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COMMENTARY

Say You Want a Revolution

Change needs help from its friends.

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In recent months, skepticism about the appeal of freedom has given way to a new belief: that democratic revolution is now possible, even inevitable, in places such as Lebanon, Iran, Syria and Kyrgyzstan. But "people power" is not an unstoppable tidal wave, and it would be wrong and naive to conclude that we need only step back and let it happen. The Western world has a lot at stake, and our support for democratic forces in the Middle East and beyond will be important, perhaps even decisive.

Freedom-loving people know what we want to see in Beirut, Damascus and Tehran: the central square bursting with citizens demanding an end to tyranny, massive strikes shutting down the national economy, the disintegration of security forces charged with maintaining order, and the consequent departure of the tyrants and the beginnings of a popularly elected government.

A successful people's revolution is the outcome of careful planning and mass discipline, but it requires political and economic support from outside the country — and maybe some from within.

There are three indispensable requirements: first, a unified opposition that can put aside internal disagreements over the details of what will follow the downfall of the tyrannical regime; second, a disciplined democratic movement that rigorously applies the rules of nonviolent conflict; and finally, careful preparation of the battlefield — which means that members of the armed forces must be persuaded to make individual decisions rather than act as part of a collective organization.

If the opposition is not unified, the regime will be able to break it apart by making deals with its component parts. If discipline is not maintained, violence will break out and the regime, which has more weapons than the opposition, will probably prevail. If members of the security forces are threatened as a group, they will be more likely to maintain a collective identity rather than joining the revolution individually.

In Iran and Lebanon, and probably in Syria, the prerequisites for democratic revolution are in place. Opposition groups in Iran are united in their call for free elections, perhaps preceded by a national referendum that will either legitimize or reject the theocratic state. In Lebanon, 1 million people just demonstrated their support for the quick removal of the Syrian occupiers.

Now the West needs to help. The lessons learned in Georgia and Ukraine need to be passed along. Indeed, this information is so important that Western governments should provide funding so that it can be broadcast around the clock.

The activists will need to communicate with one another, and the West can provide them with suitable equipment — satellite phones, text messaging, laptops and servers — that they may not be able to get by themselves. Just as the West provided Solidarity and Soviet dissidents with fax machines during the Cold War, we should help contemporary dissidents get the best tools available.

The people using nonviolent tactics — sit-ins, blockades and strikes, along with protests — must include workers, shopkeepers, and others who, unlike students, have their livelihoods at risk. They will be reluctant to walk off their jobs unless they know their families will not starve as a result. The West should follow Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's example: In the months leading up to his seizure of power in 1979 he smuggled thousands of sacks of rice into Iran to feed his supporters.

Finally, outsiders seeking to aid democratic revolutions must remember this: Only indigenous

forces can be the prime movers. There must be no replay of 1953 in Iran, when the United States and Britain stage-managed mass demonstrations against the government in order to restore the shah to his throne. We must trust the judgment of the people who are, in all cases, the foundation of lasting change.

If they want open support, they should get it. If they want it delivered discreetly, donors should respect their wishes.

Americans, Europeans and others who freely choose their own rulers cannot be indifferent about the success or failure of democratic revolution around the world, and we must not limit our support to rhetoric. There is every reason to believe that this latest surge of revolution will succeed, provided that the courage and passion of the people of the region receive suitable assistance from the democratic world.

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