

Civilians in Nonviolent Conflict

Possibilities for Nongovernmental Civic Forces in Seeking Rights and Justice

Remarks by Jack DuVall
“For a Civil Peace Service in Catalonia” Conference, 27 March 2006
3rd International Gathering for the Culture of Peace – Barcelona, Spain

Introduction

I am honored to be speaking with you, in order to share with you certain ideas that my colleagues and I have obtained in the course of our work distributing knowledge about civilian-based nonviolent action. For a century, nonviolent activists have been waging struggles for human rights, democracy, and freedom, and the strategies they’ve developed may contain valuable lessons for civil peace services that you help establish, here in Europe and elsewhere.

One advocate of these services describes three phases of a conflict in which a civil peace service might be active – in preventing conflict, through diplomacy; after conflict, through reconstruction and rehabilitation; and during conflict, through mediation, arbitration and other techniques. This anatomy assumes that conflict should be muted or ended. Yet we know that on another level, all politics is dialectical – ideas and proposals compete for acceptance. Some win; others lose. But no one is killed or injured. What if conflict of that kind, nonviolent conflict, could be used to dissolve the worst kind of injustice or oppression? It has, many times.

Resistance for Rights

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 they had opposed. 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 writer Henry David Thoreau, whose essay, “On Civil Disobedience” had been published in 1849. Thoreau 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 his native India, Gandhi returned home from South Africa and launched a great nonviolent movement 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, the regime was immobilized, and the president left. Czechs, East Germans, Mongolians and others living under Soviet client regimes choked the streets of their capitals until their rulers stepped down. Black citizens boycotted South African businesses and made the country ungovernable, until a new political system was established. 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."

Nonviolent Conflict in Our Time

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.

Four years later, similar events unfolded in Ukraine. An outgoing administration had succumbed to corruption, restricted press freedom, stood accused on good evidence of having murdered the country's most prominent independent journalist, and almost surely had poisoned an opposition presidential candidate. When vote fraud in the presidential election, on the scale of 2.8 million rigged ballots, was revealed (with the help of international observers) and was found to favor the regime's candidate, a million Ukrainians came to the center of Kyiv and would not leave until a new vote was ordered.

Their systematic planning and strict nonviolent discipline impressed the secret service and army, and they blocked orders to use violence. Pressured also by the European Union, the Ukrainian government allowed a new vote to be held, and the challenger won. The Orange Revolution opened the door to government truly based on the consent of the people.

In 50 of 67 transitions from democratic to authoritarian rule to democracy in the last 35 years, nonviolent civic force was pivotal. Vaclav Havel described how this force could arise. He said that living without your rights was living a lie – the lie that life is normal – and that escaping the lie, by confronting the fact of injustice, could make the truth visible, through a social movement or civil conflict. This would be living in the truth, Havel, said, and it would open up "explosive, incalculable" power.

People power opens the vise of oppressive 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 control events.

To drive this civic force, you need the engine of a strategy – and that has three cylinders. The first is unity: The movement should achieve consensus about goals and encompass a wide

spectrum of groups and communities. Without unity, a movement can't claim to represent the aspirations of the people and its action won't enlist broad participation.

In Poland, Solidarity became the means by which left intellectuals, conservative Catholics, factory workers, students, and merchants coalesced into an enduring civilian force that kept putting pressure on General Jaruzelski's regime. The original people power movement that forced the resignation of Ferdinand Marcos featured political will and physical courage by wage-earners, businessmen, nuns, students, and military officers.

The second cylinder of the strategic engine is meticulous planning. No successful nonviolent movement is spontaneous. The opponent's vulnerabilities have to be assessed, tactics have to be chosen that shake support for repression, and action has to be sequenced to probe and outpace the decision-making resilience of those responsible for injustice.

No campaign to win rights or justice is creditable unless it gains higher ground in the contest for political legitimacy and moral authority. Winning that contest is impossible unless violence is avoided, because just as repression discredits a government by showing that it's lost the ability to persuade, armed attacks criminalize those who wish to change it.

Nonviolent discipline is therefore the third cylinder in the engine of strategy for civic power. Without it, civilians won't remain in the battle and the cause will lose its staying power. Moreover, violence converts a conflict into a contest of arms instead of political strength – a contest which governments have the experience to dominate.

Nonviolent discipline is also critical in co-opting people from within an apparatus that is violating or withholding rights. At the height of the Orange Revolution, hundreds of thousands of demonstrators were strictly nonviolent. Volodymyr Filenko, head of mass action for the campaign of opposition presidential candidate Viktor Yushchenko, said of the soldiers they faced, "It was very important that we never, ever provoked them with aggression. Our actions were very peaceful...And this did have an impact on the military."

One general later said, "Besides his official position, every soldier is also a citizen. 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." That's not surprising when you learn that one of the demonstrators' slogans was "Military with the people!" No wonder that when an order came to crack down, the army and the secret service refused to cooperate.

Unity, planning and nonviolent discipline are necessary to drive a movement forward -- so that voices can be heard which were silent, so that rights are regained which were stripped away, so that people can become who they want to be. Their words, their action, their lives and sacred honor are the fuel for this kind of revolution. Democratic power is not seized by a few, it is summoned from the many.

Gandhi suggested that nonviolent force begins with self-rule by individuals. He knew that the greatest asset in gaining rights is the free and disciplined mind of every person who joins the struggle. The dauntlessness of those who compose the force 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.

The opinion that ordinary people cannot engineer meaningful change, and that only some external agency can do it for them, reduces citizens to mere pawns. Implicit in this are two beliefs, which would reinforce apathy and inhibit action: first, the belief that we are all prisoners of nebulous larger forces and power-holders, that we are tossed around like seaweed on the tides of history; and second, the belief that things change only by material intervention, especially new techniques or money, rather than by changing the minds of individuals by gaining acceptance of new ideas.

If you believe that power is lodged in social structures and faceless institutions rather than in the consent of people whose cooperation they require, you may readily believe that the only means of winning rights is to dismantle those institutions by destroying those who defend them. But unless you love to kill for its own sake, sanctioning violence requires you to believe that the ends justify the means.

“For me,” Gandhi said, “means and ends are practically identical.” Instinctively he followed Immanuel 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? Osama bin Laden says that “oppression...cannot be demolished except in a hail of bullets.” But since Gandhi began his work, there is no instance anywhere in which violent revolution or terror has ever launched a government based on the people’s consent.

So violence circumvents the people. It uses the false assertion of the people’s support without harnessing their action so as to demonstrate that support. Neither those who use violent repression nor those who tout violent revolution would give the people the opportunity to set the course of history – they would reserve that for themselves.

And how reasonable is it to believe that annihilating lives can enhance life, that destruction opens the door to progress, that hate is the gate to harmony? If you do not think that those are reasonable propositions, then you can’t believe that violence should be the means to liberate the people. Violence is not the product of the people’s power, and it almost never yields the people’s rights.

When rights are achieved, and when justice is done, then peace is possible. I’d like to show you now the story of how the Chilean people achieved this...

We settled on our title for *A Force More Powerful* (the book, the television series, and now the video game) when we read of Gandhi’s meeting with African-American ministers in 1937. One of them asked the Indian leader whether nonviolence was active or passive. Gandhi replied, “It is the greatest and the activist force in the world...a force which is more positive than electricity, and more powerful even than ether.” It was as if he thought of it, not as religious or even political, but as a kind of science, with laws to be applied and power to be derived.

Gandhi’s legacy is being consummated today in nonviolent struggles for rights and democracy everywhere. I have met and talked with activists, students and civic leaders from West Papua, Zimbabwe, France, Iran, Tunisia, Venezuela, 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, or just help them speak and assemble freely again in the cities and open spaces 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.

Change that arises from nonviolent civic force is therefore indigenous as well as self-organized, representative, and consistent with the means to achieve it. The promise that this form of power offers to displace violence and establish peace has never been more timely – and redeeming that promise is the responsibility of everyone who believes that our time, our age can be decisive.

Apart from anything our governments may do, as individuals we should not flinch from this responsibility. Do you believe, as I do, that anyone who knows how to alleviate suffering should relieve it? Then let us help others learn how to do so. Do you believe, as I do, that anyone who knows how to avert violence should forestall it? Then let us show others how to do so. Do you believe, as I do, that anyone who sees a thoroughfare to equal rights and justice should point the way? Then let us post a sign there.

“To work in...the People,” the American poet Walt Whitman said, “this, I say, is what Democracy is for...” And the prophet Isaiah said, “The work of righteousness shall be peace.” I say that all of us, through our associations and foundations, through our libraries and universities, through all appropriate organizations and major institutions, should work to aid any people anywhere who can’t yet speak, who can’t yet write, who can’t yet teach, who can’t yet represent the truth about their lives, without being deprived of all these rights or even of their lives. Their passion to be free and independent should not ever be in doubt. Nor should our willingness to help them.