

Toward a Nonviolent World

The Means of Power and the End of Domination

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Agents of Change

Eight weeks ago I met a woman who is changing the world. Her name is Jennifer Latheef, and she is a citizen of the Maldive Islands, which has had the same corrupt, authoritarian ruler for 28 years. Until less than two years ago, political opposition in the Maldives was quickly repressed, but then a dissident was killed in police custody and international pressure forced the government to permit open dissent. Jennifer became an opposition leader, but was arrested for engaging in a nonviolent protest – and charged with terrorism. She was under house arrest when I talked with her in a simple, small but colorful house in Male, the capital-city where 70,000 people live on a one square mile island in the blue clear water of the Indian Ocean.

Jennifer Latheef had all the earmarks of a determined nonviolent campaigner, which I've come to recognize in my contact with nonviolent activists: She was fearless, calm, approachable, pragmatic, and absolutely shining with intelligence. I have little doubt that this woman can, if she chooses, eventually become prime minister or president of her country, after it becomes genuinely democratic.

Today the diversity, skill and strategic impact of all the Jennifer Latheefs in the world substantially exceed the political ability and enduring effect of all those plotting armed insurrection, terrorist attacks or other violent methods of seeking power:

- West Papuans are increasingly turning to nonviolent resistance to fight for self-determination against the Indonesian military, which has occupied their land since 1963.
- Indigenous people's organizations in Ecuador, Bolivia and other Andean nations have taught themselves how to use nonviolent tactics, to fight for a share of political power in those countries.
- Students, merchants and civic activists in Belarus have not given up nonviolent resistance to a Russian-sponsored dictatorship, despite stolen elections and stiff repression.
- *Women of Zimbabwe Arise* includes thousands of women who campaign unstopably for real democracy to end the corruption and repression in that African land.
- Women's rights campaigners and ordinary workers in Iran regularly stage protests and strikes, which cannot fully be quelled by the police or brutal gangs connected to senior officials.
- Democratic activists, students and oppositionists in Egypt are increasingly well-organized and determined to put a nonviolent end to Hosni Mubarak's endless autocracy in that nation.
- The nonviolent struggle for self-determination of the Sarwahi people, whose homeland in the Western Sahara is occupied by Morocco, is becoming more insistent and systematic.

- There is a new dedication among Eritreans to nonviolent struggle, taken up by pro-democratic groups opposing a government that jails dissidents and persecutes religious minorities.
- The nonviolent Tibetan resistance to Chinese occupation of Tibet, unbowed and unrepentant, is now being mirrored in the resistance to Chinese control by Uyghurs in East Turkestan.
- Last year when the UN World Information Summit convened in Tunis, it was greeted by protests mounted by nonviolent pro-democratic resisters, who noted that there was no free information in autocratic Tunisia.

These ten examples represent only a handful of the civilian-based nonviolent struggles -- against violent suppression of human rights, justice, and self-rule -- that are gaining strength today. The application of nonviolent strategies is accelerating because the knowledge of how to develop and apply this form of power is being key-stroked around the world every hour.

This knowledge has been crystallized from the lessons of successful nonviolent conflicts during the past 100 years – Gandhi’s campaigns against the British Raj in India, unarmed resistance against the Germans in World War II, the disruption and defeat of segregation by the American civil rights movement, the rise of Solidarity in Poland, the people power revolution in the Philippines, the decisive nonviolent phase of resistance to apartheid in South Africa, the nonviolent expulsion of General Pinochet from the presidency of Chile, the civilian-driven toppling of Soviet client regimes in Eastern Europe and Mongolia, and the popular electoral revolutions against Milosevic in Serbia, Shevardnadze in Georgia and one-party rule in Ukraine.

In every one of these conflicts, hundreds of thousands or millions of ordinary citizens have joined civic coalitions to seek decisive change in favor of rights or democracy. Strikes, boycotts, mass protests and civil disobedience have been used to challenge the legitimacy and drive up the cost of the existing system, divide the loyalties of those who enforce its repression, and thereby take apart its power.

The Means of Power

In his book *The Unconquerable World*, Jonathan Schell argues that the great political phenomenon of the 20th century was the cascade of popular revolutions wrecking the plans of empire and tyranny, eventually manifested in nonviolence. But the impetus for liberation could trigger either violent or nonviolent revolt, and the choice of how to resist reflects a choice of different forms of power, not simply different tactics.

The scope of nonviolent resistance mustered by Gandhi against British control of India sobered the few colonial leaders who understood it. “England can hold India only by consent,” said Sir Charles Innes, a provincial governor, “We can’t rule it by the sword.” Hannah Arendt understood why: “Where commands are no longer obeyed, the means of violence are of no use,” she said. “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.” Abraham Lincoln had said a century earlier, “No man is good enough to govern another man, without that other’s consent.” Now we know that no one is *capable* of ruling others without their consent, once they know learn how to resist.

In South Africa, the United Democratic Front explicitly said that its nonviolent strategy was to make the country “ungovernable.” The majority, whose rights the apartheid regime refused to recognize, simply enforced the absence of any compact with it – showing why all political power is inherently democratic, whether or not elections authorize its use. The viability of democratic power does not depend on procedures, it arises from direct, credible and sustained manifestation of the people’s intent. When that disappears, so does political authority. In any political order, what must be visible and ascertainable is that citizens themselves are genuinely represented by those who make and enforce laws, or else that order is not legitimate.

When Hannah Arendt’s “sudden dramatic breakdown” happens to a system where the people’s intent is not ascertained, and when that’s followed by a new system in which the people make decisions, she’s describing what happens when nonviolent movements collapse abusive regimes and restore rights. But transfers of power through violence don’t call on mass participation, rarely bother to ascertain the people’s intent once a new system is established, and almost always reserve decisive power for one ruler or party that never yields to any fair test of popular support. The difference in the two means of achieving power is whether the agency of change is the people.

Gandhi would have had no difficulty understanding this. “For me,” he said, “means and ends are practically identical.” Instinctively he followed Kant’s categorical imperative: “Act as if the maxim of your action were to become by your will a general law of nature.” If Kant and Gandhi were right, what does that suggest about the rationale for violence as a means of power? Osama bin Laden says that “oppression...cannot be demolished except in a hail of bullets.” Lenin went further, saying that “real, nationwide terror” was needed to “reinvigorate” a country.

But since Lenin wrote those words, there is no instance anywhere in which violent revolution has liberated a people and launched a government based on their consent. Yet in 50 of 67 transitions from authoritarian to democratic governments in the past 35 years, nonviolent civic force was pivotal. The record of how power changes hands suggests that violence is not a rational means to liberate people, if liberation is understood to mean self-determination, which is to say, power exercised “by the people” as well as “for the people.”

One hundred years after Gandhi began his nonviolent experiments in South Africa, there is a robust new strategic model for the nonviolent production of political power which is now universally accessible and directly competitive with the much older model of violent confiscation performed by invasions, coups or insurrections. And this new model has these advantages: It is honest, and it works. It says to people: Join this movement, and you can be liberated – and your sons and daughters will rule themselves, as they see fit.

Model for Liberation

While this model for liberation is making history before our very eyes in struggles around the world, it is unprecedented as a set of prescriptive ideas for political action in this way: It was not formulated by statesmen, writers or philosophers. It has no Locke and Jefferson, no Marx and Trotsky, as sufficient originating sources. Even Gandhi learned from those who went before, from the women’s suffrage movement, from the struggle for Irish home rule, and from the Russian Revolution of 1905. We celebrate and

study Gandhi not so much because he invented nonviolent resistance, which he did not, but because he was the first successful leader of a national nonviolent movement in the modern news era, and he could memorably articulate the ideas behind his methods.

The content of books, films, workshops and other tools, now being distributed in scores of countries today, which explain the use of nonviolent action to produce political power, represents an accretion of ideas from Thoreau to Gandhi to Gene Sharp and other contemporary writers, both academic and popular. But these ideas have been vastly amplified and altered in practice by nonviolent activists, leaders, groups and movements in more than 50 countries over the past century, through reinterpretation, strategic innovation, and tactical adaptation. The result is that it isn't possible any longer to teach nonviolent action from a theoretical perspective derived from any one of its historical contributors and expect that nonviolence can be used to collapse oppression. You must fish out and incorporate a myriad of new ideas and lessons from the surging river of resistance coming forth from nonviolent fighters everywhere.

It will not be Western policymakers, international institutions, cautious diplomats, technology-equipped special forces, armed guerrillas, or self-appointed jihadists who will rescue from oppression the people of the Middle East or Africa or any other region soaked with injustice and misery. It will be the ordinary people inhabiting what we call "civil society", who are now usually treated by outsiders as victims or beneficiaries of action by others. As they learn to apply the political power they already possess, they will remake their own nations and lives.

Civic nonviolent resistance is, therefore, not a form of moral exhibitionism that shames power-holders into granting rights. It is a catalyst for incubating and applying independent power, through self-organizing, mass mobilizing, and incapacitating adverse reactive forces. It does not petition for power, it produces it.

This new model for liberation could not arrive at a better time historically, for the world is now raked with cross-fire from four developments that may otherwise jeopardize the advent of a less violent, more collaborative global society:

- The recrudescence of the violent insurrectionary vanguard, never successful historically in delivering the people's rights but manifested now in the form of transnational Islamist terrorism.
- Attacks on large numbers of innocent civilians in countries whose policies are unrelated or incidental to the grievances of the perpetrators, which have lent impetus and justification for pre-emptive and preventative military campaigns by governments expected to protect those civilians.
- International traffic in weapons of mass death by certain states and non-state actors who want to extort compliance with their demands, gain the ability to intimidate their enemies, or mesmerize the global media.
- In the global marketplace, the rising valuation of extractable resources such as oil, which has handed new financial resources to certain authoritarian states – states that have hardened domestic repression and vilified the new global flow of knowledge about civic resistance, which they see as a threat to their hold on power.

At the root or in the gun-sights of these forces are governments not based on the people's consent – dictators, one-party states, and military rulers. Terrorist groups want

to topple such rulers, and they recruit followers on the basis of that proposition. Democratic governments, seeing undemocratic regimes as the cause of discontent fueling terrorism, plan new ways to promote democratization. A few of those regimes, to shore up the only means of power they regard as serious – namely, the ability to create fear-inducing violence – seek nuclear capability. If the world’s authoritarian governments vanished tomorrow, much of the steam for these four forces would vent from the boiler of general violence that is the cause of so much anguish.

But the nonviolent model for liberation speaks directly to those who represent the market for this violence.

The Market for Violence

On June 30 of this year, Osama bin Laden said that Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the al Qaeda leader in Iraq, had taught the world “practical lessons in how to take liberty by force...he taught humanity how to rebel against tyrants,” adding in another message: “Only iron can dent iron...Anyone who hopes to convince these apostates without weapons...is like a fool who tries to convince the wolves to stop preying on the cattle. It will never happen...except through war.” Those who are mesmerized by the violence of their opponent are those who believe the claim that only war assures freedom.

Yet however the conflict is waged between violent extremists and those whom they threaten, it would be a mistake to project the outcome solely by looking at who brings the most iron. If that were true, they wouldn’t bother to win support and sympathy by appealing to people’s grievances and calling for a new birth of freedom. The lure of violence is also its weakness: its real ability to fight is not physical, it’s political.

Last month the White House released a new National Strategy for Combatting Terrorism. It concedes that “the principal terrorist enemy” has “ideological ends,” and it argues that if freedom comes to the lands where terrorists operate, their cause will die. But there is not one persuasive sentence in this Strategy about how to respond to the political claims of terrorists. Instead the document bristles with priorities like, “attack terrorists and their capacity to operate,” “deny terrorists entry to the United States,” and “eliminate physical safe havens.”

Military action to quell terrorism may be necessary, but it will only reduce the immediate supply of terrorists, not the long-term political demand for what they do. Among oppressed people, there is an acute demand for liberation. But the best way to reduce the demand for what your competitor does is to offer a better product or service. And mass nonviolent resistance, the most effective liberation service that history provides, has advantages that are easily explained to those who want to be free.

It has a far better record of freeing people, in part by calling on everyone to join the work of liberating -- women, minorities, workers and merchants, not only young men with more testosterone than rational judgment. It doesn’t depend on highly theatrical tactics and media coverage to try to make its enemies afraid, as if states with trillion-dollar armies could be frightened. It doesn’t push its most courageous fighters to destroy themselves but salvages their experience and reinvests its manpower in more ingenious ways to continue the struggle. And it does not have to glorify death. Bin Laden once said, “Death is truth.” That reminded me of how a Serbian nonviolent leader explained why Milosevic and his regime lost the people’s faith: “Their language smelled

like death,” he said. Nonviolent organizers know something that terrorists don’t: Death is not widely popular.

But the attraction of hyperviolence to the followers who keep it going will ebb only insofar as its perceived necessity as a strategy for liberation is supplanted by other, more successful strategies – as the people of societies where violent groups now thrive marshal a new kind of force to free themselves.

Two months ago I met a number of brave young nonviolent resisters in a Muslim nation in Asia, where the regime’s repression and corruption are also opposed by radical Islamists. There is a competition for liberation going on right now in that society. The preachers of jihad tell the people: Don’t believe these democratic groups, they will only deliver you from the dictator to the imperialists. But more than half the women of that society -- and everyone who wants a voice in how they’re governed – know that the extremists would only exchange one closed society for another.

They have a choice, but so do we. Will we limit our defiance of violence to killing the few who are violent, or imploring them to stop -- while the many who don’t realize they have a choice of how to fight keep delegating that fight to those in love with violence? Or will we help all those who crave their rights to learn the way that Indians and Poles and Filipinos and Chileans and South Africans and Serbs and African-Americans, and so many others, won their rights?

In 1848, Abraham Lincoln, then a congressman from Illinois, said on the floor of the House: “Any people anywhere, being inclined and having the power, have the right to rise up and shake off the existing government, and form a new one that suits them better. This is a most valuable, a most sacred right, which we hope and believe is to liberate the world.”

Do we really believe, with Lincoln, that people have the right to overturn any form of domination? Do we really believe, with Gandhi, that they have the opportunity? What the people do, and how they do it, will determine if the world will free itself of violence.

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