

Recognizing the Power of Nonviolent Action

By Stephen Zunes | March 30, 2005

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You probably didn't notice, but February 20 was Nonviolent Resistance Day. One might think this would be cause for celebration by an administration committed to expanding freedom and democracy. But there weren't any special ceremonies at the White House or resolutions in Congress. For despite all the rhetoric lauding freedom and democracy, the U.S. government has rarely supported, and has often opposed, nonviolent movements working for democratic change.

Nonviolent action campaigns have been a part of political life for millennia, challenging abuses by authorities, spearheading social reforms, and protesting militarism and discrimination. In recent years, however, there has been an increase in movements that have not only led to significant political and social reforms advancing the cause of human rights but have even toppled repressive regimes from power and forced leaders to change the very nature of their governance. In more recent decades, nonviolence has become a more deliberate tool for social change, evolving from an ad hoc strategy associated with religious or ethical principles into a reflective, even institutionalized, method of struggle.

Indeed, the past 20 years have witnessed a remarkable upsurge in nonviolent insurrections against autocratic rulers. Primarily nonviolent "people power" movements have overthrown authoritarian regimes in nearly two dozen countries over the past two and a half decades, have forced substantial reforms in even more countries, and have seriously challenged other despots.

In contrast to armed struggles, these nonviolent insurrections are movements of organized popular resistance to government authority, and they—either consciously or by necessity—eschew the use of weapons of modern warfare. Unlike conventional political movements, nonviolent campaigns usually employ tactics outside the mainstream political processes of electioneering and lobbying. Tactics may include strikes, boycotts, mass demonstrations, the popular contestation of public space, tax refusal,

destruction of symbols of government authority (such as official identification cards), refusal to obey official orders (such as curfew restrictions), and the creation of alternative institutions for political legitimacy and social organization.

Why Nonviolence Works

Not all nonviolent pro-democracy movements have been successful, of course; several have been suppressed, as in Burma and China. What is surprising is not that some of them have failed—as have many violent insurgencies around the world—but that so many of them have succeeded.

The world is certainly no less conflictual than in past years. Yet, there have been dramatic improvements in civil and political rights over the past two decades, and nonviolent action has played a crucial role in this transition, including the downfall of dictatorships in Eastern Europe, Latin America, Africa, and Asia. There are several reasons why insurgents have turned away from armed struggle to embrace nonviolent action.

One reason is a growing awareness of the increasing costs of insurgency warfare. In a mirror image of Western national security managers, who insisted during the 1960s and 1970s that guerrilla warfare could easily be defeated (even in such cases as Algeria and Vietnam), many on the left and in the Third World created a counter-myth of the invincibility of such movements. However, technology has given status quo powers an increasing advantage in recent



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years. Even when an armed insurgency is victorious, large segments of the population are displaced, farms and villages are destroyed, cities and much of the nation's infrastructure are severely damaged, the economy is wrecked, and there is widespread environmental devastation. The net result is an increasing realization that the benefits of waging an armed insurrection may not be worth the costs.

Another factor endorsing nonviolence is the tendency, once in power, for victorious armed movements against dictatorships to fail in establishing pluralistic, democratic, and independent political systems capable of supporting social and economic development and promoting human rights. Often these shortcomings result in part from counter-revolution, natural disasters, foreign intervention, trade embargoes, and other circumstances beyond a victorious popular movement's control. However, the choice of armed struggle as a means of securing power tends to exacerbate these problems and creates troubles of its own. For one, armed struggle often promotes the ethos of a secret elite vanguard, downplaying democracy and showing less tolerance for pluralism. Often disagreements that could be resolved peaceably in nonmilitarized institutions lead to bloody factional fighting. Some countries, like Algeria and Guinea-Bissau, experienced military coups not long after armed revolutionary movements ousted colonialists. Others, like Angola and Mozambique, endured bloody civil wars.

Still another drawback of armed revolt is that maintaining a strong military generally requires greater dependence on outside benefactors for weapons. In the past this led several revolutionary governments to become reliant on the Soviet Union, which—like any major power—traditionally tied strings to its aid. Even a relatively low level of assistance during the course of an armed struggle starts a dependent relationship that is hard to break. This association can, in turn, induce elements of the old dictatorship to ally with rival major powers in an effort to overthrow the new government.

For example, having ousted the Somoza dictatorship through armed force, the popular but heavily militarized Sandinista Front—despite largely avoiding

the Cuban revolution's pitfall of sliding into a communist dictatorship—was still faced with U.S.-organized attacks by armed mercenaries. U.S. support for the Contras was justified by American policymakers on the (largely fabricated) grounds that the Sandinista military had aggressive designs on neighboring countries. In turn, the national security threat from the United States reinforced the military wing of the Sandinistas, robbing precious funds from desperately needed domestic programs and leading eventually to military conscription and counterinsurgency efforts that alienated some important segments of the population. The result of the Contra War was widespread destruction, the collapse of the Nicaraguan economy, and the Sandinistas' eventual electoral defeat.

The poverty and injustices afflicting many Third World countries are so extensive that a successful armed movement against an authoritarian regime—even if it has strong organization, proven mobilization skills, and a coherent ideology—is not sufficient to address the pressing concerns facing a country in transition after the devastation of the revolution. As a result, there has been a growing interest in tactics that minimize the degree of dislocation in a country and maximize the chances that segments of the population can become contributing members of a post-authoritarian political order to help build a new society respectful of human rights.

The growing awareness of the power of nonviolent action stems from several phenomena. First, insurgents are increasingly convinced that armed resistance tends to upset undecided elements of the population, who then seek security in the government. When facing a violent insurgency, a government can easily justify its repression. But force used against unarmed resistance movements usually creates greater sympathy for the government's opponents, a phenomenon that former Harvard sociologist Gene Sharp has referred to as “political *jiu jitsu*,” whereby an opposition movement leverages state repression to advance the movement's ends. Second, unarmed campaigns involve far more participants, taking advantage of a popular movement's majority support. Unarmed resistance also encourages the creation of alternative

institutions, which further undermine the repressive status quo and form the basis for a new independent and democratic order.

Armed resistance often backfires by legitimizing the use of repressive tactics. Violence from the opposition is often welcomed by authoritarian governments and even encouraged through the use of *agents provocateurs*, because it then justifies state repression. But state violence unleashed on unarmed dissidents often triggers a turning point in nonviolent struggles. A government attack against peaceful demonstrators can be the spark that transforms periodic protests into a full-scale insurrection.

Unarmed resistance movements also tend to sow divisions within pro-government circles for a number of reasons. First, disagreements surface internally regarding how to effectively deal with the resistance, since few governments are as prepared to deal with unarmed revolts as they are to quash armed ones. Violent repression of a peaceful movement can often alter popular and elite perceptions of the legitimacy of power, which is why state officials usually use less repression against nonviolent movements. Second, some pro-government elements become less concerned about the consequences of a compromise with insurgents if their resistance is nonviolent. Unarmed movements increase the likelihood of defections and noncooperation by unmotivated police and military personnel, whereas armed revolts legitimize the role of the government's coercive apparatus, enhancing its self-perception as the protector of civil society. The moral power of nonviolence is crucial in the ability of an opposition movement to reframe the perceptions of key parties: the public, political elites, and the military, most of whom have no difficulty supporting the use of violence against violent insurrections.

The efficacy of nonviolent resistance in dividing supporters of the status quo is apparent not just in rendering government troops less effective but also in challenging the attitudes of an entire nation and even foreign actors, as in the South African struggle against apartheid. Pictures of peaceful protesters—including whites, members of the clergy, and other “upstanding citizens”—broadcast on television world-

wide lent legitimacy to anti-apartheid forces and undermined the South African government in a way that the armed rebellion was unable to do. As nonviolent resistance within the country escalated, external pressure in the form of economic sanctions and other solidarity tactics by the international community raised the costs of maintaining the apartheid system.

Due to increased global interdependence, the non-local audience for a conflict may be just as important as the immediate community. Just as Gandhi played to British citizens in Manchester and London, organizers of the civil rights movement in the U.S. South were communicating to the entire nation and especially to the Kennedy administration. Insurgency against the Soviet bloc was disseminated by television broadcasts that spread the news from country to country, legitimating local protests that no longer seemed like isolated events organized by unstable dissidents. The prominent role of the global media during the anti-Marcos “people power” movement in 1986 was instrumental in forcing the U.S. government to scale back its support of the Philippine dictator. Israeli repression of nonviolent protests by Palestinians during the 1980s had a similar effect on Americans, whose perception is significant given the role of both private citizens and the U.S. government in sustaining Israel's military and economic infrastructure. As Rashid Khalidi observed, the Palestinians had “succeeded at last in conveying the reality of their victimization to world public opinion.”

As the pro-active ingredient in nonviolent resistance, the creation of alternative structures provides both a moral and a practical underpinning for efforts aimed at bringing about fundamental social change. Parallel structures in civil society may render state control increasingly impotent, as they did throughout Eastern Europe leading up to the events of 1989. In the Philippines, Marcos lost power not through the defeat of his troops and the storming of the Malacañang Palace but from the withdrawal of sufficient support for his authority, so the palace became the only part of the country that his troops could effectively control. On the same day that Marcos was officially sworn in for another term as president in a

state ceremony, Corazon Aquino was symbolically sworn in as the people's president. Given that most Filipinos saw Marcos' election as fraudulent, the vast majority offered its allegiance to President Aquino rather than President Marcos. The transfer of allegiance from one source of authority and legitimacy to another is a key element of a successful nonviolent uprising.

In the course of a successful nonviolent revolution, and with adequate popular participation, political authority may be wrested from the state and invested in institutions of civil society, as these parallel institutions grow in effectiveness and legitimacy. The state may become increasingly impotent and irrelevant, as parallel nongovernmental institutions take over an increasing portion of the tasks of governing a society, providing services to the populace, and creating functional equivalents to the institutions of the state.

Nonviolent Movements Against U.S.-backed Governments

The United States has often supported repressive leaders—such as Numeiry in Sudan, Duvalier in Haiti, Marcos in the Philippines, Chun in South Korea, and Pinochet in Chile—who have attempted to crush nonviolent pro-democracy movements. Each of these U.S.-backed dictators was overthrown through nonviolent movements, though, thanks in part to a lack of U.S. support for the new democratic governments, both Sudan and Haiti slid back into authoritarian rule. And despite 33 years of U.S. support through both Republican and Democratic administrations, Suharto of Indonesia—with even more blood on his hands than Saddam Hussein—was toppled in an unarmed insurrection in 1998.

In 1980-81 during both the Carter and Reagan administrations, the Salvadoran government was able to withstand a series of general strikes thanks to a commitment from the United States to finance 80% of San Salvador's budget. Bolstered with outside economic support, unpopular governments can often survive the near total collapse of domestic economic activity brought about through such massive noncooperation. As a result, many in the

nonviolent Salvadoran struggle joined the armed insurrection.

A particularly problematic version of this stonewalling phenomenon is manifested by governments—particularly those relying on foreign support—that effectively suppress nonviolent movements without undermining their legitimacy by privatizing their repressive apparatus. This occurs when military officers and top political officials allow or encourage private vigilantes—often with the direct support of elements of the police and military—to violently suppress nonviolent movements as a means of terrorizing the general population into submission. Despite approval by key sectors of the governing apparatus, these death squads are distinct enough from the official chain of command that the government can plausibly deny responsibility. Although most nonviolent activists still blame the government, foreign supporters and some neutral sectors of the population—critical players in the success of pro-democracy movements—may accept the portrayal of the government's leaders as moderates doing their best to curb violence and extremism on all sides.

By privatizing its repressive apparatus, an unpopular government can avoid full-scale warfare and retain some measure of legitimacy by opting instead for “low-intensity conflict (LIC),” a counterinsurgency strategy advocated by U.S. military advisers over the past few decades. This concept evolved in the late 1970s and early 1980s in El Salvador and has been utilized in counterinsurgency situations in Guatemala, Colombia, and the Philippines.

LIC advisers contend that shooting into crowds doesn't work; it merely strengthens the opposition. Overkill can win battles but lose the war. Acknowledging that overt government repression of nonviolent, popular civilian movements is counterproductive, LIC strategy advocates other forms of neutralizing opposition forces, such as economic development programs, propaganda, and focused anti-guerrilla military campaigns. An authoritarian government is encouraged to combine repression with nominal civilian control of its administration to help convert the population to its cause. Sanitizing

and training local armed forces is an integral part of restoring respectability to the autocratic government. Eschewing a shotgun approach, LIC strategy uses a scalpel to neutralize the opposition: wipe out trade union, academic, and religious leaders; identify and annihilate grassroots supporters of the opposition; limit and repress independent human rights groups. This pinpoint focus is where death squads have played an important role.

For example, while American military trainers teach responsible crowd control methods, they also encourage focused forms of violence. The now-famous secret CIA report to the Nicaraguan Contra forces advocates “the selective use of violence” by paramilitary units instead of “indiscriminate” repression as a means of “decapitating” opposition leadership.

The privatization of the repressive apparatus of an unpopular government often has a chilling effect on the prospects of successful nonviolent insurrections. One creative counter-measure involves “nonviolent intervention” by teams of international volunteers organized by Peace Brigades International (PBI) and similar groups. Growing out of the Gandhian tradition, PBI and its sister organizations have sent teams to Guatemala, El Salvador, Sri Lanka, Colombia, and the Israeli-occupied Palestinian territories in the West Bank and Gaza Strip to accompany prominent nonviolent activists as unarmed bodyguards, to stand between soldiers and peaceful demonstrators, to form blockades to protect homes from destruction, and to engage in other tactics. Political leaders are eager to avoid the diplomatic fallout from international observers—particularly North Americans or Europeans—witnessing or becoming casualties of attacks by their soldiers or death squads. Leveraging this concern, these nonviolent intervention teams, despite their small numbers, have become remarkably successful deterrents to state repression.

The successes of such efforts are limited, however. For example, despite the murder by Israeli occupation forces of Rachel Corrie, a 23-year-old American nonviolent activist protecting the home of a Palestinian physician from destruction by Israeli bulldozers in 2003, the Bush administration has

continued its unconditional support for Israel’s repression in the occupied Gaza Strip and West Bank. Indeed, within a month of her killing, Congress voted to increase U.S. aid to Israel by \$1 billion. Adding insult to injury, the Democratic senators in Corrie’s home state of Washington—Patty Murray and Maria Cantwell—persist as outspoken defenders of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, have consistently defended human rights abuses by Israeli occupation forces, and have even denounced the International Court of Justice for its ruling last summer stating that Israel, like other nations, was required to abide by international humanitarian law.

Perhaps the greatest single challenge to the effectiveness of nonviolent action in the cause of human rights is the power of U.S.-backed transnational institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, which can essentially determine the economic policies of newly democratic countries and hold them responsible for debts accumulated by previous dictatorships. Although nonviolent movements may be victorious in enhancing civil and political rights in a country, such movements may be unable to improve people’s social and economic rights.

For example, in the spring of 1997, when tens of thousands of Nicaraguans engaged in a general strike to protest President Arnaldo Aleman’s austerity programs, former Sandinista soldiers and former Contras left their guns at home and collaborated to set up roadblocks and engage in street protests adhering strictly to disciplined nonviolence. Faced with massive nonviolent resistance, the government relented, and the austerity measures were withdrawn. However, the United States, through the International Monetary Fund, forced the Nicaraguan government to implement the austerity plan anyway. As Alejandro Bendaña, a leading Sandinista intellectual, asked an American audience a few months later, “Will the United States allow the people of Latin America to succeed with nonviolence?”

For nonviolent action to be truly effective in the cause of democracy and human rights, it must be transnational, opposing not just the worst manifestations of institutional violence and human rights

abuses but also their source, often lodged within advanced industrialized countries like the United States.

Nonviolent Movements Against Governments Opposed by the United States

During the Cold War, U.S. support for right-wing dictatorships was justified by claiming they were an important bulwark against communism, which—as a “totalitarian” system—was deemed impossible to reform from within. It was felt that military means, such as marshaling strategic alliances like NATO and armed insurgencies like the Afghan mujahedeen, were the only way left-wing dictatorships could be challenged. And yet, nonviolent movements eventually brought down entrenched communist rulers in Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Mongolia. During that same period, the Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia broke free from the Soviet Union, also largely through the use of nonviolent resistance. With the partial exception of the Solidarity movement in Poland, however, there was little direct support from the United States.

During the 1990s, the oppressed ethnic Albanian majority in Kosovo waged a massive nonviolent campaign against its Serbian oppressors using strikes, boycotts, peaceful demonstrations, and alternative institutions in one of the most widespread, comprehensive, and sustained nonviolent campaigns since Gandhi’s struggle for Indian independence. Tragically, the U.S. government and much of the rest of the world chose to ignore the Kosovars’ nonviolent movement. Only after a shadowy armed group known as the Kosovo Liberation Army emerged in 1998 did the world media, the Clinton administration, and other Western governments finally take notice. By waiting for the emergence of guerrilla warfare before seeking a solution, the West gave the Milosevic regime the opportunity to crack down with an iron fist. Western diplomatic efforts were too late and culminated in a NATO bombing campaign that not only killed over 500 civilians but led to a dramatic increase in Serbian repression. State violence inflamed the Kosovar movement, which became dominated by armed ultranationalists who have

proven far less ready to compromise or to guarantee the rights of the Serbian minority in an autonomous Kosovo.

Less than a year later, however, the people of Serbia were able to achieve nonviolently what 11 weeks of NATO bombing could not accomplish: the ouster of their dictatorial leader, Slobodan Milosevic. This was the third major nonviolent uprising against Milosevic: the previous two failed in large part due to the refusal of the United States and other Western powers to support the democratic forces. Indeed, during the 1996 uprising, U.S. special envoy Richard Holbrooke successfully argued that the Clinton administration should back Milosevic—in recognition of his role in the successful peace deal in Bosnia—and not risk the instability that might result from a victory by Serbian democrats. Through first appeasement and then warfare, Washington allowed Milosevic to remain in power far longer than necessary. As the democratically elected Yugoslav President Vojislav Kostunica put it: “The Americans assisted Milosevic, not only when they supported him but also when they attacked him. In a way, Milosevic is an American creation.”

The success of nonviolent movements may be forcing Washington to recognize the power of peaceful resistance. Though less than European support, last fall’s U.S. economic assistance to pro-democracy groups in the Ukraine helped rectify an attempt to steal the country’s presidential election. U.S. support had a similar impact in the former Soviet republic of Georgia in 2003.

In most other countries, however, the United States continues to downplay internal pro-democracy movements while threatening military intervention in the name of democracy’s defense. For example, in Iran, there has been a dramatic growth in civil society institutions challenging the Iranian government’s human rights abuses. Leading Iranian pro-democracy activists have recognized that any foreign military attack on their country would have disastrous consequences to their struggle. In the February 19 issue of the British newspaper *The Independent*, leading Iranian human rights activist and 2003 Nobel Peace

Prize winner Shirin Ebadi observed: “Respect for human rights in any country must spring forth through the will of the people and as part of a genuine democratic process. Such respect can never be imposed by foreign military might and coercion—an approach that abounds in contradictions.” Instead, Ebadi insists that “the most effective way to promote human rights in Iran is to provide moral support and international recognition to independent human rights defenders.”

It is important, therefore, to recognize that because nonviolent movements for human rights and democracy are by their nature indigenous, home-grown phenomena, they cannot be controlled by the U.S. government. Political repression and the need for democracy in countries like Iran and Syria are quite real, but it would be naïve—particularly in light of active U.S. support for other dictatorships in the region—to believe that the Bush administration really cares about promoting freedom in the Middle East or anywhere else. As Ebadi noted, “It is hard not to see America’s focus on human rights in Iran as a cloak for its larger strategic interests.” Behind their platitudes and public pronouncements, U.S. officials recognize that the power of nonviolent action must be downplayed in order to justify massive U.S. military spending to build “an arsenal for democracy” and for U.S. military intervention overseas.

It is relatively easy to criticize U.S. military intervention as well as the hypocrisy and double standards of the Bush administration’s rhetoric championing democracy. However, to effectively support alternatives to U.S. policy, progressives should first concede that there are repressive rulers that indeed need to be challenged and should then insist that the way to lasting regime change is not by bombing and invasions but through the power of nonviolent action.

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