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Democratization takes mature institutions and an establishment willing to relinquish power, not just election protests.

Elections' false promise

Protests like those following Iran's disputed vote rarely produce democratic reforms

By Mitchell A. Orenstein

As Iranians continue to protest their lack of voice, Western publics, commentators and policymakers express growing sympathy with the demands for free and fair elections. Yet the romance and tragedy of these events should not blind us to the fact that electoral protests of this type seldom produce democratization.

Research I conducted with graduate student Katya Kalandadze, soon to be published in *Comparative Political Studies*, shows that "electoral revolutions" similar to the one in Iran have occurred with some frequency worldwide since 1991 as authoritarian regimes have sought legitimacy by giving greater scope to elections — while avoiding full democracy.

Electoral revolutions are defined as mass protests sparked by an election in an authoritarian or partly authoritarian regime that is widely observed to be rigged. An opposition movement mobilizes peacefully in street protests to demand an extra-constitutional remedy, such as the annulment or re-running of the election. Some are successful; most are not.

Most countries that experienced electoral revolutions since 1991 have been post-communist countries such as Armenia, Azerbaijan (both of which neighbor Iran to the north), Belarus, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Serbia and Ukraine. African countries such as Ethiopia, Madagascar and Togo have also experienced electoral revolutions, as has Peru. Some countries have had more than one episode.

In most cases, electoral revolutions are suppressed by the government through beatings, shootings, jailing of key leaders and other tactics of the type that are being used in Iran today. Similar tactics have been used periodically and effectively by

Azerbaijan in 2000, 2003 and 2005.

More surprisingly, even when electoral revolutions are successful in overturning election results, democratic progress is slow or nonexistent in subsequent years, as measured by common indexes of democracy. Only five years after the Orange Revolution of 2004, for instance, Ukraine remains immersed in a crisis of confidence, as democratically elected leaders squabble over the spoils of the lucrative oil and gas trade. Kyrgyzstan never became more democratic. Georgia's Rose Revolution brought to power a pro-Western leader who has entrenched his own rule.

Serbia is the only recent case of significant democratic progress after a successful electoral revolution, and much of this was due to exceptional international interventions, from bombings to promises of European Union membership. Even in Serbia, democratic progress has been incremental.

Given the almost complete lack of success, it is time for the U.S. — and democratic activists in countries around the world — to reassess electoral revolutions as a strategy for democratization.

Why are electoral revolutions often doomed to failure? There are two interlocked sets of reasons. First, countries that experience electoral revolutions often are not ripe for democracy. They lack certain structural preconditions, such as a high level of economic development and widespread values that reinforce democratic politics. The roots of authoritarianism are deeper than a lack of fair elections. Second, electoral revolutions gain mass appeal by focusing narrowly, rather than addressing the wide range of institutional, cultural and other factors that may be preventing democratic governance.

Demanding free and fair elections has proven to be a great tactic for mobilizing

hundreds of thousands of citizens in countries around the world. However, counting votes accurately would not guarantee democracy in Iran.

Iran would need a total overhaul of its political institutions — a regime change, not a government change — for democratization to occur. The dilemma is that protests demanding a regime change would be a lot smaller. Maintaining broad consensus in the opposition camp depends on keeping many of the key obstacles to democratization off the agenda.

Despite such problems, the U.S. has supported electoral revolutions in countries worldwide, believing that free and fair elections, whatever the circumstances, provide an opening for democracy. It is time for new tactics.

When democratization does occur, it's often through secretive negotiations between regime leaders ready to surrender power and democratic activists ready to make a deal with their enemies. In many cases, democratization is initiated by the regime itself because it has lost faith in the efficacy of authoritarian rule.

Iran does not look ripe for a negotiated transition to democracy. The Iranian regime seems unlikely to yield power; and the opposition is not demanding full democracy — only fair elections between candidates pre-approved by the religious authorities for a "presidency" that is not the most powerful political office in the land.

Nearly 20 years of experience shows that electoral revolutions do not create conditions for enduring political change. They raise great hopes. But these hopes are almost invariably disappointed.

Mitchell A. Orenstein is the S. Richard Hirsch Associate Professor of European Studies at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS). His e-mail is morenstein@jhu.edu.