

Chapter Thirty-four

THE REDISTRIBUTION OF POWER

What consequences of success?

Sometimes one hears extremely different claims about the consequences of successful nonviolent struggle. Some hostile critics have casually claimed that chaos—not a more free or just society—will result. Other critics have said that the result will be a new dictatorship following the breakdown of the previous ordered system. Neither of these possibilities is likely to result when a disciplined nonviolent struggle has occurred, and especially not when it has been at least moderately successful.

Disciplined nonviolent resistance is not chaotic or disorderly. Effective nonviolent action involves both self-discipline and group discipline, as well as order. In fact, the more discipline is evident in nonviolent action, the more effective the struggle is likely to be, and also the less chance of later disorder and chaos.

It is true that several cases of nonviolent struggle have been followed by the establishment of a new dictatorship. Sometimes, for any of several possible motives, an authoritarian or dictatorial group may seek to exploit the unstable transition period by seiz-

ing control of the State, as we have already noted. Wise nonviolent struggle strategists and leaders should anticipate this danger and prepare and publicize plans for massive noncooperation to deter and defeat such attempted usurpations.

Both chaos and dictatorship are contrary to major trends in the long-term consequences of nonviolent struggle. Assuming that at least a moderately competent application of nonviolent struggle has occurred, the nonviolent technique of struggle has important lasting effects both on the nonviolent struggle group itself and on the distribution of power between the contenders in the conflict and within the wider system.

Effects on the nonviolent struggle group

The technique of nonviolent action produces changes in the participants. The strength of the nonviolent resisters is likely to grow as the struggle proceeds. Consequently, power becomes more widely diffused in the society, rather than concentrated in the hands of any oppressive elite.

Participation in nonviolent action both requires and produces an end to passive submission to the opponents' will. This participation also helps to correct a lack of self-confidence, negative self-images, a sense of helplessness and inferiority, a dislike of responsibility, or a desire to be dominated, which are often present in subservient populations. During the course of successful nonviolent struggles, these feelings tend to be replaced by their opposites.

Even more important than the changes produced by the nonviolent struggle on the opponents is the strengthening of the former subordinates who have learned to use this technique. This experience teaches them that they can act together with others with the same grievance and can make a major impact on improving their situation. Participation in struggle teaches them that people who were once weak can become strong.

Experience in using nonviolent action has also shown that participation tends to increase the degree of fearlessness among the resisters. Initially, the nonviolent resisters may need consciously to control both their fear and anger. Later, the fear may subside. By learning that they can remain firm in the face of repression, they often gain a sense of liberation from fear. With the reduction

or loss of fear, nonviolent resisters diminish, or can even eliminate, one of the major sources of the opponents' power: fear of punishment. This will not only weaken the current opponents but enhance the ability of the grievance group over the long term to remain free of oppression from any future opponents as well.

Jawaharlal Nehru, who was never a believer in ethical nonviolence, reported that participation in noncooperation gave the Indian masses "a tremendous feeling of release. . . . a throwing-off of a great burden, a new sense of freedom. The fear that had crushed them retired into the background, and they straightened their backs and raised their heads."¹ Similar reports have come from very different struggles in other parts of the world.

Hierarchical systems exist in part because the subordinates submit as a result of seeing themselves as inferiors. Therefore, two steps to challenge and to end the hierarchical system are first, to get the members of the subordinate group to see themselves as full human beings who are not inferior to anyone; and, second, to get them to behave in ways consistent with that enhanced view of themselves. Members of the previously subordinated group learn they are capable of resistance and of wielding significant power to correct the problems they face.

Despite the hardships of struggle, the nonviolent resisters may find the experience satisfying. This has been reported from diverse conflicts, including the pro-Jewish strike in Amsterdam, under Nazi occupation in February 1941:

To those who had participated, the strike provided a sense of relief since it represented an active repudiation of the German regime. . . . In the strike the working population had discovered its own identity in defiance of the occupying power.²

Participation may bring a new spirit, sense of self-worth, and hope for the future.

The effectiveness of nonviolent action increases when the resisters and the general grievance group possess a high degree of internal unity. Violence usually excludes some people from participation because of age, sex, physical condition, beliefs, or distaste. However, nonviolent action seems to contribute to internal

¹ Jawaharlal Nehru, *An Autobiography* (New edition: London: The Bodley Head, 1953), p. 69.

² Werner Warmbrunn, *The Dutch Under German Occupation, 1940-1945* (Palo Alto, California: Stanford University Press, 1963), p. 111.

unity, and attracts wider and more heterogeneous groups to take part. This growth has been seen in the labor movement, as E. T. Hiller reported: Conflict "solidifies the group." "Under attack, strikers perceive the identity of their interests."³

The withdrawal of cooperation from the opponents and their system need not lead to confusion and disorganization. Instead, such withdrawal tends to produce greater cooperation within the general grievance group and among the resisters particularly. The movement against the opponents requires organization, cooperation, and mutual support within the grievance group in order to meet social needs and maintain social order. The boycott of certain institutions requires the strengthening of other institutions or the creation of new ones. For example, economic boycotts require alternative sources for meeting economic needs. Massive political noncooperation requires development of alternative social and political institutions, in extreme cases potentially leading to parallel government. This was an explicit part of the mid-nineteenth century Hungarian resistance to Austrian rule.⁴

When nonviolent action is used with at least moderate effectiveness, the technique will tend to spread. The same people may use it later under other circumstances, and other people may follow the example in dealing with their own problems. Although violence may also be contagious, the consequences are very different. There were repeated instances during the Russian 1905 Revolution in which strikes and other methods of struggle spread by imitation. Small successes from strikes earlier in the year 1905 led to expansion of trade union organizations and more strikes. Similarly, limited political successes have sometimes prodded nonviolent resisters to press on for larger objectives.⁵

Although the effects of nonviolent struggle on the opponents are very important, in the long run the effects on the nonviolent resisters themselves are far reaching and potentially more important. If people are strong and learn to resist effectively, it becomes difficult or impossible for anyone to oppress them in the first

³ E.T. Hiller, *The Strike* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1928), pp. 30 and 90.

⁴ Arthur Griffith, *The Resurrection of Hungary: A Parallel for Ireland* (Third edition. Dublin: Wheland & Son, 1918), p. 170.

⁵ See Sidney Harcave, *First Blood: The Russian Revolution of 1905* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), pp. 77, 79-81, 134, 143-144, 154, 171, 176-177, and 215.

place. This strengthening of the grievance group will ultimately alter power relationships in lasting ways.

Diffused power and the nonviolent technique

A free society needs strong social groups and institutions capable of independent action and able to wield power in their own right in order to control an established government or a regime of domestic or foreign usurpers. If such groups and institutions are weak, they need to be strengthened. If they are absent, they need to be created in order to control rulers who do not wish to be controlled.

Here, questions of social organization and political technique converge. There may be a causal connection between the relative concentration or diffusion of power in the society and the technique of struggle—political violence or nonviolent action—relied upon to maintain or to change the social system. Therefore, the choice between political violence or the technique of nonviolent struggle as the society's ultimate sanction may help determine the future capacity of that society to exercise popular control over any ruler or would-be ruler.

It has been widely recognized that violent revolutions and wars have been accompanied and followed by a tendency toward an increase in both the absolute power of the State and the relative centralization of power in its hands. Technological changes in military weaponry and transportation and the breakdown of the distinction of targeting and casualties between civilians and the military forces have accentuated this tendency. As was discussed in Chapter Two, centralized control by a self-selected clique directing the institutions of war can be later turned against the previous government and the population in order to seize and maintain political control. Because political violence often contributes to the destruction of a society's independent institutions, the population of a society that has used major violence may be less capable of resisting internal or foreign oppressors than a society that has used nonviolent methods of struggle and still has strong, independent institutions.

Nonviolent struggle, therefore, appears to have different long-term effects on the distribution of power within the society than does violent struggle. The nonviolent technique does not have the

centralizing effects of political violence. Instead, it seems that major application of organized nonviolent struggle increases the potential for greater popular control because this type of struggle contributes to increased diffusion of effective power throughout the society. People learn how to organize themselves and how to conduct resistance against identified opponents. Therefore, people are likely to develop greater freedom of action and, consequently, less dictatorship and greater democracy.

Widespread use of nonviolent action in place of political violence tends to diffuse power among the populace. The people using this technique become more self-reliant by developing their leadership capacities and improving their capacity to apply an effective means of struggle. Also, the power of the post-struggle governments is likely to be more limited, and the population is likely to have developed a reservoir capacity for nonviolent struggle for possible use against future dangers.

The leadership necessary in nonviolent struggle tends to be more democratic, does not rely on violence to maintain group cohesion, and depends upon the acceptance of its moral authority, political and strategic judgment, and popular support. Furthermore, although at times very important, the leadership of nonviolent struggles is changeable and can be temporary. Among the reasons for this are two: the leaders are often arrested or killed and the resistance itself consequently requires greater self-reliance among the participants. Under extreme conditions with severe repression, efficiency requires that the resisters be able to act without reliance on a central leadership group. This situation may affect the kind of leadership that develops and is accepted in nonviolent struggles, as compared to violent conflicts. Leaders of successful nonviolent struggles are less likely than those of successful violent struggles to become tyrants because the nonviolent technique tends to produce greater self-reliance among the population and to strengthen civil society.

The leaders of violent struggles can establish central control for two reasons. First, they are able to regulate and distribute the supply of military weapons and ammunition to the combatants and population. Second, they are able to command the application of violence, even against the population. In contrast, the leaders of nonviolent struggles cannot do this because the weapons of nonviolent action are not material ones.

Following a successful violent struggle, the State with its repressive capacity is likely to be larger than before the struggle. However, in the case of nonviolent struggles this is unlikely, and the population's capacity for popular struggle is likely to have increased. The society's independent institutions are also likely to have been strengthened through their roles in resistance. Consequently, they will be more able to function effectively in the future, both in peaceful times and in crises.

Nonviolent struggle can help citizens become free, organized, disciplined, courageous, and capable of instituting a democracy and of defending it when needed. These people are more likely to be confident in their capacity to act effectively in the future.

People who know they have successful experience in applying an independent capacity for struggle are likely to be treated with greater care by their rulers because the populace is able to resist in order to secure and to defend their claimed rights.

However, it is unrealistic to expect that a successful nonviolent struggle for particular objectives will not only gain those goals but also will solve other problems that were not even in contention during the conflict. A single nonviolent campaign certainly will not eliminate future use of violence by that society or political system. Instead, replacement of violence with nonviolent action is likely to become possible by a series of specific substitutions for particular purposes, if and when those substitutions are seen to be desirable and effective.

The capacities developed to succeed in a nonviolent struggle can be used to defend the attained objectives from future threats, if the population chooses to use these capacities. Gains made by nonviolent struggle can therefore be relatively durable and do not require violence for their preservation.

This is, of course, a tendency, and not a guaranteed process. Following a successful nonviolent struggle, power may become more diffused among the population, giving the people greater control capacity than they previously had over their political future. However, under some circumstances this may not happen. The experience in popular power may be diminished, even in people's memory, and largely lost as people fall back into their previous views and patterns of submission. Which of these occurs, and to what degree, depends on the course of the nonviolent struggle, and on later choices and events. However, experience in

the effective use of nonviolent action arms the populace with knowledge of how to wield the nonviolent weapons if they so choose.

All of these indications are suggestive that nonviolent action and political violence may contribute to quite different types of societies. This possibility merits careful examination.

However, these characteristics alone do not ensure that no other forms of perceived social, economic, or political injustice will remain or will be practiced following a successful nonviolent struggle. Nor, in other cases, do these characteristics alone guarantee a vibrant, durable democracy after nonviolent struggle has defeated an oppressive government.

In several cases aiming at major political change, a dictatorial group has seized control of the State as a nonviolent struggle group approached success, as in Burma in 1988, or as the transition of power from the old regime was in process, as in the Russian Empire in 1917.

It is therefore important to plan how the new relationships will be implemented after success and, in cases in which major political change is the objective, to plan carefully the new democratic structure. It is necessary to strengthen the independent institutions of the society. It is also crucial to strengthen the population's capacity to resist new would-be oppressors or dictators. This means to spread among the population both a general understanding of nonviolent struggle and also specific strategies to defend newly won relationships and freedoms.

The future uses and effectiveness of nonviolent struggle depend in part upon gaining increased knowledge of its nature, deepening one's skills in applying this technique in crises, gaining greater strategic insight, and spreading this knowledge throughout society. In developing these capacities, there are roles for the contributions of many people.