton-wielding riot police, a major connection is the yawning gulf between the protesters' great hopes that their expression of public opinion will mitigate political power and economic inequity, and the very small chance they will actually weaken the influence of the vested interests that are using their power to maintain the status quo. That difference can often be measured by the one between many educated people's expectations of or hope about how the world works and how it really does.

Public disgust with the authorities is growing in the three countries. But the greatest similarity may be intellectuals' unrealistic expectations.

Russia is among the starkest examples. Disgust over Vladimir Putin's announcement that he'd run for a third term prompted mounting resentment over growing authoritarianism and corruption to boil over into protests in December 2011. They were accompanied by confident talk of a changed country and Putin's imminent demise — despite his decade of preparing for just such a possibility by steadily gathering the country's administrative reins ever more tightly in his hands.

Eighteen months on, the Kremlin's jailing of peaceful protesters symbolizes a broad crackdown on liberty in a country that in that way resembles the Soviet Union more than any time since the collapse of communism.

Although the Arab Spring revolutions went much further by toppling old administrations, it's far from certain the new ones, with the possible exception of Tunisia, promise anything better. Like it or not, regime change has so far done more to empower the intolerant Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and armed groups in lawless Libya than advance democratic politics and equality of opportunity.

In the U.S., the Occupy movement that channeled a groundswell of public disgust with impunity for bankers whose greed predictably ruined the economy has vanished almost without trace. The failure to do anything significant to curb the astronomical earnings of people who benefitted from a public bailout even as unemployment soared and workers' salaries have sunk to their lowest in a half-century must be added to government eavesdropping on the list of travesties by the administration of President Barack Obama.

Of course, enforcing accountability, let alone passing new regulations, is immensely difficult when the Republican Party does everything it can to undermine the White House. However, that no longer suffices as justification for why Obama hasn't done more to broker deals and criticize his opponents. Instead of advancing an open society, the imprimatur of his liberalism, intelligence and promise, he has actually helped perpetuate some of the worst Bush-era excesses against which he campaigned.

Meanwhile, corporate profits continue soaring and inequity growing in a country where real equality of opportunity is dismal and declining. So much for America's waning role as a beacon of progress.

It's been said before that comparisons between political systems are often most useful for defining dissimilarities. That U.S. democracy still stands despite the Republican assaults

clearly says more about the U.S. than it does about parallels to Putin's Russia. Still, it's hard not to make comparisons when observing politics — and some can help shed light on both.

Astute observers characterize Russian politics as a jockeying between political clans of leading officials ultimately loyal to Putin. Power travels down: Those closest to the president are most influential. It tends to move in the opposite direction in the U.S.: interest groups' influence buoys politicians who do their bidding. Like the Russian clans, however, they wield far more control than many people like to believe.

How else to explain the National Rifle Association's ability to thwart passage of a gun registration bill favored by 80 percent of Americans? Or the continued existence of the electoral college instead of direct presidential elections? Both greatly favor entrenched interests over democracy.

The NRA may well be uniquely powerful because it occupies the nexus of a hugely profitable industry and advocacy of gun ownership, one of the core "values" the rich and powerful in the Republican Party exploit for generating support from the less fortunate masses to vote against their own economic interests. Its success also helps explain why the Occupy movement had so little traction among most Americans.

The numbers are also against the protesters in Turkey, where an economic boom is helping move pious people from the countryside to the cities, swelling a fault line between Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's supporters and critics.

However, the greatest similarities between the countries' politics may be the unrealistic expectations of intellectuals and other leftists in each of the countries, laudable as they may be. They resemble the dashed hopes of democrats during the revolutions of 1848 across Europe, where reaction in many countries delayed reform for years after a newly prosperous bourgeoisie abandoned the workers who provided the backbone for street movements against old regimes.

Despite all that, however, those revolutions proved crucial as groundwork for future democratization by expressing the will of oppressed people. Today's protests may be doing the same in a similar way.

Critics of the status quo can better lay that groundwork by sticking to advocating concrete, achievable aims, something the Occupy organizers have refused to do. In Russia, however — where the opposition laudably pushed for down-to-earth progress such as new, fair elections — it did happen. It may be a time of great frustration there, and will no doubt soon be in Turkey, too. But although hope the public will is positively influencing politics at the moment may be unrealistic, taking the long view may ultimately help sustain the struggle.

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