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Demagoguery & Violent Protests in Emerging Democracies

Neil Thompson sees a link between the ongoing crisis in Ukraine and street demonstrations in Turkey, Venezuela and beyond. To him, they're just the latest in a line of middle-income countries that are running into popular opposition against their 'emerging' political systems.

By Neil Thompson for ISN

In February 2014 Western media came alive with pictures of rioting in Ukraine between anti-government protestors and police forces. Dozens of people were killed, the government fell, and relatively calm relations between Russia and Europe significantly soured. Soon afterwards ex-Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich went into exile in Russia. Immediately after, his *bête noir* [Yulia Tymoshenko](#) was released from the prison she had been sent to after losing the previous 2010 elections. In Ukrainian politics, the price of a fall from political grace is usually steep.

Without doubt, the original reasons behind the instability in Ukraine, economically motivated social unrest, have been subverted by an outside power furthering its own national interests. However, Ukraine is by no means the only middle-income country with a suitably developed electoral process to have recently witnessed an explosion of social protest against its political system. Instead, the phenomenon has been occurring throughout the emerging world of middle-income states for [several years](#). From urban redevelopment in Turkey, to inflation and rampant violent crime in Venezuela, a particular type of elected government is increasingly finding itself at odds with quasi-revolutionaries over grievances that are relatively easy to resolve.

Setting the Pattern

What all of these movements appear to have in common is not the desire for further success at the ballot box, but to dislodge incumbent governments with demonstrations of people power. More often than not, government forces have responded with an iron fist. Yet, if neither side can be cast as outright 'tyrants' or 'terrorists', then neither can it be said that they are abiding by Western democratic rules of the game. In the case of the latter, restraint was used for influencing international attention when it was there, and absent when international attention was elsewhere. In this respect, the struggles in these places seem reminiscent of the rougher aspects of West's democratic past (the start of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, or the May 1968 riots in France).

Consequently, it seems that in newly 'democratic' middle-income countries, where political rules are still fluid and unpredictable, the emergence of issues that raise the spectre of a return to an

authoritarian past can encourage risky political behaviour. Although the political system of states like Ukraine or Thailand is formally democratic, there is a winner-take-all mentality underneath that encourages 'lawfare', law-breaking and thuggishness in pursuit of political victory. In addition, there is still a lack of the concept of a 'loyal opposition' in many of these emerging states. Politics often revolves around the irreconcilable tensions between the old ruling order and a newer incipient oligarchy, which has emerged as a beneficiary of recent economic growth. Political conflict between, or within, the ruling elite(s) can therefore quickly become explosive.

Take Turkey for example, where now-President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has been dogged by scandal and [controversy](#) ever since May 2013, when the violent eviction of environmental protestors at Taksim Gezi Park led to clashes with police. Like many middle-income states' oligarchies, both the AKP and its enemies appreciate the benefits and conveniences of a modern society. But their country's political system is still seen as a possession to be taken and held against 'the other'. Thus in Turkey we see [competition](#) between Erdogan's AKP, backed by a newly prosperous pious lower-middle class base, and the old secular order. The protestors [confronting](#) Turkish riot police in 2013 were more likely to be wealthier, more 'liberal' and more secular. In other words, in the context of Turkish politics they [represented](#) the older social order created by modern Turkey's founder Kemal Atatürk.

Likewise in Venezuela the increasingly authoritarian and inept socialist government of Nicolas Maduro, who won the previous presidential election by the thinnest of margins, battles an opposition that has never really accepted the legitimacy 'Chavismo', however electorally successful it has proven to be in the past. In Ukraine, the Euromaidan movement drew support from nouveau-riche oligarchs from outside the narrow ruling circle. They worried that former President Yanukovich's bowing to Russian demands threatened the new financial empires they had built for themselves since independence. Another motive was the [greed](#) of the Yanukovich 'family'; the clique of corrupt figures around the President was seen to be monopolising too many sources of financial revenue for themselves.

By contrast, Thailand's old ruling elite has stayed united as it systematically sabotages any populist 'red' government elected. Most recently, ex-Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra's Pheu Thai party was hounded into early elections after a botched amnesty bill. The opposition then organised a blockade of polling stations that successfully denied the re-elected government a quorum of MPs big enough to form a government. Finally the Thai army, having watched for months from the sidelines, mounted yet another [military coup](#) to 'restore order'.

Democratic Works in Progress

In these struggles we quite often see the 'rule of law' being usurped by 'rule by law', with the state manipulating the legal system to clamp down on the opposition. Predictably the opposition usually retaliates through extra-legal actions on the streets or parts of the state apparatus that it controls. For example in Turkey's ongoing saga, all factions have sought to manipulate the forces of law and order in their favour. Erdogan has purged the judiciary and police of elements hostile to him, after Islamist rivals sought to open a corruption investigation against members of his inner circle. This squabble was itself due to the fall-out from the violent response to the earlier Taksim Gezi Park [uprising](#). Erdogan alienated himself from the more pro-Western parts of his ruling coalition and was forced to rely upon his more conservative, nationalist supporters to gain his presidency.

The events in Ukraine and other countries are of course specific to their different political situations. Thailand's long-running political battle seems the very opposite of the sudden storm that engulfed Erdogan's seemingly meteoric rise towards the Turkish presidency in 2013. Yet when taken together they seem different to the other social revolts we have seen in the past generation. The fall of Communism, the Colour Revolutions or the Arab Spring were all to a great or lesser degree a rebellion against authoritarian systems of government which had out-lived their popular legitimacy and real

usefulness to large sections of their respective national elites. By contrast, those governments that are currently experiencing political unrest won elections that were deemed to have been reasonably free and fair. They were not elected autocrats in the mould of Kazakhstan's Nursultan Nazarbayev or Rwanda's Paul Kagame.

However, democratic checks and balances did not restrain the inter-elite competition in any of these countries. In a sense, democracy failed precisely because of these states' authoritarian pasts. That's because the skeleton of a democratic system has yet to be fully fleshed out in many emerging middle-income countries, meaning that mental holdovers abound. Under these circumstances, a winner-takes-all attitude makes compromise and checks-and-balances difficult to sustain because they can be seen as treachery in a zero-sum game. Meanwhile, all opposition moves against government policies were virulent and sustained. In response, restraints such as constitutions were re-written or repealed, and the judicial system co-opted or sidelined. The elaborate social mechanisms developed in the West (such as the proliferation of public enquiries in the UK) since the 1960s and 70s to dispel social conflicts have not yet arrived in newly economically developed states.

A Brighter Future?

Yet, there are reasons to be hopeful about the future political direction of those middle-income states now in turmoil. Many 'second stage' Western states such as Greece, Portugal and Spain went through equally turbulent decades after democratising their political systems in the 1970s. Eventually, narrow ruling cliques were widened and social conflict tamed. Domestic politics evolves through actions, not the fixed formalities of elections, and it is through these early struggles that the habits and patterns of democratic rule are really set. The lumbering stagnation of internationally-supervised political systems like Bosnia (which has just had its own [riots](#)) or Kosovo should be a warning against too much intervention. States that were left to find their own way to democratic stability and the rule of law during the 20th century have often fixed themselves better than those entities currently being run by the international community.

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