

World Crises in Leadership
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At the end of the Cold War, the world seemed hungry for political freedom. The Nazis and Soviet Union had been discredited, and the United States seemed to be the world's model. To our credit, at least for a short time, we mentored a number of countries that had never known freedom to try participatory governance.

When I ran the United Nations Association in San Francisco, delegations of wannabe democracy national groups were shepherded through our office for a presentation on how the UN would assist in elections. They were then sent to the Hoover in Stanford University for a crash course in capitalism. Non-profits hosted them, offering support in issues as diverse as handicapped access (non-existent in most places), women in leadership, and openness to religious diversity.

One delegation touched and surprised me: a group of young women in brand new red "power suits" from Mongolia (formerly Soviet), who had leaped from a herding society to a modern aspiring republic overnight, from patriarchy to female partnership.

We took for granted that our system would be so seductive that the lesser-developed world would leap at the opportunity to modernize and democratize. As often the case in history, we were ahead of our skis. These efforts met pushback from the former powers that be and old habits were found hard to change. Corruption soon replaced liberal democracy and although people sometimes voted, elections were not always free and fair. The newly emancipated states, once the Muslim part of the Soviet Union, quickly reverted to authoritarian rule, with former Soviet thugs seizing and keeping power.

The European states freed from Soviet rule did somewhat better, having nearby European models. The Baltic states did best, having nearby models from Scandinavia to help them. Poland and Czechoslovakia were eager to join the European democracies. The Czechs and Slovaks (component parts of their country) peacefully split into two countries, the only peaceful example of such realignment ever. Yugoslavia did not fare as well; it split into its three different religious components (Roman Catholic, Russian Orthodox, and Muslim) and quickly devolved into very ugly civil wars.

The further east former Soviet colonies, Ukraine, Georgia, and Belarus), found Russia interfering and bullying them into accepting Russian influence. Russia was desperate to prevent these states from joining NATO, which would halt their ability to dominate and threaten them. The Western democracies did not rise up to protect those new states.

Today, former democratically elected leaders are trying to become leaders for life, or at least, continuing their leadership by fraudulent elections. Vladimir Putin has managed to seize power for 20 years, in violation of Russia's constitution. He is now trying to be President for Life, outraging his entire cabinet, which just quit government.

Turkey's leader, now behaving as an elected dictator, is following Putin's example. Even Israel is wrestling with an elected leader who is desperate to maintain his power to avoid jail for corruption. And authoritarian China, mostly ruled by committee, is morphing into a one-man leader for life. But all of them are facing public outraged demonstrations.

One bright light in the struggle between corrupt dictatorships hiding behind fake elections and a modern representative leader is in Ukraine, which is now a center of the struggle for liberal democracy. A new young and inexperienced president, Volodymyr Zelensky, is a wonder to behold.

His knowledge of government comes from his playing president in a television show (compare this with West Wing). He has shown himself to be David against Goliath (the bully Trump), avoiding corruption at home and in the US by not giving in to Trump's attempt to cheat 2020 election voters. He has stood up to Vladimir Putin too, waging war to protect his country from being dismantled by Russia.

He has also shown himself a patriot, not a thin-skinned demagogue. His Prime Minister, an economist, was caught on tape insulting Zelensky's lack of knowledge of economics. Zelensky has welcomed the Prime Minister to use his expertise to serve the country. Perhaps Trump, who loves dictators and hopes to be one, might learn something from this sterling example.

684 words

Dr. Laina Farhat-Holzman is a historian, lecturer, and author of "How Do You Know That? Contact her at Lfarhat102@aol.com or www.globalthink.net.