When I argued in the February issue of Policy Options, in “Truth and Consequence: The WikiLeaks Saga,” that the leak of the US cables had beneficial impacts, we hadn’t yet seen the report by the US Ambassador to Tunisia about his dinner at the home of President Ben Ali’s brother-in-law, its descriptions of decadent excess, a tiger in a cage, arrogance, entitlement and waste.

That seaside villa has since been wasted by vengeful citizens, its occupants having flown in the wake of Ben Ali’s own escape to Saudi Arabia.

It wasn’t the leaked cable that overturned Ben Ali, but it became part of the combustible material that in December caught fire. The college graduate fruit seller, Mohammed Bouzizi, face slapped by a female police officer, his wares confiscated for a minor infraction, set himself aflame and died on January 2, having written he sought only his dignity, a message that resonated throughout a country fed up with a corrupt and authoritarian clan that, for its amusement, kept tigers in cages and, for its enrichment, a whole population in subordination.

The events that cascaded through Tunisia and then Egypt are global game-changers. It is too early to tell how well democracy will take in either country and whether it will now blossom elsewhere in the Middle East, but a different trend line has been set for human political aspiration and in Western public opinion.

Prior to the Tunisian breakout, public interest in established democracies had sunk to a new low.

In the US, when pollsters the Pew Research Center asked citizens to indicate their chosen priorities in foreign policy, democracy promotion was noted by only 10 percent, a drop in 10 years from 44 percent, the biggest drop for any category recorded since the Second World War.

The explanations are no mystery. Ten years ago, the Bush administration launched its “freedom agenda,” an exercise in national hubris that was used to explain the invasion of Iraq, when the other reasons such as WMD and support for 9/11 came up dry. Americans pushed back at the notion it is their business to worry about how other people were governed. The quagmire of Afghanistan sealed the point.

When I was going through US Border Protection at Seattle Airport in 2007 to take up direction of an international democracy support project for the Community of Democracies I was conducting out of Princeton University, the tough African-American officer bridled when she heard the reason for my visit.

“You’re doing WHAT?” she asked. “Haven’t we stuck our noses enough in other folks’ business? Haven’t we done enough damage?”

So they had. And with the deepest economic recession in 60 years on their plates, as well as a vivid debate about the quality of American governance, American democrats
were't feeling much solidarity with the aspirations of would-be democrats across the sea.

The drop in support paralleled what Freedom House, which keeps democratic score globally, termed a “democratic recession” in its 2010 Annual Report. For the fourth year in a row, retreats from democracy outscored gains, the longest period that had happened in 40 years.

Would-be democrats suffered under the growing confidence of authoritarian regimes. China’s economic gains had created expectations that legitimacy didn’t need democracy if one-party rule delivered greater prosperity. Of course, it’s a false bargain, but China’s economic growth rates seemed a contrast to the struggles of some new democracies with the challenges of democratic transition. Some, like Russia, were withdrawing rights only recently gained because of the growing popular notion that democracy had undermined order and security.

An “authoritarian internationale” had sprung up, with the Chinese helping Iranians game social network technologies, Moammar Ghaddafi financing Robert Mugabe and Hugo Chavez cheering on anybody Americans were opposed to.

The Tunisian and Egyptian democratic uprisings turned the negative trend lines on their heads. A new Zeitgeist has spread across the Arab world from Tunisia, that authoritarian pretensions to legitimacy could be challenged. This “Arab awakening” is real, whether or not regimes fall to protestors elsewhere. Information technology connections lifted Arab youth from their humiliating isolation from the wider world.

Across that wider world, authoritarians are rattled. It does seem likely regimes to accept inevitable reforms while fearing inward collapse in strategically key points.

A conservative-liberal political argument rolls the op-ed pages in Canada. On successive March days in the Globe and Mail, historian Jack Granatstein presumed Obama’s foreign policy is a “disaster” because it doesn’t put unspecified security interests ahead of Arab democratic aspirations, while Beirut editor Rami Khouri argued the US is marginalized because its support for democratic principles in the area is muted by US interests. Obama probably has it about right.

A major question for democracies is why it all came as a surprise.

It always does. There have been over 60 democratic uprisings since Portugal in 1974 (323 revolutions since 1900) and we are always surprised. We over-invest in the status quo, which we equate with security and stability. That the undemocratic Middle East is inherently unstable has been obscured by our deference to oil, counter-terrorism, business deals, and a line out of Israel that is scornful of Arabs and their aspirations.

These focal points override our values and also our judgment. Too many bought into statements as recent as a month ago from former vice-president Omar Suleiman of Egypt or Crown Prince Al Khalifa of Bahrain that Arabs just “aren’t ready” for democracy, that the two — Arabs and democracy — don’t fit together.

So we accept false choices, such as belief that the choice in Egypt was between a dictator and rule by hostile Islamists. In Bahrain, the rhetorical choice is between rule by a clan of Sunnis who are 20 percent of the population, with 80 percent who, being Shia, must be cats’ paws of the Iranians. On the consumer side, Saudi Arabian youth is given the false compensation of material comfort in return for a dearth of human rights.

Some European countries disgraced themselves. The French government of President Nicolas Sarkozy, who created the “Union of the Mediterranean” with Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak as co-chairman, was particularly compromised. The French foreign minister resigned because of Tunisian Christmas freebies, and the scapegoated ambassador in Tunisia was fired — he hadn’t seen the revolt coming, the French foreign ministry at the Quai d’Orsay explained, because relations with fraternal Tunisia were too “intimate” for perspective.

That wasn’t an American problem. WikiLeaks showed us, as Tom Malinovski of Human Rights Watch put it, US diplomats “might just mean what they say” about human rights, that their privately communicated views were the same as discourse in public. Authoritarian leaders who had in the past counted on CIA winking and nodding in inconsistency were, and are, rattled.

Of course, the first lesson about the breakout of democracy is that it can’t be exported or imported. It has to emerge from the people in question. So, how did it happen?

As democracy advocate and theorist Thomas Carothers has explained, democracy breakout and transition have two initial chapters. Chapter one involves throwing off a dictator. Chapter two is the sometimes more
daunting job of building the new democratic form of governance and making it deliver what people need in the way of livelihood and security in addition to rights and justice.

Popular uprisings are created over time. They emerge when a closed society’s open secrets become “public truths,” as US scholar Clay Shirky put it in Foreign Affairs. Examples in Tunisia of what Shirky terms “shared awareness” would run the gamut of narrative about the ruling family’s intimidation-for-profit, corruption, police abuse and shaming behaviour. It is not that Tunisia was in a state of grinding poverty, but rather that education resulted in lack of professional fulfilment. Poorer people could expect no justice.

Much has been written about the role of information technologies and especially social networks in chapter one uprisings.

No doubt they provide a powerful instrument for mobilizing and convening protest. In Manila in 2001 text messaging brought a million people wearing black into the streets and turned out the corrupt President Joseph E. Estrada. The death of a young woman protestor in Tehran, shot down in the 2009 Green Movement uprising, was uplinked to YouTube and galvanized the Internet.

In Tunisia, Twitter and Facebook brought demonstrators out.

But the significant communications had been going on for years among Tunisians, creating that “shared awareness.” They had been connected to the outside. They knew what norms of governance are elsewhere, what they were being deprived of. Moreover, young activists were connected to protest predecessors elsewhere, youth movements like Otpor in Belgrade who turned out Milosevic, and Pora! in Kiev who reversed the election coup in Ukraine. These democrats (and some interesting international NGOs) mentored Tunisians — and Egyptians — in techniques of nonviolent civil resistance.

This sort of communications work over time forms what Shirky calls the environmental context of social networking, when civil society builds its capacities and beliefs. He writes we spend too much effort trying to persuade authoritarians to keep our foreign “instruments” unfettered, Web sites and TV feeds like the New York BBC World, when the really conclusive contributions to shared awareness are what the people in closed societies are able to say among themselves.

The general point is that people still make revolutions, not information technologies.

The Tunisian and Egyptian democratic uprisings turned the negative trend lines on their heads. A new Zeitgeist has spread across the Arab world from Tunisia, that authoritarian pretensions to legitimacy could be challenged. This “Arab awakening” is real, whether or not regimes fall to protestors elsewhere. Information technology connections lifted Arab youth from their humiliating isolation from the wider world.

In Egypt, because Mubarak’s long reign was seen as important for the “peace process,” Westerners turned their scrutiny away from the pent-up resentments of Egyptians over corruption, lousy services and lack of accomplishment at the national level — 44 percent of Egyptians are illiterate — and for individuals. Egyptian engineers and other professionals roamed the Gulf and North Africa as itinerants because there was no work at home.

Egypt has grinding poverty but also a professional middle class, and pillars of civil society, including, of course, the Muslim Brotherhood Mubarak tried to demonize, but which Egyptians know is actually pretty mainstream.

Western commentators pooh-poohed the chances of Tunisia’s uprising migrating to Egypt where it was said the population was passively fatalistic. When Obama grabbed the chair of his first National Security Council meeting on the topic, he found the consensus expert analysis gave only a 20 percent chance of Egyptians taking up the Tunisian uprising example.

“We are all Khaled Said,” heralded the Facebook page about the young computer businessman beaten to death by security thugs. Five million Egyptians are on Facebook. Tahrir Square filled with a wide array of protestors demanding Mubarak’s ouster. The government turned off the Internet and telecommunications for cellphones (contrary to assumptions it couldn’t be done just like that) but it only made more people pour into the streets to find out what was going on. Psychologically, it contributed to a tipping point where people, ordinary people, who were not especially political at all, felt they had to be there even at the risk to their lives. The support Mubarak expected from the usual established scaredy-cats once violence and disorder broke out — if Mubarak’s thugs could only force it to — didn’t materialize in any decisive way.

The world watched, mesmerized, and largely inspired. Public opinion trend lines about supporting other people’s aspirations for democracy began to shift. Eighty-three percent of Americans thought Mubarak should step down — “now.”

Its spread to Libya has been a less fortunate story. Nonviolence couldn’t hold against a dictator with security forces willing to shoot people down. Libya had no civil society to speak of. Tribal divisions contrast with Egypt’s sense of being a 7,000-year-old nation. At this writing in mid-March 2011, the UN Security Zone and the Arab League have authorized a “no-fly zone” over Libya.
Canada is participating with six CF-18 fighter jets and support staff based in the Mediterranean. We shall see how effective this is in pushing back Ghaddafi’s push-back of the popular revolt against his 42-year despotic regime.

Chapter one conflicts between democratic protestors and authoritarian rulers are inherently asymmetrical. The regime has all the tools of force. Many dictators have learned they cannot count on the professional army and must have blindly loyal forces — like Iran’s Revolutionary Guards — so heavily invested in the regime's survival they will use all the firepower at their disposal, which is what has happened in Libya (where shamefully, the Algerian military has been adding to the arms available).

Western democracies have a dilemma. The Libyan revolution can only claim authenticity if Libyans bring it off without foreign, especially Western, boots on Libyan soil. But some sort of military support to help balance the unfair fight seemed to many to be within the purview of the “responsibility to protect” — at one time not so long ago a policy initiative that redounded to Canadian honour.

Ghaddafi and his odious sons, courted once by Canadian businesses, scholars and even Prime Minister Paul Martin, all eager for deals, are going to be pariahs internationally. Democracy will come to Libya, if not in the near term, then before long.

Other authoritarians are clamping down. The Saudis, under the banner of the Gulf Cooperation Council, have moved troops into Bahrain to help defend the Khalifa family from democracy. Of course, the Saudis claim it is a step to counter Iranian influence. It is really a step to counter the influence of democrats in the Wahabi kingdom of the El-Saud clan itself, stuck in a theocratic time warp where women aren’t allowed to drive and where youth isn’t expected to think.

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Neil MacFarquar of the New York Times regretted that the political demise of Mubarak would mean the end of anti-Mubarak jokes in Egypt. He sought replenishment in Saudi Arabia. It wasn’t easy to find but finally he came up with a Saudi political joke.

A Somali, an Egyptian and a Saudi are asked their opinion on the eating of meat. The Somali, baffled, replies, “What’s ‘eating’?” The Egyptian asks, “What’s ‘meat’?” The Saudi asks, “What’s an opinion?”

Yemen is another locale of protest. It’s a hard case. Outside the capital, Sana’a, it is basically anarchy. Unemployment is officially 37 percent. Everyone has at least a gun or two. Al-Qaeda is there. Across the narrow Bab el Mandeb Strait of the Red Sea sits Somalia, where al-Qaeda, gangs and pirates inhabit a state deemed to be failed almost 20 years ago. Oil from the Gulf goes through that narrow passage to Europe and America.

What is Obama to do? The US Fifth Fleet is in Bahrain, and part of the US oil addiction is supplied along the Yemen Coast where al-Qaeda has probably its ultimate redoubt. The US is trying, pragmatically, country by country to manage without glaring inconsistency the collision between principles and interests. It is extraordinarily difficult and deserves more than the usual braying about “Obama’s incompetence.”

Are the Maghreb and Middle Eastern experiences likely to reverberate much more widely or is it a question of a delayed “Arab Spring” catching up? Are global trend lines really changed? The unanimous Security Council vote to kick Ghaddafi’s Libya out of the UN Human Rights Council, where Libyans had held sway for years, and to refer his lethal suppression of Libyan protest to the International Criminal Court, do suggest a much wider political imprint.

Will it help aspirining democrats elsewhere to turn out authoritarian rulers and enable them to have a say in decisions taken over their lives, which is really the most basic of human political rights?

To answer, we need to study why some democratic protest uprisings succeed and others fail. Here are six common features of success:

Income levels. As a rule, when per capita annual income exceeds $6,000, a protest movement will succeed. When it is below $1,500, it won’t. (Egypt’s is about $2,800, about the same as Indonesia, where it succeeded.)

There are qualifiers. Authoritarian oil-wealthy states may not turn out so happily for democrats, even when the revenues are distributed inadequately, as was the case in Libya. Occasionally, a very poor country, such as Mali, does come up with its form of democracy.

The point is not really about income, of course, but about infrastructure and social capital. A wealthier country will have civil society pillars able to conduct on social networks the sort of national conversation that contributes to the social awareness “something must be done.”

Civil society. The existence of civil society is fundamental, not just for
democratic transition but for development on all levels.

Political effect emerges from apolitical activity on a private, non-governmental level. ANC militants against apartheid in South Africa cut their organizational teeth in football clubs white rulers seemed to leave alone. In Prague, in the 1990s, the music scene helped the Velvet Revolution prepare. In Cuba recently, I saw daycare centres for single working mothers set up by the Catholic Church where women were taking decisions about something they were running for the first time in their lives.

Empowerment happens in many ways. What is clear is that without a functioning civil society, people who have banded together in unions, professional organizations, environmental movements and day-to-day activities like running libraries or co-ops, a chapter one uprising will have much greater difficulty transiting through chapter two, building the new democracy.

The army. The role of the army is often decisive. In Prague, Belgrade, Kiev and Jakarta, the army refused to fire on the people. Their own people.

In Cairo’s Tahrir Square, the army stayed neutral until Mubarak’s thugs began to attack peaceful protestors. On February 2, the army intervened against them and Mubarak fell.

Why did the army refuse orders to shoot and then intervene decisively? Did they see that Mubarak was by that time a loser and just change sides? After all, the Egyptian military is a big economic stakeholder in the country, accounting for up to 30 percent of GDP.

There is something professionally more noble to be factored in. The army is a very respected national institution. The principle of being the defender “of all the people” is real to its officers.

This is especially so because of training they have had at staff colleges.

An Egyptian girl waves her national flag as antigovernment protesters demonstrate around her in Tahrir, or Liberation Square. The tumultuous events of the Arab Spring then rolled on into Libya.
in democracies. Many commentators have presumed the $1.3 billion in US annual military aid is mostly what influenced Egyptian military leaders. More likely, it is the “mil-mil” mentoring countless officers have had at the US Army Staff College on the sorts of issues that weren’t taught when such as a young Idi Amin went abroad to train: human rights, civilian authority, transparency.

The Ukrainian army didn’t fire on protestors in the Orange Revolution. For 15 years the officers had been going through NATO partnership programs. Conscripts saw themselves reflected in the youthful demonstrators on the Maidan.

Contrary examples, sadly, abound. In Tiananmen Square (1989), Rangoon (2007) and Tehran (2009), orders to shoot protestors were obeyed.

In Burma, the army is the hermit regime, and the country’s wealth is the army’s spoils.

In China, an ideological cohesion kicks in. In Iran, it is more theocratic, spearheaded through the Revolutionary Guards whom Iranian-Canadian expert Ramin Jehanbegloo concludes actually control the country as well as its oil, gas and nuclear industries.

Nonviolence. It is essential for success that popular protests be nonviolent. Gandhi and Martin Luther King are often described as being “peaceful” protestors. Nothing could be more wrong. They disturbed the peace to effect change, through civil resistance, which is a form of conflict, but nonviolent by definition.

Such conflicts being asymmetrical, the use of force invites counterforce, which is bound to be superior.

Moreover, the use of violence alienates the bulk of people. In the hierarchy of needs, safety and security come at the top.

Authoritarian regimes want violence to break out so that they can reassure troubled citizenry they are restoring order and safety.

Discipline. It is essential that protestors therefore maintain discipline. As noted, there has been an international mentoring chain of instruction in nonviolent civil resistance training, more or less in the wake of the writings of nonviolent guru Gene Sharp, whose key book, From Dictatorship to Democracy, is essentially the basic text.

The counterpart to discipline in nonviolence is discipline to minimize in-fighting among protestors who have one purpose in common, to throw off the yoke, but who come from very different places in terms of their political conceptions of what sort of democratic governance should follow.

Popular protest movements are usually bottom-up phenomena. Charismatic leaders such as Aung San Suu Kyi can serve effectively as emblematic inspirers, but most movements are genuinely popular not relying on top-down command and control, making discipline all the more vital.

Outside support. Democracy can neither be exported nor imported. It certainly can’t be imposed through Iraq-style “regime change.” It needs to emerge from within, to be authentic and enduring.

What is Obama to do? The US Fifth Fleet is in Bahrain, and part of the US oil addiction is supplied along the Yemen Coast where al-Qaeda has probably its ultimate redoubt. The US is trying, pragmatically, country-by-country to manage without glaring inconsistency the collision between principles and interests.

But outside support can be extremely useful. Democratic governments can help buttress civil society’s development everywhere, in a myriad of ways, but it isn’t as much a state interest as it is one in the interest of our own civil societies. International NGOs do it better. Governments support it as a function of solidarity with democrats in our own societies, not as a function of state interest.

This introduces a vital issue of management for democracies. We have principles and we have interests. They shouldn’t be in competition. We can do more than one thing at a time. It is a lesson that distinguishes the Obama administration from US policy during much of the Cold War or the “War on Terror.”

Strategic engagement is essential, with China, Iran, Cuba and others. But those partnerships on issues of common functional concern have to be deployed as well on behalf of our principles, which argue for supporting the rights of assembly and free speech denied citizens of the countries concerned. It is not on our account we speak with clarity and candour to the regimes concerned, but to make sure they understand that any strategic partnership needs efforts on their part to accommodate the human rights they have in almost every case agreed to in a whole host of UN and other covenants and that they proclaim every day in propaganda. Consistency is critical for credibility.

Hosni Mubarak, in office for 30 years, fell after only 18 days of democratic protests, the same length of time it took demonstrators on the Maidan in Kiev to bring about the Orange Revolution. Often, the seemingly invulnerable drop the quickest: Ceausescu was dispatched in Romania in just 10 days.

But the post-uprising phase has immediate perils. Post-Shah of Iran, post-fall of Saddam, post-death of Tito, post-French revolution for that matter, all veered toward extremists or into chaos, when there is always a would-be Napoleon ready to fill the void. It is why chapter two — governance — needs to be prepared and, to the extent it is purposeful, mentored, long in advance.
It is much easier for democracies to support the phase of actual democratic transition, working openly with a partner government and supporting civil society and institutional and other forms of governance development.

Again, there are a number of basic rules to success (adapted from The Diplomat’s Handbook for Democracy Development Support, 2nd ed.):

1. It’s up to them. As Freedom House has put it, “The men and women of each country are really the authors of their own democratic development.”
2. There is no single template for democracy. Each trajectory is different, pending on traditions and states of readiness.
3. The building blocks of change are in civil society.
4. Organic and durable change is usually bottom-up, rarely elite-driven.
5. Successful transition relies on behaviour. It is not a process or an “app” to be downloaded or transferred.
6. Democracy thus has to be learned and over time. Education is essential.
7. Free and fair elections are only one of many starting points. Post-election management of diversity and pluralism is critical.
8. Violence is rarely effective as a force for change.
9. Democracy needs security — and needs to ensure it.
10. To sustain popular acceptance, democracy must deliver other essential outcomes — transparency, fairness, justice and adequately shared economic progress.

The key is for a democratic government in transition to establish its legitimacy. It comes from much more than free and fair elections.

Reconciliation after conflict is important. The circle of retribution needs to be narrow if the society is to move forward. Countries learn from one another. Chileans mentored South Africans in setting up a truth and reconciliation commission and South Africans mentored Rwandans. The best mentors are often those who have gone through similar transitions.

But developed countries have the material and moral means to support democracy movements. We made major errors at the outset of the last wave of democratic transition. We thought we could send expensive advisers from the World Bank and finance departments to tutor Russians on how we do things in Frankfurt or New York. We didn’t have a clue about the uniqueness of their challenges, emerging from a totalitarian past and turning everything upside-down at once. I was there at the time, as Canada’s ambassador to Moscow, and I was both enthralled and appalled at what was going on, in terms of our inputs and their outputs.

It is not our democracy or economy we are trying to convey. The “Washington Consensus” is long-since discredited. It is the development of other new democracies that we are fraternally supporting as we can, with humility and patience, bearing in mind that chronologically major anti-democratic abuses persisted in our own democracies until recently, and that today the fault lines of anti-democratic behaviour are major objects of our own citizens’ complaints.

The rule of law doesn’t come from copying our statutes or mimicking our courts. The rule of law — as Thomas Carothers has written — resides within the heads of citizens. By now we are hard-wired. It will take time. We must stay the course alongside as long as we are welcome. Too often we have sent observers to oversee a free and fair first election and then walked away in self-satisfaction.

We have to care about the quality of other people’s lives and opportunities.

Vaclav Havel has written in The Diplomat’s Handbook that “more and more people are aware of the indivisibility of human fate on this planet, that the problems of anyone of us, or of whatever country we are from — be it the smallest and most forgotten — are the problems of us all; that our freedom is indivisible as well, and that we all believe in the same basic values, while sharing common fears about the threats that are hanging over humanity today.”

That is what the brave citizens of Tunisia and Egypt have done. They have shaken the world. So have the equally brave citizens of Libya, Bahrain and, yes, in their own way, Saudi Arabia. Stay tuned. More, after the break.

Contributing Writer Jeremy Kinsman served as Canada’s ambassador or high commissioner to 15 countries and organizations, including Russia, Britain and the European Union. He currently heads a Community of Democracies program for democracy development and is Regents’ Lecturer at the University of California, Berkeley. He is distinguished visiting diplomat at Ryerson University in Toronto.