

“Winning Rights and Breaking Corruption Through People Power”
Outline of remarks by Dr. Peter Ackerman
12th Annual International Anti-Corruption Conference

[Note: Plenary is on the topic of “Breaking the Vicious Cycle: Corruption and Poverty; Obstacles to Social and Economic Rights”]

The premise of my remarks is that levels of corruption correlate strongly with levels of state violence and oppression. Rid society of the latter, and the process by which it is accomplished will largely rid society of the structural basis for corruption.

- It is clear that where poverty and corruption are worst, democracy is usually absent or anemic. So the “vicious cycle” is unlikely to be broken without people first winning political rights.
- In 50 of 67 transitions from authoritarianism to democracy in the past 30 years, the pivotal force for winning rights has been nonviolent civic resistance, through tactics such as strikes, boycotts, mass protests and civil disobedience.
- In other words, the “vicious cycle” has been broken repeatedly through people power:
 - People power did it in Poland, where the whole system of privileges and rights for party bosses and bureaucrats – as well as political repression -- was brought down by workers. They used strikes to win a free trade union, and then used that union, Solidarity, to de-legitimize the system and finally gain free elections.
 - People power did it in the Philippines (where the term was invented). In 1983 and 1984, civilians joined in protest campaigns against state corruption and against President Marcos who had stolen another election. When the military defected in the face of these protests, he had to resign.
 - People power did it in South Africa, where boycotts of white business and strikes by black workers sparked a wave of nonviolent resistance that helped end the apartheid regime. That also ended an era marked by huge slush funds for apartheid supporters, illicit ivory trading by defense officials, and other corruption.
 - People power did it in Serbia, where millions marched to prevent Slobodan Milosevic from holding onto power after losing an election in 2000. After a decade of wars and corruption, many of them were rallied by the slogan, “He’s stolen the best year of our lives.”

- People power did it in Georgia, where the Rose Revolution was called by one of its leaders, “a revolt against a kleptocratic government.”
- And people power did it in the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, where the outgoing president had been implicated in the killing of a prominent journalist investigating government corruption. Millions protested a fraudulent election, until the nation’s top court ordered a recount, which the opposition won.
- Because strategies to mobilize nonviolent resistance were successful in these cases, they offer important lessons today for anti-corruption campaigns all over the world:
 - The first lesson is that where government is repressive or not responsive, campaigns have to involve large numbers of civilians to put pressure on the system. Nonviolent resistance disrupts the status quo. It forces all those who support or go along with the system to doubt whether it can be sustained, shaking their loyalty to that system.
 - Another lesson is that a campaign has to unite a diverse cross-section of the society and not just certain parties and classes, behind pragmatic, achievable goals. Enlarging the space for the campaign to grow is often more important tactically than trying to collapse the system in one blow.
 - Another lesson is that a campaign has to plan continuously and marshal resources to achieve tactical capacity that goes beyond protests. It has to raise the cost of the system by varying the types of pressure it applies and constraining the options of those defending the system.
 - Another lesson is that a campaign has to maintain nonviolent discipline. If it degenerates into free-lance agitation or violence, it will lose civilian participation, political legitimacy and the advantage of surprise – because repressive rulers expect and know how to quell violence.
 - When a campaign against corruption emulates the great nonviolent movements of the past by applying these and other principles, it will divide the ranks of those who accept, justify and uphold the corrupt system. What before seemed unassailable will be under attack, not just by opposition parties, NGOs or foreign watchdogs, but by the people themselves.

My organization, the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, distributes to people everywhere – who ask for it -- the knowledge of how to develop nonviolent strategies to fight for their rights. Dozens of movements that oppose corrupt governments in Africa, Asia, the Pacific islands, the Middle East and Latin America are applying this knowledge – and we would be delighted to share it with anyone here today.