

## Chapter Two

### TAPPING THE ROOTS OF POWER

#### Human problems and the distribution of power

Important progress has been made over the past century to meet human needs more adequately and to advance freedom and justice throughout the world. However, grave problems remain for which there are no easy solutions. Long-standing conflicts, injustices, oppression, and violence continue and even take new forms.

Many of these problems are created or maintained by the actions of those persons and groups that control the State apparatus of their society, using its vast resources, bureaucracy, police, and military forces, to implement and enforce their will. In many States, the dominant group is seen to be so powerful that it can ignore the good of those it dominates in order to gain its objectives. In other cases, certain elites have created their own means of con-

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For fuller analyses of power and sources of the thinking in this chapter, see Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1973), pp. 7-62, and Gene Sharp, *Social Power and Political Freedom* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1980), pp. 21-67 and 309-378.

trol and repression and have imposed their will by violence outside of the State apparatus.

The concentration of power and control in the State can under certain circumstances be applied with great cruelty against an apparently helpless population. Such a State can impose tyranny, wage wars, establish or maintain oppression, indoctrinate the population, and commit genocide. It is the machinery of combined central controls and institutionalized violence that makes modern tyranny possible.<sup>1</sup>

Against opponents with strong means of control and repression, people who see themselves as victims of oppression, injustice, and dictatorship often feel weak and powerless, unable to challenge the forces that dominate them. These dominated groups may include exploited economic classes, harassed religious minorities, populations of attacked or occupied countries, victims of attempted genocide, people living under dictatorships, nations under foreign domination, or despised ethnic or racial groups, among others. In all such cases the problem exists because one group has the power to impose its will on a weaker group.

When faced with such a strong State, power is seen to derive from the few who command the administrative system and the institutions capable of applying violence for political purposes. The population is therefore believed to be fully vulnerable to rulers who may aim to sweep aside democratic institutions and human rights and to become tyrants. They never dream that they could possess sufficient power to improve their lives and to change those relationships.

### **Political power viewed as derived from violence**

If the population widely believes that the real power in politics derives from violence, that it “comes out of the barrel of a gun,” then whoever has the most and biggest guns will find it much easier to control the population.

Most such populations then passively submit. Sometimes, however, people who reject the current regime as oppressive and who see the power of violence arrayed against them conclude that

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<sup>1</sup> For further discussion of this analysis see Gene Sharp, *Social Power and Political Freedom*, pp. 285-308.

they must use whatever violence they can muster against their oppressors. This may take the form of violent rebellions, assassinations, terrorism, or guerrilla warfare. The results of these actions for the oppressed population have often been far from positive. Violent rebels are unlikely to succeed against extreme odds and the general population most likely will suffer massive casualties.

In the unlikely case that violent rebels succeed in defeating oppressive rulers, the rebels will probably have simply established themselves as a new ruling elite in control of the State apparatus. Violence may on occasion remove the previous rulers or dominant elite and replace them with other persons or groups. However, the actual relationship between the dominant elite and the dominated population is unlikely to be fundamentally altered by use of violence. In fact, the violence will likely contribute to a still greater concentration of power and an increased use of violence for political objectives.

Real and lasting liberation requires significant changes in the power relationships within the society, not merely replacement of personnel. Liberation should mean that the members of the previously dominated and weak population obtain greater control over their lives and greater capacity to influence events.

If we wish to create a society in which people really shape their own lives and futures, and in which oppression is impossible, then we need to explore alternative ways to meet the society's basic need for means of wielding power. We also need to explore the origins of political power at a much more basic level.

### **Political power as variable**

The views that power derives primarily from the capacity to wield violence and that the power of rulers is monolithic and relatively permanent are not correct. Power relationships are not fixed and unchangeable. Instead, the power capacities of the State and the other institutions of the society are variable and are derived from the interplay of

- the varying degrees of power wielded by the respective groups in the society;

- the degree to which these various groups have mobilized their power potential into effective power;
- the degree to which the social, economic, and political institutions of the State and other powerful institutions are flexible and responsive to the will of the various sections of the population.

The existing distribution of power in a society is very real, but it is not permanent and will not be maintained under all conditions. Indeed, that distribution can at times change dramatically and rapidly.

A major change in the distribution of power happens when the sources of power at the disposal of the rulers are weakened or withdrawn, thereby drastically reducing their effective power. The power relationships also change if formerly weak groups mobilize their unused power potential into effective power.

Unless the sources of power of dominant groups are restricted or severed, or the sources of power of weaker groups are mobilized or strengthened, or unless both happen, the subordinated and oppressed groups inevitably remain in essentially the same relative power position. This is true despite any other specific changes that may be made in the society or whether or not changes occur in the persons of the rulers.

A fuller understanding of the nature of political power will help us to understand how power relationships can be fundamentally changed. In contrast to the monolithic view that political power is solid and highly durable and can only be weakened or destroyed by major destructive violence, the following insight is more accurate. It also allows for an understanding of how effective control can be exercised over rulers who are, or could become, oppressors.

### **The social view of power**

The social view of power sees rulers or other command systems, despite appearances, to be dependent on the population's goodwill, decisions, and support. As such, power rises continually from many parts of the society. Political power is therefore fragile. Power always depends for its strength and existence upon a replenishment of its sources by the cooperation of numerous institutions and people—cooperation that does not have to continue.

In order to control the power of rulers, those sources of power that are provided by the society's groups and institutions must first be identified. Then the population will be able, when needed, to restrict or sever the supply of those sources.

## **Sources of political power**

The persons who are at any point the rulers do not personally possess the power of control, administration, and repression that they wield. How much power they possess depends on how much power society will grant them. Six of these sources of political power are:

(1) *Authority*: This may also be called legitimacy. It is the quality that leads people to accept a right of persons or groups to lead, command, direct, and be heard or obeyed by others. Authority is voluntarily accepted by the people and therefore is present without the imposition of sanctions (or punishments). The authority figures need not necessarily be actually superior. It is enough that the person or group be perceived and accepted as superior. While not identical with power, authority is clearly a main source of power.

(2) *Human resources*: The power of rulers is affected by the number of persons who obey them, cooperate with them, or provide them with special assistance, as well as by the proportion of such assisting persons in the general population, and the extent and forms of their organizations.

(3) *Skills and knowledge*: The rulers' power is affected by the skills, knowledge and abilities of such cooperating persons, groups, and institutions, and the relation of their skills, knowledge, and abilities to the rulers' needs.

(4) *Intangible factors*: Psychological and ideological factors, such as habits and attitudes toward obedience and submission, and the presence or absence of a common faith, ideology, or sense of mission, contribute to the rulers' power.

(5) *Material resources*: The degree to which the rulers control property, natural resources, financial resources, the economic system, communication and transportation, and the like, helps to determine the extent or limits of the rulers' power.

(6) *Sanctions*: These have been described as "an enforcement of obedience." The type and extent of sanctions, or punishments,

at the rulers' disposal, both for use against their own subjects and in conflicts with other rulers, are a major source of power. Sanctions are used by rulers to supplement voluntary acceptance of their authority and to increase the extent of obedience to their commands. The sanctions may be violent or nonviolent. They may be intended as punishment or deterrence against future disobedience. Violent domestic sanctions, such as imprisonment or execution, are commonly intended to punish disobedience or to prevent it in the future, not to achieve the objective of an original command. Military sanctions may be intended for defense or deterrence against foreign enemies or for combating strong internal opposition.

The presence of some or all of these six sources of power at the disposal of the rulers is always a matter of degree. Only rarely are all of them completely available to rulers, or completely absent.

Power relationships similar to those in political societies with State structures exist in other hierarchical institutions as well, which also derive their power from the cooperation of many persons and groups. Consequently various forms of dissent, noncooperation and disobedience may have important roles to play when members of such institutions have grievances against the people who direct or control those institutions.

### **The sources of power depend on obedience and cooperation**

These six sources of political power are necessary to establish or retain power and control. Their availability, however, is subject to constant variation and is not necessarily secure.

The more extensive and detailed the rulers' control over the population and society, the more such assistance they will require from individuals, groups, organizations, and branches of the government. If these needed "assistants" reject the rulers' authority, they may then carry out the rulers' wishes and orders inefficiently, or may even flatly refuse to continue their usual assistance. When this happens, the total effective power of the rulers is reduced.

Because the rulers are dependent on other people to operate the system, the rulers are continually subject to influence and restriction by both their direct assistants and the general popula-

tion. The potential control of these groups over the rulers will be greatest where the rulers depend on them most.

Let us, for example, consider *authority* and *sanctions* from this point of view. The other four sources of power are highly dependent on these two.

Authority is necessary for the existence and operation of any regime. All rulers require an acceptance of their authority: their right to rule, command and be obeyed. *The key to habitual obedience is to reach the mind. Obedience will scarcely be habitual unless it is loyal, not forced.* In essence, authority must be voluntarily accepted.

The weakening or collapse of authority inevitably tends to loosen the subjects' predisposition towards obedience. Then the decision to obey or not to obey will be made consciously. Obedience may even be refused. *The loss of authority sets in motion the disintegration of the rulers' power. Their power is reduced to the degree that their authority is repudiated.*

Sanctions may be applied to enforce obedience and cooperation. However, the rulers require more than reluctant outward compliance. Sanctions will be inadequate as long as acceptance of the rulers' authority is limited. Despite punishments, the population may still not obey or cooperate to the needed extent.

A special relationship exists between sanctions and submission. First, the capability to impose sanctions derives from the obedience and cooperation of at least some subjects. Second, whether these sanctions are effective or not depends on the response of the subjects against whom they are threatened or applied. *The question is to what degree people obey without threats, and to what degree they continue to disobey despite punishments.*

Even the capacity of rulers to detect and punish disobedience depends on the existing pattern of obedience and cooperation. The greater the obedience of the rulers' subjects, the greater the chances of detection and punishment of disobedience and noncooperation. The weaker the obedience and cooperation of the subjects, the less effective the rulers' detection and enforcement will be.

The rulers' power depends on the continuous availability of all the needed forms of assistance. This assistance comes not only from individuals, officials, employees and the like, but also from the subsidiary organizations and institutions that compose the

system as a whole. These may include departments, bureaus, branches, committees, and the like. Just as individuals and independent groups may refuse to cooperate, so too these unit organizations may refuse to provide sufficient help to effectively maintain the rulers' position and to enable them to implement their policies. No complex organization or institution, including the State, can carry out orders if the individuals and unit organizations that compose such an institution do not enable it to do so.

The internal stability of rulers can be measured by the ratio of the strength of the social forces that they control and the strength of the social forces that oppose them.

### **Obedience is the heart of political power**

The relationship between command and obedience is always one of mutual influence and some degree of interaction. That is, command and obedience influence each other. Without the expected obedience by the subordinates (whether in the form of passive acquiescence or active consent) the power relationship is not complete, despite the threat or infliction of sanctions.

The reasons why people obey rulers are multiple, complex, variable, and interrelated. These reasons include the following:

- Habit
- Fear of sanctions
- Moral obligation
- Self-interest
- Psychological identification with the ruler
- Indifference
- Absence of self-confidence to disobey

All rulers use the obedience and cooperation they receive from part of the society in order to rule the whole. The part of the population that administers and enforces the rulers' policies is most likely to obey and cooperate in those duties because of feelings of moral obligation and of personal self-interest, especially motives related to economic gain, prestige, and status.

Most people in the general population obey from habit. Yet, the degree of obedience among the general population, even



among these administrators and enforcers, is never fixed, nor automatic, nor uniform, nor universal. Because the reasons for obedience are always variable, the degree of obedience is also variable, depending on the individuals concerned and on the social and political situation. In every society there are boundaries within which rulers must stay if their commands are to be obeyed and if the population is to cooperate.

Disobedience and noncooperation by the general populace are rarely undertaken lightly. Noncompliance usually is followed by punishments. However, under certain circumstances, members of the population will become willing to endure the consequences of noncooperation and disobedience, including inconvenience, suffering, and disruption of their lives, rather than continue to submit passively or to obey rulers whose policies and actions can no longer be tolerated.

When the reasons for obedience are weak, the rulers may seek to secure greater obedience by applying harsher sanctions or by offering increased rewards for obedience. However, even then, the results desired by the rulers are not guaranteed. A change in the population's will may lead to its withdrawing its service, cooperation, submission and obedience from the rulers.

This withdrawal of cooperation and obedience under certain circumstances may also occur among the rulers' administrators and agents of repression. Their attitudes and actions are especially important. Without their support, the oppressive system disintegrates.

Being accustomed to widespread obedience and cooperation, rulers do not always anticipate generalized noncompliance and therefore often have difficulties handling strong disobedience and noncooperation.

## **Consent and withdrawal of consent**

Each reason for obedience, whether it is free consent or fear of sanctions (intimidated consent), must operate through the will or volition of the individual person to produce obedience. The present reasons for obeying must be seen by the population as sufficient grounds to obey. However, the will or volition of the individual may change with new influences, events, and forces. In varying degrees, the individual's own will can play an active role

in producing obedience or disobedience. This process can happen with large numbers of people.

The personal choice between obeying and disobeying will be influenced by an evaluation of either the short-term or the long-term consequences of obeying or disobeying, or of a combination of the two, depending on the individual. If the subjects perceive the consequences of obedience to be worse than the consequences of disobedience, then disobedience is more likely.

Obedience only exists when one complies with the command. If you are sentenced to imprisonment and walk to jail willingly, you have obeyed. If you are dragged there, you have not obeyed.<sup>2</sup>

Physical compulsion may yield some results, but since it affects only the body, it does not necessarily produce obedience. Only certain types of objectives can be achieved by direct physical compulsion of disobedient subjects—such as moving them physically, preventing them from moving physically, seizing their money or property, or killing them. But these actions do not necessarily result in obedience. The overwhelming majority of rulers' commands and objectives can be achieved only by inducing the subject to be willing for some reason to carry them out. (The ditch remains undug even if the men who refuse to dig it are shot.) *It is not the sanctions themselves that produce obedience, but the fear of them.*

However, people generally seek to avoid severe penalties for disobedience and noncooperation, except for special cases in which feelings are very intense. In such cases, disobedience and noncooperation sometimes occur despite repression.

In summary, the rulers' power depends upon the availability of its six sources, as reviewed previously. This availability is determined by the degree of obedience and cooperation given by the subjects. Despite inducements, pressures, and even sanctions, such obedience and cooperation are, however, not inevitable. Obedience remains essentially voluntary. Therefore, all government is based upon consent.

This does not mean that the subjects of all rulers prefer the established order. Consent is at times granted because of positive

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<sup>2</sup> David Austin, *Lectures on Jurisprudence or the Philosophy of Positive Law* (Fifth edition, rev. and ed. by Robert Campbell; 2 vols. London: John Murray, 1911), vol. I, pp. 295-297.

approval. However, it is also often granted because people are at times unwilling to suffer the consequences of the refusal of consent. The latter is consent by intimidation. Refusal of consent requires self-confidence, motivation to resist, and knowledge of how to act to refuse, and often involves considerable inconvenience and suffering.

## **The structural basis of resistance**

The answer to the problem of uncontrolled political power, that is to oppression, therefore may lie in learning how to carry out and maintain withdrawal of obedience and cooperation despite repression. This will not be easy.

Greater confidence and ability to practice noncooperation and disobedience can usually be achieved when members of the population are able to act as members of groups or institutions. This is also a requirement for effective restriction or severance of the sources of political power that were discussed above. At times, individuals may protest or resign and barely be noticed, but if all persons in a government department refuse to implement a policy, their actions can create a major crisis.

Very importantly, in order to have a significant political impact, the disobedience and noncooperation often need to take the form of mass action. While individual acts may at times not have much impact, the defiance of organizations and institutions—for example, trade unions, business organizations, religious organizations, the bureaucracy, neighborhoods, villages, cities, regions, and the like—can be pivotal. Through these bodies people can collectively offer disobedience and noncooperation. Organizations and institutions such as these, which supply the necessary sources of power to the opponent group, are called “pillars of support.”<sup>3</sup>

The ability of the population to wield effective power and to control the power of their rulers will be highly influenced by the condition of these organizations and institutions. It is these “places” (or *loci*) where power can be mobilized and where it operates. Such “places” provide the structural basis for the control of the rulers, whether or not they wish to be controlled. Where

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<sup>3</sup> The term was introduced by Robert Helvey.

these independent bodies are weak, the controls over the rulers' power will be weak. Where those bodies are strong, the capacity to control the rulers will be strong.<sup>4</sup>

### **Factors in controlling political power**

Three of the most important factors in determining to what degree rulers' power will be controlled or uncontrolled are

- the relative desire of the populace to control the rulers' power;
- the relative strength of the society's independent organizations and institutions;
- the population's relative ability to withhold their consent and cooperation by concrete actions.

Freedom is not something that rulers "give" the population. The degree of freedom within a society is achieved through the interaction between society and government.

According to this social insight into the nature of political power, people have immense power potential. It is ultimately their attitudes, behavior, cooperation, and obedience that supply the sources of power to all rulers and hierarchical systems, even oppressors and tyrants.

The degree of liberty or tyranny in any government is, therefore, in large part, a reflection of the relative determination of the population to be free and their willingness and ability to resist efforts to enslave them. "For the tyrant has the power to inflict only that which we lack the strength to resist," wrote the Indian sociologist Krishnalal Shridharani.<sup>5</sup>

### **Self-liberation and the mobilization of power potential**

Without the direct participation of the population itself in the efforts to make changes, no major changes are likely to occur in the relative power positions between the population and whoever

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<sup>4</sup> For further discussion of this analysis, see Gene Sharp, "Social Power and Political Freedom," in *Social Power and Political Freedom*, pp. 21-67.

<sup>5</sup> Krishnalal Shridharani, *War Without Violence: A Study of Gandhi's Method and its Accomplishments* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1939; reprinted: New York & London: Garland Publishing, 1972), p. 305.

occupies the position of rulers. At most, a new group will replace the old one as rulers. The new rulers may or may not, at their own discretion, behave with restraint and concern towards the welfare and liberties of the people.

If the liberation of oppressed people is to happen and be genuine and durable, it must therefore be essentially self-liberation. That liberation needs to be achieved by means that ensure a lasting capacity of people to govern themselves, to shape their own society, and to act to ensure their freedoms and rights. Otherwise, the people will face the likelihood of new, potentially even more oppressive, rulers, merely waving a different flag or espousing a different doctrine.

The great Indian Gandhian socialist Rammanohar Lohia once wrote that he was tired of hearing only of the need to change the hearts of the oppressors. That was fine, but far more important was the effort to change the hearts of the oppressed. They needed to become unwilling to continue accepting their oppression, and to become determined to build a better society. Weakness in people's determination, and very importantly in their ability to act, makes possible their continued oppression and submission. Strengthen that determination and increase that ability to act, and these people need never again be oppressed. Such self-liberation can be achieved only through an increase in the power of the subordinates by their own efforts.

Indian independence leader Mohandas K. Gandhi emphasized the importance of a change of will and a change of attitude as prerequisites for a change in patterns of obedience and cooperation. There was, he argued, a need for

- a psychological change away from passive submission to self-respect and courage;
- recognition by the subjects that their assistance makes the existing regime possible;
- the building of a determination to withdraw cooperation and obedience.<sup>6</sup>

Gandhi was convinced that these changes could be consciously influenced.

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<sup>6</sup> See Gene Sharp, *Gandhi as a Political Strategist, with Essays on Ethics and Politics* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1979), pp. 43-59.

Once the dominated population wishes to make changes, it needs to be able to mobilize and wield effective power. Once the population is *willing* to disobey and noncooperate, it requires means of strong *action*. It then needs a technique of action through which it can maintain and strengthen its existing independent institutions, create and defend new ones, and, resist, confront, and undermine the power of oppressive rulers.

The population needs to be able to restrict and sever the sources of power of its oppressors. The power of the rulers is weakened to the degree that the population

- repudiates the moral right of the current rulers to rule;
- disobeys, noncooperates, and refuses to assist the rulers;
- declines to supply the skills and knowledge required by the rulers;
- denies the rulers control over administration, property, natural resources, financial resources, the economic system, communication, and transportation.

Additionally, if the rulers' punishments against a defiant population are not available because of disaffection in the military or police forces, or if popular defiance continues and even grows despite harsh penalties, then the power of the rulers will shrink or even dissolve.

A technique of action capable of accomplishing those controls over the power of rulers and of mobilizing the power potential of the population should also be one that will give the populace a lasting capacity to control any rulers, and to defend the population's capacity to rule itself. A type of action with the potential to achieve such controls is the technique of "nonviolent action" or "nonviolent struggle." Let us, therefore, examine in greater depth the nature of this type of struggle.