

Portuguese Lessons for Turkey's Role in the Arab Spring

by [Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](#)

Dec 15, 2011

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](#)

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

The "Carnation Revolution" suggests democracy can take root in the most unexpected places if the necessary outside support is provided.

On April 25, 1974, the "Carnation Revolution" shook Portugal's 48-year-old dictatorship. A group of army officers, joined by the masses and underground communist movement, rebelled against the regime. Surprisingly, the dictatorship collapsed like a house of cards.

Portugal, then ridden by poverty, illiteracy and authoritarianism, found itself at a crossroads: military rule or communist takeover. But neither happened. Thanks to the often untold story of efforts by Germany's Social Democratic Party (SPD) government and the Stiftungs (NGOs linked to Germany's political parties) to build centrist forces in Lisbon, the unexpected occurred: Portugal became a democracy.

Portugal in the 1970s parallels today's Arab Spring. Arab countries, similarly poor and undemocratic, also stand at a crossroads, faced with the choice between military rule and an illiberal (in this case radical Islamist) takeover.

In the 1970s, Germany's SPD, the first elected social-democratic government in Bonn, had the ability to uphold social democracy as a legitimate alternative to communism in Lisbon. Turkey can play a similar role in the Middle East today if Ankara's first Islamist-rooted and democratically-elected party, the AKP, encourages alternatives to radical Islamist parties.

In 1974, Portugal lacked deep democratic traditions and a sizable middle class. The powerful communist movement stood ready to hijack the revolution, while the military -- which took charge after the dictatorship -- seemed lost. The situation looked bleak. Only a few years later, however, Portugal blossomed as a democracy and later entered the European Union. It is now one of the world's most liberal democracies.

To facilitate this, the German government strategically built a political center in Portugal: The SPD literally helped found the Portuguese Socialist Party (PS), a social-democratic movement that called for a democratic Portugal and the defeat of communist efforts to take power, in Bad Munstereifel, Germany.

Furthermore, Germany took the lead in organizing the "Friendship Solidarity Committee for Portuguese Democracy and Socialism" in August 1975. Led by German chancellor Willy Brandt, this committee included leading European social democrats, such as Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme and Austrian Chancellor Bruno Kreisky, and became a platform in which social democrats shared knowledge with the PS and developed strategies for successful democratic transformation. The committee also prepared the groundwork for Portugal's EU membership.

The German Stiftungs, too, performed a valuable function. SPD-affiliated Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) provided financial assistance to the PS. FES alone donated 10 to 15 million German marks for campaign training and the funding of PS leaders' travel, using discrete Swiss bank accounts to facilitate monetary transfers. Stiftungs connected to liberal and conservative German parties built counterparts in Portugal, as well.

Today, Turkey could play Germany's role in Arab countries, as tall an order as that might sound. First, Ankara needs to shine as an example of liberal democracy. To this end, the Turks need to use the debate on writing a new constitution to draft an exemplary liberal charter.

Even then, Ankara needs help to play Germany's role. Just as Bonn received financial and political assistance from the United States and other democracies in building Portuguese democracy, Turkey would benefit from support from the West as well as other Muslim-majority democracies, such as Indonesia, especially in creating "Turkish Stiftungs," the missing part of the Germany-Turkey parallel.

And let's not forget the EU's soft power in promoting Portugal's liberal democracy; today, when there is no such force for the Arab world, can Turkey help create it?

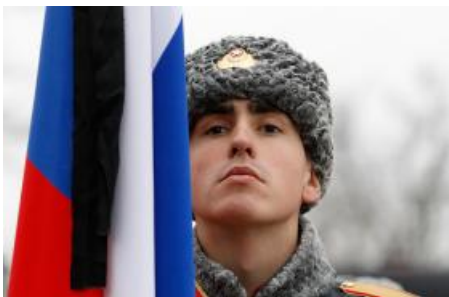
The road will be rough: Whereas many Portuguese welcomed the Germans, I heard from Arabs of all political stripes at the Abant Platform's recent conference on the Arab Spring in Turkey that "Arabs will not applaud their former imperial ruler's direct intervention."

Ankara's efforts to play Germany in the Arab world will have to be extremely gentle, and its success cannot be taken for granted. It might still be worth a try, though. The "Carnation Revolution" suggests democracy can take root in the most unexpected places if the necessary outside support is provided.

Soner Cagaptay is director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute. ❖

Hurriyet Daily News

RECOMMENDED



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[The Ukraine Crisis Isn't Over: Russia Has Lied About Troop Withdrawals Before](#)

Feb 16, 2022



Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/ukraine-crisis-isnt-over-russia-has-lied-about-troop-withdrawals)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[As China Thrives in the Post-9/11 Middle East, the US Must Counter](#)

Feb 16, 2022



Jay Solomon

(/policy-analysis/china-thrives-post-911-middle-east-us-must-counter)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

[Democracy & Reform \(/policy-analysis/democracy-reform\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Turkey \(/policy-analysis/turkey\)](#)