

Chapter Three

AN ACTIVE TECHNIQUE OF STRUGGLE

A simple insight

Nonviolent action, or nonviolent struggle, is a technique of action by which the population can restrict and sever the sources of power of their rulers or other oppressors and mobilize their own power potential into effective power. This technique is based on the understanding of political power presented in the previous chapter.

That understanding showed that the power of rulers and of hierarchical systems, no matter how dictatorial, depends directly on the obedience and cooperation of the population. Such obedience and cooperation, in turn, depend on the willingness of the population and a multitude of assistants to consent by their actions or inaction to support the rulers. People may obey and cooperate because they positively approve of the rulers or their orders, or

For fuller analysis of nonviolent struggle and the thinking in this chapter, see Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, Boston: Porter Sargent, 1973.

they may obey and cooperate because they are intimidated into submission by the fear of punishment.

Yet, despite such punishments, acts of protest, disobedience, and noncooperation have occurred frequently in many societies. Sometimes, these have been of major significance, as noted in Chapter One.

Nonviolent struggle does not require acceptance of a new political doctrine or of a new moral or religious belief. In political terms, nonviolent action is based on a very simple insight: people do not always do what they are told to do, and sometimes they do things that they have been forbidden to do. Subjects may disobey laws they reject. Workers may halt work, which may paralyze the economy. The bureaucracy may refuse to carry out instructions. Soldiers and police may become lax in inflicting repression or even mutiny. When all these events happen simultaneously, the power of the rulers weakens and can dissolve.

The technique of nonviolent struggle has been applied against a wide variety of opponents. The term "opponents" is used here to refer to the adversary, whether a group, institution, regime, invader, or, rarely, an individual, against whom nonviolent struggle is being waged. Usually, the most difficult of these conflicts are those against the current rulers of the State or groups that have State backing. However, the technique is also applicable in conflicts against less formidable opponents. The issues in these conflicts vary from case to case. They may include not only political but also social, economic, religious, and cultural ones.

When people repudiate their opponents' authority, refuse cooperation, withhold assistance, and persist in disobedience and defiance, they are denying to their opponents the basic human assistance and cooperation that any government or hierarchical system requires. If the opponents are highly dependent on such assistance, and if the resisters refuse cooperation and disobey in sufficient numbers for enough time and persist despite repression, the persons who have been the "rulers" or dominant elite become just another group of people. This is the basic political assumption of this type of struggle.

A way to wage conflict

Nonviolent action is a generic term covering dozens of specific methods of *protest*, *noncooperation* and *intervention*. In all of these, the resisters conduct the conflict by doing—or refusing to do—certain acts by means other than physical violence.

Nonviolent action may involve acts of *omission*—that is, people may refuse to perform acts that they usually perform, are expected by custom to perform, or are required by law or regulation to perform. Or, people may commit acts of *commission*—that is, people may perform acts that they do not usually perform, are not expected by custom to perform, or are forbidden to perform. Or, this type of struggle may include a *combination* of acts of omission and commission. In no way is the technique of nonviolent action passive. It is action that is nonviolent.

Although nonviolent means of conducting conflicts have been widely used in the past, they have not been well understood, or they have been confused with other phenomena. This misunderstanding and confusion have often reduced the effectiveness of attempts to use this technique. This has thereby benefited the opponents against whose regime or policies the struggle was directed. If this type of struggle is falsely identified with weakness and passivity, confused with pacifism, lumped with rioting or guerrilla warfare, or viewed as a type of action that does not require careful preparations, then nonviolent struggle may not even be attempted, or, if it is, the effort may well be ineffective.

Classes of methods of action

At least 198 specific methods of nonviolent struggle have been identified. These constitute three main types of activity. The first large class is called nonviolent protest and persuasion. These are forms of activity in which the practitioners are expressing opinions by symbolic actions, to show their support or disapproval of an action, a policy, a group, or a government, for example. Many specific methods of action fall into this category. These include written declarations, petitions, leafleting, picketing, wearing of symbols, symbolic sounds, vigils, singing, marches, mock funerals, protest meetings, silence, and turning one's back, among many others. In many political situations these methods are quite

mild, but under a highly repressive regime such actions may be dramatic challenges and require great courage.

The second class of methods is noncooperation, an extremely large class, which may take social, economic, and political forms. In these methods, the people refuse to continue usual forms of cooperation or to initiate new cooperation. The effect of such noncooperation by its nature is more disruptive of the established relationships and the operating system than are the methods of nonviolent protest and persuasion. The extent of that disruption depends on the system within which the action occurs, the importance of the activity in which people are refusing to engage, the specific type of noncooperation used, which groups are refusing cooperation, how many people are involved, and how long the noncooperation can continue.

The methods of social noncooperation include, among others, social boycott, excommunication, student strike, stay-at-home, and collective disappearance.

The forms of economic noncooperation are grouped under (1) economic boycotts and (2) labor strikes. The methods of economic boycott include, among others, consumers' boycotts, rent withholding, refusal to let or sell property, lock outs, withdrawal of bank deposits, revenue refusals, and international trade embargoes. Labor strikes include: protest strikes, prisoners' strikes, slowdown strikes, general strikes, and economic shutdowns, as well as many others.

Political noncooperation is a much larger subclass. It includes withholding or withdrawal of allegiance, boycotts of elections, boycotts of government employment or positions, refusal to dissolve existing institutions, reluctant and slow compliance, disguised disobedience, civil disobedience, judicial noncooperation, deliberate inefficiency, and selective noncooperation by enforcement agents, noncooperation by constituent government units, and severance of diplomatic relations.

The methods of nonviolent intervention all actively disrupt the normal operation of policies or the system by deliberate interference, either psychologically, physically, socially, economically, or politically. Among the large number of methods in this class are the fast, sit-ins, nonviolent raids, nonviolent obstruction, nonviolent occupation, the overloading of facilities, alternative social institutions, alternative communication systems, reverse strikes,

stay-in strikes, nonviolent land seizures, defiance of blockades, seizures of assets, selective patronage, alternative economic institutions, the overloading of administrative systems, the seeking of imprisonment, and dual sovereignty and parallel government.

These and many additional similar methods of nonviolent protest and persuasion, noncooperation, and nonviolent intervention constitute the technique of nonviolent action.

Success has requirements

Nonviolent struggle does not work through magic. Although nonviolent resisters have succeeded many times, they have not done so every time, and certainly not without cost. The simple choice to conduct a conflict by nonviolent action does not guarantee success.

Many past struggles were only partially successful. Sometimes a victory was short-lived because people did not use it well to consolidate their gains, nor did they effectively resist new threats to their liberties. In other cases, victory in a single campaign won concessions, but new struggles were still required to gain the full objectives. Nevertheless, in some cases, major victories were achieved that many people would have expected to be impossible through nonviolent resistance.

However, some of the past cases of nonviolent struggles failed to accomplish their objectives. Such failure has occurred for a variety of reasons. If the resisters are weak, if the specific methods used are poorly chosen, or if the resisters become frightened and intimidated into submission, then they are unlikely to win. If the resisters lack a strategy by which to wage the struggle with maximum effectiveness, their chances of succeeding are greatly diminished. There is no substitute for genuine strength and wise action in the conduct of nonviolent struggle.

Participating in a nonviolent struggle does not make an individual immune from imprisonment, injury, suffering, or death. As in violent conflicts, the participants often suffer harsh penalties for their defiance and noncooperation. Yet, victories by nonviolent struggle with few casualties, and even none, also have occurred, and commonly the casualties in nonviolent struggles are significantly fewer than those in comparable violent struggles for similar objectives.

Much greater consideration of this technique will assist us in assessing its potential relevance and potential effectiveness. Let us, therefore, survey the operation of nonviolent struggle.

Uses and effects of nonviolent struggle

Nonviolent struggle can be employed as a substitute for violence against other groups in one's society, against groups in another society, against one's own government, or against another government.

Many times, only the methods of nonviolent protest and persuasion may be used in attempts to influence opinions of the opponents and others. Such actions may affect the moral authority or legitimacy of the opponents. However, these methods are the weaker ones.

Many of the methods of noncooperation are much more powerful because they can potentially reduce or sever the supply of the opponents' sources of power. These methods require significant numbers of participants and usually the participation of groups and institutions in the refusal of cooperation.

The methods of nonviolent intervention may be applied by groups of various sizes. Some of the methods—as a sit-in in an office—require fewer numbers of participants to make a major impact than do methods of noncooperation. In the short run at least, these methods are generally more disruptive of the status quo than noncooperation. However, some of these methods may often be met with extreme repression. In order to make their impact, the resisters must be prepared to withstand this, while persisting in their nonviolent defiance. Unless the numbers of participants are extremely large—as in massive sit-downs on central city streets—it may not be possible to maintain the application of these methods for long periods of time. Casualties may be severe.

It is very important that those who plan to engage in a nonviolent struggle choose the methods they will use with extreme care. The methods chosen should strike at the opponents' vulnerabilities, utilize the resisters' strengths, and be used in combination with other methods in ways that are mutually supportive. To be most effective, the methods will also need to be chosen and implemented in accordance with a grand strategy for the overall

struggle. The grand strategy needs to be developed before the specific methods are selected. The development of grand strategies and strategies for limited campaigns will be discussed in Part Four.

The effects of the use of the diverse methods of nonviolent action vary widely. Such effects depend on the nature of the system within which they are applied, the type of the opponents' regime, the extent of their application, the normal roles in the operation of the system of the persons and groups applying them, the skill of the groups in using nonviolent action, the presence or absence of the use of wise strategies in the conflict, and, finally, the relative ability of the nonviolent resisters to withstand repression from the opponents and to persist in their noncooperation and defiance without falling into violence.

Repression and mechanisms of change

Since these methods of nonviolent action, especially those of noncooperation, often directly disturb or disrupt the supply of the needed sources of power and "normal" operations, the opponents are likely to respond strongly, usually with repression. This repression can include beatings, arrests, imprisonments, executions, and mass slaughters. Despite repression, the resisters have at times persisted in fighting with only their chosen nonviolent weapons.

Past struggles have only rarely been well planned and prepared and have usually lacked a strategic plan. Resistance was often poorly focused, and the resisters often did not know what they should or should not do. Consequently, it is not surprising that, in the face of serious repression, nonviolent struggles have at times produced only limited positive results or have even resulted in clear defeats and disasters. Yet, amazingly, many improvised nonviolent struggles have triumphed. There is now reason to believe that the effectiveness of this technique can be greatly increased with improved understanding of the requirements of this technique, and with development of strategic planning.

When nonviolent struggles succeed in achieving their declared objectives, the result is produced by the operation of one of four mechanisms—conversion, accommodation, nonviolent coercion, or disintegration—or a combination of two or three of them.

Rarely, the opponents have a change of view; that is, a conversion takes place. In this case, as a result of the nonviolent persistence and the willingness of the people to continue despite suffering, harsh conditions, and brutalities perpetrated on them, the opponents decide that it is right to accept the claims of the nonviolent group. Although religious pacifists frequently stress this possibility, it does not occur often.

A much more common mechanism is called accommodation. This essentially means that both sides compromise on issues and receive, and give up, a part of their original objectives. This can operate only in respect to issues on which each side can compromise without seeing themselves to be violating their fundamental beliefs or political principles. Accommodation occurs in almost all labor strike settlements. The final agreed working conditions and wages are usually somewhere between the originally stated objectives of the two sides. One must remember that these settlements are highly influenced by how much power each side can wield in waging the conflict.

In other conflicts, the numbers of resisters have become so large, and the parts of the social and political order they influence or control are so essential, that the noncooperation and defiance have taken control of the conflict situation. The opponents are still in their former positions, but they are unable any longer to control the system without the resumption of cooperation and submission by the resisters. Not even repression is effective, either because of the massiveness of the noncooperation or because the opponents' troops and police no longer reliably obey orders. The change is made against the opponents' will, because the supply of their needed sources of power has been seriously weakened or severed. The opponents can no longer wield power contrary to the wishes of the nonviolent struggle group. This is nonviolent coercion.

This is what occurred, for example, in the Russian 1905 Revolution. As a result of the Great October Strike, Tsar Nicholas II issued the constitutional manifesto of October 17, 1905, which granted a *Duma* or legislature, thereby abandoning his claim to be sole autocrat.

In more extreme situations, the noncooperation and defiance are so vast and strong that the previous regime simply falls apart. There is no one left with sufficient power even to surrender.

In Russia in February 1917, the numbers of strikers were massive; all social classes had turned against the tsarist regime; huge peaceful street demonstrations were undermining the loyalty of the soldiers; and troop reinforcements dissolved into the protesting crowds. Finally, Tsar Nicholas II, facing this reality, quietly abdicated, and the tsarist government was “dissolved and swept away.” This is disintegration.

In Serbia in October 2000, the Otpor-initiated defiance and noncooperation campaign met almost all the characteristics of the disintegration campaign, with one notable exception. Milosevic had clearly lost his power capacity and faced nonviolent coercion. However, he retained enough power to go on television to capitulate. He had suddenly discovered that, contrary to earlier claims, his electoral rival Vojislav Kostunica had actually won the election and Milosevic had not. He had only enough remaining power to claim television time to surrender. This was almost disintegration. This mechanism, however, remains a rare ending of nonviolent struggles.

Additional elements of nonviolent struggle

While noncooperation to undermine compliance and to weaken and sever the sources of the opponents’ power are the main forces in nonviolent struggle, one other process sometimes operates. This is “political ju-jitsu.” In this process, brutal repression against disciplined nonviolent resisters does not strengthen the opponents and weaken the resisters, but does the opposite.

Widespread revulsion against the opponents for their brutality operates in some cases to shift power to the resisters. More people may join the resistance. Third parties may change their opinions and activities to favor the resisters and act against the opponents. Even members of the opponents’ usual supporters, administrators, and troops and police may become unreliable and may even mutiny. The use of the opponents’ supposedly coercive violence has then been turned to undermine their own power capacity. Political ju-jitsu does not operate in all situations, however, and instead heavy reliance must therefore be placed on the impact of large scale, carefully focussed noncooperation.

The importance of strategy

Effective nonviolent struggle is not the product of simple application of the methods of this technique. A struggle conducted by nonviolent means will, generally, be more effective if the participants first understand what the factors are that contribute to greater success or to likely failure, then act accordingly.

Another important variable in nonviolent struggles is whether they are or are not conducted on the basis of a wisely prepared grand strategy and strategies for individual campaigns. The presence or absence of strategic calculations and planning, and, if present, their wisdom, will have a major impact on the course of the struggle and on determining its final outcome. At this point in the historical practice of nonviolent struggle we can project that a very significant factor in its future practice and effectiveness will be its increasing application on the basis of strategic planning.

Competent strategic planning requires not only an understanding of the conflict situation itself, but also an in-depth understanding of why this technique can wield great power, the major characteristics of nonviolent struggle, the many methods that may be applied, and the dynamics and mechanisms at work in actual struggles of this technique when applied against repressive regimes.

The topics and themes of this chapter are all presented more extensively and in greater depth in the remaining chapters of this book.

We will examine the multitude of individual methods encompassed by this technique in the next chapter.