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From Resistance to Revolution and Back Again: What Egyptian Youth Can Learn From Otpor When Its Activists Leave Tahrir Square

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Images from left to right:
Otpor; April 6 Movement; Kmara

Abstract: *The uprisings witnessed throughout the Middle East have lent new credence to the power of youth movements and nonviolent resistance in authoritarian settings. Mounting evidence indicates that youth activities from Egypt to Algeria have benefited from the lessons of their contemporaries in post-Communist Europe. Yet the lessons of Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine and elsewhere have bearing beyond the immediate revolution. This article examines the untold story of Otpor, the Serbian youth movement now heralded for having influenced Egypt's youths. It looks beyond the parallels of revolutionary methods, to the sources of Otpor's ultimate collapse in Milosevic's absence. In doing so, it draws out lessons that may be applied to current and future youth movements throughout the Middle East as they lay the groundwork for post-revolutionary democracy.*

The political demise of Hosni Mubarak has captured the world's attention, galvanizing democracy's enthusiasts in what was to have been another "dark year" for democracy. Unpredictable and in many respects unprecedented, the uprisings witnessed throughout the Middle East have breathed new life into the democracy promotion industry. And yet, for all their novelty, the events in Egypt offer a narrative with which we are all familiar.

The story goes something like this: For years, an authoritarian regime uses violence and repression to maintain its rule. Regime cronies are awarded lucrative access to state coffers, while a nascent political opposition is divided and harassed, imprisoned and sometimes, murdered. For years, foreign leaders condone the regime's longevity in the name of regional stability, its unsavory character legitimized by reference to historical grievances and cultural deficits. Then, suddenly, the regime collapses. Nation-wide protests, inspirational acts of nonviolent resistance, and an undaunted youth movement force the regime to its knees. As analysts attempt to make sense of the changes, they credit cell phones, savvy marketing strategies, and most recently, social media tools. They attribute the demand for democracy to foreign policy makers, foreign aid, and models derived from neighboring states and the far abroad. For days and sometimes, weeks, the world is enraptured. And then, just as quickly, public interest fades.

Of course, the story of revolutionary upheaval does not end with the unseating of a dictator. All too often, authoritarian regimes fall only to rise again, altered in name but not in substance. Just as frequently, those at the forefront of change—those leading the protests, dodging the bullets, and building the barricades—struggle to find purpose in its aftermath. For members of the anti-regime opposition, their newfound unity and empowerment frequently proves ephemeral, the demands of transition too great.

This experience can be particularly disillusioning for a nation's youth, many of whom bear the greatest risks and make the steepest sacrifices in the midst of revolution. As post-revolutionary reverie fades, youths are often among the first to be disenchanted by the pitfalls of transition and the seeming endurance of the status quo. Young people—so vital for the ousting of a dictator—become passive observers in the subsequent transition, their passion and ingenuity left untapped by newly democratic authorities.

As we learn of the role young Egyptians have played in Mubarak's unseating, it is difficult not to draw parallels to the similarly courageous feats of youths and youth movements throughout the post-Communist space. For all the differences distinguishing the Egyptian from the post-Communist experience—and there are many—there are also significant similarities which deserve further investigation. In particular, there is mounting evidence that Egyptian

groups such as Kefaya (Arabic: Enough!), the April 6 Youth Movement, and Youth for Change built upon and adapted revolutionary models employed by young activists in Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine, and elsewhere. Adhering to the tenants of nonviolent resistance, their strategies and tactics evoked those so successfully employed by youth movements such as Otpor (Serbian: Resistance!), Kmara (Georgian: Enough!), and Pora (Ukrainian: It's Time!) in the run-up to the "color revolutions" of the early 2000s. The role of Otpor is likely to have been particularly profound.

Formed in late 1998 by a handful of student activists uneasy with the Serbian regime's increasingly authoritarian tone, Otpor became the dominant symbol of anti-Milosevic opposition. Through a horizontal network of Otpor "hubs" in villages, towns, and cities across Serbia, Otpor activists honed the lessons of nonviolent resistance developed by American scholar Gene Sharp and retired U.S. Army Colonel Robert Helvey. Waving the clenched fist of resistance, young people across Serbia risked their safety—and sometimes their lives—to partake in covert actions against the regime. Thanks to the ingenuity of its activists and its seemingly leaderless construction, Otpor developed into a genuinely national network, boasting its own press office and in-house training center, capable of setting loose thousands of eager anti-regime activists throughout Serbia. For months, Otpor lambasted the Milosevic regime, pressing the chronically fissiparous Serbia opposition to unite. It organized massive theatrical events and concerts across Serbia, all with the aim of delegitimizing the regime and undermining its rule of intimidation.

When in October 2000 Milosevic resigned amidst a wave of mass uprisings reminiscent of those now witnessed throughout the Middle East, many attributed his fall to Otpor. As a consequence, in the years that followed Otpor came to symbolize the power of the people—above all, young people—in confronting oppression. Yet according to Rade Milic, a long-time Otpor activist, "Otpor became more than a symbol-it became a methodology. We were the experts in leading nonviolent resistance." Indeed, members of Otpor soon set about sharing their experiences and techniques with clandestine activists in Georgia, Ukraine, Belarus, Lebanon, and elsewhere. Srdja Popovic, an Otpor founder and current director of the Center for Applied Nonviolent Action and Strategies (CANVAS), claims to have met with and trained activists from 37 different countries, including several from the Middle East. According to several accounts, as well as the admission of Popovic himself, Otpor activists not only inspired, but shared insights with aspiring Egyptian revolutionaries in the years preceding the February 2011 changes.

It is tempting to view the lessons of Otpor as assuming relevance solely for the build-up to regime change. The lessons of "people power" and non-violent resistance offer a compelling narrative that fits comfortably within our conceptions of democracy's primacy. Yet the story of Otpor continued long after Milosevic's fall. Its import for budding revolutionaries did not end with the changes of October 2000. To the contrary, in the years that followed Serbia's "Bulldozer Revolution," Serbia underwent a protracted transition that included the assassination of a reformist prime minister, the resurgence of the far-right Serbian Radical Party—whose leader sits before The Hague Tribunal accused of instigating war crimes and atrocities—and a legacy of corruption and nepotism that continues to pervade its politics.

The situation for Serbia's youth has been particularly dire. The vast majority of Serbia's youths are unemployed. Most have never traveled beyond Serbia's borders, and a growing number cite their sympathies with Serbia's most reactionary forces. Despite young people's clear need for an instrument through which to voice their concerns, however, Otpor disbanded soon after Milosevic's departure. A similar fate was ultimately met by Pora and Kmara.

In fact, the post-communist space is littered with the remnants of youth movements of revolutions past. Their absence after revolution is as striking as their presence within it. So instrumental in driving revolutionary changes, young people are among the first to be disenchanted by post-revolutionary realities—left without jobs, without a clear vision for change, and without a vehicle through which to channel their grievances. Should Egypt's youth wish to escape a similar fate, several lessons are worth noting.

Craft an Identity beyond the Dictator

By the eve of Slobodan Milosevic's ouster in October 2000, Otpor had gained national prominence. The organization's hitherto low profile leaders became a magnet for domestic and international journalists, eager to learn the secrets behind their success. For months, Otpor activists were featured guests on national television and radio outlets, they gave lectures and speeches at universities around the world, were the recipients of MTV's "Free your Mind" award, and even helped design video games simulating the strategies of nonviolent resistance. Long under the influence of Milosevic's anti-Otpor propaganda, Serbia's citizens, old and young alike, embraced these courageous young leaders with a level of trust and hope they never espoused for Serbia's political class.

As a consequence, Otpor boasted tremendous leverage in the months following Milosevic's resignation. Unfortunately, it did not know what to do with it. An intensely heterogeneous movement comprised of leftists and conservatives, monarchists and republicans, nationalists and cosmopolitans, with Milosevic's departure Otpor lost the glue that bound it together. Without their shared disdain for Milosevic to unite them, Otpor members could not

agree on how to proceed. They bickered not only over the concrete steps Serbia's first post-Milosevic government should take, but also over the movement's identity and its future. Some believed that post-Milosevic, Otpor had no further role to play—its goal accomplished, its rationale now outdated. Others hoped for the formation of a watch dog agency, whereby Otpor would monitor Serbia's newly elected authorities and keep the promise of democracy alive. Still others believed Otpor should transform itself into a political party, mounting the call for change from within the structures of power.

For months, Otpor struggled to reach a consensus on these matters. When three years later Otpor emerged as a political party, it was too little, too late. Otpor had failed to resonate with the voters and it received less than 2 percent of the national vote.

Resist the Temptation to Politicize

Though the retelling of Otpor's story has tended to downplay the political backgrounds of Otpor's founding members, the reality was always more complicated. From the very beginning, Otpor members combined their status as students with a penchant for political activism. Many were members of oppositional parties, with political ambitions of their own. In the wake of revolution, numerous Otpor functionaries—including some of the organization's foremost leaders—departed the movement in the hopes of rejoining their respective parties and launching independent careers within the new government. Today, former Otpor members boast a significant presence within the highest echelons of power. Serbia's controversial foreign minister, Vuk Jeremic, is just one example of a former Otpor activist who successfully made the transition into politics.

The influx of Otpor members may have strengthened Serbia's political coterie, but it had decidedly negative consequences for the movement itself and for Serbian civil society more generally. Otpor lost many of the visionaries that once defined its spirit in the run-up to Milosevic's ouster. Perhaps more significantly, Serbian civil society was deprived of young, vibrant activists, leaving it too weak to convincingly counterbalance the powers of political society.

Yet the final straw came with Otpor's decision to forge a political party. When in 2003 Otpor opted to stand for elections, it lost the credibility that had defined it within Milosevic's Serbia. Paradoxically, what was once a student movement, comprised of young activists—many younger than 14—became a political party dominated by adults.

More importantly, the transformation into a political party meant that Otpor had to drastically change its structure and methods of operation. Like all political parties, it had to establish clear leadership and a pyramidal structure that ran contrary to the decentralized nature of its revolutionary politics.

In doing so, Otpor sacrificed a major tenet of its struggle against Milosevic: the (seeming) absence of a leader. One of Otpor's strengths in Milosevic's Serbia had been its refutation of formal, bureaucratic procedures. This fluidity allowed Otpor to embrace Serbs of all backgrounds and opinions, and is what made it so attractive for Serbia's youth, so disenchanted by traditional political parties and their corrupt practices. Ironically, however, it is also what delegitimized Otpor the party.

When in 2003 Otpor failed to enter parliament, the organization quickly disbanded. Those at the top of the party traded their revolutionary garb for comfortable positions within the larger, pro-establishment Democratic Party. Otpor's fate was thus relegated to the dustbin of Milosevic-era politics.

The impact of Otpor's unraveling for Serbia's youth has been profound. Serbia's young people lack a stake in the system. They have no effective means to voice their concerns, and no clear instrument through which to channel their discontent. Otpor could perhaps have provided such a vehicle had its leaders made the transition not to politics, but to youth advocacy. Just as they once resisted a dictator, so too might they have resisted the subsequent political disenfranchisement that has afflicted youths across Serbia and the greater Balkans region.

Maintain an Independent Agenda

In the weeks and months following Milosevic's ouster, the events of October 5th came under increasing scrutiny as scholars and policymakers sought to identify the factors enabling the Serbian opposition's success. Before long, a common narrative had emerged in which a single factor loomed large: foreign intervention. In the U.S., the *Washington Post* reported that "U.S.-funded consultants played a crucial role behind the scenes in virtually every facet of the anti-Milosevic drive." In Germany, *Der Spiegel* applauded "massive political and material support from Berlin" for having "contributed to the fact that opposition groups and parties could develop the strength to force Milosevic to surrender." Even Thomas Carothers—not one to exaggerate foreign intervention's impact—acknowledged the exceptional role Western actors played in facilitating Milosevic's ouster.

Of all the forms of foreign intervention—and there were many—it was overt democracy assistance that won the

greatest praise. Proponents of such assistance were eager to brand "their" Serbian experiment as an emblem of aid's utility. Thus, the distributors of U.S. aid to Eastern Europe credited their assistance for having played a "key role" in regime change by providing Serbia's citizens "the tools [they] needed to liberate themselves". Similarly, the Office of Transition Initiative (OTI) identified its assistance as one of but three factors accounting for the "surprising and extraordinary defeat of Milosevic."

Not surprisingly, much of the credit was bestowed upon those organizations that had offered funds and support to Otpor—among them OTI, the Open Society Institute, the National Endowment for Democracy, Freedom House, and the International Republic Institute. In the aftermath of the NATO bombing of Serbia, these organizations offered material and financial assistance to Otpor activists-sponsoring trainings and workshops in neighboring Budapest, connecting Otpor functionaries with the likes of Sharp and Helvey, and funding the arsenal of Otpor-embellished stickers, matchboxes, and posters that dotted the Serbian landscape.

Unfortunately, the emphasis on the external factors driving Serbia's revolutionaries did little to bolster the domestic prestige of Otpor, whose activists had long struggled to dispel any notion of their dependence on Western governments. Though clearly a boon for the democracy promotion industry, the all too public praise bestowed upon the international community came largely at Otpor's expense.

Many donors rushed to join the Otpor bandwagon after October 5th, in an effort to lay claim to Otpor's victories. The organization was thus inundated with external assistance, but lacked a vision for how to channel it. The funds soon exceeded Otpor's means, and the organization quickly gained a reputation (however undeservedly) for corruption and self-enrichment. Otpor's failure to clearly disassociate itself from foreign aid in the aftermath of regime change ultimately spelled its doom, and made its entry into mainstream politics all the more arduous.

Lessons for Egypt and Elsewhere

In the coming weeks and months, we are likely to learn of more uprisings, more bastions of discontent, and quite possibly, more revolutions. As we do, analysts will be eager to locate the seeds of such resistance in virtual technologies, cell phones, Facebook, Twitter, the lofty rhetoric of American policymakers, and yes, even revolutionaries in post-Communist Serbia. Their efforts will often seem to discount the hearts and minds of the region's youths. Invariably, however, the struggles of Tunisians, Egyptians, Algerians, Iranians and others will be their own, decided on their own terms.

Still, Otpor's experience is telling in several respects. Most importantly, it elucidates the need to plan ahead, to think beyond the immediate goal of regime change. Movements that are defined solely on the basis of a dictator's ousting have little merit once that dictator is gone. Moreover, movements that fail to identify themselves in positive terms—as *for* something beyond the abstraction of "democracy," rather than simply against a sitting regime—are unlikely to withstand the tests of time.

Also significant is the need to align oneself with the movement, rather than a specific party, in the aftermath of regime change. Resisting the temptation to move up the ranks of organized politics is difficult, but may well be in the interest of democracy in the long-term. To maintain a presence within civil society, serving as a voice for the disenfranchised, may provide an outlet for those likely to suffer from post-revolutionary disillusionment.

Finally, Otpor's experience speaks to the need to maintain a safe distance from external influences, even those that purport to support democracy. As Srdja Popovic puts it, "cultivate external support, get the knowledge and the material resources from those offering it and use it for your movement's mission. But beware of their political advice because successful revolutions are only those which are home grown."

Indeed, revolutions are made by revolutionaries, they are the products of their own people. The line that distinguishes outside influences that help from those that hurt is all too often a fine one.

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