

## **Learning About People Power: Choosing the Right Ideas to Explain Nonviolent Struggle**

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### *Violence*

The syllabus for this institute says that it's for educators who want to address "the growing violence in our schools and our communities." The community that my organization addresses is the world, and so I'd like to begin by talking about the form of violence in the world today that most quickly captures our attention, terrorism.

What is *al Qaeda*? What are the goals of those who have planned and spurred this new wave of transnational terror? They recruit followers out of societies which they say are suffering because of political oppression, which in turn, they claim, relies on Western support – and which they say they want to overthrow. In other words, they are political insurrectionists. But can terror succeed as a strategy of "regime change"?

The modern political philosopher whose writing on violence has best stood the test of time, in my judgment, is Hannah Arendt. In her essay, "On Violence," which has gone through 29 re-printings in the 35 years since it was published, she said:

*"Violence, being instrumental by nature, is rational to the extent that it is effective in reaching the end that must justify it. And since when we act we never know with any certainty the eventual consequences of what we are doing, violence can remain rational only if it pursues short-term goals. Violence does not promote causes, neither history nor revolution, neither progress nor reaction..."*

*"In a contest of violence against violence, the superiority of the government has always been absolute."*

In other words, violence directed against British or American civilians will engender a far more violent response, because their governments have far greater means to locate and kill their adversaries. Does anyone really imagine that any U.S. president or British prime minister would interpret terrorism as a reasonable demand to stop military assistance to the Egyptian or Saudi governments? No, terrorism against civilians will always be seen the way that civilians see it: As an existential threat that requires a proportionate response.

Since the Bolsheviks hijacked a nonviolent struggle against the Russian Tsar one hundred years ago and failed in the attempt to stage a violent revolt, there is not a single instance in the world in which terror or organized violence has succeeded in overturning an oppressive government which was followed by a government that upheld basic rights for the people.

So terror as a strategy of liberation is not rational, on the basis of logic or history, as Hannah Arendt argued. But it is not the only possible such strategy, as we shall see.

Now, is there an objective need for liberation in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and many other countries in the Middle East and beyond? Absolutely. Just consider these very recent headlines:

From the *Washington Post*, May 26, dateline Cairo: “A nationwide referendum on multi-party elections in Egypt turned violent Wednesday as pro-government mobs attacked and beat demonstrators on the streets of the capital.”

From the Beirut *Daily Star*, May 31: “On May 24, at around 6 p.m., the Syrian authorities arrested all eight members of the board of directors of the Jamal Atasi Forum for Democratic Dialogue in Syria. The forum was the only tolerated independent political forum left in the country...”

From Human Rights Watch, June 12, in a news release: “Iran’s elections for all practical purposes are pre-cooked,’ said Joe Stork, deputy director of Human Rights Watch’s Middle East Division....More than a thousand candidates registered for the June 17 presidential elections, but the Guardian Council approved only eight, all of whom are former or present government officials...89 women registered their candidacy, but none were approved.”

From the *Washington Post*, June 15, dateline Shengyou, China: “Hundreds of men armed with shotguns, clubs and pipes on Saturday attacked a group of farmers who were resisting official demands to surrender land to a state-owned power plant, witnesses said. Six farmers were killed and as many as 1900 others were seriously injured...The farmers, who had pitched tents and dug foxholes and trenches on the disputed land to prevent the authorities from seizing it, said they suspected the assailants were hired by corrupt local officials.”

From CNN, June 21, dateline Harare, Zimbabwe: “Zimbabwe police have extended a demolition campaign targeted the homes and livelihood of the urban poor, to vegetable gardens they rely on for food...The crackdown on urban farming – at a time of food shortages in Zimbabwe – is the latest escalation in the government’s month-long Operation Murambatsvina...which has seen police demolish the shacks of poor city dwellers, arrest street vendors and smash their kiosks...The United Nations estimates the campaign has left at least 1.5 million people homeless...The Rev. Oskar Wermter...a parish priest in one of the poorest downtown areas, called the crackdown...’insane and evil’.”

### *Political Power*

Terrorists are right: Oppression is a worldwide epidemic. But in all of these countries and many more where basic rights are withheld, there are groups and movements consisting of ordinary citizens who are using something other than terror or violence to resist repression and demand change. They’re using nonviolent strategies and tactics to disobey the government and to organize more people to resist. Can they succeed? Let’s ask Hannah Arendt. She said, in 1970:

*“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...*"

*"Where commands are no longer obeyed, the means of violence are of no use; and the question of this obedience is not decided by the command-obedience relation but by opinion and, of course, by the number of people who share it...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."*

This is the concept of power at the core of how nonviolent civilian-based movements succeed, and this form of civilian resistance – dissolving oppression by starving it of popular consent or acquiescence, and driving up its operating costs (through strikes, boycotts and civil disobedience, as well as protests) -- was at the heart of the great people power revolutions of the past one hundred years.

Indians refused to pay the taxes of their British colonial masters. African-Americans refused any longer to obey segregation laws and customs. Polish workers refused to leave their shipyards and factories until they won the right to organize a free trade union. Ordinary Filipinos refused to let a dictatorial president's loyal army units attack rebellious soldiers, blockading them with their bodies – and the military fell apart, and with it, the dictator's regime. Chileans refused to let General Augusto Pinochet steal a plebiscite, forcing him out. Czechs, East Germans, Mongolians and others living under communist regimes besieged their capitals and refused to go home until their rulers did. Serbs, Georgians and Ukrainians by the millions refused to permit corrupt, fraudulently elected leaders to hold onto power. More genuine democracy and respect for human rights followed in all these countries.

But this concept of power, and the strategic dynamics of civilian-based movements, are not understood or even perceived by many journalists in any of the world's major media organizations. Neither are these concepts really understood by more than a few government policymakers anywhere in the world – or even by many educators and teachers. That's because a whole host of misconceptions about nonviolent action obstruct that understanding. Unless these misleading ideas are corrected, nonviolent power cannot be taught in ways that will translate into action. And unless we are merely engaged in entertaining ourselves intellectually, we should want to teach nonviolent ideas in order to produce nonviolent action.

### *False Ideas*

In his superb new book, "Unarmed Insurrections: People Power Movements in Nondemocracies," Rutgers sociologist Kurt Schock identifies 19 prevalent misconceptions of nonviolent action. Let me read you two of them, which Schock frames correctively:

*"The effectiveness of nonviolent action is not a function of the ideology of the oppressors. It is claimed that nonviolent action can succeed only in democracies or only when it is used against 'benign'...oppressors."* But that is not true, he explains.

*“...the effectiveness of nonviolent action is not a function of the repressiveness of the oppressors. In fact, campaigns of nonviolent action have been effective in brutally repressive contexts, and ineffective in open democratic polities.”*

And let me define three more misconceptions, from an article that Peter Ackerman and I have in this summer’s edition of *Harvard International Review*:

First, nonviolent struggle is often read only “as a form of peacemaking or conflict resolution, rather than as a way to wage and win a conflict.” So the media and even protagonists in dissident movements dismiss it as lacking force or “needing outside patrons.”

Second, “elite policymakers and news producers naturally pay ample attention to the moves of high office-holders, commanding generals and famous figures. The potential or even imminent actions of ordinary citizens usually fly beneath their political radar.”

Third, “any victory of people power tends to be written off” as one of a kind, once a local factor “seems to have turned the political tide,” such as the leadership change to De Klerk in South Africa, or Yushchenko’s poisoning in Ukraine. “Yet none of these circumstances would have mattered if there had not been indigenous civilian resistance applying extreme pressure on these regimes’ institutions and backers.”

So when you hear an American politician or commentator giving credit to U.S. assistance for what happened in Ukraine, or when you hear someone saying that people power is a form of Western intervention, don’t believe them. People power comes from the people of the country where it’s produced and not from anyone else. It is their skill in developing nonviolent strategies and engaging in nonviolent tactics that always make the difference.

That is why Martin Luther King, Jr. said of action to correct injustice, “Don’t wait for the government to do it. *You* must do it.” And that is a powerful message to give to anyone in a classroom: Nothing will change until you make it change. And it’s mainly a question of whether your plan for change makes sense. It’s your intelligence and persistence that will make the difference. So the reality of people power on the street – not its theories or its metaphysics -- is what is exciting about it.

I defy anyone to suggest what is more compelling – as an image or an event -- than a million people in one place. And that is what the Ukrainian people rallied to produce in their “Orange Revolution”, when they took over the public space of their capital city, Kiev, last December, to resist the government when it tried to steal an election for its favored candidate. But TV anchor people and instant pundits all over the world immediately misinterpreted what this meant.

They said that this was a sudden confrontation between protesters and an armed regime, which always had the option of cracking down and ending the movement. They said that the best hope for a peaceful outcome lay in the intervention of European negotiators who flew to Kiev to negotiate. And they said that the protesters couldn’t remain for very long outside in the cold and sustain the movement. But none of these things were true.

## Real Events

For over a year before the Orange Revolution, a broad-based coalition of student, business and political groups had patiently organized for the eventuality that the Kuchma government would try to steal the presidential election, and they had a strategy for what to do: not just to protest, but to occupy the heart of the capital indefinitely, halting normal operations of government and sowing doubt within the police and military about how the Ukrainian people would see them if armed force was used. And what happened? Let's listen to the words of those who participated, words that come from interviews conducted by a researcher we sent to Ukraine just last month:

Peter Burkovsky, a Yushchenko staff member, said: "The people were very self-organized. A majority of the common people understood that they...should behave peacefully." One speaker at the demonstrations said, "We are a force, but a peaceful force."

Taras Stetskiy, deputy head of Yushchenko's central HQ, said: "If we had not prepared for at least a year, I don't know that spontaneous outbursts would have led where they did...For every event, we had a special plan for preparation and conduct. There were people assigned to work with the uniformed services...Our strategy was to...make sure that they would hesitate before firing on anyone...This is also why we had our slogan, 'military with the people'."

Volodymyr Filenko, head of mass action for the campaign, said: "It was important that we never, ever provoked them with aggression. Our actions were very peaceful...There was no quarreling or swearing or cases of fighting...And this did have an impact on the military."

Did it? One senior law enforcement official with the regime, who talked to us on condition of anonymity, said this: "I have a great deal of respect for the fact that the Yushchenko people did all they could to prevent any kind of conflict...They'd offer food, clothes in a very friendly way...It was amazing...There were groups of women who would encourage [soldiers] not to take illegal actions. I want to emphasize this – there was a very significant gender factor."

One general talked about the position in which the movement had placed the military. "Besides his official position, every soldier is also a citizen," he said. "Many guys from our office, for example, would leave work in the evening, change their clothes, and go to the Maidan [the main demonstration space] to join the revolution...I've spoken with many people in uniform, and I've never heard one person who thought, I would use my rifle against civilians." And why not? Not because soldiers won't shoot if they were being shot at – that's their universal instinct. But because the people's movement exhibited strict nonviolent discipline.

In short, the Ukrainian people neutralized through nonviolent action the ability of corrupt rulers to curtail the people's movement through violent action. When a government loses the ability to enforce its will because no one obeys, it loses power. That was the reality of the Orange Revolution.

But in the weeks that followed, another, false version of events sprang from commentators outside Ukraine. An article in *The New York Times* said that the American

Bar Association's training of Ukrainian judges may have been the key factor, since it helped their supreme court invalidate the election. Russian critics said that training of Ukrainian activists by veterans of the Serbian resistance to Slobodan Milosevic was the shadowy force behind events. A reporter for the *Financial Times* even gave my organization credit for supposedly having made a timely contribution, even though we never had contact with a single Ukrainian. But as Viktor Yushchenko himself said, in a statement with Georgian president Mikhail Saakashvili, "We strongly reject the idea that peaceful democratic revolutions can be triggered by artificial techniques or external interference."

### *Explanatory Power*

Why should we care about these misconceptions and distortions? Because they help reinforce the mesmerism of hopelessness and violence, which immobilizes and intimidates people and prevents them from using the power that comes from the knowledge they can acquire and the skill they can use in applying that knowledge.

Saying that people power does not come from the people is also an insult – to the millions of people who did not lose hope and were not intimidated, and who marched, boycotted, went on strike, were jailed, and even died, fighting nonviolently and successfully to erase injustice and dissolve oppression for the past hundred years.

If we believe that people power doesn't arise from the people who apply it, if we only take seriously the power of governments or the power of terrorists, then we are not only ignoring history, we are also saying that ordinary people cannot really do anything, that you – and your students -- cannot do anything, unless you choose violence. But that too is refuted by history.

A major new study supported by our Center and just published this month reports that in 50 of the 67 transitions from authoritarianism to democracy in the past 35 years, nonviolent civic resistance was a major force – and, in contrast, where opposition movements used violence, the chances for liberation were greatly reduced. "The activity of strong nonviolent coalitions reduces the appeal of opposition violence," it concluded. Why? Because those who want to be violent always claim that it's the only way to fight effectively. When that claim is disproved, the allure of violence is deflated.

That is why every teacher of nonviolent action plays a critical part in ridding the world of terrorism. Osama bin Laden has said, "The walls of oppression and humiliation cannot be demolished except in a rain of bullets." In that statement is represented the weakness and ultimately the downfall of his movement, because no political movement – which is what radical Islamist terrorism represents – can succeed if its strategy is based on false ideas.

All ideas that are *received* but are not *examined* – if they cannot explain real events -- cannot be the basis for sustained effective action, and that applies to teaching nonviolent action as well as undertaking it. The ideas that you teach will not find adherents – they will not stimulate your students – if they do not have explanatory power. To produce that power in the classroom, you should embed the ideas that you teach in the stories, narratives and cases where they were exhibited in the action of real people. That is what we do when we develop tools and resources for activists who want to wage nonviolent conflict. Through those tools, we've tried to crystallize the ideas and

teach the practices that explain and develop nonviolent power. So I'm in the same business that you are: I'm an educator. I'm trying to build the capacity of people to understand and use the knowledge of how they can liberate themselves.

Fifty years after Allied military forces invaded the beaches and fields of Normandy, from which they eventually liberated France from Nazi occupation in 1944, I stood in the American military cemetery overlooking Omaha Beach. I have never been so moved at any historical site in my life. Under towering trees, thousands of white crosses stretched across the green grass toward the gray English Channel beyond. Then I noticed something about the graves -- that the graves of corporals were next to the graves of generals, that in the permanent physical record of this American sacrifice, there were no meaningful distinctions of rank, age or ethnic background. Inscribed in one of the marble memorials was the following line:

*"This embattled shore, portal of freedom, is forever hallowed by the ideals, the valor and the sacrifices of our fellow countrymen."*

Those soldiers defeated a great mortal threat to the civilization of the world, a vicious ideology that had no way to win consent except through violence. Sixty years ago, few knew any other way to quell such violence. Today there are other embattled shores, other portals of potential freedom, and in those lands live people who must learn that violent death is no longer the mandatory sacrifice to win their freedom.

All systems of human endeavor based on violence collapse. "Out of the barrel of a gun grows the most effective command," Hannah Arendt said. "What can never grow out of it is power."