

The Conundrum of 'Democratic' Coups

The U.S. government says it wants to spread "democracy," a questionable claim considering the history. Think Iran-1953, Guatemala-1954, Chile-1973, Haiti-1991/2004, etc. Just this past year, the U.S. has embraced coups against elected presidents in Egypt and now Ukraine, as Lawrence Davidson observes.

By Lawrence Davidson

In the past couple of years a disturbing political phenomenon has arisen. To put it simply, groups espousing "democracy" have caused their countries to politically self-destruct by violently turning against the results of free and fair elections. Apparently, they act this way because the elections did not go their way and/or the elected officials adopted policies they oppose. They do so even when there is a possibility that changes in policy, and even changes in constitutions, can be had peacefully through legal means.

Admittedly this is happening in states both new to democratic politics and deeply divided along ideological lines. A tradition of compromise and a sensitivity to minority rights are not yet manifest in some of these fledgling "democracies."



As I have explained in [a previous analysis](#), this is what happened in Egypt in 2012-2013. In this episode, the country's democracy movement, led on by such groups such as Tamaroud, turned against the democratically elected government of Mohammad Morsi because of its Islamist orientation. They boycotted the government's constitutional convention, claiming that their demands were not being met, allied themselves with authoritarian forces, and went back into the streets to bring the government down.

These ersatz "democracy" advocates claimed that the Morsi government was going to create a "dictatorship of the majority," that is, an Islamist majority. They were frightened that their minority rights, be they in reference to religion,

lifestyle or gender, would not be protected. This was a palpable fear rather than an assured fact.

Thus, the real question for them should have been whether the constitution that the Morsi government was creating was open to amendment by democratic actions over a reasonable period of time. There was some debate over this but no definitive evidence that this would not be the case. Nonetheless, instead of allowing Morsi to serve out his term of office and test out the proposition that political evolution was possible within the newly won democratic environment, the “liberals” showed no patience. They simply abandoned the “democratic road.”

There was something strange about this, for given their ability to bring massive numbers of people into the streets to demonstrate against Morsi, one would think that, come the next election, their chances to exact meaningful compromises from the Morsi forces was very good. Worse yet, they conspired with the starkly undemocratic military officer corps to overthrow the government. In this they succeeded and now find themselves under a brutal military dictatorship.

The Ukrainian Case

Now we have the situation in Ukraine. Like Egypt, Ukraine is deeply divided, this time between those who identify with western Europe and those who identify with Russia. Driven by both economics and anti-Russian sentiments, the former group wants to join the European Union, and some go so far as to call for Ukraine to become part of NATO – a really provocative move given Russian sensitivities. The latter group is largely made up of ethnic Russians.

In 2004, Ukraine experienced its “Orange Revolution,” in which a campaign of non-violent popular protest overturned a presidential election tainted by widespread vote rigging. Under the circumstances, this action was both appropriate and necessary. In the rerun of the election, Viktor Yushchenko, a Western-oriented leader, won the presidency. However, for the next four years political power within Ukraine’s parliament shifted back and forth between the various ideological blocs.

In 2008, the global financial crisis caused a severe downturn in the Ukrainian economy. That situation no doubt influenced the outcome of the 2010 elections, which brought the Russian-oriented Viktor Yanukovich to power (in an election deemed fair by outside observers). Yanukovich proceeded to negotiate an extension of Russia’s lease on the naval base at Sevastopol in return for favorable prices on imported natural gas. All efforts to join NATO were abandoned.

Yanukovich adopted other policies orienting Ukraine toward Russia. He may have

felt ideologically comfortable in doing so, but he also had good economic reasons for his actions. This past year, Ukraine needed financial support, and the West, in the form of the European Union, was offering an economic package with many neoliberal economic strings attached.

So Yanukovych decided to go with the Russians, who offered to buy \$15 billion worth of Ukrainian bonds and again reduce gas prices. Yanukovych, for sure, is no angel. (As with many other Ukrainian politicians, there have been credible accusations of serious corruption.) And, unless he is watched carefully, he may well play fast and loose with democratic rules. But his decision to negotiate a deal with Russia, announced in November 2013, was legal and economically prudent.

Before the end of November, the Western-oriented opposition, the ones who allegedly were most supportive of keeping things within “democratic” parameters, put hundreds of thousands people in the streets of Kiev. The demonstrations were started by students supporting a turn toward the West, but they were soon joined by right-wing nationalist groups whose rhetoric and actions have unsavory fascist overtones. The protesters were soon taking over government buildings – behavior which spread to regional cities by early in 2014. Soon the risk of civil war was real.

I have seen no evidence of a formal alliance between the “democratic” protesters and those of fascist leaning. On the other hand, I have seen no evidence that the “democrats” sought to distance themselves from the fascist right. They seem to have informally been brought together by the common objective of destroying the Yanukovych administration.

In the face of the growing protests, Yanukovych agreed to a compromise agreement with opposition leaders that would have paved the way for a new “national unity government,” a reduction in presidential powers, and early new elections. It was at this point that the protest movement took a troubling turn.

The opposition forces in the streets refused the negotiated compromise and stormed the presidential palace, forcing Yanukovych to flee the country. The opposition also took control of the parliament and issued an arrest warrant for him as well. As in Egypt, the forces of “democracy” had aided and abetted in staging a coup against a democratically elected leader.

All of this predictably aroused Russian concerns not only for their naval facilities and personnel in the strategic Crimean Peninsula, but also for the fate of the Ukraine’s ethnic Russian population. It has also opened the door to ethnic inspired separatism that could well pull Ukraine apart. Recent events in Crimea and eastern regions of Ukraine are just the tip of the iceberg of what is

possible.

The U.S. Response

The United States, the self-proclaimed head of the “international community” and (at least in its own eyes) a democratic model for the world, has not reacted to these events in Egypt and Ukraine in an inspiring fashion.

In the case of Egypt, the Obama administration refused to call the overthrow of the democratically elected president a “military coup,” even though that was the case. Avoiding the rhetorically obvious meant that there would be no automatic cutoff of the bulk of American aid to Egypt. For its part, Congress made no move to deprive the new military regime of the statutory aid doled out to the Egyptian army each year. In fact, the U.S. has had an all-too-muted response to the demise of democracy in Egypt.

When it comes to Ukraine, there is some evidence that neoconservative holdovers in the State Department encouraged the Ukrainian opposition in its defiance of the elected government. Victoria Nuland, Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs, repeatedly showed up at Kiev demonstrations, including once to hand out cookies.

Nuland was caught discussing, on an open telephone line, who should be the new leader of the country. Her favorite candidate turned out to be a 39-year-old Ukrainian adherent to neoliberal economics, Arseniy Yatsenyuk, who was willing to “cut subsidies and social payments” along the lines of an IMF aid plan. These are just the sort of policies that would guarantee that Yatsenyuk would never win an honest election (as he himself has acknowledged).

The behavior of the Egyptians and Ukrainians may not be all that surprising. Neither people come out of a democratic political culture. Nonetheless, there is something particularly disturbing when those who present themselves as champions of “democracy” betray their own alleged principles and violently refuse to accept free and fair electoral results.

It is the old scenario where you play the game only if you are sure you will win; otherwise you fly into a rage and upset the whole board. The situation gets even worse when one realizes that representatives of the U.S. government might be encouraging such anti-democratic behavior.

Liberal democracy (with a strong, tempering dose of social democracy) may be the best, or perhaps the least worst, form of government (it depends on how you look at it). But, to create it and keep it requires respect for both majority rule and minority rights, plus tolerance for a diversity of opinion and a willingness to make reasonable compromises.

Democratic behavior also precludes making deals with authoritarian forces whose ambitions are dangerous to democracy itself, whether military dictators or paramilitary extremists. Will others learn from the mistakes of Egyptian and Ukrainian “democracy” advocates? Somehow I doubt it.

Lawrence Davidson is a history professor at West Chester University in Pennsylvania. He is the author of *Foreign Policy Inc.: Privatizing America's National Interest*; *America's Palestine: Popular and Official Perceptions from Balfour to Israeli Statehood*; and *Islamic Fundamentalism*.
