

more
than
might?

DEFINING POWER

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People Power Primed

Civilian Resistance and Democratization

Tisovets, a popular ski resort in the Carpathian Mountains, is a tiring four-hour drive in a four-wheel-drive from Lviv. The journey was exceptionally challenging for Ukraine's newly elected president, Viktor Yushchenko, and Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili. Meeting there on January 5, 2005, they reviewed the events that led to their elections. The democratic movements that propelled them to power had to overcome obdurate regimes, defeat corrupt individuals, and confound the disbelief of international observers.

"The people of Ukraine and Georgia have demonstrated to the world that freedom and democracy, the will of the people, and free and fair elections are more powerful than any state machine, notwithstanding its strength and severity," the two presidents announced in a joint statement. This confident assertion would not have surprised President Gloria Arroyo of the Philippines, President Ricardo Lagos of Chile, President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa, or President Vojislav Kostunica of Serbia and Montenegro—whose countries were also transformed by "people power." Yet the ideas Yushchenko and Saakashvili endorsed in Tisovets still flout the world's conventional wisdom.

Commentators outside of Ukraine seem unable to believe that ordinary Ukrainians were behind the Orange Revolution. An Oxford professor attributed the victory to US support for Ukrainian opposition groups, coming from businessman George Soros and US agencies such as the National Endowment for Democracy. One *New York Times* article identified the American Bar Association's training of Ukrainian judges as the key factor. Russian pundits cited the training of young Ukrainian activists conducted by veterans of Otpor, the Serbian student group that helped bring down Slobodan Milosevic.

That outside analysts gravitated to external factors was no doubt vexing to the two men who had spearheaded the Orange and Rose Revolutions. In their Carpathian Declaration, Yushchenko and Saakashvili had an unambiguous response: "We strongly reject the idea that peaceful democratic revolutions 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."

So the road to Tisovets was not paved with US money or built with Serbian advisors. It took Ukrainian and Georgian drivers to maneuver the sharp turns and hard terrain that they and their people knew best. Still, the basic knowledge of how to drive had already been conceived, by many people in many countries.

What is People Power?

"People power is a form of consciousness." "People power is a euphemism for mob rule." "People power" is about restoring the 'invisible institution of morality.'" None of these phrases, plucked at random off the Internet, comes close to defining the historical phenomenon of people power. Most references in news coverage

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are just as errant. The term was coined in the Philippines to describe the outpouring of popular opposition to the dictator Ferdinand Marcos, yet it was a split in his military forces, facilitated by the protests that immobilized Manila, that actually compelled Marcos to resign.

Protest by itself cannot pry a ruler from office because power does not come from a public show; it comes from applying force. When directed strategically by a civilian-based movement, protest is only one of many nonviolent tactics, including strikes, boycotts, blockades, and hundreds of other acts of economic and social disruption that can dissolve the political or military support beneath a ruler. The power in “people power” is best understood as the yield from detonating these nonviolent weapons.

Mohandas Gandhi was the first in the 20th century to discern what ordinary civilians could do—or refrain from doing—to change their country’s course. “Even the most powerful cannot rule without the cooperation of the ruled,” he said. If enough people withdraw that cooperation, they will shrink the government’s legitimacy and raise the costs of enforcing its will. The instrument for bringing this about is a self-organized movement, which political scientist Sidney Tarrow describes as having “the power to trigger sequences of collective action” based on a unified frame for common goals. When non-violent movements of this kind have drained a ruler’s sources of support, the results have changed history:

In 1980, the Solidarity Movement in Poland used industrial strikes to make the Communist regime permit a free trade union. Ten million Poles soon joined. The movement continued underground during martial law, and President Wojciech Jaruzelski eventually asked Solidarity to help negotiate Poland’s first free elections, which it won.

From 1985 to 1990, the United Democratic Front in South Africa used boycotts and strikes to damage apartheid-supporting businesses, eroding their support of the racial system to help make the country ungovernable, in turn forcing the ruling party to negotiate a new political system.

In 1986, after President Marcos stole an election, fueling state-wide anger among Filipinos, a veritable army of his civilian opponents surrounded and protected key military units that

had defected, signaling that the president had lost the option of repression. He resigned.

In 1988, following five years of growing protests against the military government of General Augusto Pinochet, Chileans organized a “crusade of civic participation” to win a plebiscite that Pinochet called and that persuaded his fellow junta members to refuse orders to crack down and compelled him to step down.

From 1989 to 1990, in Prague, East Berlin, Sofia, Ulan Bator, and other Soviet-sphere capitals, tens of thousands of ordinary citizens occupied public squares as the world watched on television, forcing these regimes to hold free elections and liberating more than 120 million people from authoritarian control.

In 1996 and 1997, thousands of Serbian students and workers marched in Belgrade to demand that President Slobodan Milosevic accept opposition victories in municipal elections. He finally did so. In 2000, the protesters were joined by hundreds of thousands of ordinary Serbs from all over the country who converged on the capital after Milosevic refused to accept his own electoral defeat. When the dictator’s defenders refused his orders, he had to leave.

The similarities among these civilian-based transitions



Opposite: Voters in the former Soviet Republic of Georgia go to the polls to elect a new president to replace Eduard Shevardnadze in what became known as the “Rose Revolution.” **Above:** Ukrainian president Viktor Yushchenko arrives at the European Council in Strasbourg with Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili.

more than might? **DEFINING POWER**

to democracy are readily apparent. That they have not caught the attention of many policy makers or pundits is due to three misconceptions.

First, nonviolent action is often misread as a form of peacemaking or conflict resolution rather than as a way to wage and win a conflict. When launched, especially against a repressive ruler, nonviolent action is usually dismissed as lacking punch or needing outside patrons. Once civilian-based resistance is seen for what it is, as a way to defeat rather than soften or persuade an opponent, the home-grown strategy and tactics that often produce success can be identified.

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. When a regime succumbs to such a strategy, outside observers are flabbergasted.

Third, any victory of people power tends to be written off as *sui generis* once a catalytic factor is noticed that seems sufficient to have turned the political tide. In Ukraine, it was Yushchenko's poisoning that appeared to galvanize the opposition; in Serbia, the independent vote count; in South Africa, the leadership change to Frederik Willem de Klerk;

in Chile, Pinochet's decision to hold a plebiscite. 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, making the cost of repression prohibitive. Dismissing these misconceptions and understanding the necessary conditions that produce such a constructive crisis is essential if the adoption of people power as a means of democratization is to spread.

How People Power Succeeds

The great strategic scholar Thomas Schelling wrote nearly a half-century ago about the dynamics of conflict between violent and nonviolent opponents: "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.... 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." In other words, the outcome will be determined by the skill of the contestants, not history, nebulous international forces, or other collateral factors. For a civilian-based nonviolent movement to

PEOPLE POWER IN PROGRESS



1980

1980-1981

Polish workers go on strike to urge the Communist government to allow free trade unions. ▣

1982



1984

1986

After stealing an election and causing outrage among Filipinos, President Ferdinand Marcos resigns after civilian opponents protect defecting military units. ▣



1986

1985-1990

The United Democratic Front of South Africa protests pro-apartheid businesses. ▣

PEOPLE POWER: CIVILIAN RESISTANCE AND DEMOCRATIZATION

overturn an oppressive government, three conditions are necessary for victory.

The first is unity, encompassing the full spectrum of groups and activists who want an open, democratic society. Unity must be predicated on a consensus about goals, both short-term and long-term. Unity of purpose also fosters organizational cohesion so that leaders' decisions can be carried out to maximum effect. In Serbia's 2000 presidential campaign, opposition leaders set aside personal ambitions to unite behind Kostunica as a respected candidate against Milosevic and to prevent the regime from playing opposition groups against each other. Beyond avoiding internal conflicts, only a coalition-based campaign can plausibly claim to represent the preponderance of the civilian population, whatever its ethnic or ideological divisions.

Though the global media tend to focus on the looks and words of a movement's leader, some of history's people power revolutions lacked charismatic leaders. All were driven by robust coalitions. Solidarity, for instance, became the agency by which conservative Catholics, left-wing intellectuals, shipyard workers, and merchants in Poland coalesced into a civilian force that put continuing pressure on the Communist regime, even during the years of martial law. The people's movement that roused the majority of Chileans to

oppose Pinochet included groups of every political shade, from radical socialists to free-market conservatives.

The second necessary condition is concerted planning. Organizing a movement is not done spontaneously. It requires tactical capacity building so that personnel can be trained, material resources marshaled, and independent communications maintained. And it requires the strategic sequencing of varied tactics in order to probe, confuse, and even overwhelm the opponent. In Georgia in 2003, the youth group Kmara invited veterans of the Serbian group Otpor to come to Tbilisi and provide advanced training in nonviolent action. From that flowed better planning and better execution in Kmara's sequence of graffiti, leaflet, and poster campaigns against corruption and for media freedom. At the heart of developing a campaign strategy is analysis of the opponent's sources of support, including the country's business leadership, its religious establishment, and its security apparatus—and then the application of tactics to weaken and splinter these regime pillars. Internal audiences are even more crucial than external supporters, and both are influenced by the contest for legitimacy between movement and regime.

Winning that contest is impossible unless the opposition refrains from violence, because just as repression may

1988

General Augusto Pinochet is forced to step down after civilians call for a "crusade of civic participation" to win the plebiscite. ▣



1988

1990

1992

1994

1996

1989-1990

Civilians in several Soviet capitals, such as Ulan Bator, stage public demonstrations to force the government to hold free elections. ▣

1996-1997

Serbians in Belgrade protest the cancellation of opposition victories in municipal elections and urge President Slobodan Milosevic to resign. ▣

Source: Peter Ackerman and Jack Duvall

delegitimize a regime, armed attacks may discredit the values and strategy of a movement. Nonviolent discipline is therefore the third condition of success in civilian-based struggle. Without it, a movement cannot enlist the participation of most people, who will avoid the risks associated with violent resistance. Moreover, violence converts the conflict into a contest of arms, in which most regimes have an advantage.

Nonviolent discipline is also critical in co-opting regime defenders. Defections from the police and military frequently break the back of a repressive state. Soldiers are unlikely to switch allegiance to people who are shooting at them. A dictator's defenders come from the same communities and



A Ukrainian resident waves orange ribbon at a religious procession in downtown Kiev to support the Ukrainian opposition led by Viktor Yushchenko.

families as the movement's legions. They know what is at stake: their livelihood and future prospects in a society that has a chance to escape from capricious, deadly misrule.

Once election fraud occurred in Ukraine, commanders in the Security Service faced a decision. As one top general said, "Today we can save...our epaulettes, or we can try to save our country." Four days later, security officers went to

their counterparts in the Ukrainian police and army. "Do not forget that you are called to serve the people," they argued. When the Interior Ministry ordered troops to shut down the huge demonstrations in Kiev, the Army Chief of Staff said his troops would be "on the side of the people." The crackdown was aborted.

Afterward, two senior Security Service commanders disclosed that their wives had been among the protesters, and one said his daughter was on the streets, too. This dynamic is nothing new. At the height of people power in the Philippines in 1986, with the military split into opposing camps, one protester got on an independent radio station and addressed his nephew, a key military officer: "Artemio, this is your uncle Fred speaking...please listen to me." Then he explained why his nephew should join the people.

The people's cause is what a unified, well-planned, and disciplined civilian-based movement comes to embody. It elevates the struggle above the level of "technique," in the words of the Carpathian Declaration, and to the question of the country's future. In some way, every nonviolent movement represents a simple, existential proposition: it is time to rule ourselves, it is time to be free. Thus the meaning of *Pora*—"It's Time!"—the name of the Ukrainian student group.

As Yushchenko and Saakashvili knew, they would not have taken power without the catalyst of outrage over a stolen election. But opportunities do not materialize without planning and preparation. As the two presidents also surely knew, the revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia sprang from strategies and decisions that supplied the prerequisites of people power.

Why People Power Matters

In a 2005 study, Freedom House counted 67 transitions from nondemocratic to democratic governments in the world between 1970 and 2003. Strong or moderately strong nonviolent civic forces were present in 50 of these cases. More than 70 percent of those involved broad-based nonviolent popular fronts or civic coalitions that were highly active.

The tens of thousands of civilians who make people power work become the cadres of politically active citizens who make democracy work. That is a major reason why such states tend to remain democratic long after the change Freedom House noted that the stronger the nonviolent civic coalition operating in societies in the years immediately preceding the transition, the deeper their transformation in the direction of freedom and democracy. This correlation—between indigenous civilian-based resistance and the sustainability of democratic rule—should reframe the debate about how the international community or any government should encourage democratization.

Thus far that debate has been mired in the supposed dichotomy between “hard power,” threatening the big stick of military force, and “soft power,” relying on the carrots of diplomacy and trade. But whether the effect is supposed to be coercive or seductive, both these tools of influence are projected from outside the domain of a menacing, repressive regime. By contrast, people power is an indigenous force and operates inside that domain, with more intimate access to a regime’s foundations of power.

The reality is that foreign nationals cannot formulate a civilian movement’s discourse, analyze its opponent’s pillars of support, or make tactical decisions in a fast-flowing conflict. Action to produce each of the conditions necessary for

societies happily accept economic, social, or humanitarian assistance from international, regional, or national development agencies. Accountability for results has long been seen as critical for effective absorption of this aid. Because democratic governance provides that accountability, international help for civilian-led democratization is a smart way to protect the world’s investment in human development.

And the stakes are even higher. Repressive regimes deal in death. All imprison or execute dissidents. Some profit from traffic in women and children procured for slavery or the sex trade. In their most destabilizing form, they are purveyors or customers of weapons of mass destruction—and they inspire insurrectionaries who often turn to war or terror as a means

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people power can be derived only from local expertise. What can come from abroad are communications equipment, funding for tangible articles like computers or bumper stickers, and training in the generic skills of nonviolent resistance—all of which quicken the pulse of people power.

At Tisovets, Yushchenko and Saakashvili implicitly endorsed the idea of international assistance for civilian-based resistance, when they said that they appreciated “the support from democratic states and organizations for the nonviolent struggle of our citizens.” Much criticism of this support has come from those who suspect ulterior US motives even though training in vote monitoring from the European Union and aid from non-US-affiliated non-governmental organizations were equally if not more helpful to the movement in Ukraine.

Transnational assistance to nonviolent movements is nothing new. Catholics in Europe and North America aided nonviolent activists in Poland and the Philippines. US labor unions assisted the anti-Pinochet campaign in Chile. African-American organizations were vital in their support of the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. The liberators of the Philippines, Chile, and South Africa were Filipinos, Chileans, and South Africans. But as the Carpathian Declaration made clear, the material and political solidarity given to indigenous movements, plus the knowledge of people power harvested from abroad, have been highly opportune.

Drawing the cloak of sovereignty over their abuses, some regimes claim that their own people’s demands for change are a symptom of foreign intervention. Yet most undemocratic

of liberation. They should no longer be tolerated.

The most effective and least costly agent for dissolving these regimes is not violent revolt, not war, and not even external power. It is the capacity of civilians in these societies to wage a struggle for freedom, if they are equipped with the knowledge of how to use strategic nonviolent resistance. In the shadow of the horror that the regimes they oppose could otherwise perpetrate, refusal to assist indigenous forces would be a humanitarian failure.

To protect and expand this assistance, and to insure it does not serve any government’s agenda for “regime change,” an international institution or new international foundation should channel aid to civilian groups that choose people-power strategies. Such an institution should be independent and adopt new international norms for dispensing help. For example, assisted groups should commit to nonviolent action, democratic self-rule, and the standards enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Now that the knowledge of how ordinary citizens can democratize their own nations has been developed, the international community should make it available everywhere. Distributing this new literacy of liberation cannot manufacture people power. But it can accelerate it. Georgians and Ukrainians followed Indians, Salvadorans, Czechs, Mongolians, and a score of other peoples who used nonviolent strategies to reconstitute or replace governments that had trampled on their rights. Many others will take the same road in the years ahead. The only question is whether the world will heed the words from Tisovets and help them. ■