Debating the Color Revolutions

AN INTERRELATED WAVE

Mark R. Beissinger

Mark R. Beissinger is professor of politics at Princeton University. He is the author of Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State (2002) and is currently working on a book about the politics of empire.

In Lucan Way’s insightful, highly structural account of the color revolutions, they had to happen. Each was separately determined by the weakness of the authoritarian regimes. As Way puts it, “regime collapses have resulted more from authoritarian weakness than opposition strength” (62). For Way, it is even misleading to conceptualize these events as revolutions; they were authoritarian turnovers involving defections from incumbent leaders by their own allies due to the failure of these regimes to consolidate themselves (67n3). Moreover, according to Way, these events should not be thought of as an interrelated wave, as each would have occurred even if the other cases in the neighborhood had not materialized and even without the influence of transnational linkages. Rather, they were merely a collection of individual and separate cases.

To place Way’s argument in its proper context, I should note that those like myself who study these revolutions as an interrelated wave also acknowledge the significance of structural factors in determining their outcomes. My own work, for instance, notes many of the same structural conditions identified by Way (as he recognizes in an endnote)—among them, a regime’s weak control over its coercive apparatus, the absence of oil wealth, and strong transnational ties to the West. So what really differentiates Way’s interpretation from those of scholars who approach these events as an interconnected wave?

The key difference is that, for Way, the failure of authoritarian consolidation is causally sufficient, and he sees little need to explain opposition mobilization against the state and its role in the collapse of these regimes. Even ties with the United States and Western Europe are viewed by Way in large part as factors affecting the resources available to authoritarian
regimes rather than to regime opponents (60–61). For scholars who take the politics of mobilization seriously, such arguments fail on several accounts. Authoritarian weakness alone cannot address the contingencies involved in the process of mobilization. Nor does it explain why these revolutions assumed similar forms across diverse contexts. And it does not answer why attempts at revolution rapidly proliferated across so many different contexts during a compressed period of time. Way’s article is a significant contribution in that it highlights some of the features that help to undermine or stabilize authoritarian regimes. But it is only half an argument. Way’s failure to address the sources of mobilizational strength and his contention that the color revolutions were separate, structurally determined events largely disconnected from opposition strength, transnational ties, learning, and the power of example leave critical issues unanswered.

To begin with, how can Way know that the color revolutions would have occurred even without strong oppositions, transnational ties, or diffusion effects? There are good reasons to doubt the veracity of this teleological counterfactual. With the exception of Kyrgyzstan’s 2005 Tulip Revolution, the last in the wave and one which diverged dramatically from the others in protest size and opposition violence, the successful color revolutions mobilized enormous numbers of people and largely pursued peaceful tactics of nonviolent resistance that were well planned in advance. More than 500,000 people took to the streets in Serbia, more than a hundred thousand in Georgia, and up to a million in Ukraine, and in each of these countries the mobilizations played a critical role in the outcome of events, in part by foiling the incumbent rulers’ attempts to fix elections, repress challengers, and forcibly remove threats to the regime.2

This is in fact what makes them revolutions rather than merely authoritarian turnovers: They marshaled hundreds of thousands of people, which was critical to bringing about regime change. Indeed, it is hard to imagine that a change of regime would have occurred without them—the larger the protest, the greater the ability to avoid repression, disrupt state operations, and force defections from a regime. If the size of protests did make a difference in the outcomes of these revolutions, then what does that say about Way’s argument that the regimes collapsed more because of their internal weaknesses than because of opposition strength? Clearly, more than just the disaffection of regime allies drove these events.

Furthermore, assuming that opposition strength matters, how did these movements learn to mobilize such large masses, and why were common strategies deployed among oppositions in various countries? In Way’s account, these mobilizations materialized almost automatically—as a function of the defection of key elites from the regime’s coalition or as a result of some supposedly optimal, universally known way of challenging authoritarian rulers. These are not plausible answers. A large body of theory points to the social bases of opposition movements, the organizational networks and resources that they have at their disposal,
and the protest repertoires available to them, among other factors. In the case of the color revolutions, many of the key actors who were involved have themselves ascribed considerable importance to cross-national ties and influences and to transnational civil society programs—even though they have a clear interest in portraying their revolts as thoroughly local. These revolutions borrowed tactics, organizational forms, slogans, and even logos from one another. If Way’s argument were correct, these borrowed tools would have made no difference in the ability of opposition movements to mobilize, withstand regime repression, or induce defections from within the regime. From what we know, however—both from these examples and many others around the world—that is not the case.

Then there is the unexplained temporal upsurge of revolutionary activity across the entire postcommunist region. Way’s argument not only falls short in credibly addressing why attempts to challenge postcommunist authoritarianism assumed similar form, but it also fails to account for why these similar challenges suddenly appeared—albeit to varying degrees and with varying success—within a compact period of time in almost all the states in the region. Way would have us believe that all the cars of authoritarianism ran out of gas at the same time. But why at the same time? And why did challenges materialize even in such countries as Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, and Russia, where authoritarian regimes still had quite a lot of gas left? Why did oppositions try to pull into the gas station sometimes even before their tanks were empty?

A more plausible explanation is that these challenges clustered in time and took similar form precisely because they were part of an interrelated wave. Treating the color revolutions as interconnected not only accords with how the actors viewed these events at the time, but also jibes well with what we know about democratization elsewhere in the world. Considerable evidence shows that democratization has taken place in waves within particular world regions, and that neighborhood and demonstration effects have played important roles in realizing democratizing outcomes. For example, statistical analyses have demonstrated that the odds of an authoritarian regime undergoing a democratic transition are increased by anywhere from 6 to 10 percent for each country in its region that is already a democracy—a substantial effect. In short, linkages across cases of democratization have been the norm rather than the exception, and these linkages have palpably affected outcomes. For Way’s argument to be correct, it would have to account for why the color revolutions, if they were isolated rather than interrelated cases, were exceptional in the politics of democratization.
It is common for observers of revolutions afterward to speak the language of predictability and determination. Timur Kuran has shown, however, that such pronouncements are often the product of rationalization. For the most part, revolutions come as a surprise to participants and observers alike—and this was true of the color revolutions as well. Their unexpected nature is a result of the importance to revolutionary outcomes of opposition mobilization (not just authoritarian defections), the dangers involved in openly opposing authoritarian regimes (whether weak or strong), and the ways in which individual acts of opposition are related to one another (both within a state or across state borders). Way’s article tells us a great deal about what occurs within authoritarian regimes to make them vulnerable to potential overthrow. It is less artful, however, in explaining the important issues of the scope, form, timing, and outcomes of democratic revolution.

NOTES


2. Way actually vacillates in the article about how strong these authoritarian states were and the role of large mobilizations in undermining them. While his overall argument is that these authoritarian regimes were so weak that only small or modest opposition was necessary to overthrow them, he also states that “the relative strength of the Ukrainian state made regime overthrow impossible without large-scale protest,” and that it was only in the face of “massive protest” that the police stood aside in Belgrade (64). If massive protests were necessary in these cases, however, it is hardly explained by authoritarian defections.
