

# Iran: Code Orange?

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Yelena Biberman

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**“Iran is now on the verge of an Orange-style Revolution.” This statement is likely to elicit enthusiasm from those working tirelessly to promote democracy in Iran.**

However, the term “Orange Revolution” has become a misnomer. Yes, the Ukrainian uprising was “Orange.” But it was not a revolution. Ultimately, it brought no fundamental change to Ukrainian politics and bred further corruption. Today, less than five years later, the vast majority of those who participated in the protests no longer support their leader. If Victor Yushchenko ran for president again, he would have no real chance of winning the election.

With Iran now closer to change than it has been over the past 20 years, a Ukrainian-style transformation should not be the goal of those who seek democracy in Iran. An incomplete revolution would be worse than a full one. As the Ukrainian case has shown, such a half step would discredit and dishearten those who believe that fundamental change is possible and very likely bring about a political relapse.

## Parallels with Ukraine

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As in the “Orange Revolution” in Ukraine, the current political disarray in Iran was sparked by allegations of electoral fraud and is characterized by the major role of young people. Like the dramatic events that took place in Ukraine, it’s also a result of years of pent-up frustration, helplessness, and hope, especially among members of the young post-revolutionary generation. It’s also a product of serious organizational capacity, though significantly lower in Iran than it was in Ukraine due to the more oppressive nature of the regime. And in Iran, it’s not yet clear who is doing the organizing.

The key ingredient in both episodes has been youth. Iran is a young country. The majority of the country’s population is under the age of 30, with the median age now being 27. In fact, Iran’s current youth population (between 15 and 30 years old) is the largest it has ever been in the history of the country.

The Iranian state has failed to meet young people’s growing demand for economic opportunities, moral guidance, and even basic needs. A record number of young Iranians are consequently emigrating, marrying later in life, and turning to drugs. As one Iranian émigré has recently shared with me, there has also been a wave of conversion to other religions as a sign of protest against the clerical regime.

Young people played an important role in the landslide victory of reformist Mohammad Khatami in 1997, but soon became disappointed with Khatami’s inability to deliver the promised reforms. Student protests were common in the early 2000s, but died down by the time Mahmoud Ahmadinejad took office.

On March 17, 2009, when Khatami withdrew his candidacy for the country's June 12 election and announced that he would support fellow reformist Mousavi, few doubted that Mousavi would spark the imagination of the young. At the same time, experts cautioned that Mousavi's victory, like the victories of Khatami in 1997 and 2001, would be no guarantee of major change in Iran due to the Islamic Republic's power structure.

## Khamenei's Blunder

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If it wanted to prevent fundamental change, Iran's ruling elite made a brilliant blunder by engineering Mousavi's defeat. The defeat of Mousavi acted to mobilize the population (of Tehran) and raised its expectations of fundamental change, should Mousavi come to power. As the regime cracked down on the protesters, it inadvertently transformed the issue of contention from election fraud to the legitimacy of the clerical rule.

However, like Viktor Yushchenko in Ukraine, Mousavi would not have brought revolutionary change. He has challenged the outcome of a presidential election, but he hasn't truly challenged the country's political structure and institutions. Without such a challenge, a modern revolution cannot succeed in Iran.

The Iranian government's second blunder was the arrest of members of former president Hashemi Rafsanjani's family. Rafsanjani heads both the powerful Expediency Council and Assembly of Experts, which has the authority to monitor and remove the supreme leader. He's also the founder of the Islamic Azad University, a mega university with over a million students. In other words, angering Rafsanjani will no doubt further fuel the fire of Iranian youth discontent.

The Iranian ruling elite has learned nothing from the Orange popular uprising in Ukraine. In Ukraine, the slip-up was Russian President Vladimir Putin's premature congratulation of Viktor Yanukovich's victory. As Yanukovich appeared to have been handpicked by the Kremlin, so did Ahmadinejad seem handpicked by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. In both cases the people didn't have any say, but clearly had something very important to tell their government.

The most important lesson for the Iranian opposition to take away from the Orange uprising is the realization that bringing Mousavi to power won't be enough. Yushchenko, victor of the "Orange Revolution," now enjoys a 2% popularity rating. He has no chance of being re-elected in the next presidential election, scheduled to take place in January 2010. In fact, Ukrainian voters may pick Yanukovich. For those inside Iran and those outside, putting all of one's faith in Mousavi as Iran's best chance for democracy is misguided.