Civic Movements for Reform and Liberation: The Historical Model

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One hundred years ago, a mass meeting was convened in Johannesburg, South Africa by Mohandas Gandhi, an Indian lawyer outraged by the government's proposal that Indians carry registration cards. "The Old Empire Theatre was packed from floor to ceiling," Gandhi wrote. One speaker said that they "must never yield a cowardly submission to such degrading legislation."

During a long campaign of non-cooperation, Indians burned their registration cards, marched across borders, and thousands went to jail, Gandhi himself three times, all to disrupt the government's racial laws. In the eighth year of nonviolent civic action, the government withdrew the laws. One piece of one empire of contempt for people's rights was pulverized, starting that night at the Empire Theatre. The date was September 11.

Gandhi said that one of those who influenced his thinking was the American essayist Henry David Thoreau, who had said, "All men recognize…the right to refuse allegiance to, and to resist, the government when its tyranny or its inefficiency are great and unendurable."

To apply this right in India, Gandhi returned home from South Africa and launched a great nonviolent conflict against British rule. Millions boycotted the government's monopolies, quit state jobs, and marched and protested. The scope of resistance sobered the few colonial leaders who understood what was happening. "England can hold India only by consent," said Sir Charles Innes, a provincial governor. "We can't rule it by the sword."

Gandhi's campaigns were the first stories of mass civic resistance reported worldwide by broadcast media. Ever since, the rate with which people have applied this new force has accelerated. The Danes obstructed German occupiers in World War II by strikes and work slow-downs. African-Americans marched and boycotted until racial segregation was dissolved. Polish workers refused to leave their shipyards until they'd won the right to a free trade union.

Filipinos blocked a dictator's army units from attacking officers who had switched sides, his regime was immobilized, and he resigned. Czechs, East Germans, Mongolians and others living under Soviet client regimes choked the streets of their capitals until their rulers stepped down or called new elections. Black citizens boycotted South African businesses and made the country ungovernable, until a new political system was established.

A week ago, former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic was buried. *The New York Times* called him "a ruler of exceptional ruthlessness" who had created "a violence not seen in Europe since 1945." Five years ago, a nonviolent movement to

dislodge Milosevic was spurred by a youth group, Otpor, to unite behind an opposition presidential candidate and rally the public to enforce a fair election. A million Serbs converged on Belgrade, the military refused to crack down, and Milosevic had to go.

. Gandhi had said that "the people, when they become conscious of their power, will have every right to take possession of what belongs to them." In 50 of 67 transitions from authoritarian rule to democracy in the last 35 years, nonviolent civic force was pivotal. People power opens the vise of autocratic government by disputing its legitimacy, escalating the cost of its operations, and splitting the ranks of its own defenders. Strikes, boycotts, and civil disobedience are among the nonviolent tactics that interrupt the capacity of those resisting change to monopolize information and dictate events.

Broad social unity, systematic planning and nonviolent discipline are necessary to drive a movement forward -- so that voices can be heard which were silent, so that people can become who they wish to be. Their words, their action, their sacred honor are the fuel for this kind of revolution.

The opinion that ordinary people cannot engineer meaningful change, and that only some external agency can do it for them, reduces citizens to pawns. Implicit in this are two beliefs, which reinforce apathy and inhibit action: first, the belief that we are all prisoners of nebulous larger forces and power-holders; and second, the belief that things change only by material intervention, especially new techniques or money, rather than by changing minds through gaining acceptance of new ideas, and by releasing the capacity to act by modeling a new strategy for seeking power.

But some refuse to see this. I was struck by an interview with Vladimir Putin nine months after the Orange Revolution. He suggested that the losing side in Ukraine had been "cornered" by "unconstitutional activities" and suggested that civic resistance could turn a country into "a banana republic where the one who shouts loudest is the one who wins," as if too many voices in the public space could spoil the plans of those who hold power. Well, yes. That's called democracy.

The dauntlessness and intelligence of those who make up what we call people power are the foundation of its victories, nothing else. Those who insist that something else explains the "colored revolutions" or the end of apartheid or the fall of communism ignore the purpose and perseverance of the people who defied authorities that defiled their dignity.

To those who believe this cannot work if repression is too great, the political philosopher Hannah Arendt had an answer:

In a contest of violence against violence, the superiority of the government has always been absolute; but this superiority lasts only as long as the power structure of the government is intact – that is, as long as commands are obeyed and the army or police forces are prepared to use their weapons. When this is no longer the case, the situation changes abruptly...The sudden, dramatic breakdown of power that ushers in revolutions reveals in a flash how civil obedience – to laws, to rulers, to institutions – is but the outward manifestation of support and consent.

Pull away that support, and power shifts. That's how nonviolent civic movements succeed. I have met and talked with activists, students and civic leaders from West Papua, Zimbabwe, Iran, Tunisia, Palestine, Italy, the Philippines, Iraq, China, Australia, Libya, Azerbaijan, Kenya, West Sahara, and the United States, all of whom are convinced that nonviolent strategies can curb corruption, defend free elections, re-energize democracy, reclaim their homeland, or just help them speak and assemble freely in the cities and schools of their nations.

Civic defiance is a global phenomenon, even as its strategies develop in the basements and the barrios of a thousand different villages and cities. Democratic power is not contrived or seized by a few, it is summoned from the many. And it can be summoned in the Arab world.

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