

**Bottom-Up, Inside-Out:  
The Record and Potential of Civilian-Based Nonviolent Power  
To Win Freedom and Respect for Human Rights**

by Berel Rodal  
Vice Chairman,  
International Center on Nonviolent Conflict

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States and rulers have traditionally occupied center stage in the world's political discourse, law, policy planning, and punditry. Strategy is conventionally equated with statecraft, and with military (including insurgency) leadership. Power is identified with coercive violence, actual or potential. Legitimacy is associated with governmental authority.

A new perspective is coming into view, placing new forces and actors, and new forms of action, on the main stage. The phenomenon of al-Qaeda and other forms of violent insurgency are sometimes considered to have carried this message to global consciousness. In fact, more than violent insurgency, it is civilian-based nonviolent action that demands attention as a force in winning freedom, human rights, and more democratic, accountable government.

For decades the record of accomplishment of nonviolent civic resistance has significantly exceeded that of change attempted under violent auspices – the latter showing a far lesser record of success, while incurring much greater loss of life and property, and achieving very little in terms of forging democratic societies with enduring freedom for their citizens.

### The Record

Before, during, and after the great wars of the last century, a series of other conflicts took place, not between nations but within them, conflicts centered on self-determination and freedom from oppression. These conflicts have been overshadowed, in the academy and in the news and entertainment media, and in our consciousness, by intercontinental and guerilla war, genocide and terror. But the lessons to be drawn from the use and success of the nonviolent sanctions used in these engagements may be as pertinent to advancing freedom from tyranny in the twenty-first century as those to be drawn from the land and air engagements of the Great Powers, epic naval battles in the Pacific, or fighting in the jungles of Indochina or the streets of Baghdad.

In each of these other, societal conflicts, disruptive actions were used by civilians as sanctions, as aggressive measures to constrain or punish opponents and to win concessions. Protests such as petitions, parades, walkouts, and demonstrations were used to rouse public support and mobilization. Forms of non-cooperation such as strikes, boycotts, resignations, and civil disobedience served to frustrate the operations of governments. Direct intervention such as blockades, factory occupations and sit-ins thwarted rulers' ability to subjugate their people. The historical results were massive: Tyrants were toppled, governments collapsed, occupying armies impeded and political systems that denied human rights shattered.

The intellectual and other streams feeding the phenomenon of civilian-based nonviolent power are rich and venerable. Etienne de la Boetie in the 16<sup>th</sup> century formulated the notion of consent as the ultimate source of political power, wrote about the origins of dictatorship, developed the analysis of political power in which the technique of non-violent struggle is rooted and described the means by which people could prevent political enslavement and liberate themselves. In the dramatic year of 1848 – the year of a largely but not entirely nonviolent revolution in Prague – President Lincoln asserted the right of humans to demand that they be governed with their consent, their right to rise up and shake off oppression, and, as well, the importance of their having the power to do so.

The modern record, however, may be said to begin in Russia in 1904 – when an Orthodox priest, Georgii Gapon, persuaded 150,000 workers to walk the icy streets of St. Petersburg in the century's first public challenge to autocratic power. He ignited mass action that led to the country's first popularly elected national parliament.

Miners and railway workers in the Ruhr in 1923 confronted invading French and Belgian soldiers sent to extract German resources as World War I reparations. Their non-cooperation forced the British and Americans to press for the troops' withdrawal.

In 1930-1931 Mohandas Gandhi led mass civil disobedience against the British in India. He convinced his followers to stop paying salt taxes and buying cloth and liquor monopolized by the British, intensifying their sustained and successful drive to independence.

Indeed, campaigns of nonviolent action could be successful even under Nazi occupation, at least in some places. Danish citizens during the German occupation refused to aid the Nazi war effort and brought their cities to a standstill, forcing the Germans to end curfews and blockades.

Salvadoran students, doctors, and merchants, fed up with the brutality imposed on their country by a military dictator, organized a civic strike in 1944. Without picking up a single gun, they detached the General from his closest supporters, including members of the military, and forced him into exile.

Less than ten years after the British left India, a Baptist preacher from Georgia, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., following Gandhi's teachings, led his fellow African Americans on a fifteen-year campaign of marches and boycotts which led to the overthrow of racial segregation in the American South.

A few years after Dr. King was assassinated, Polish dissidents -- in perhaps the century's pivotal moment of nonviolent conflict -- defied communist rule by initiating new forms of resistance, rare in the Soviet bloc. Beginning with a momentous strike in the Gdansk shipyards, workers won the right to organize a free trade union, giving rise to Solidarity and eventually the end of Communism.

In Argentina, mothers outraged by the governments' silence about the disappearance of their sons took to marching and conducting vigils in the central plaza of Buenos Aires. They did not stop until the legitimacy of the country's military junta was undermined, leading to its downfall after the debacle of the Falklands War.

General Augusto Pinochet in Chile too was forced from office by a surging and disciplined civilian nonviolent popular movement, deprived of the support of his military as he sought to ignore the results of a plebiscite he was not supposed to lose.

Half a world away, after Ferdinand Marcos stole an election in the Philippines in 1986, Corazon Aquino, the widow of the assassinated popular opposition leader Benigno Aquino Jr, led hundreds of thousands into the streets. In conjunction with opposition to the regime by reform-minded military officers, Marcos found himself unable to retain power by force, and fled the country.

While Solidarity continued its struggle under martial law, boycott organizers, trade unions, and religious leaders in South Africa joined to wage a sustained nonviolent campaign against apartheid. In conjunction with international sanctions, they eventually forced the freeing of Nelson Mandela, enabling the successful negotiation of an end to White rule and the prospect of a democratic future.

Days after the Berlin Wall fell, thousands of Czech students sat down at the edge of Wenceslas Square in Prague chanting. "We have no weapons...The world is watching." In weeks the communist regime in Czechoslovakia and others like it in East Germany, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Mongolia were gone.

In 1999-2000, a student-led resistance movement in Serbia and a unified political opposition effected the defeat of Slobodan Milosevic at the polls he tried to rig. With his security forces neutralized by the force of disciplined nonviolent mobilization, and facing a general strike, the 'Butcher of the Balkans' was compelled to relinquish power.

We are now seven years into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, during which period one witnessed Georgia's Rose Revolution, Kyrgyzstan's Tulip Revolution, Lebanon's Cedar Revolution and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine.

Even though these various events occurred in different parts of the world and in different decades, they are essentially the same story -- the story of what is possible for people to do when their interests and those oppressing them cannot be reconciled, when the normal political processes available in functioning democracies are not available, and when armed resistance is an unavailable or unpromising option. In each of these conflicts, tens and hundreds of thousands, or millions of ordinary citizens joined civic coalitions to seek decisive change in favor of rights or democracy. Strikes, boycotts, mass protests, civil disobedience and other tactics were used to challenge the legitimacy of the existing system and to drive up the cost of its maintenance.

### The Dynamics of Civilian-based Nonviolent Power

The repressive violence available to a regime is but one element in a sustained contest between the ruler and the ruled, when those who are ruled do not consent to be so ruled. The strategist and Nobel Laureate Thomas Schelling observed nearly 50 years ago that:

The tyrant and his subjects are in somewhat symmetrical positions. They can deny him most of what he wants - they can, that is, if they have the disciplined organization to refuse collaboration. And he can deny them just about everything they want - he can deny it by using the force at his command. They can deny him the satisfaction of ruling a disciplined country, he can deny them the satisfaction of ruling themselves. They can confront him with chaos, starvation, idleness and social breakdown, but he confronts them with the same thing and, indeed, most of what they deny him they deny themselves. It is a bargaining situation in which either side, if adequately disciplined and organized, can deny most of what the other wants; and it remains to see who wins.

Study of the various cases of nonviolent campaigns for freedom and rights makes it clear that success is not a matter of inspired improvisation in response to particular happenings. It proceeds, rather, from working on the basis of a strategic concept about how to fight oppression. Strategic thinking is the critical first step in "seeing who wins." This is what Solidarity's Adam Michnik understood to be the main ingredient in the recipe for the

movement's success, even after the imposition of martial law when matters seemed hopeless. Michnik declared that:

Above all, we must create a strategy of hope for the people, and show them that their efforts and risks have a future. The underground will not succeed in building a widespread national opposition without such a strategy- without faith in the purpose of action. Otherwise, resistance will amount to nothing more than oral testimony or an angry reaction. And the movement will cease to be one that is aware of its political goals, that is armed with patience and consistency, and that is capable of winning.

What Solidarity proved in Poland, despite the presence of 250,000 Soviet troops on Polish soil and a million in the environs, and what the anti-apartheid civilian-based movement proved in South Africa, is mirrored in virtually all of the other successful nonviolent resistance movements. That is, specifically, that there few if any objective conditions that in themselves determine whether nonviolent mobilization to challenge an oppressive regime can lead to a victorious outcome. The record suggests that while success is never certain, it is superior strategic skills on the part of the leadership of nonviolent movements that can change objectively unfavorable conditions and yield results that 'experts' frequently deem at the outset to be impossible.

Vaclav Havel described how the force required could arise. He said that living without your rights was living a lie – the lie that life is normal – and that escaping the lie, by confronting injustice, could make the truth visible, through a social movement or civil conflict. This would be living in the truth, Havel said, and it would open up “explosive, incalculable” power.

Tyrannies are very often more vulnerable than they seem – whatever their capacity for repression. There are many cases today of nonviolent resistance movements that have not yet succeeded, from Burma to Belarus to Zimbabwe to Iran. Yet repressive rulers in

these countries are no more brutal or cunning than others who were forced to step aside in the past.

Just as military leaders learn from historic battles, the example and experience of other nonviolent resistance movements can inspire successful strategies in new conflict situations. No group was more open to learn from others with experience in nonviolent conflict than were the OTPOR students who helped spark the unexpected downfall of Slobodan Milosevic, who was thought at the time to be invincible. That result was brought about, well over a year after the NATO bombing campaign, without a shot fired.

Serbs shared lessons learned from their nonviolent victory with Georgians who prepared the Rose Revolution, and Georgia's success helped encourage many of the participants in Ukraine's Orange Revolution, which yielded images and lessons that emboldened the young Lebanese in their "Intifada for Independence," also styled the Cedar Revolution.

Modern communications, audio-visual technology in particular, enormously facilitates the access people almost everywhere have to the experience of others, to lessons of past successes and failures, and to the potential inherent in civilian-based movements to achieve dramatic and enduring results. Their imaginations have been ignited in ways impossible to achieve with the written word. Documentaries distributed by the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict (ICNC), notably *A Force More Powerful* and *Bringing Down a Dictator*, have been seen in seventy countries, translated into ten languages, and have led to a growing demand for basic knowledge and organizational know-how relating to strategic nonviolent action. ICNC's mission is to better understand the experience and dynamics of civilian-based nonviolent power, and to disseminate this knowledge widely. ICNC works with others to create appropriate standards for such dissemination and training. We believe that the best guidance to offer those seeking knowledge and training should remain generic, and eschew providing operational or other forms of specific advice on particular conflict situations. Only indigenous actors can assess the demands, opportunities and dangers of their struggle and design strategies most



appropriate to their context. What such actors can learn from outside experts and veterans are the critical ingredients that are visible in civilian-based campaigns everywhere.

We believe that history, recent history in particular, teaches that three elements are essential to winning freedom and rights by means of civilian-based nonviolent campaigns.

First, a movement must unite behind leadership that represents the breadth of the nation and not just certain parties and classes. That leadership must also be agreed on a set of achievable goals. Solidarity campaigned for a free trade union, creating the political space needed to grow the movement and change the country. Campaigning for the end of the Communist system would assuredly have had another result.

Second, a nonviolent movement must plan continuously and marshal resources to achieve tactical capacity that goes beyond the simple and most familiar forms of protest. An effective civilian resistance must be capable of executing a portfolio of tactics, intelligently sequenced and integral to a comprehensive strategy, to apply continuous pressure on the adversary.

Third, the movement must adhere to nonviolent discipline, because violence brings with it serious negatives, notably, that

With the eruption of violence on the part of the opposition/resistance, citizen participation evaporates;

Violence makes far less likely the defection from the regime of constituencies it depends on – the business community and the nation’s armed defenders – whose loyalty to the regime should not be assumed. Both groups can be influenced by effective civic action but are unlikely to defect if they are being shot at.

Notwithstanding the extraordinary record of people power, the dynamics of nonviolent conflict remains under-recognized and misunderstood, conflated with nonviolence as an ethical preference, with passive resistance, or with conflict resolution and peacemaking. It is in fact about power, but turns much of the traditional approach and conversation about power and effectiveness on its head.

It centers on the role of people, rather than governments;

It centers on the inside, what people inside a country organize themselves do, rather than on the role of outside actors;

It does not petition for power, it generates it, by self-organizing, mass-mobilizing, delegitimizing and incapacitating the adversary – unlike power sought by violent means, which does not involve mass participation and reserves decisive power for the fighter, his cohorts and party.

ICNC and Freedom House together analyzed the sixty-seven transitions to democracy recorded in Freedom House rankings over the last 35 years, to see if there were meaningful correlations between opposition behavior before a change in government and the level of freedom afterward. The study “How Freedom Was Won” records that in fifty of the sixty-seven transitions, nonviolent civic force was pivotal; that when less violence is used by the opposition more freedom follows; and that the broader the popular participation in the resistance to tyranny, the greater the freedom after the change. In short, that how one chooses to fight determines what one wins. Sustainable democratic outcomes resulted from those transitions featuring the centrality of civilian-based nonviolent action, whereas those involving oppositional violence, and, equally interesting, elite accommodation showed much weaker correlations with democratic outcomes.

### The Empires Strike Back

Statements by Russian, Chinese, Zimbabwean, Venezuelan, and other authoritarian leaders and spokesmen, especially since the Orange Revolution, have given clear expression to alarm, recognition of the potency of civilian-based nonviolent mobilization,

and to their individual and collective determination to constrain its development in their countries. Civilian-based nonviolent action is presented as a sinister, externally-fostered technique to bring about ‘regime change’, justifying the identification of civil society in their countries as a strategic battleground and the provision of external assistance to civil society and human-rights capacity-building as illegitimate interference, and making it subject to constraint, harassment, and regulation.

In their statement of January 5, 2005 (now known as the Carpathian Declaration) the two leaders of the Rose and Orange Revolutions, Presidents Shakashvili of Georgia and Yushchenko of Ukraine, declared that

We strongly reject the idea that peaceful democratic revolution can be triggered by artificial techniques or external interference. Quite the contrary, the Revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine happened despite such political techniques or outside interference

The reference of course is to Russia, not a ‘West’ taken somewhat unawares by these revolutions. In fact, to borrow a turn of phrase from Engels, one may say that a spectre haunts the world’s authoritarians – the spectre of civilian-based nonviolent power, a force which can only increase in importance as modernization extends its reach.

Who invented people power? Was it Mohandas Gandhi, who generated many of its early ideas? Filipinos, who first used the phrase to describe their own movement? Or Solidarity? In fact, strategic nonviolent action was invented, re-invented and refined in a score of different conflicts over decades. That evolution is continuing today. In a globalizing world, in which knowledge circulates with heretofore unimagined rapidity, in which people are able to learn from each other, and in which the individual consumer is fed an unending diet of technological innovation, the potential for the “bottom-up” assertion of rights can only grow stronger.

The fearful, the threatened, and the skeptical are prone to describe regime change as the object and prize. In fact, the object is transformation in the way people themselves can determine how they are governed. In the not too distant future every hero of a color revolution will be due to leave office. The question in which all have a stake is whether that leader will be replaced in a constitutionally mandated free and competitive election determined by citizens. And if not, what will the citizens do to redress the attempt to usurp their democracy? Will they submit passively, or resort to violence, or will they seek inspiration from their own and the world's heritage of nonviolent civic action? And when they ask for assistance in the form of generic advice and know-how that builds a nonviolent capacity to challenge oppressive rule, who will and who should be there to help?

There is now recognition, at least on paper, of a collective "responsibility to protect" people threatened by genocide, ethnic cleansing and other crimes against humanity. Might it not be time to think also about recognition of a "right to help" - not a blanket right of outsiders to interfere in others' domestic politics, but a right of people facing oppression to receive help, that is not merely another country's foreign policy instrument, that does not unfairly tilt the domestic playing field, and that is nonviolent? The Helsinki accords established that respect for human rights in sovereign countries were legitimate matters for concern and comment on the part of outsiders. Individuals and institutions who care about democracy and freedom, peace and security need now to work together on modern norms for how citizens and civil societies may legitimately freely work together and to make knowledge universally accessible across national boundaries.