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Outside view: Liberation by the people

By Jack DuVall
A UPI Outside View
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Abraham Lincoln suggested that any people have the right to rise up and replace an oppressive government with one that upholds their rights and freedom. Since his time, however, there is not a single case in which a violent movement has collapsed an authoritarian regime and replaced it with a government based on the consent of the people.

How then have we come to the point that three-quarters of the world's nations are democratic? Some have been freed after wars begun by totalitarian rulers have ousted those regimes. Yet there is another force in history that has liberated millions in great waves.

Forty years after Lincoln was martyred, the Russian writer Leo Tolstoy, campaigning for an end to conscription, predicted that "public opinion" would change "the whole structure of life" in the world, in the process of which violence would become "superfluous." That echoed the American founder James Madison's insight that "all government rests on opinion," that it cannot function without the people's acceptance.

While working as a lawyer in South Africa, Mohandas K. Gandhi said he was "overwhelmed" by Tolstoy's arguments. Inventing a new way for his fellow Indians to fight against hated forms of discrimination, Gandhi enlisted them in burning their racial registration cards and engaging in mass illegal border crossings -- all of which derailed the enforcement of a racial law, until it was withdrawn.

Gandhi had refined raw negative public opinion into precisely applied political power. He went on to wage 20 years of campaigns against British rule of India, using marches, boycotts and civil disobedience to demolish British confidence in the permanence of their control.

Later the Danish and other European peoples engaged in strikes and nonviolent sabotage to obstruct Nazi occupiers in World War II. Applying Gandhi's ideas, African-Americans disrupted racial segregation in the 1950s and 1960s, with sit-ins, boycotts and huge demonstrations, until the nation had to enforce their rights.

Little more than a decade later, Polish dissidents joined striking shipyard workers to challenge unelected rulers with a new free trade union, soon joined by 10 million Poles, undermining the regime's legitimacy and later forcing free elections.

In the same decade, Filipinos fielded the "people power" movement against the corrupt, autocratic president Ferdinand Marcos, splitting the loyalty of his military and forcing him

out. Also in the 1980s, black South Africans, creating hundreds of civic groups in townships and villages, called strikes and boycotts to make their country "ungovernable" and its commerce less viable, sundering the apartheid system.

As that happened, a nonviolent civilian-based movement in Chile shook off the fear of a military junta, created space for regular protests, and won a plebiscite staged by Gen. Augusto Pinochet, dividing his generals and making him resign. The next year, millions in East Germany, Czechoslovakia and other East European nations besieged the boulevards of their cities and evicted ruling parties in a matter of weeks.

In Mongolia the following year, student-led protests forced free elections, and at the end of the 1990s, Serbian students galvanized the opposition to Slobodan Milosevic, generating a unified campaign capped by a million Serbs converging on Belgrade, until soldiers refused orders to crack down and the dictator had to go.

Today the makings of similar movements can be found in Iran, Ukraine, Belarus, and Zimbabwe. Civilian-based groups using nonviolent tactics are active in Hong Kong, Tibet, Burma, West Papua and the Palestinian territories. Civilian opposition and dissidence are present in Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and other Central Asian autocracies, and also in Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco and other Arab nations. And the preconditions for clandestine resistance and self-organizing are detectable even in North Korea.

In only one or two of these struggles have certain groups adopted "nonviolence" as a moral preference. Most have chosen nonviolent tactics because they realized that violence would be futile, or because ordinary people could not otherwise participate, sacrificing the full resistance potential of the population. Nonviolent movements that succeed in bringing down dictators do not abhor conflict. They want to recast or abort political systems that have tortured and killed people.

Whatever their impetus for choosing civilian-based struggle, all these nonviolent warriors have instinctively grasped what Dr. Gene Sharp, the foremost living authority on nonviolent action, meant, when he wrote: "Liberation... ultimately depends on the people's ability to liberate themselves."

We know from testimony taken from terrorists arrested after the Madrid train bombings this year that some of the perpetrators rushed back to their apartments to watch the television coverage, savoring the shock they had caused the Spanish people. This was their moment of gratification, but in two centuries of terror, that is the main thing that terrorists have produced -- spectacles, not power.

The gratification of those joining a nonviolent struggle is not immediate, and the liberation they attain is hardly ever on the nightly news. Instead, it becomes a fact of history.

The British thought they defeated Gandhi after the Salt March in 1931, but they eventually lost India. The Polish communists thought they had beaten Lech Walesa when they dragged him off to prison in 1981, but he told them: "You idiots, at this moment you lost; you will come back to us on your knees." Seven years later, they did.

Many nonviolent fighters seem to have nine lives. How is their endurance, and the success of their movements, achieved?

First, the leaders of a civilian-based movement have to articulate clear goals that reflect the people's grievances and animate a sense of the injustice they have borne. Gandhi, Adam Michnik in Poland and Corazon Aquino in the Philippines all said essentially, "This government is running the country for their own benefit. Why should we help them?"

Second, the movement's organizers have to recruit people from all walks of life to diversify its ranks and broaden the scope of non-cooperation with the demands and decrees of the government -- and they have to unify the opposition behind the basic objective of ousting the regime, without which any particular political goals are unreachable.

Third, the movement's leaders should develop a strategic estimate of all the material, economic and political sources of the regime's power and devise and employ tactics that dilute that power. The political philosopher Hannah Arendt said, "It is the people's support that lends power to the institutions of a country." When that support contracts, and the people act to shred those institutions' ties to the regime, it cannot cling to power.

Fourth, the movement should multiply acts of small-scale resistance horizontally throughout the country, straining the outermost ranks of the regime's repressive apparatus -- and the initial tactics should entail low physical risk, to lessen the fear of participating.

Fifth, all stages of the resistance should remain nonviolent, to insure that the movement gains the upper hand in the contest for legitimacy with the regime, which will inevitably discredit itself with acts of brutality -- and to prompt the police and military to realize that the movement is not aiming at them, it's aiming at the top.

Sixth, a campaign to sow doubt about the regime's future should be aimed at policemen and soldiers, to befriend them or soften potential rancor. The inner core of an oppressive regime is usually narcissistic and venal, and its armed defenders know that best of all. They may turn to an increasingly popular movement in a crisis, when defections are conceivable.

Seventh, the movement should seek support from abroad, in the form of direct aid from nongovernmental organizations and foundations, as well as foreign governments so long as that bestows no propaganda benefit on the regime. And international sanctions should be sought, if they are targeted at rulers, not the people.

Eighth, a movement must be ready for a last burst of repression, know when to pause to give itself the opportunity to regroup, or be prepared to exploit an opportunity to negotiate, to obtain more defensible political space if it needs more time before pressing forward again. In short, it has to know how to downshift as well as move into overdrive, as circumstances require.

Ninth, once the movement has gathered as much momentum inside and outside the country as it can reasonably expect, it should escalate resistance to force the regime on the defensive. If the dictator is ridiculed in cafes and classrooms, if taxes and fees go unpaid, if public administration is in disarray, if police and soldiers are demoralized, and if key industries are grinding down, then a dictator's system for keeping control is jeopardized. His only real power derives from making his own people and the world

believe that he cannot be ousted except through violence. Once that belief is destroyed, the end is predictable.

Since terror is a form of political violence, and most political violence is practiced either by oppressive regimes, or by insurrectionary groups fighting such regimes, any strategy to eliminate terrorism should give substantial new assistance to civilian-based nonviolent movements that are struggling to liberate the people of these nations.

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