

The Ukrainian lesson

Contributed by NowLebanon
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Enthusiastic Western-backed opposition supporters raised tents in the center of the Ukrainian capital Kiev in November 2004 to protest the communist government's fraudulent run in the presidential elections. They staged daily demonstrations and sit-ins for two months, a movement the Western press dubbed the "Orange Revolution". In a historic and triumphant moment, in January 2005 the Orange Movement's leaders took power in Ukraine with the hopes they could at last keep Russia at bay and install a Western-backed democracy.

Only a couple of months later a similar revolution took place in Beirut. After former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri was assassinated on February 14, 2005, the anti-Syrian opposition took to the streets of Beirut demanding Damascus withdraw its troops from Lebanon as part of the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1559, and for a court to be established to investigate Hariri's murder. The largest demonstration took place on March 14, with supporters of most political parties in the country descending on Martyrs Square in a show of support. The Lebanese "Independence Intifada" became known as the "Cedar Revolution" after the iconic tree on the country's flag, an image friendlier to the West.

The two parallel revolutions were born to achieve the same principles: democracy and sovereignty. Ukrainians had had enough of poverty and misery brought on by the corrupt communists backed by neighboring Russia. The Lebanese had had enough of the injustice and oppression brought on by the corrupt Syrian-backed government and military. The assassination of the prime minister had been the last straw. So both Ukrainians and Lebanese took the streets to get what they wanted.

But five years later, they are disappointed. Supporters of the Orange and Cedar revolutions are no longer filled with the same sense of hope and triumph. Although Ukraine and Lebanon have two very different political systems, the people who backed the revolutionary changes in both countries feel the same sense of disenchantment with their leaders.

The Orange Revolution has already been deemed a failure. Yulia Timoshenko, the opposition leader who won the hearts of Ukrainians in 2004 by calling for democracy and for joining the European Union and NATO, lost the presidential elections on February 7. After five years of ex-President Viktor Yushchenko's corruption, political instability and lack of economic reforms, Ukrainians voted again for change.

The new Ukrainian president is Orange Revolution villain Viktor Yanukovich, leader of the Russia-backed Party of Regions. Unlike with the November 2004 elections that spurred the Orange Revolution, on February 7, 2010, international observers say they've seen no evidence of electoral fraud.

The Ukrainian Orange Revolution is a lesson Lebanon can learn from. Five years after the Cedar Revolution, the March 14 forces are calling on the Lebanese to take part in the rally marking the anniversary of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri's assassination and the beginning of Lebanon's sovereignty plea. February 14, 2010 is a test for the leaders of March 14.

Many Lebanese say they are choosing not to attend the February 14 rally because their political leaders failed to deliver the transparent democracy and sovereignty they promised. Rampant government corruption has landed Lebanon at 130th place out of 180 on Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index. Bribery, nepotism, favoritism, patronage, embezzlement, kickbacks and vote-buying still exist at alarming levels, according to the Lebanese Transparency Association.

At the same time, Syria's influence in Lebanon is still strong. Even though Damascus withdrew its army, Syria still holds a strong grip in Lebanon through its satellite political groups. Democratic reforms have been moving slowly and with great difficulty. Though the Special Tribunal for Lebanon has been established, the investigations are time consuming and there have been few concrete results. Though the March 14 coalition won the majority of seats in the parliamentary polls of June 2009, it had to make deep concessions to the Syrian-backed opposition in order to be able to form a government five months later.

This year, many Cedar Revolution supporters are not sure why exactly they should take part in the February 14 rally. They feel disappointed and forgotten. It is up to those who led the Cedar Revolution to admit to their mistakes and answer to their supporters. If they want to avoid further disillusion of their message and support base, they must learn from the Ukrainian failure.

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