

Establishing Justice in Muslim Societies: The Role of the People

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Presented at a Conference of the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy
Washington, D.C. - May 31, 2004

The nature of justice that should come to prevail in Islamic societies is now being extensively debated, but the process of establishing justice where it may not fully exist is political -- and it will not be established under oppressive rulers. President Bush has often extolled American intervention in Iraq as a liberation of the Iraqi people, and it is true that they no longer have to live under the brutality of Saddam Hussein. There should be no objection to liberating people from an oppressor, but there can be a difference of opinion about who should do it, and how.

History suggests that the people in any oppressed society can liberate themselves from authoritarian, repressive or unjust rule – and they have done so repeatedly, without military force or terror, for more than half a century, on every continent. Recent examples include the people power revolution in the Philippines which dislodged the autocratic president Ferdinand Marcos in 1986; the people’s movement against Gen. Augusto Pinochet in Chile, which forced him to step down in 1988; the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa in the 1980’s; the rise of Solidarity in Poland and other opposition movements in Eastern European communist nations in the 1980’s, which collapsed those regimes; and the nonviolent overthrow of Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia in 2000.

How were democracy and justice produced through these struggles? By the action of civilian-based movements using nonviolent strategies for taking political power. Such movements have overturned all types of regimes: corrupt, one-man autocracies; “regimes that wear a uniform,” i.e. government by military strongmen; governments based on ethnic or racial minority groups which deny the rights of majorities; and one-party, authoritarian states. Each of these types of regimes use repressive violence – torture, disappearances, or even genocide – to exert control and discourage opposition. But each has also been defeated by civilian-based forces that did not use strategies based on violence.

How has this happened? What have been the common features of nonviolent movements that have defeated violent, undemocratic regimes?

First, opposition groups coalesce into a broad-based movement of ordinary civilians, which is united behind simple, straightforward goals that relate to the longstanding grievances and long-term aspirations of the people. Gandhi captured the essence of how to make such an appeal – invoking the universal impulse to equity and justice -- when he said, in various ways: “The British are running this country for their own benefit. Why should we help them?”

Second, initial acts of organized opposition are chosen that involve little or no physical risk, so that ordinary civilians will be less reluctant to participate. Work stay-aways, boycotts and other acts that don’t require public protest help civilians signal to each other that they

are prepared to resist, and once the social paralysis based on fear of repression is even slightly reduced, the limits on a regime's capacity to suppress opposition will begin to be revealed.

Third, the movement follows a strategy for action that aims to diminish and ultimately dissolve the sources of political and economic support required by a regime to remain in power, beginning with the perception of its legitimacy. If the dictator is ridiculed and laughed at, if business cannot function normally, if taxes are not paid, and if public administration is disrupted – then the regime's ability to function normally is degraded. None of this happens spontaneously; it requires planning and sequencing a variety of nonviolent tactics to distribute resistance throughout the country, establishing a state of intermittent or permanent challenge to the regime, and calling into question its ability to control events.

Third, as the regime begins to lose legitimacy in the eyes of its own people, it will begin to lose legitimacy in the eyes of the world. Initially this can be induced by exposing the regime's human rights abuses and corruption, but the strategic objective for a movement should be to obtain material support from the international community and trigger sanctions aimed at the regime's leaders, though not at the economic position of the people. When "the whole world is watching," in the eyes of Czech student protesters in 1989, the regime's latitude for repression can be further narrowed.

Fourth, few regimes can lose popular and international legitimacy and continue to be seen as legitimate by their own security forces. Specific tactics can help weaken the sympathy and subvert the loyalty that members of the police and military feel toward their boss in the presidential palace. In most cases coming from the ranks of ordinary civilians themselves, policemen and soldiers are under no illusions about the true character of the rulers they serve. They know they are self-absorbed, corrupt, and put their own interests ahead of the nation. Many men in uniform feel a higher patriotism and are potential defectors in a crisis, and a well-organized, increasingly popular movement can furnish a convincing rationale or even a haven for such defectors.

Fifth, once the movement has created internal space for resistance, garnered outside support, and gained the capacity to mobilize a significant part of the civilian population to take overt action, it can escalate a campaign to make business as usual impossible in the country. In the words of the anti-apartheid movement of South Africa, it can achieve the ability to make the country "ungovernable" until the regime itself changes. No regime, however repressive in intention, can hold power indefinitely when its internal and external support is declining and the cost of keeping physical control is rapidly rising. Its only real power derives from its ability to make its own people and the world believe that it cannot be forced from power except through violence. Once that belief is destroyed, its end is only a matter of time.

So popular, civilian-based nonviolent resistance can produce liberation from oppression. Can this also happen in the Islamic world? Perhaps we should rather ask why it could not. Are the people of Muslim societies somehow less able to master the strategies of nonviolent liberation than East Europeans, Latin Americans, Africans or Asians who have done so in the past? If there is no racial or ethnic incapacity to use nonviolent resistance, there is

surely no religious incapacity. And if precedents and evidence of civilian-based resistance in Islamic countries are needed, they can easily be cited:

In 1919, in Egypt, months of popular civil disobedience against British rule occurred. Students, lawyers, telegraph and railways workers all engaged in strikes.

In 1929, as Gandhi was planning his biggest campaign of civil disobedience against British rule in India, the Pashtun leader Abdul Ghaffar Khan founded his nonviolent "Servants of God" movement against British rule in what is now Pakistan. He organized hundreds of villages and tens of thousands of people, leading boycotts of British-owned liquor stores and inspiring thousands of Muslim women to lie down in front of police lines while holding the Koran.

In 1981, when Israel extended its administrative control over the Druze area of the Golan Heights, the Druze called a general strike, engaged in demonstrations, and flouted Israeli-imposed curfews. Hundreds eagerly sought arrest by Israeli soldiers. When Israel sent in 15,000 more troops, bulldozed houses and shot demonstrators, the Druze refused to back down. Finally the Israelis yielded, agreeing not to force the Druze to become Israeli citizens, join the Israeli army, or give up their traditional water and land rights.

In 1985, in Sudan, weeks of nonviolent demonstrations in Khartoum and Omdurman against the repressive rule of Jafaar Niemiery was capped by a general strike that paralyzed the country and paved the way for a bloodless coup.

In 1987-88, in the first Palestinian Intifada, tens of thousands of ordinary civilians boycotted Israeli products, refused to pay administrative fees and or show identity papers, demonstrated publicly, and substantially increased the cost of the Israeli occupation – increasing the number of military "refuseniks" in the IDF and splitting public support in Israel for hard-line policies, which led eventually to the Oslo negotiations.

Today, on the West Bank, civilian-based, nonviolent resistance is finally rising again, focused on the construction of the new wall. A fresh generation of Palestinians, tired of failed politicians and convinced that the armed struggle is futile, has begun to apply up-to-date nonviolent strategies.

Throughout the Islamic world today, unrelated to American initiatives and sometimes at odds with them, there are signs of terminal fatigue with repressive rulers:

- In Algeria in 2003, the president was booed by earthquake victims when he visited their neighborhoods, human rights activists seem undeterred by periodic killings, and a decade of repression of independent journalists has not stamped out the drive for more open expression.
- In Tunisia, less than a month after embracing President Bush in the Oval Office as well as the idea of democracy, President Ben Ali suppressed demonstrators gathered at the state broadcast headquarters – and in Tunisian coffeehouses, they sarcastically call the president's style of governing "Ben Ali Baba democracy." In the long term it will not long be possible for such a ruler to profess democratic sympathies without delivering on them.

- In Egypt, most major opposition parties have boycotted mid-term elections this spring, and an editor at a major state-owned newspaper has said that “discontent and impatience” are “boiling over” among Egyptians who use the internet.
- In Syria, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, civilian oppositionists who reject armed struggle are at various stages of organized dissent or outright resistance.
- In Indonesia, the world’s largest Muslim nation, civilian-based self-determination movements in Papua and Aceh are challenging a government that itself came to democratic power after nationwide nonviolent demonstrations in 1999.

Civilian-based turbulence does not, by itself, dislodge unjust regimes. That requires the use of a strategy to shred the rulers’ legitimacy, drive up the cost of their control, and undermine their support from police and military organizations. But the knowledge of such strategies is today spreading with greater velocity throughout the world.

Through that knowledge, people who demand justice can seize power, not by incinerating rulers but by extinguishing the consent and support – the obedience – they need to dictate the future. The Prophet Muhammad’s successor Abu Bakr al-Siddiq said: “Obey me as long as I obey God in my rule. If I disobey him, you will owe me no obedience.” There is no sanction, divine or otherwise, for injustice or oppression. So it can and will be disobeyed.

If that disobedience is strategically marshalled and massively distributed throughout a civilian population, no type of injustice can withstand it – in a Muslim or any other kind of society.