

The New York Times | <http://nyti.ms/1hTDUpg>

Sunday Review | OP-ED COLUMNIST

The Square People, Part 2

MAY 17, 2014

Thomas L. Friedman

IN a famous 1995 interview about her dysfunctional marriage and the infidelity of Prince Charles, Princess Diana noted that “there were three of us in this marriage, so it was a bit crowded.” I find myself thinking of that quote lately to describe the new politics and geopolitics that have been produced by “The Square People” — all those newly connected and aspiring middle classes who have gathered in the squares from Cairo to Kiev, Istanbul to Tehran, and Tunis to Moscow to demand a greater voice in their future and better governance. A lot of leaders are discovering that these Square People are like a spontaneous third party that has emerged between themselves and their tame traditional opposition and, as a result, their politics is getting a bit crowded — and a lot more interesting.

Indeed, “The Square” — as the place for these newly networked political forces to gather, collaborate and pressure for change — is truly disrupting both traditional politics and geopolitics. But the big thing to watch going forward is which Square People can go from *disruption* to *construction* — can take the energy and inchoate aspirations of their Square followers and turn them into parties, elections and better governance. Surely, the most interesting of these dramas today involves The Square People of Ukraine versus Russia’s president, Vladimir Putin.

Putin was minding his own corrupt business, living in a two-party relationship with his neighbor Ukraine, which was being led by the even more corrupt, pro-Moscow President Viktor Yanukovich. Suddenly, spontaneously from below, an emergent, connected, aspiring middle class of Ukrainians — fed up both with regime corruption and how far they'd fallen behind their neighbors in the European Union — demanded that Yanukovich forge closer cooperation and trade ties with the European Union. They also demanded something now common to every square: the right to be treated as “citizens” with rights and responsibilities, not as the playthings of oligarchs or outside powers.

Yanukovich opted instead for a closer economic relationship with Russia, so The Square People in Kiev toppled him, challenging every aspect of Putin's K.G.B.-shaped worldview. Putin does not believe any political protest can ever be spontaneous. If a large body of Ukrainians gathered in the square of Kiev to demand an end to corruption and closer ties with the E.U., it could only be because the C.I.A., NATO or the E.U. inspired or paid them to do so. Putin's whole mind-set is top-down, and the notion that the combination of globalization and the I.T. revolution might have given the “people” both the ability to see things they could never see before — and the tools to collaborate and act on them from the bottom up — is totally alien to him.

Putin is looking backward, trying to restore Russia's czarist empire, using its natural resources, while the Kiev Square People are looking forward, trying to associate with the E.U., so they can develop their human resources. They believe that integrating their economy with Europe would produce from beyond the judicial reform, transparency and regulations that they could not generate from below and that their leaders would never enact from above. For the Square People of Kiev, an E.U.-Ukraine association is a vital lever for domestic renewal, but for Putin it is a direct threat to his “sphere of influence.”

Ditto in Turkey. A spontaneous movement emerged to resist Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's attempt to install a mall in the only green space near Istanbul's central Taksim Square, but it quickly mushroomed into protests against his autocratic rule. Erdogan went berserk. He had created a

two-party universe that included only himself and the official Turkish opposition parties and TV stations, which he had totally cowed, tamed and neutered. So Turkey's Square People created a new opposition, and, through Twitter and YouTube, their own TV network.

But Erdogan has managed to outmaneuver his Square People with repeated election victories. How? A report from Turkey in Forbes.com Friday gives one answer. Most of Erdogan's largely rural voting base is not on YouTube or Twitter. They "are tech-illiterate; they get their news from television," which he controls. "Television news channels show only the damage and virulence of protest, a selection of images that ultimately give the impression of anarchy loosed upon the country by rabid troublemakers." Putin has used the same propaganda in Moscow and Ukraine.

This failure to translate their aspirations into parties that could contest elections and then govern is the Achilles' heel of The Square People — from Tahrir Square to Occupy Wall Street.

Or as Moises Naim, the author of a very smart book on this subject, "The End of Power," recently observed in The Atlantic: Today "an appeal to protest via Twitter, Facebook, or text message is sure to attract a crowd, especially if it is to demonstrate against something — anything, really — that outrages us. The problem is what happens after the march. ... Behind massive street demonstrations there is rarely a well-oiled and more-permanent organization capable of following up on protesters' demands and undertaking the complex, face-to-face, and dull political work that produces real change in government. This is the important point made by Zeynep Tufekci, a fellow at the Center for Information Technology Policy at Princeton University, who writes that 'Before the Internet, the tedious work of organizing that was required to circumvent censorship or to organize a protest also helped build infrastructure for decision making and strategies for sustaining momentum. Now movements can rush past that step, often to their own detriment.' "

Daniel Brumberg, a democracy expert at Georgetown University and the United States Institute of Peace, points out that the most successful Square People in the Arab world, who forged a whole new constitution, are in Tunisia,

which is the Arab country that had “the most robust civil society institutions — especially a powerful labor union federation, as well as business, human rights and lawyers associations — that could arbitrate between the secular and religious factions,” who had come together in the square to oust Tunisia’s dictator. Tunisia also benefited from an army that stayed out of politics and the fact that the secular and Islamist forces had a balance of power, requiring them to be inclusive of one another.

I’m encouraged by the many government-monitoring civil society groups that have emerged in Ukraine to make sure that the will of its Square People will not be stolen. Whether Ukraine’s Square People can also develop the inclusive politics — to respect the views of the more pro-Russia population in the East — remains to be seen. Without Square People, no change is possible in these countries, but without civil society institutions and inclusive politics, no change is sustainable.

I invite you to follow me on **Twitter**.

A version of this op-ed appears in print on May 18, 2014, on page SR1 of the New York edition with the headline: The Square People, Part 2.

© 2015 The New York Times Company