

Historical uses of nonviolent action

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Look at the history of your country and you will find examples of nonviolent action: demonstrations, strikes, boycotts or other forms of popular non-cooperation. The causes will vary – rights of workers and peasant farmers, freedom for slaves, votes for women or people without property, caste and racial equality, against political impunity, or freedom from occupation. However, until the twentieth century – and in particular the campaigns of Mohandas Gandhi in South Africa and India – nonviolent action was not widely understood as a conscious strategy for social transformation.

Gandhi was convinced that nonviolence had a particular power, both in its effect on those resisting and on their opponents. He saw that social solidarity can overcome attempts to dominate, exploit or otherwise oppress a population. He also believed that it was not enough to oppose and blame an adversary, but that people must look at their own behaviour. Freedom and justice should be the basis on which a movement constructs itself. Gandhi was not the first to observe that those who rule depend on the cooperation of the ruled, but he made this central to his strategies of civil resistance. He evolved his ‘Experiments with Truth’ over time, and was not the most systematic thinker about nonviolence. However, he insisted on certain fundamentals:

1. Campaigns must maintain nonviolent discipline;
2. Constructive Programmes to address problems are of central importance.

In India, Gandhi expanded this Constructive Programme (see p56) to include reducing inter-religious hostility, tackling discrimination based on gender or caste, countering illiteracy and ignorance on sanitation, promoting self-sufficiency in food and spinning one’s own cloth.

The example of the Indian independence struggle had a huge influence on subsequent movements against colonialism and racial discrimination, especially in Africa and the USA, and generated initial research into what makes nonviolent resistance effective. Over sixty years later, nonviolent activists are still ‘experimenting with truth’ – many movements have adopted methods of nonviolent resistance, and research on what makes nonviolent action effective is flourishing.

Challenging oppression

The style of nonviolent resistance varies a lot according to context. Since the term ‘people power’ was coined when the Marcos regime in the Philippines was toppled in 1986, and especially since the downfall of Milosevic in Serbia in

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2000, some observers have talked about an ‘action template’ for popular non-violent action overthrowing a corrupt and authoritarian regime trying to win ‘elections’ by force and fraud. There are of course similarities between the downfall of Milosevic and ‘people power’ actions elsewhere. Indeed some of the Serbs who used nonviolence creatively against Milosevic have helped to advise and train groups in similar circumstances. However, circumstances vary and each movement has to analyse what will work for them.

The ‘global nonviolent action database’ is an online database of nonviolent actions, covering many decades and all of the continents. See <http://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu>

Predominantly nonviolent forms of protest, influenced by differing national contexts, played an important role in replacing authoritarian or military regimes in South Korea and Taiwan in the 1980s, and in Thailand in 1992. Mass mobilisation may sometimes lead to temporary rather than lasting success; in Nepal, the impressive movement to curb the king’s arbitrary power and create parliamentary government in 1990 had to be repeated in 2006, to bring back the parliamentary system. The experience of popular nonviolent resistance can create a basis for revived rebellion.

Nonviolent protest – framed in terms of achieving limited goals – was widely adopted in the former Soviet bloc from the 1970s, where activists were acutely aware of the danger of Soviet military intervention. The most impressive protests occurred in Poland, where by the 1970s intellectuals and workers made common cause, and major strikes won economic concessions. The Solidarity movement that began in the Gdansk shipyard in 1980 gained support from all sectors of society and sympathy from some in the Communist Party apparatus, but despite its ‘self-limiting’ demands for free trade unions was seen as a threat by the Soviet leadership, leading to martial law in December 1981. For a while the Solidarity organisation went underground and promoted low key forms of resistance such as election boycotts. More overt resistance was carried out by smaller groups, notably *Wolność i Pokój* (Freedom and Peace), which promoted imaginative and often witty demonstrations (mainly by students and young people) in the later 1980s, and used links to western peace groups and media to provide some protection against regime oppression. Then, as Gorbachev’s ‘perestroika’ inside the USSR created new pressures for change across Eastern Europe, a revived Solidarity negotiated with the Communist Party and won elections in June 1989. Where regimes were intransigent, as in East Germany and Czechoslovakia, nonviolent rebellion from below (and Moscow’s support for change) led to the dismantling of the Berlin Wall and the ‘Velvet Revolution’.

The East European revolutions of 1989 encouraged internal dissent inside the USSR – especially in the Baltic republics where protest had already begun and where popular nonviolent resistance complemented demands from newly nationalist governments to achieve independence in 1990-91. The rapid changes in East Europe also had repercussions in Sub-Saharan Africa, where between 1988 and 1993 action from below in the form of boycotts, strikes and

mass demonstrations (combined with western economic and political pressure) led to the ending of autocratic one-party regimes in Malawi and Zambia and in parts of Francophone Africa, where Benin led the way. However, some significant movements, for example against President Moi in Kenya and the ‘villes mortes’ campaign in Cameroon, did not manage to oust their presidents at the time; and other, temporarily successful campaigns, were reversed. The most sustained movement for democratic equality in Africa was the resistance to apartheid, which took nonviolent forms up to 1960. The African National Congress then rejected nonviolence and created an armed wing – *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (‘the Spear of the Nation’) – which initially intended (according to Mandela) to minimise harm to individuals and maximise damage to the infrastructure of the regime. After the 1976 Soweto school children’s uprising, mass trade and community-based resistance developed in the 1980s – with some violent aspects but fundamentally using strikes, boycotts and other nonviolent methods.

The problem of oppression

Many people are sceptical about the power of nonviolence against entrenched, repressive regimes, where any overt resistance is liable to be brutally crushed. However, there are a large number of ways of responding nonviolently to oppression.

Firstly, there are ways of keeping resistance alive through small scale, symbolic, or indirect forms of protest (practised in Chile in the early 1980s and other parts of Latin America, and at various stages in Eastern Europe) and by creating alternative forms of organisation to promote educational and cultural goals (for example the ‘flying university’ in Poland); these types of initiative can set in motion fundamental social change. Moreover, more overt forms of nonviolent action (including vigils, as by the ‘Mothers of the Disappeared’ in Argentina, public fasts, as in Bolivia in 1977-78, and various kinds of strikes) occurred in Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s in the face of torture, disappearances and death squads, and led to general strikes and mass protest that helped to end dictatorships in Bolivia, Brazil and Uruguay.

Secondly, when popular anger becomes widespread, open and unarmed rebellion may be possible and in some circumstances – as in Iran in 1977-79 – succeed in toppling the regime, despite thousands being killed. Brutal oppression can crush an immediate nonviolent rebellion, but there may be an important legacy of experience and organisation. For example, the 1988 uprising in Burma led to the formation of the ‘National League for Democracy’ which, under the symbolic leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi, the National League contested and won elections in 1990. Afterwards, many were imprisoned and the military regime remained in power. However, even if a regime crushes overt resistance – as the Burmese military suppressed the 2007 rising led by Buddhist monks – it may find it politic to make some concessions subsequently: In 2010, the regime released Suu Kyi, and in 2012 allowed the National League to contest elections for 48 parliamentary seats. A key factor here was a Western economic boycott (urged by the Suu Kyi opposition) and the regime’s reluctance to be too dependent on China.

Thirdly, international pressure by campaigning groups, international bodies and/or national governments have often played an important role in eventually persuading a regime to make concessions, as happened with the campaign against Apartheid in South Africa. Such pressure was also important in enabling the opposition in Chile to campaign successfully for a 'No' vote in the 1988 plebiscite designed to renew General Pinochet's presidency.

The emphasis here has been on national movements of resistance to repressive forms of rule, but even in 'free', democratic societies there persist many forms of structural and cultural violence, such as discrimination and social deprivation, and states continue to deploy destructive military arsenals (including in some cases nuclear weapons) that activists respond to with nonviolent means. In recent decades, innovative and challenging forms of nonviolent action have been associated with a wide range of social movements against discrimination, economic injustice, war and environmental destruction.

Nonviolent or unarmed resistance?

A very wide range of popular protests have been incorporated in the literature under the term 'nonviolent resistance' (or sometimes 'civil resistance'). Their common feature is that they have relied primarily on symbolic protest, forms of non-cooperation or nonviolent intervention. Some movements usually described as nonviolent have, however, involved defensive violence (as in Tahrir Square in Cairo in January 2011), or even frequent stone throwing (as in the First Palestinian Intifada of 1987-92). There is a continuum between:

1. The kind of moral commitment and interpretation of nonviolence adopted by Gandhi.
2. A very conscious political and strategic commitment to avoid violence as generally in East Europe in the 1980s; and
3. Willingness to use essentially nonviolent methods (and avoid armed conflict) but no commitment to avoid low level physical violence, true of many movements.

It is possible therefore to distinguish between 'nonviolent resistance' (where there is an organised attempt to avoid violence on moral and/or strategic grounds) and 'unarmed resistance', which stops short of guns and bombs. But within any given movement there may be varied attitudes to nonviolence: most participants in Gandhi's campaigns did not share his philosophy of nonviolence as a philosophy of life and, at best, saw nonviolence as a good strategy to achieve their campaign goals. While movements with low level physical violence are quite common, there may be a group committed to strict nonviolent methods – as was true in the Intifada.

There is still a qualitative difference between unarmed and armed struggle. While the turn to violence is sometimes understandable when faced with extreme oppression, it is by no means a 'quick fix'. If an armed struggle can mobilise wide popular support (and combine with forms of unarmed resistance) then it can succeed, as in Nicaragua in the 1970s. However, armed groups can become separate from the population, and have been known to turn to extortion

and kidnapping to maintain themselves, or even prey upon ordinary people, as in Colombia. Where the population is divided on ethnic or religious lines, then a turn from unarmed to armed struggle may result in civil war, as happened to two countries caught up in the 'Arab Spring' in 2011; in Libya, where nonviolent protests and regime defections occurred initially before the conflict descended into civil war, and in Syria, where an impressive six month campaign of unarmed defiance became marginalised by a complex and wholly destructive war between ideologically and religiously opposed groups. Sometimes, the superior military capacity of the regime, and the heavy losses incurred in fighting, make significant armed resistance untenable. It is significant that some guerilla struggles have turned towards unarmed resistance, as in East Timor, 1991-99.

The Role of Pacifists

We in the War Resisters' International embrace nonviolence as a matter of principle. We recognise that this commitment makes us a minority and requires us to work with people who do not necessarily share our pacifist principles. We want to look beyond rhetoric or short-term shock tactics to develop forms of active nonviolence that challenge systems of oppression and to construct alternatives. This means defining goals that make sense to many non-pacifists as well as using methods and forms of organisation that are attractive to those who do not have a pacifist philosophy.

Historically, pacifists have played a vital, innovative role in social movements, developing nonviolent tactics and forms of organisation. For example, the first US 'freedom rides' against racial segregation in the 1940s, and British direct action against nuclear weapons in the 1950s, were pacifist initiatives. The creative nonviolence of these groups encouraged more widespread use of nonviolent action by the mass movements that followed. Since the 1960s, pacifists have introduced nonviolence training, initially preparing activists for the kind of violence they might meet. Subsequently, nonviolence training has played an essential role in promoting more participatory forms of movement organisation.

Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. became such towering figures within their own movements that some people believe successful nonviolence depends on 'charismatic' leadership. For us in the WRI, however, nonviolent action is a source of social empowerment that strengthens the capacities of all participants without depending on superhuman leaders. Therefore we have advocated: more participatory forms of decision-making; promoted organisation based on affinity groups; and expanded nonviolence training to include tools for participatory strategy assessment and development.

A bibliographical source for the movements mentioned here (and many others) is: A Guide to Civil Resistance, Vol. 1, ed. April Carter, Howard Clark and Michael Randle, Merlin Press, 2013 (available from WRI).

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