

Elite Use of Uprisings

While emanating from popular aspirations for better lives, uprisings are also useful to elites. In the last centuries, every attempt to transform the world system has only strengthened it. Both the American and French Revolutions led to intensified imperial conquests. From the Russian Revolution to the Chinese, from May 1968 to Gwangju, insurgent energies have been redirected to revitalize unjust structures of hierarchy and populate them with new elites. The global antiapartheid struggle brought Nelson Mandela out of decades of imprisonment on Robben Island and into the highest seat of power in the South Africa, but he was compelled to implement neoliberal economic policies that continue to plague the poor. Similarly, East Asian uprisings against dictatorships, even when they included significant forces against capitalism, enabled the IMF and World Bank to broaden their powers. In democratic South Korea, the Philippines, and elsewhere, new administrations implemented neoliberal programs that permitted foreign investors to penetrate previously closed markets and to discipline workforces of millions of people in order for giant corporations and banks to extract greater profits. Mubarak may have been deposed, but the military rulers who followed him in power stabilized the system of Mubarakism.

In *The Shock Doctrine*, Naomi Klein uncovered elite use of economic crises to assert more total systems of control. While economic crises are different than those produced by popular insurgencies, both types of crises have nonetheless been turned into vehicles for system domination and expansion. After the worldwide revolts of 1968 caught everyone by surprise, the CIA evaluated and found ways to use the People Power tactic—as in Ukraine's Orange Revolution. Between 1974 and the mid-1990s,

more than sixty countries changed into some form of democracy.³² Insurgent democratization movements transformed theorists like Samuel Huntington, compelling him to swallow his denunciation of the “democratic distemper” (his idea of the “problem” of too much democracy in the United States as a cause of antiwar protests) and to switch to singing the praises of democracy.³³

Despite the system’s capacity to absorb and even profit from the energies of insurgencies, it would be wrong to judge uprisings simply as failures. Compared to dictatorships, democratic governments, like countercultural spaces, contain new opportunities. Victories in achieving democracy in Korea, ending apartheid in South Africa, mitigating U.S. racism and sexism, and promoting expanded rights for all have created better lives for millions of people—as well as establishing the staging grounds for future struggles. The basic criterion must be whether or not uprisings help improve people’s daily lives. To judge social movements by the specific administrations that they leave in their wakes or by their failure to change the entire system would be to condemn all past attempts as well as to disregard liberties and prosperity won. If we are to be realistic, we need to count ways movements have improved people’s lives, opened doors for subaltern groups who had previously experienced only closed ones, and won greater freedoms in the everyday lives of ordinary people.

A more cynical reading of uprisings' impact has been inculcated by political scientists' production of a veritable library of books on democratization which emphasize elite-led transitions from authoritarianism, thereby posing the inevitability of elite rule as an iron law whose certainty is the same as that of winter's coming in Boston. Even in cases where the decisive factor in democratization was popular insurgency—as in South Korea in 1987—much of mainstream U.S. literature considers the transitions elite-led.³⁴

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Alagappa, *Civil Society*, 3.

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See *Asia's Unknown Uprisings Vol. 2*, chap. 1 for a critique of Huntington.

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See *Democracy in Korea: The Roh Tae Woo Years* (New York: Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs, 1992).