

Falling dictators

A Minute With ...™ political scientist Milan Svulik

Editor's note: 2011 has seen one long-time Arab dictator after another dropping from power, beginning in Tunisia, then Egypt, and recently Libya. In Syria, an eight-month uprising continues despite a violent crackdown and rising death toll. Were the deposed autocrats just paper tigers all along? And how does a ruler like Bashar al-Assad in Syria continue to survive in power, yet is unable to quash protest? Authoritarian rule may seem simple compared to democracy, but the power dynamics are in fact quite complicated, and unique to each situation, says political scientist Milan Svulik, whose book on the subject, "The Politics of Authoritarian Rule," will be published next year by Cambridge University Press. He was interviewed by News Bureau social sciences editor Craig Chamberlain.

These uprisings appeared to come out of nowhere, similar to when the Iron Curtain fell two decades ago in Eastern Europe. Why is that?

Popular uprisings in dictatorships are inherently unpredictable. Because of severe repression, ordinary citizens in dictatorships cannot publicly express their political attitudes and are often afraid to reveal the intensity of their opposition to the regime even to their relatives or colleagues. This is a serious obstacle to any opposition movement: Opposition leaders or potential defectors from the regime's leadership cannot gauge the extent of public support they would enjoy if they called for an overthrow of the regime. This is why, when we do observe successful uprisings against autocrats, they are often triggered by focal events – such as the self-immolation by the Tunisian street vendor last December – and thus unexpected.

Authoritarian regimes have internal security forces to repress any opposition, and they obviously had been effective in these countries for many years. Why have they been unable to prevent or put down these uprisings?

All dictatorships repress to some extent, but none has the capacity to defeat a mass opposition movement that involves a significant fraction of a country's population. The intuition behind this is not too distant from the one behind bankruptcies of many financial institutions during the recent financial crisis. Banks carry enough cash reserves to service everyday cash withdrawals, but they will go bankrupt when a large number of their depositors suddenly decide to withdraw their savings.

In a similar fashion, any dictatorship

maintains enough repressive capacity to counter isolated challenges to its stability. But it is simply infeasible for any dictatorship to maintain enough repressive personnel to defeat a widespread uprising of several tens of thousands. And of course, there is no federal deposit insurance for dictators – that is, unless you are the Bahraini monarchy and can count on Saudi tanks to come to your rescue.

Why did the army play no part in either Tunisia or Egypt in restraining the protests? And why has the opposite been true in Syria?

A complete answer to this question will not be possible until we learn more of the inside story about the role of militaries in these events. But one clue about why militaries sometimes fail to intervene on behalf of a dictatorship is in their role, or lack of it, in internal repression. Dictators are wary of relying on their militaries for repression – they fear that a politically engaged military might exploit its political leverage and turn against them.

This is why the Tunisian regime, for instance, deliberately kept its military small, underequipped and out of politics. The ousted Tunisian president Ben Ali, like his predecessor Habib Bourguiba, relied for repression on internal security forces rather than the military. But when mass protests erupted in December 2010, the police and internal security services were overwhelmed. And the army – seeing the magnitude of the protests and lacking a vested interest in the regime's survival – refused to intervene.

In Syria, by contrast, the military has been closely incorporated into the regime's government, the ruling Baath party, and

"You want to make sure that the regulations you put in place are effective, that they do what they were designed to do," said David Gay, the coordinator of the deposition program. "That's why we're here. We spend a lot of money to promulgate regulations. There's a lot of concern about their impact on industry. This study shows clear, significant evidence of the direct impact of regulation."



photo by Bonnie Weir

the repressive apparatus. After all, the current president Bashar Assad's father came to power in 1970 in precisely the kind of military coup that the Tunisian leadership feared. To ensure its loyalty, the Syrian officer corps is recruited on sectarian grounds, from a minority Shia sect. Thus the Syrian military knows that if the regime falls, they will fall with it. They therefore have an incentive to fight tooth and nail for the regime's survival.

You note that these have not been representative dictatorships, so we should be cautious about what lessons we learn from this year's events. How so?

The authoritarian regimes in North Africa and the Middle East have been some of the most entrenched and repressive authoritarian regimes of our times. Many rely on oil for their survival, many are monarchies and many have been governed by long-serving, aging leaders. It is in part the notoriousness of their leaders that makes them unrepresentative: The average dictator is not a household name because he stays in power for only a few years and is most often replaced not in a popular uprising but by another member of the elite in a palace coup.

Thus when we generalize from the Arab Spring to other authoritarian regimes – China, Russia or Iran – we need to care-

The deposition program continues to monitor sulfur and nitrogen compounds in rain. Although acidic precipitation has decreased, it has not disappeared, particularly remaining prevalent across the eastern U.S. In addition, the program has expanded its screening and monitoring of other problematic pollutants such as ammonia and mercury.

"We still have acid rain," Lehmann said.

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fully distinguish between the unique and the representative features of many North African and Middle Eastern dictatorships. **All of these autocrats have maintained their power in different ways. But are there common aspects to their rule that make any hoped-for transition to democracy more difficult?**

A striking feature of these uprisings is the lack of an existing opposition or charismatic revolutionary leaders.

These have been truly popular revolutions, which adds legitimacy to their aspirations. But it may also prove a weakness on the path to democracy. As a result of decades of severe oppression, the opposition forces in almost every transforming country in the region lack recognized leadership, partisan organization and coherent political ideology.

In fact, the only organized political force in most countries in this region are conservative, Islamist groups. Meanwhile, the emergent transitional governments in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya are being formed under the tutelage of defecting, formerly authoritarian elites or militaries. The populations in these countries may quickly grow disillusioned with democracy if the first truly competitive elections bring to power religious extremists or former authoritarian elites. ♦

"Yes, the trend is down, and we should celebrate that, but it's still a problem. There is still progress to be made, and there are new regulations coming along to continue to reduce emissions of sulfur and nitrogen compounds."

The Illinois State Water Survey is a unit within the Prairie Research Institute at the UI. ♦

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