Fight for democracy continues in Ukraine

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The Soviet Union's collapse in 1991 ushered in a wave of democracy that was virtually unthinkable only a few years before. The U.S.S.R.'s 15 republics became independent countries and ordinary people elected their leaders in many of them. During this heady time most people saw the shift to democracy as permanent and irreversible. But intervening events have shown otherwise, with the latest act in this "democracy drama" currently being played out in Ukraine.

Ukraine, the second-most populous country in the former Soviet Union after Russia, occupies a strategic geographical position between Russia and the West. On Nov. 21, the Ukrainian people went to the polls to elect a new president. Their choice was between the reform-minded Viktor Yushchenko and the status quo candidate, Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich.

Yushchenko had long been the favorite to succeed current President Leonid Kuchma. Kuchma, however, supported Yanukovich and directed that state-controlled television and other resources be used to support his candidate. In addition to this resource deficit, Yushchenko was allegedly poisoned during the campaign. Through all of this Yushchenko maintained his pre-election lead and was widely expected to win.

But the election results showed Yanukovich receiving the most votes; by all accounts victory was stolen from Yushchenko through massive vote fraud. This triggered huge protests across Ukraine. For almost two weeks, hundreds of thousands of people braved snow and bitter cold to demand a solution that would result in a president reflecting the voters' will.

As a Ukrainian friend wrote in an e-mail to me: "We ... have joined the protesters and also taken to the streets. The best minds of Ukraine (singers, poets, journalists and politicians) joined the protesters to defend their choice of Yushchenko. It is clear to everyone that Yushchenko won this election and there was blatant vote rigging."

Last Friday, these brave people won an unexpected and decisive victory. Ukraine's supreme court overturned the election results and ordered a new runoff. The task now before the people is to ensure that the Dec. 26 runoff is fraud-free.

The stakes in Ukraine are especially great when considering that democracy is struggling in the former Soviet Union. For me, the most important component of democracy -- the litmus test -- is the right of the people to select their nation's leader in a free and fair election. Six of the 15 post-Soviet countries currently pass this litmus test. Seven countries fail the test: Belarus, ruled by a neo-Stalinist; the five countries of Central Asia, whose leaders have all been in power since their countries became independent 13 years ago; and Azerbaijan, whose new president took over from his deceased father.

That leaves Russia and Ukraine. Russia technically meets the test in its post-Soviet presidential elections but President Vladimir Putin, a former KGB officer, has increasingly pursued anti-democratic policies. Most recently, he has used the horrific terrorist massacre of schoolchildren in the town of Beslan as a pretext to try and eliminate direct election of provincial governors.

As for Ukraine, a properly conducted runoff election, and a Yushchenko victory, will be a major triumph for democracy. It will invigorate not only Ukraine but may encourage populations in neighboring Belarus and Russia to demand restoration or expansion of their own democratic practices. But a loss will embolden those who support more authoritarian policies and make it harder for the people to resist.

Democracy in the former Soviet Union will achieve a great victory or experience a serious defeat in the runoff. In a region that has suffered incalculable evil over the past century, let us hope for victory.

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