

# Editorial

The end of authoritarian or totalitarian rule and democratisation can take many different paths – the death of a dictator, a popular revolution or simply unexpected election results – and lead to a variety of different outcomes. One tendency, witnessed at the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the new millennium, has been the ousting of authoritarian leaders through what have been christened “colour revolutions”. This has involved thousands of people, wearing coloured symbols, taking to the streets and showing their discontent with the current regime while the opposition, legitimated by such crowds, have been able to negotiate political change with the authorities.

Attempts to use force to sedate such protests have been successful in some cases but surprisingly enough in similar political environments the elites have refrained from using the police or the army to quash demonstrations. One might, thus, wonder what has pushed people to take to the streets in their tens and hundreds of thousands as in Georgia or Ukraine and why some local elites have preferred to retire, while others, as in Belarus or Uzbekistan, have done everything possible to remain in power. As social scientists interested in former socialist countries, and lucky enough to have been in the right place at the right time, we have become fascinated by these protests, their essence, characteristics, and the changes they have wrought on geopolitics. This special issue of *Totalitarianism and Democracy* is a first attempt to provide tentative answers to some basic questions arising from the colour revolution phenomenon.

Non violent protest methods to achieve political or social objectives have been employed since time immemorial. The practice of hunger striking, for example, to shame a wrong-doer into giving justice to an injured party has been practiced in Ireland for two millennia. An original attempt to conceptualise those elements that might be useful for devising a strategy of non violent struggle can be found in the 18<sup>th</sup> century when Étienne de La Boétie wrote his *Discours de la servitude volontaire*, asking why people tended to obey orders even when these go against their most vital interests. It was in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, that non violent protests became a major strategy, promoted by figures like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, and people understood that much could be achieved by collective action that did not involve recourse to violence. The success or failure of non violent agitation was almost always determined by the nature of the disputed regime. The trajectories of the civil rights movements in the United States and Northern Ireland during the 1960s reinforced the fact that the pace of reform, the level of violence, and the ultimate outcome were heavily influenced by the capacity of the state to embrace civil rights demands and control all non-state actors involved in the process. A concerted legislative campaign initiated by Lyndon Johnson at the behest of civil rights agitators, combined with prompt state action to redress clear cases of discrimination and segregation greatly reduced tensions and have done

much to ensure America's domestic tranquillity and inter-ethnic harmony, such as it is. In Northern Ireland, the authorities were unable to countenance reform simply because the very *raison d'être* of the state was to institutionalise anti-Catholic discrimination. In such circumstances, as the apartheid regime in South Africa and the communist regimes of Eastern Europe discovered, reform could only lead to regime collapse and a completely new political dispensation.

Non violent movements became popular in Eastern Europe during the 1970s and 1980s as a way of defying communist authorities while incurring a smaller risk of outright repression. The activities of Polish Solidarność in 1981 provide ample evidence of how strong and successful non violent protest can be. At the end of the perestroika period non violent protests become increasingly common. While Solidarność had struggled mainly for better working conditions, protests at the end of the 1980s aimed at overturning the political order in Eastern Europe. Primary examples include the Czechoslovakian "Velvet Revolution" and Eastern German "Friendly Revolution" while in the USSR a human chain of two million people stretching from Vilnius to Tallinn held hands to symbolise their determination to achieve independence for the Baltic Republics (1989). Though sometimes, as in Tbilisi (1989) and Vilnius (1991), the authorities killed protesters, the demonstrators stuck with their strategy of peaceful collective action. This movement of people power has not been limited to Eastern Europe. The Philippines, South Korea, Pakistan, Burma, China and a number of other countries have seen the rise of non violent protest movements, though the outcome has not always been idyllic.

In 1991 Gene Sharp, already known for having worked out the most complete list of (198) methods of non violent action and founding the Albert Einstein Institute in Boston, published a book called "From Dictatorship to Democracy". Starting from his theory of power, Sharp developed an overall strategy to oust dictators by non violent means through joint efforts by the opposition and civil society aimed at mobilising the population. Translated into several languages, the book provided an invaluable guide with practical instructions on how to avoid violent confrontation and achieve better results. It offered an alternative not only to the opposition but to international actors. As a result, a number of international donors became interested in funding "less but better", that is targeting grassroots and civil society movements that have more contact with the population and potential for effecting social change. This international approach was accompanied by a different domestic attitude. Discontented with prevailing political circumstances, people from a number of former socialist countries began to concentrate more on civic initiatives targeting the population's political awareness and thus fostering and accelerating social change. The fruits of this new strategy are visible from post-communist European countries like Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine to the far corners of what was the Soviet empire in Asia. The number of such movements could be increased were one to include countries like Nepal, Iran or Burma, but there is as yet no consensus on

whether the expression “colour revolutions” can be used to describe phenomena beyond the borders of the former communist world.

Colour revolutions can be characterized by the presence of five main elements. Firstly, we could mention the presence of a political opposition not only willing and able to present itself before the electorate but also to unite against the authorities, as a fragmented opposition is a sign of weakness to the ruling elites. The political opposition establishes links with other elements in society and deepens its contacts with the population and, in so doing, gains credibility in the eyes of the authorities and the electorate. The second main element is the population itself, which will have to delegitimize the ruling elite at a given moment. Since the political opposition is unable, alone, to reach out to the electorate, they will need the assistance of those actors already in touch with the population. This brings us to the third point, the role of non governmental organisations. NGOs and civil society organisations in general have deservedly received increased attention for providing mechanisms whereby popular engagement in political issues can be encouraged. In many post communist countries, these organisations have been at the front line of civic campaigns, protests movements and political actions, and have successfully brought large sections of the population into active political engagement with issues central to the fate of democracy. Increasingly connected with NGOs and civil society organisations is the role of the fourth element – external actors, particularly foreign governments and international donors. These external forces have increasingly switched their focus of assistance from bigger to smaller targets like civil society movements or civic campaigns. International actors can also affect the equilibrium of forces in a country. In many spheres throughout the post-communist world ruling elites, NGOs and other local actors compete for assistance from Russia and the United States as the two states battle for influence in the region.

Finally, the preconditions for such protests are also important. A relatively liberal political environment is necessary for civil society to develop, for foreign donors to assist local development, for an independent media to emerge and to enable the opposition to freely organise and mobilise. All these preconditions, which stem from a relatively tolerant political atmosphere, are crucial to the outcome of a protest movement. In Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, where the opposition is illegal, it is much more difficult for the opposition to organise rallies or to get in touch with some Western counterparts; this in turn narrows the way Western actors can support local oppositions. In Russia and Belarus, where all foreign funding to local NGOs has to pass through state control (and much of it dissolves into taxes) it is harder to fund civil society than in Ukraine or Kyrgyzstan. Moreover, if the authorities feel that the use of force will bring more benefits (remaining in power) than costs (loss of popularity at international level) they might plump for this option, as has already happened in Belarus and Uzbekistan.

Hypothesising that these five elements are the most important in understanding the colour revolution phenomenon we have decided to explore all of them in

detail and this special issue of *Totalitarianism and Democracy* is a first attempt to illustrate, through case studies, how each of the elements mentioned above can contribute to the success or failure of a colour revolution.

With this scope, the first article here describes the Czechoslovakian transition to democratic rule in 1989 known as the Velvet Revolution. The well researched work by Stanislav Balík, Jan Holzer and Lubomir Kopeček carefully examines how acquiescence to communist rule quickly faded during the autumn of 1989 while the people of Czechoslovakia gradually lost their fear and acted in unison to press their demands. The peaceful dismantling of communism in Central Europe in the space of a few months in 1989 can also be seen as evidence of a historical continuity of non violent revolutions; the 1989 upsurge of democratisation and civic activism in Central Europe is a link between mass movements of the past and this current wave of colour revolutions.

The second article in this issue provocatively explores the change of strategies employed by international donors and domestic organizations. Reflecting on the “civil society paradigm”, Simon Tordjman explores the movement away from funding government managed programmes towards support for non governmental ones. This, it is suggested, became a priority in the mid 1990s and has led a number of institutions, from USAID to the German Marshall Found, to consider the contribution of grassroots and people-oriented projects as crucial to democratisation. The main idea is that democratisation cannot be achieved from the top but needs a solid popular basis to consolidate; only when people understand the very importance of democracy can political change follow, provided certain conditions are met.

One of these conditions – opposition consolidation – is elucidated by Marlene Spoerri. The opening question of the article is why, in the course of the 1990s, did the opposition in Serbia repeatedly fail to find a common position, even when there was sufficient time and opportunity at their disposal. A second related question that is addressed is how and why did a solid coalition emerge within a few months in 2000 when early elections were called and there was little time to discuss common policies or strategies in detail. Spoerri provides a complete comparative analysis that highlights the importance of a united compact opposition in challenging authoritarian rule and explains why the hitherto fractious opposition managed to coalesce in 2000 but not before.

Aware that revolutions derive from a synergy of forces, both domestic and foreign, the editors decided to contribute a piece on the importance of external forces in the Georgian, Ukrainian and Kyrgyz colour revolutions. We argue that the level of American intervention has been grossly over-estimated by Russia and the deposed autocrats who have struggled to explain how they were toppled by mass protests. Furthermore, we maintain that people participation and important social changes were more decisive factors in undermining the detested status quo. While Russia sees an American hand in all movements to depose unpopular regional leaders and insists on viewing colour revolutions through the lens of bi-polar zero-sum politics, it is our contention that rather than the pro-

testers in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan being passive actors prompted only the wishes of their external sponsors, the decision to take to the streets was grounded in local realities and taken independently of foreign governments or their agents.

In line with the tradition of *Totalitarianism and Democracy*, special issues remain open to contributions that further our understanding of the journal's main focus – theoretical approaches to totalitarianism. In this respect we were asked, and are pleased to include, a lucid examination of Sigmund Neumann's concept of totalitarianism composed by the former Director of the Hannah Arendt Institute, Gerhard Besier. The exemplary work that he has produced on the subject of totalitarianism is testimony to his expertise in this area and his contribution cannot but add to the scientific value of the journal.

Finally, we are indebted to a number of individuals. As this is a special issue devoted to the “colour revolutions” we sought book reviews that prioritised those countries and regions where the phenomenon has been active. We are grateful to all those who enthusiastically contributed. We would like to thank once more the authors for their energy, commitment, and punctuality in refining and improving their articles.

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