

The Arab Revolutions and the Democratic Imagination

By [Walden Bello](#), March 16, 2011



The Arab democratic uprisings have brought a rush of nostalgia to many people who staged their own democratic revolutions years earlier. As they watched events unfold in Cairo's Tahrir Square on Al Jazeera and CNN, that feeling of "all that is solid melting into thin air," as Marx would have put it, returned to many of those who went to the barricades during the original People Power Revolution in the Philippines in 1986.

People who threw personal security to the winds and rushed to face down Ferdinand Marcos' armored personnel carriers in February 1986 could also relate to what the Egyptian internet activist Wael Ghonim said about the key psychological moment in an uprising: "We knew we would win when people began to break through the psychological barrier, when they decided that it was better to die for a cause than to live without dignity...We're stronger than those [Mubarak's] guys because they fear for their lives while we're ready to give ours."

Breaching the psychological barrier of fear was coupled with another feeling that ran through the crowds in both Tahrir Square and Manila: the sense that people were truly determining their destiny, that they were taking matters into their own hands. This was the primordial democratic moment, the pristine moment of self-rule that is so inadequately conveyed by theoretical treatises on democracy.

Along with nostalgia, however, came a keen sense of missed opportunities. To many who participated in the popular democratic revolts that swept the Philippines and Latin America in the 1980s and Eastern Europe in 1989, the euphoria of people power was short-lived, giving way, as events unfolded, to concern, disappointment, then cynicism. The critical juncture occurred when the managers of the political transition transformed the raw power of direct

democracy that overthrew dictatorships into representative electoral democracy to simplify the mechanics of democratic governance.

The Conundrum of Representative Democracy

Some of the classical theorists of democracy were troubled by this transition. Rousseau distrusted representative democracy because he sensed it would replace the “General Interest” or “General Will” of the people with what he called the “Corporate Will” of their elected representatives. Marx and Engels were famously contemptuous of representative democracy because, in their view, it simply concealed the ruling economic interests of the bourgeoisie behind the fig leaf of parliamentary politics. Perhaps most critical was the political sociologist Robert Michels, who saw elections evolve from being a method by which the people replaced their leaders to a mechanism through which leaders manipulated people to acquire permanent power. Michels went on to assert that representative democracies could not escape the “iron law of oligarchy.”

The fears of these classical theorists of political science became realities in the post-uprising systems of governance that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. For the expectant citizens of the new democracies in the Philippines and Latin America, people power euphoria gave way to western-influenced parliamentary electoral regimes, in which traditional economic elites promptly came to hold sway. Competitive politics flourished, but with factions of the elite competing among themselves for the right to reign. Progressive politics was marginalized within systems dominated by conservative or centrist elite agendas. Corruption greased the wheels of the system.

Structural Adjustment via Democracy

Even as traditional elites hijacked the resurgent parliamentary systems, the United States and the multilateral agencies subverted them to push through austerity programs that the authoritarian regimes they previously supported had no longer been able to impose on recalcitrant citizenries. It soon became clear that Washington and the multilateral agencies wanted the new democratic regimes to use their legitimacy to impose repressive economic adjustment programs and debt management policies. In Argentina, for instance, the international financial institutions pressured the post-dictatorship government of Raul Alfonsin to abandon neo-Keynesian policies, implement tax reforms, liberalize trade, and privatize

enterprises. When the government quailed, the World Bank suspended disbursements of a structural adjustment loan to bring it into line.

In Peru, the government of Alberto Fujimori was elected on a populist anti-International Monetary Fund (IMF) platform. But on assuming office, it proceeded to impose a neoliberal program that included steep price increases in the rates charged by state enterprises as well as radical trade liberalization. These measures provoked a deep recession, leading to popular discontent that in turn provided an excuse for Fujimori to suspend the constitution and reinstitute strongman rule.

In the Philippines, one of the key reasons Washington abandoned Ferdinand Marcos was its realization that the dictatorship's lack of legitimacy made it an ineffective instrument for repaying the country's \$26 billion dollar foreign debt and for implementing the IMF-World Bank structural adjustment program. Not even the economic crisis accompanying the end of the regime stopped the Bank and the Fund from demanding that the fledgling government of President Corazon Aquino make debt repayment its top economic priority. The government submitted, issuing a law that affirmed the "automatic appropriation" of the full amount needed to service the foreign debt yearly from the national budget. With some 30 to 40 percent of the budget going to debt service, the government was deprived of vital investment capital, throttling economic growth and leaving the country floundering as its neighbors sprinted ahead during the years of the so-called Southeast Asian Miracle.

In Eastern Europe and the old Soviet Union, the euphoria of 1989 gave way in the 1990s to hard times, as the IMF took advantage of the transition from communism to impose "shock therapy," or the rapid and comprehensive imposition of market processes. The process led to a tripling of the number people living in poverty to 100 million. Although in Eastern Europe, most liberal democratic regimes were able to survive the association with radical adjustment, in Russia and its former dependencies in Central Asia, the mafia capitalism that shock therapy spawned led people to tolerate if not support the return or persistence of authoritarian regimes such as that of Vladimir Putin in Russia. By 2010, [according to one analysis](#), some 80 percent of the residents of the former Soviet Union were still living or were back under authoritarian regimes.

Reviving the Democratic Imagination

The political imagination narrowed, with democracy emptied of its direct, unmediated character, dominated by competing elites, and unable to shake off its association with radical, poverty-creating market reform.

The first significant challenge to the ossification of the democratic impulse took place in Latin America, where in the first decade of the new century, the disenchantment with neoliberalism, the emergence of innovative populist political parties and movements, and the mobilization of civil society all combined to open up new avenues for popular intervention in the political process in Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia.

The Arab Revolution extends this challenge to the democratic imagination to create institutions that will promote greater direct intervention by citizens, sustain popular participation in decision-making, block the subversion of the electoral process by elite interests and money politics, and reestablish the primordial link between liberty, fraternity, and equality that has animated all great democratic upheavals since the French Revolution.

The Arab Revolution has two things going for it in meeting this challenge of liberating the democratic imagination. First, the youth who spearheaded it are less bound to respect the prescriptions of traditional representative democracy and likely to be more innovative in entertaining the possibilities offered by information technology in elaborating new, more direct forms of representation, much like they used information technology to subvert the traditional mechanisms of repression and mobilize the crowds that overthrew the repressive dictatorships.

Second, neoliberal pro-market reforms are in severe disrepute, which was not the case in the 1980s and 1990s. The liberalization of capital flows has provoked several crises, including the current global downturn, while trade liberalization has resulted in the displacement of local agricultural producers and local manufacturers by foreign imports. More than at any other time since the Reagan-Thatcher neoliberal revolution in the 1980s, radical free market solutions lack credibility. Owing to the lack of alternative frameworks, however, neoliberal policies remain the default mode among economists and technocrats.

The revolutionary democrats of the Arab world have an opportunity to bring about the next stage in the global democratic revolution. Will they accept the challenge, or will they withdraw back to private life, as some have indicated, leaving older generations of politicians to come to center-stage with their tired, archaic western models of representative democracy?

