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The trifecta of civil resistance: unity, planning, discipline

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Three attributes can make the difference between success and failure for nonviolent movements around the world: unity, planning, and nonviolent discipline.

What makes nonviolent civil resistance movements effective?

If we accept the axiom that in politics “power is never given, it is always taken”, the conclusion necessarily is that historic nonviolent movements were successful because, somehow, they wielded power that was greater than that of their opponents.

This conclusion conflicts with, and opens up a direct line of questioning about, the widely-held assumption that power ultimately originates from control of material resources and capacity for violence. If this assumption were entirely correct, nonviolent movements would categorically fail against better-armed and -resourced opponents. What history reveals, however, is a timeline of many successful nonviolent struggles, extending back for more than a century, with protagonists and causes as diverse as humanity itself. To list some examples:

- * In the 1930s and 1940s, Indians won their independence by engaging in massive noncooperation (economic boycotts, school boycotts, strikes, tax refusal, civil disobedience, resignations) that threatened to make India ungovernable and eventually convinced the British to leave;
- * During the 1950s and 1960s, the US Civil Rights Movement won equal rights through nonviolent campaigns such as the Montgomery bus boycotts and the Nashville lunch-counter sit-ins that exploited weaknesses in the institutionalized segregation system and attracted supporters nationwide;
- * From 1965-1970, the United Farm Workers union grew from a small, practically unfunded local organization to a national presence through their successful use of strikes and boycotts against California grape vineyards;
- * In 1986 in the Philippines, activists joined with military defectors to rally millions to demonstrate against the US-backed dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos. With his options quickly diminishing in light of this nonviolent uprising, Marcos fled the country;
- * In 1988, Chileans overcame the fear instilled by the brutal dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet and campaigned and demonstrated against him. These actions so undermined Pinochet's support that even his fellow military junta members were no longer loyal to him at the peak of the crisis, and he was forced from power;
- * From 1980-1989, Poles organized an independent trade union as part of the Solidarity movement and took back their country from Soviet rule;
- * In 1989, protests and strikes that became known as the Velvet Revolution led to a peaceful transition from communism in Czechoslovakia. Similar actions led to peaceful transitions in East Germany, and in Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia in 1991;
- * Strikes, boycotts, civil disobedience and external sanctions beginning in the 1980s played a major role in ending apartheid in South Africa in the early 1990s;

* In the following decade, Serbs (2000), Georgians (2003), and Ukrainians (2004) ended autocratic rule by mobilizing to prevent or resist fraudulent election results;

* In 2005, Lebanese ended the occupation of their country by Syrian troops through massive nonviolent demonstrations;

* In 2006, Nepalis engaged in mass disobedience and forced the restoration of civilian rule;

* From 2007-2009, in the midst of violent insurgency and in the face of a military ruler, Pakistani lawyers, civil society groups, and ordinary citizens successfully pushed for the restoration of an independent judiciary and a repeal of state of emergency laws.

If people do not obey, rulers cannot rule

These and other movements of civil resistance succeeded because they were based on a fundamental insight about power: that nearly all institutions, organizations, and systems in a society depend on the ongoing consent, cooperation, and obedience of large numbers of ordinary people. Therefore, if people choose to withdraw their consent and cooperation in an organized and strategic way, they can wield coercive power. When people do not obey, then presidents, mayors, CEOs, generals, and other “power holders” can no longer rule with unchecked power.

Nonviolent tactics, such as strikes, boycotts, mass demonstrations, civil disobedience, the establishment of parallel institutions, and literally hundreds of other creative actions, were the instruments used to do this. They were not used necessarily for moral reasons, but rather for pragmatic ones. Some who adopted civil resistance had seen similar strategies work in other countries or in their own histories, and recognized that this type of resistance had the best prospects of success of the options available to them.

Skills and conditions

Amidst these inspiring nonviolent movement victories, however, history and the contemporary world also offer examples of failed or inconclusive movements. The world watched Poland's and Czechoslovakia's nonviolent revolutions in the same year that it saw the Tiananmen Square massacre. In the last decade, large numbers of people used nonviolent tactics in Burma, Zimbabwe, Egypt and Iran, but movements' goals have not so far been achieved. In the successful self-determination struggle in East Timor, civil resistance was indispensable, but while it has helped propel civilian-based movements against occupiers elsewhere—in Palestine, West Papua, Western Sahara and Tibet—those struggles remain unresolved.

What accounts for the discrepancies among these and other cases?

The factors that made these and other movements succeed or fail is a subject on which reasonable and well-informed people can disagree.[1] Each situation is highly complex and establishing direct causality is difficult at best. The arguments I most often hear by scholars, journalists, and others are that the trajectories and outcomes of these and other predominantly nonviolent movements were largely determined by structures, conditions and exceptional circumstances in which each movement operated.

For example, arguments have been made that nonviolent movements are effective only in societies in which an oppressor is unwilling to use lethal force. Others may claim that certain economic criteria (i.e. economic ideology, income levels, wealth distribution, the presence of a middle class) and educational levels are critical for successful

movements. Still others claim that the role of superpowers and regional hegemony supersedes the importance of other variables in determining a movement's outcome. The number of additional structures and conditions a person can cite—i.e. ethnic diversity, political and cultural history, population size, land area—are numerous, and to be sure, many of these conditions can influence the course of a given movement.

As a counterpoint to structural and conditional factors are factors based on a movement's skills in waging conflict, i.e. what academics call "agency". Skills and agency refer to those variables over which a movement has some control: what strategy of action the movement chooses; what language it uses to mobilize people and keep them involved; how it builds coalitions; where and how it targets its adversary; and a myriad of other decisions involved in engaging in civil resistance.

In my view, these skill-based factors are often significantly underemphasized or overlooked by those who come into contact with and analyze nonviolent movements. Why this is so is beyond the scope of this article, but one reason may be that people doubt or do not know the premise on which nonviolent action is based—that through shifts in collective behavior, power can be re-allocated from entrenched and oppressive adversaries to people's movements. Instead, they assume that there must have been exogenous variables or extraordinary circumstances that made this possible in the cases in which it has occurred.

However, we can respect the role of structures and conditions in influencing nonviolent movements' trajectories and outcomes without downplaying the importance of agency and skills. Indeed, agency and skills make a difference, and in some cases have enabled movements to overcome, circumvent, or transform adverse conditions.

The importance, and sometimes primacy, of skills and agency are considered common knowledge in other disciplines such as business or military thinking. Why should nonviolent struggle be any different in this regard? A military general or corporate CEO would laugh if they were told that strategy was of marginal importance to the outcome of their endeavors. Sun Tzu's classic *The Art of War* would not be so well known if people thought the outcome of contests and contentious interactions were always foreordained by material conditions.

To return then to the opening question of this article—what makes nonviolent movements effective?—we can start to find answers by looking at strategic choices and best practices gleaned from historic movements. There are a variety of agency-based factors and skills that can influence a movement's outcome, but (for the sake of simplicity) if we distill those down to a few essentials, three attributes of successful nonviolent movements emerge: unity, planning, and nonviolent discipline.

Unity, planning and discipline

At first glance the importance of such attributes may seem self-evident. Yet the profundity of these attributes and their overarching implications sometimes are missed when one views movements at a predominantly tactical and granular level. Each merits elaboration.

Unity is important because nonviolent movements draw their strength from the participation of people in diverse sectors of society. Put simply: numbers matter. The more people a movement has supporting it, the greater its legitimacy, power, and tactical repertoire. Successful movements therefore continually reach out to new groups in their societies, e.g. men and women; youth, adults, and elders; urban and rural populations; minorities; members of religious institutions; farmers, laborers, business people, and professionals; wealthy, middle class, and lower economic stratas; police, soldiers, and members of the judiciary, as well as other groups.

Successful movements also continually reach out to their opponent's supporters, understanding that one of the strengths of sustained civil resistance in the service of a unifying vision is the ability to induce loyalty shifts and

defections among its opponent's ranks. For example, the South African anti-apartheid movement's ongoing civic disruption combined with its call for national reconciliation was able to garner widespread support and create unity for the cause of change, even among some white supporters who had previously supported the apartheid state.

Participants in nonviolent movements must also make complex decisions about the course their movements should take. Strategic planning is of central importance in doing this. Regardless of the merit of one's cause or the morally indefensible acts of one's opponent, oppression is usually not overcome solely through spontaneous and improvised acts of resistance, even if such acts are well-executed. Instead, movements gain traction when they plan how civil resistance can be systematically organized and adopted by people in society to achieve targeted and focused goals.

Deciding what tactics to use and how they should be sequenced; developing galvanizing propositions for change based on the aspirations and grievances of the people who the movement aims to represent; planning what individuals and groups to target with tactics and what short-, medium-, and long-term objectives to pursue; and building lines of communication so that coalitions can be negotiated and built are just some of the issues around which nonviolent movements must creatively strategize. Doing so requires a holistic analysis of the situation in which the nonviolent struggle takes place. As part of their planning process, effective movements formally or informally gather information, listen to people at the grassroots, and analyze themselves, their adversaries, and uncommitted third parties constantly through the course of a conflict.

Finally, a strategy is only effective if it is executed in a disciplined way. The largest risk for a failure of discipline in a nonviolent movement is that some members may become violent. Therefore, nonviolent discipline—the ability of people to remain nonviolent, even in the face of provocations—is often continually instilled in participants. There are practical reasons for this. Violent incidents by members of a movement can dramatically reduce its legitimacy while giving the movement's opponent an excuse to use repression. Furthermore, a movement that is consistently nonviolent has a far greater chance of appealing to a broad range of potential allies—including even an adversary's supporters—through the course of its struggle.

A full exploration of these attributes could fill books, and the subject of nonviolent resistance merits and is continually receiving further systematic study. Each movement that emerges adds a body of knowledge to the collective understanding of this phenomenon, yet there is still much about the art and science of this form of political and social action that remains to be mapped and developed.

But these three attributes—unity, planning, and discipline—are timeless, and as such provide a general framework through which members and supporters of movements, as well as those who report and study them, can quickly assess a movement's state. Is it unified? Does it have a plan? Is it disciplined? The actions of those who embody these principles in nonviolent action have already blazed a path towards a more peaceful and just world. The future will be shaped by those who continue to do so.

[1] For the purposes of this article, I am defining “successful” movements as those that achieve their stated objectives and “failed” movements as those that do not achieve their stated objectives. There is a temporal element in this definition as well. A successful movement may achieve its stated objective (i.e. the Orange movement in Ukraine in 2004) but challenges in ensuing years to that movement's achievement may cause backsliding (for more information on the Ukraine case, see the November 17, 2010 article “The struggle after people power wins” by Olena Tregub and Oksana Shulyar on openDemocracy). Conversely, a movement that fails to achieve its stated objective (i.e. the Chinese pro-democracy movement in 1989) may create collateral effects in ensuing years that constructively advance the movement's cause (for more information on the China case, see the November 17, 2010 article “Repression's Paradox in China” by Lester Kurtz on openDemocracy). While not necessarily changing the classification of a specific movement as “successful” or “failed”, these subsequent effects can be powerful and therefore are noteworthy in their own regard.

About the author

Hardy Merriman was director of programs and research at ICNC from 2005 to 2007. He edited the book "Waging Nonviolent Struggle: 20th Century Practice and 21st Century Potential" by Gene Sharp and also co-authored "A Guide to Effective Nonviolent Struggle".