

FIGHTING THE HYDRA: LESSONS FROM WORLDWIDE PROTESTS AGAINST CORRUPTION

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In the past half decade, a succession of uprisings against corruption has broken out worldwide. The frequency and significance of these events forces the question: What is going on? And does this international phenomenon hold lessons for others beset with systemic political corruption, not least in the United States? A look at countries as diverse in culture and political history as Brazil, Burkina Faso, Guatemala, Lebanon, Romania, South Africa, and South Korea suggests that it does.

Patterns

- Navigating between specific material concerns and all-encompassing ideologies, these recent anticorruption protests take up one of the roots of modern democratic development: obliging the powerful to submit to the law.
- Because the corruption they challenge is systemic, the protests have frequently encountered a tension between making concrete demands of those in power (say, cleaning up streets or reversing an amnesty law) and aiming at the kleptocratic system more broadly (such as demanding electoral reforms).
- This generation of protesters has been attracted by a horizontal model for action, and has balked at designating leaders. But the conceit of leaderlessness has its limits.
- Crucial allies have been found within the justice sector, where independence is prized. Defecting elites have also contributed to the fall of some regimes.
- In only one of the countries examined (Burkina Faso) has a structural change been won. Elsewhere, the results have been mixed, with some specific reforms gained, a more robust civil society, and some shifts in attitudes and behavior on the part of business and government officials alike.
- The sophisticated networks the anticorruption campaigns are challenging are highly flexible and resilient. Often bouncing back after sacrificing a few heads, they have been particularly skillful at playing to identity divides within the population.

Takeaways

Activists elsewhere who wish to challenge corrupt systems should consider the following:

Leadership is necessary to give direction to what might be spontaneous and multipolar protests. The leaders must be rigorously principled and able to cross political and identity boundaries.

Consistent decision making mechanisms should be established to allow for transparent processes that can federate participants.

A detailed reform agenda that targets the kleptocratic network's diverse capabilities will be crucial to exploiting whatever window of opportunity does open.

This agenda should be communicated to ordinary people in such a way as to capture their imaginations, so support doesn't flag when some symbolic victory is achieved.

Long-range planning is required to effectively deal with the multiple likely countermoves the campaign will encounter.

Alliances are force multipliers. Independent individuals or institutions within a corrupt government invariably control some levers of power, or at least information. Because kleptocratic networks are transnational, alliances outside the country's borders are also key.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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