

Yanukovych's Classic Case of State Capture

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It may seem a stretch to compare the latest upheaval in Ukraine to the popular uprisings of the Arab Spring in 2011. Indeed, religious, cultural, economic and political factors could hardly be more different. Yet in their distilled form, all of these events are revolts against state capture.

State capture occurs when all institutions of state power are monopolized by a narrow group of people belonging to a single tribe as in Libya and Yemen, or a religious sect like in Syria, an elitist military clan, as in Egypt, or a circle of family and friends, as seen in Ukraine and Tunisia. The state serves the political and personal interests of the ruling clique, maximizing influence and economic spoils at the top to the detriment of the public good and national development. For example, in Egypt a third of the country's women cannot read or write.

State capture perpetuates itself in power through pervasive and brutal control over

the political and judicial process, allowing only for imitational political groups who cannot challenge the rulers. Fake or fraudulent elections are held to forestall, not facilitate, a change of power. Law enforcement agencies and courts are corrupted to keep regime opponents at bay or in prison. The media are controlled and manipulated to demonize the opposition and glorify the ruling regime. State capture blocks all legitimate pathways for peaceful regime change.

Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich opted for state capture soon after his democratic presidential victory in 2010. In a matter of months, he established full personal control over the Constitutional Court to reverse the constitutional changes of 2004 and reintroduce the super-powerful presidency. He jailed his principal opponent, Yulia Tymoshenko, on charges that even the Kremlin found politically motivated. In 2012, he blatantly appointed proteges of his family to key agencies in charge of state finances and security. The business empire of his elder son doubled in size every year his father was in office.

Today's protests in Kiev are about the capture of the Ukrainian state by Yanukovich and family, not geopolitics. His sudden about-face on European integration, an issue that required a national debate, and the passage of dictatorial laws on Jan. 16 was the latest example that he is determined to strengthen his one-man rule.

Ukraine poses a classic dilemma: Is it legitimate for the people to overthrow a democratically elected ruler who is engaged in state capture? Unfortunately, for Ukrainians the answer may have to be written in blood.

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