

# **Chapter Thirty-five**

## **MAKING NONVIOLENT STRUGGLE MORE EFFECTIVE**

### **Success and defeat in nonviolent struggle**

Conflicts conducted by nonviolent struggle have been far more effective in the past than is generally recognized. This is demonstrated by various cases that were described in previous chapters, which are only a sampling of the applications of this technique in the past century.

Nonviolent struggle is not magic. It sometimes succeeds in achieving the objectives for which it is waged and it sometimes fails to do so. Defeat in immediate political terms is always possible, just as it is in war or other violence. “Defeat” here means a failure to achieve the objectives of the struggle. “Success” means that the objectives of the struggle have been achieved. Sometimes, the results of a conflict may be mixtures of success and failure, with the objectives partially achieved and partially not achieved. This is also true of struggles conducted with violence.

The degree of effectiveness of nonviolent struggle must, of course, be compared to the degree of effectiveness of violent

struggle *in achieving the avowed objectives for which it is applied*, not simply in physically crushing the other group. Too often in discussions of effectiveness, it is assumed axiomatically that violence is the most powerful and effective force available to achieve the intended objectives. This is not true. If one measures the degree to which the original objectives of the conflict are actually achieved, the effectiveness of violent struggle is often quite limited and the effectiveness of nonviolent struggle is often greater than usually recognized. This is despite the fact that past cases of nonviolent struggle were usually improvised or had only minimal planning and preparations.

### **Dismissing simplistic explanations**

In considering how to make nonviolent struggle more effective, it is essential to dismiss simplistic explanations and apologies for failure. These sometimes include the assertion that the avowed goal is not nearly as important as the resisters feeling good about their actions, that simple abstention from violence is sufficient, or that willingness of the resisters to die is most important. Feeling good, not engaging in violence, or being willing to die, when you have not achieved the goals of your struggle, does not change the fact that you have failed.

Many of the popular conceptions of what is required to make nonviolent action succeed are also not valid. Such misconceptions include the belief that success requires democratic, or even non-violent, opponents. Some people have argued that success requires world support, the aid of the media, a much longer time span to succeed than does violence, or a “climate of nonviolence.” All of these views are inaccurate.

The opinion has been expressed that if a group is using nonviolent action, the opponents should be expected to respond nonviolently also. If the response is instead violent repression there is something wrong, it is thought. This view is also incorrect. The opponent group or regime often depends on violence to maintain itself and its practices. When the opponents are challenged nonviolently, subsequent violent repression is usually a sign that the nonviolent movement is threatening the status quo. Nonviolent action is a technique for combating violent opponents.

## **Conditions for struggle**

Elements of the situation that may be helpful to the application of nonviolent struggle should not be confused with elements that are required, without which the struggle will surely fail. There are favorable and unfavorable internal and external conditions for the practice of nonviolent struggle. However, favorable conditions are not absolute requirements. Some nonviolent struggles have succeeded in very poor circumstances because the struggle group compensated for specific unfavorable conditions by developing their strengths and their skills in how to act under such conditions.

Nevertheless, there is no substitute for genuine strength in nonviolent struggle. If the participants in a nonviolent struggle do not as yet possess sufficient strength, determination, and ability to act skillfully against their opponents, then the simple verbal acceptance of nonviolent struggle will not save them. Deliberate efforts are required to develop that strength, skill, and capacity to act wisely.

If these characteristics are beyond the immediate reach of the potential nonviolent struggle group, then the group should not yet move beyond limited, low-risk campaigns for relatively easy, short-term objectives. Most of its attention should be dedicated to building up its own capacities internally. Only when the group is strong, determined, and skilled should it attempt strategic escalation in the struggle for its long-term objectives.

## **Factors influencing the outcome**

There are many factors that determine the outcome of a nonviolent struggle.<sup>1</sup> Some of these factors lie within the “social situation,” some relate to the opponent group, some to third parties, and many others to the nonviolent struggle group. The nonviolent struggle group can influence many, but not all, of these factors.

**(1) Factors in the social situation.** These include the degree of conflict of interest between the two groups, the social distance between them, the degree to which beliefs and norms are shared

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<sup>1</sup> These factors are taken from Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, pp. 815-817.

by the two groups, and the degree to which the population that is resisting includes significant social groups and institutions.

**(2) Factors associated with the opponent group or regime.** These include the degree to which the opponents are dependent for their sources of power on those who are noncooperating, and the degree of noncompliance that the opponents can tolerate. These factors also include the degree to which the opponents and their supporters are convinced of their views and policies and of the rightness and justification of repression or other sanctions against the nonviolent resisters.

Other factors in this group include the means of control and repression that the opponents may use; the degree to which the agents of repression obey the leadership of the opponent group; the degree of solidarity within the opponent group; the degree of loyalty within its bureaucracy and its police and military forces; the degree to which the opponents' general population supports their group's policy and repression; and the opponents' estimate of the future course of the struggle movement and its consequences.

**(3) Factors associated with third parties.** These include the degree to which third parties become sympathetic to either the opponents or to the nonviolent struggle group, and the degree to which the opinions and good will of third parties are important to both groups. These factors also include the degree to which third parties move to active support for, or noncooperation with, either of the contending groups.

**(4) Factors associated with the nonviolent struggle group.** This category includes the most important group of relevant factors, as they are the ones over which the nonviolent struggle group can exert the most influence. They include the ability to organize or to act spontaneously in accordance with the requirements of nonviolent struggle; the degree to which the resisters and the grievance group are convinced of the rightness of their cause; and the degree of confidence in nonviolent struggle among these groups. Also important are the types of nonviolent methods selected for use by the nonviolent struggle group and whether or not that group is capable of applying these methods; the soundness of the strategy and the tactics chosen or accepted by the nonviolent struggle group; and whether or not the demands made

by the nonviolent struggle group on its own members are within the capacity of these people to meet.

Additionally, the relative ability of the resisters to practice the nonviolent technique is important, as is the degree to which that group can act with discipline to implement plans. The number of participants in the actions will be important for some cases, such as those relying heavily on the use of noncooperation, provided that the numbers are compatible with maintaining both the needed quality of the activities and the requirements for use of the selected mechanism of change.

Whether the general grievance group supports the nonviolent struggle group or hinders its actions will be very important. The severity of repression, and possibly terror, imposed by the opponent group can be important as it balances with the ability of the members of the struggle group to persist in resistance. How long the resisters are able and willing to continue the struggle, their ability to keep the struggle nonviolent, and, in normal circumstances, the ability of the resisters to maintain nonsecretiveness in their actions can also be important.

The presence of effective leadership, or the ability of the group to act with discipline in accordance with a wise strategy without a significant distinguishable leadership group, is an additional factor. So also is the extent to which the resisters can arouse sympathy and support among members of the opponent group. Finally, the degree to which the nonviolent struggle group controls its own sources of power is important.

### **Increasing the chances of success**

Except for some of the factors in the social situation, most of the factors operating in the conflict are subject to change, often considerable change, during the course of the nonviolent struggle. Such changes will result in increased or decreased power for the opponent group and also for the nonviolent struggle group. If these shifts increase the power of the opponent group significantly while the power of the nonviolent struggle group diminishes, it is very likely that the opponents will win. However, if the power of the opponents instead is undermined by restricting their sources of power while the power of the nonviolent struggle

group grows, the chances of the nonviolent struggle group being successful are greatly increased.

These changes may be directly or indirectly influenced by actions of the nonviolent struggle group. This is why great care needs to be exercised in planning and conducting these actions. Skill, strength, discipline, wise strategy, numbers, and persistence are among the essential qualities.

Of the factors listed above that are potentially under the control of the nonviolent struggle group, five stand out as especially important: (1) a willingness to act; (2) the strength of the struggle group (including persistence, numbers, and organization); (3) knowledge of nonviolent struggle; (4) adoption of wise strategic plans; and (5) skillful, disciplined implementation of the adopted strategic plans.

A population that wishes to increase its ability to gain important objectives will do well to make strong efforts to increase its capacities in these five areas. However, if only the first three are present, without wise strategic plans, the chances of success are not great. Even with willingness to act by a strong group, the action is unlikely to make much impact without knowledge of what to do and how to do it.

However, knowledge of nonviolent struggle, without the ability to determine how to apply it effectively, is not sufficient either. The development and the application of wise strategies to increase effectiveness in the use of this technique are extremely important.

### **Failure to plan for success**

Some attempts to apply nonviolent struggle have been much more successful than others. As we have seen, various factors contribute to determining whether a specific attempt will succeed or fail.

Success should not be left to chance. Resisters can take deliberate steps to increase the likelihood of achieving their objectives. One of the most important factors in that effort is the use of available resources and actions in ways that increase their effectiveness in the conflict. This requires strategic planning.

Unfortunately, such planning in nonviolent struggles has seldom been given the attention it deserves. Only rarely do people

facing the prospect of such conflicts fully recognize the extreme importance of preparing a comprehensive plan before they act.

Some people naïvely think that if they simply assert their goal strongly and firmly, for a long enough period, they will somehow achieve their goal. Others assume that if they remain true to their principles and ideals, and witness to them in the face of adversity, then they are doing all they can to achieve their objectives. Some believe that if they act courageously and sacrificially, there is nothing more that they need to do. Still others simply repeat the type of action they have used in the past, or which they believe is required by their political doctrine, and have faith that they will eventually succeed.

Assertion of desirable goals, remaining loyal to ideals, and persistence are all admirable, but are in themselves grossly inadequate to achieve significant goals. Mere repetition of actions that have failed in the past often makes success unachievable. The technique of nonviolent action has special characteristics, and there are important factors that contribute to its effectiveness, as we discussed earlier.

People in conflict situations often allow themselves to be distracted from their main goal by focusing on trivial issues, repeatedly responding to the opponents' initiatives, and aiming only at short-term activities. Sometimes, too, people do not even attempt to develop a plan to achieve their goal, because deep down they do not really believe that they can succeed. These people—despite the impression they may offer—see themselves as weak, as helpless victims of overpowering forces. Therefore, they believe, the best they can do is to assert and witness, or even just die, in the faith that they are right. Consequently, they do not even attempt to think and to plan strategically about how to accomplish their objective.

This creates a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you do not believe you will succeed, and therefore do not take deliberate steps to increase your chances of doing so, you usually will fail.

## **Consequences of a lack of planning**

In the past, most nonviolent struggles were improvised without advance planning. Some of these conflicts escalated in their scope and impact far beyond anyone's original estimate, leaving the

participants unprepared for what was to follow. Such was the case in the Russian Revolution of 1905 and in the Chinese pro-democracy struggle in 1989, for example. In many other past conflicts the groups involved recognized that they needed to plan how to act, but they did so only on a very limited, short-term, or tactical basis. In most cases, these groups did not attempt to formulate a broader, longer-term, or strategic plan of action.

While spontaneity and improvisation have some positive qualities, they also have serious disadvantages. For example, if resisters make gains, they will often not know what they should do next. If resisters in certain conflicts do not adequately anticipate the brutality of their opponents, they may suffer grave setbacks leading to the collapse of their movement. When crucial decisions are left to chance due to a lack of adequate planning, consequences can be equally disastrous.

The result of such failures to plan is that the chances of success in the conflict are drastically reduced, and at times eliminated. Without the formulation of a careful strategic plan of action

- One's energy may be deflected to minor issues and applied ineffectively.
- Methods of action may be attempted that are beyond the capacity of the resisters to apply effectively.
- Strengths of the nonviolent group may remain unutilized.
- The opponents' initiatives will determine the course of events.
- Uncertainty about what to do can spread confusion among the resisters.
- The weaknesses of one's own side will grow and lead to demoralization, and have detrimental effects on the attempt to achieve the goal.

In short, the group's strengths are dissipated or their impact is minimized. Sacrifices are wasted and one's cause is not well served.

Hodgepodge activities do not move the struggle forward, but instead result in scattered and unfocused actions or, worse, in the weakening of the movement. In contrast, directed action in accordance with a plan enables one to concentrate one's strengths to move in a determined direction toward the desired goal.



Long-term planning is also important for another reason. Even after the initial goal of a movement has been achieved, such as in the overthrow of a dictatorship or an otherwise oppressive regime, lack of planning on how to handle the transition to a better system can contribute to the emergence of new oppression.

## **Strategic planning**

The short-term, or tactical, planning that has occurred in some past conflicts in which nonviolent methods have been used has often been useful and has contributed to the accomplishments of these struggles. However, longer-term strategic planning of the overall conflict has distinct additional advantages, enabling the nonviolent struggle group to calculate the most effective ways to bring down oppression, to assess when the political situation and popular mood are ripe for action, and to choose how to start the nonviolent campaign and how to develop it as it proceeds, while contending with the opponents' repression and other countermeasures.

Strategic planning also enables the nonviolent struggle group to become stronger because it knows where it intends to go and because it is aware of possible problems, events, and reactions that the resisters will likely encounter.

The more important the goal, or the graver the consequences of failure, the more important planning becomes. Strategic planning increases the possibility that available resources will be employed most effectively. This is especially important for a movement that has a noble objective but limited material resources and in which its supporters will face danger during the conflict. In contrast, one's opponents usually will have access to major material resources, organizational strength, and the ability to perpetrate brutalities.

The use of strategy is best known in military conflict. For centuries, military officers have engaged in strategic planning for military campaigns. Important thinkers such as Sun Tzu, Carl von Clausewitz, and Sir Basil Liddell Hart have analyzed and refined conventional military strategy. Mao Zedong and Ernesto "Che" Guevara, among others, have attempted to do the same for guerrilla warfare. In both conventional military warfare and in guer-

rilla warfare, the use of sophisticated strategy is a basic requirement for success.

Just as effective military struggle requires wise strategies, planning, and implementation, nonviolent action will be most effective when it also operates on the basis of sound strategic planning. However, the formulation and the application of strategy in large-scale nonviolent struggles are more complex than in military conflicts. This is because the factors contributing to success and failure in nonviolent struggles are more numerous than in military struggles. In major nonviolent struggles, potentially the whole population and many institutions of the society, not simply the military forces, become combatants. To make the efforts of all these people and institutions most effective requires competent strategies.

The absolute and relative strengths of the opponents and the nonviolent struggle group can vary widely and change quickly during the course of the conflict. The actions and the behavior of the nonviolent struggle group may have unexpected effects far beyond the particular time and place in which they occur. These changes in the strengths of the contending groups can be more extreme in nonviolent struggles than in violent conflicts. Therefore, great care must be taken in the choice of even limited actions and in the resisters' behavior during the conflict.

## Levels of strategy

In developing a strategic plan, one needs to understand that there are four levels of strategy.<sup>2</sup> Grand strategy and strategy were very briefly introduced earlier. However, it is necessary to explore them in more depth here. At the most fundamental level is *grand strategy*. Then there is *strategy* itself, followed by *tactics* and *methods*.

*Grand strategy* can be called the master concept for the conduct of the conflict. It is the broadest conception that serves to coordinate and direct all the resources of the struggle group toward the attainment of the objectives of the conflict.

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<sup>2</sup> These definitions were drafted by Robert Helvey, Bruce Jenkins, and Gene Sharp. Unpublished memorandum, Albert Einstein Institution.

*Strategy* is very similar, but applies to more limited phases of the overall struggle, such as campaigns for specific objectives. Strategy includes the development of an advantageous situation, the decision of when to fight, and the broad schema for utilizing smaller engagements within the adopted strategy.

*Tactics* refers to plans for conducting still more limited engagements within the selected strategy—limited in scale, number of participants, time, or particular issue. Tactics refer to how a group will apply its chosen methods and act in a specific encounter with the opponents.

*Methods* in nonviolent action are the many individual forms of action, such as picketing, social boycotts, consumers' boycotts, general strikes, civil disobedience, sit-ins, and parallel government, which were surveyed in Chapter Four. Among the factors to be considered in the selection of the methods are the mechanism by which change is sought (conversion, accommodation, nonviolent coercion, or disintegration), the degree of control by the resisters of the opponents' sources of power, and the status, strengths, weaknesses, and sources of power of the resisters.

If any of the four levels of strategy is inadequately conceived or developed, or even absent, the overall nonviolent struggle will be seriously weakened. Without knowledge of the broad picture, one may neglect to prepare, or be unable to take, effective steps to achieve the objectives.

The choice of the grand strategy, the implementing strategies, the tactics, and the methods to be used should determine the general direction and the conduct of the conflict throughout its course. These four levels of strategy will be discussed much more fully in the following chapter.

In implementing a strategy, careful support activities are needed. These will require planning and preparations. Such activities are tasks for logistical work. *Logistics* include a range of detailed supportive activities for the conduct of a conflict, such as the arrangement of finances, transportation, communications, and supplies.

## **Gains from wise strategies**

The formulation and the implementation of wise strategies to guide the resisters' actions makes it possible to concentrate their

strengths and actions toward the desired goal, aggravate the opponents' weaknesses, strengthen the resisters, reduce casualties and other costs, and help the sacrifices to serve the main goal.

In order to increase the chances for success, nonviolent struggle strategists will need not only to formulate a grand strategy and strategies for individual campaigns, but also to develop a comprehensive strategic plan of action to apply the strategies in concrete terms. The strategic plan will need to be capable of strengthening the population, weakening and then destroying the oppression, and building an improved society. To develop such a plan of action requires a careful assessment of the situation and of the options for effective action.

The strategic plan lays out in broad strokes the anticipated concrete steps that the resisters will need to take to implement the grand strategy and the individual strategies in order to achieve their chosen objectives. It is the operational guide for action. The plan identifies the tasks that need to be carried out on the four levels of strategy and who is to be responsible for conducting them. Factors in the preparation and selection of a grand strategy, strategies, tactics, and choice of methods will be discussed at length in Chapters Thirty-six and Thirty-seven.

The importance of strategic planning cannot be overemphasized. It is the key to making social and political movements utilizing nonviolent struggle more effective.