

Target dictators, but without violence

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[Chibli Mallat](#) | The Daily Star

With the retreat of the Western democracies globally, we can count only on ourselves when it comes to freedom. Our Ukrainian friends have determined the course of their history by accepting no less than the removal from power of a kleptomaniacal dictator. The mediocre diplomacy of the European Union and the United States, who sought compromise with a man killing unarmed demonstrators, was jettisoned overnight by the determination of those using nonviolence.

American and European support have turned into something that we should just learn to live without, for it is clear that the U.S. president, Barack Obama, has turned his back on peaceful demonstrations in the world – in Iran, Syria and Bahrain among others. He will not help and will mostly deter EU governments that are willing to help. We know the horrendous costs of leaving world leadership to petty tyrants, which is why we can rely only on ourselves.

The Ukrainians did it on their own and succeeded beyond all expectations. Nothing was more striking than how members of Viktor Yanukovych's own party accepted his removal. Nothing was more comforting than the eagerness of his own parliamentarians to push him out of office and the refusal of certain members of the security services to shoot at the crowd. It was the steadfastness of those demonstrating nonviolently in the streets of Kiev and braving snipers that brought down Yanukovych. Eighty demonstrators were killed on the last day, which tipped the balance against the president.

So we can only rely on ourselves and on the immense sympathy we have across the world for wanting to bring down petty dictators without shedding their blood, all the while they will not hesitate to shed ours. A global nonviolent revolution is on. It is up to us to keep its direction clear and ensure it spreads and is entrenched in working constitutions and fair trials of the tyrants who it brought down.

Now the next stage is upon us. The main bastion of dictatorship in the world, as we saw in Ukraine and Syria, is in Moscow, where Vladimir Putin is in charge. The priority is to remove him from office through nonviolent demonstrations. The focus today has been on Crimea. We need to bring it back to Moscow. Crimea is a mere detail, even if the native Russians have legitimate worries about marginalization by Kiev.

But those in power in Kiev know better. To prevail against Putin, they must refuse to respond to Putin's provocative violence with violence of their own. They must bolster their connections with the majority of Russian-speaking Ukrainians willing to stay in Ukraine so long as they wield real power in their regions and share power in Kiev with other Ukrainians. This end result is generally best served by a federal system. It will take time – in Kiev, in Crimea and elsewhere in the country.

We should not lose focus, however. Crimea without Putin – like Ukraine, Russia and the rest of the world without Putin – would create a more viable avenue for living together without political violence. And only the Russians can bring Putin down. This is the moment for our reasoned faith in the immense power of nonviolence and the support we offer to the likes of Gary Kasparov, Alexei Navalny and tens of millions of like-minded people in Russia.

Nonviolent resistance to Putin in Russia has been stunning in its resilience and courage. Once Putin is out and put on trial along with Yanukovych, the world will have turned a page. We had thought that a page was turned in 1991, and we should never forget how important Mikhail Gorbachev's role was in making the world safer for democracy. We missed many occasions to put an end to dictatorships in the world because we did not realize how powerful nonviolence is and how the aftermath of a nonviolent revolution needs attention, both in the new constitutions that have to be put in place and in the accountability required from those of the former regimes who killed, imprisoned and tortured.

The second Ukrainian revolution presents a new chance for a philosophy of nonviolence to take root in the world. The movement can in turn use its momentum to see the nonviolent removal of one of the most callous dictators around, Putin, and his subsequent trial. But only the Russians can do this. At one point, as in Kiev, they must stop following Putin's murderous orders. That day, a new page will be turned. We now know better how to initiate a global retreat from dictatorship – in Russia, Crimea, China, Syria, Iran and Bahrain.

A philosophy of history with nonviolence as its nexus is gaining. Putin represents the main stumbling block to its progress.

Chibli Mallat is a lawyer and professor of law. He chairs Right to Nonviolence, a Middle East-based nongovernmental organization. His next book is "Philosophy of Nonviolence," to appear this year from Oxford University Press. He wrote this commentary for THE DAILY STAR.

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