

Chapter Thirty

CHALLENGE BRINGS REPRESSION

A time of thunder

The time for action is also the time for self-reliance and continued internal strengthening. The resisters need to organize themselves, act, and mobilize others. Nonviolent action tends to mobilize power among the population affected by the grievance and enables them to exert control over their lives and society. It helps them gain confidence and increase their strength. “Rely on yourselves” may well be the cry of the resisters. Submission and passivity must be cast off for nonviolent struggle to be effective.

In order to maximize the effectiveness of the coming struggle, a sound strategy appropriate to the specific conflict needs to be adopted. The strategy chosen for the struggle, and the specific methods selected to be used in the conflict, will differ widely from one conflict to another. The process of planning strategy is discussed in Part Four.

With the launching of nonviolent struggle, basic—often latent—conflicts between the opponents and the grievance group

are brought to the surface. Through the ensuing “creative conflict and tension,”¹ it becomes possible to address the issues in those underlying conflicts and make changes that may be required to resolve them.

Exponents of nonviolent struggle agree with Frederick Douglass, the eloquent nineteenth century African-American opponent of slavery:

Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. The struggle may be a moral one; or it may be a physical one; it may be both moral and physical. But it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without demand. It never did and it never will.²

The struggle will bring changes to the grievance group—the general population whose grievances are issues in the conflict. Some changes will be psychological—a shattering of conformity, hopelessness, inertia, impotence, and passivity, increased self-respect, confidence, and awareness of their power. Other changes will be more directly social and political: learning how to act together to achieve objectives.

The withdrawal of consent, cooperation, and submission will challenge the system because these actions can weaken the supply of the opponents’ sources of power. How seriously the withdrawal does so will vary with the quality of the action, the number of resisters, and their persistence in face of repression. The social and political milieu is also important. This includes the degree of nonconformity the system can tolerate, attitudes towards the regime, and the prospects for the resistance spreading.

The final outcome of the challenge will be determined by the balance between the seriousness of the challenge and the degree to which the social and political milieu favors each side. The opponents’ efforts are clearly important but, by themselves, are not decisive. Take repression, for example. To be effective, repression must produce submission. But it only produces submission if the potential resisters grow fearful and choose to submit. At times,

¹ As termed by the important African-American civil rights activist James Farmer.

² Quoted by James Farmer, *Freedom—When?* (New York: Random House, 1965), p. 7.

repression may even increase resistance, as discussed in the following chapter.

Initial polarization followed by shifting power

The launching of nonviolent struggle will almost always sharpen the conflict. It will likely cause the conflicting groups to become more sharply delineated and stimulate previously uncommitted people to take sides. Those persons and groups initially inclined toward the opponents will tend to move closer to their position and support for them. On the other side, persons and groups initially inclined toward the nonviolent group will tend to move toward it. This instability and uncertainty in the strength of the contenders seem to be present at the beginning of all forms of open conflict.

The initial polarization period may vary in length. During this period, the nonviolent resisters need to be most careful in their behavior, because it will influence how much support they and their opponents receive. At first, the grievance group may be worse off than previously if it must now cope with repression in addition to the original problem.

If handled properly, this will likely be a temporary situation. Successful nonviolent campaigns produce a strengthened solidarity among the nonviolent resisters, a growth of wider support for correction of the grievance, and a weakening, or even disintegration, of support for the opponents. The nonviolent resisters should attempt continually to increase their strength (numerical and otherwise), not only among their usual supporters and third parties, but even among the opponents.

During the campaign the respective strengths of the two contending groups are therefore subject to constant change, both absolutely and relatively. Such changes can be large and sudden.

This highly dynamic and changeable situation means that specific acts within a nonviolent struggle may have wide and significant repercussions on the power of each side. Each proposed particular resistance action, even a limited one, therefore needs to be selected and evaluated based on its potential wider influences on the overall conflict. The nonviolent resisters' behavior may not only influence their own strength, but may also affect the strength of their opponents. The behavior of the nonviolent group will

also help to influence whether third parties support either group during the conflict.

Short-term "successes" at the cost of weakening the resistance in general and strengthening the opponents are most unwise. On the other hand, improvements in the relative strength of the resisters after the initial polarization will be highly important in determining the later course of the struggle and the final result.

The opponents' initial problem

The opponents' initial problem arises because the nonviolent action is disrupting the status quo in ways that require them to respond to the challenge. The type, extent, and severity of the nonviolent disruption will vary. The opponents' tolerance and reactions (both psychologically and in countermeasures) may range widely and may change during the course of the conflict. The degree of dissent the opponents can tolerate will be influenced by the degree to which the society is democratic or nondemocratic. There is likely to be more tolerance in a democratic society and less in a nondemocratic society, although this is not always the case. Nonviolent action also tends to produce and aggravate conflicts within the opponents' camp about what countermeasures should be taken in response to the nonviolent challenge.

The nonviolent resisters need to prevent and correct misperceptions of their intentions and activities. Such misperceptions may cause responses from the opponents that will harm both sides.

Sometimes, when confronted with nonviolent action, the opponents and their officials may become confused, especially if they are surprised by, or unfamiliar with, nonviolent action. Confusion can also occur when the resistance violates the opponents' perception of the world. That perception may be based on accepted assumptions about political reality or an official ideology or doctrine. For example, the opponents may have believed that the State and violence are the most powerful political forces. There may be other sources of the opponents' confusion, including excessive optimism and a favorable self-perception. The opponents' confusion is not necessarily beneficial to the nonviolent group and its objectives.

Frequently, opponents may react to the nonviolent challenge emotionally, seeing it as an affront, an indignity, offensive behav-

ior, and a repudiation of their authority and position. The opponents may regard these aspects of the challenge as more important than the actual issues at stake. The opponents may then either try to obtain verbal acknowledgment of their authority and position, or demand a cancellation of the nonviolent campaign, or both, before they will consent to new negotiations.

In other instances, the opponents may be less concerned with challenges to their dignity or authority and more with the immediate issues at stake. Recognition of the power of nonviolent action will sometimes lead the opponents to make limited concessions with the hope of ending the challenge. At other times, the opponents will make major concessions only after a considerable period of struggle. The opponents may do so only after they have experienced and recognized the real power of the movement.

Occasionally, opponents may genuinely believe that concessions, compromise, or surrender by them would be an unthinkable violation of their mission or duty. Even more serious can be the opponents' fear that giving way on limited specific issues will later lead to complete capitulation. This will make achieving the goal of the resisters even more difficult.

The opponents may attempt to use psychological influences, rather than repression, to induce the nonviolent resisters to be submissive again and withdraw from the struggle. The opponents may send messages such as ". . . not only can you not win, but you are already losing strength." False rumors may also be spread about the movement, its intentions, and its leadership. Attempts may be made to split groups supporting the movement, or to turn resistance leaders against each other. Or a counterattack on the issues themselves may be mounted, with the opponents trying to justify existing policies and to show that there is no justification for the demands of the nonviolent group. Such efforts are aimed at reducing the support that the nonviolent group can mobilize and retain.

Repression

When the opponents are the State, or have its support, the punishments are likely to involve repression through the use of the police, the prison system, and the military forces.

Nonviolent resistance is commonly met with repression when the opponents are unwilling or unable to grant the resisters' demands. Repression is not a sign that the resisters are weak or will be defeated. *Repression is an acknowledgment by the opponents of the seriousness of the challenge posed by the resistance.*

Sometimes the severity of the repression will be in proportion to the seriousness of the nonviolent challenge, but this is not a standard pattern.

The opponents' need to end the defiance may in certain situations be largely symbolic. But in other situations of widespread and growing nonviolent struggle, the pressures on the opponents to halt the resistance will be overwhelming, especially in a system that cannot withstand major dissent.

The impact of the initiation of nonviolent struggle on the opponents will to a large degree depend on the resisters' strategy and the specific methods launched. The other major factor will be the competency and scale with which the strategy and methods are applied. If the strategy is of poor quality or even absent, if weak methods are selected, or if only a few resisters come forward to apply stronger methods when many resisters are needed, or if many persons join the action but do so in undisciplined and incompetent ways, the action will be weak and will pose little challenge to the opponents.

For example, an economic boycott supported by only 10 percent of the population, a strike in which a small minority of the workers participate, or a campaign of political noncooperation backed by the actions of only a small doctrinal group will not seriously threaten the opponents' policies and control. The chances of harsh and massive repression will therefore be lower. However, harsh repression is still possible because the opponents may wish to instill fear of future repression.

On the other hand, if there is an economic boycott backed by 90 percent of the population, or a labor strike in which 98 percent of the essential workers walk out, the action will be strong. Similarly, in a political defiance struggle in which most of the general population disobeys the regime's orders and many of the civil servants, police, and even troops refuse to follow orders, the action will be an extremely strong threat to the opponents. Harsh repression can be confidently expected in such situations.

Repression is intended to end the protest, noncooperation, and defiance. It is the power of competently applied nonviolent struggle that triggers repression from the powers that be in an attempt to maintain their positions and control and to block the nonviolent struggle group from achieving its objectives.

Types of repression

Nonviolent resisters familiar with the technique will not be surprised at the repression inflicted by the opponents. Freedom is not free. There is a price to be paid.

It must be recognized very clearly that harsh repression can be applied against nonviolent resisters. However, it must also be recognized that generally much harsher repression is inflicted on violent resistance movements, resulting in far greater casualties and destruction. This is not because violent resistance is a greater threat to the opponents but because harsh repression against violent resistance is likely to produce fewer negative reactions than harsh repression against disciplined nonviolent resisters. Not even passive submission guarantees safety under totalitarian and other extreme dictatorships. They aim to instill fear by the example of brutal repression whether it is focused on resisters or on people who have done nothing. This fear is intended to induce compulsive submission.

Once the opponents have decided to use repression, the questions are as follows:

- What means of repression will they use?
- Will the repression help the opponents to achieve their objectives?
- What will be the response by the nonviolent group and others to the repression?

Some of the harsh measures that the opponents may use will be official. In other cases, repression may be unofficially encouraged, through the creation of extralegal paramilitary forces or assassination squads, for example. Sometimes there will be threats. Other times the repression will simply be inflicted directly against the resisters without advance warning. Some repression involves police or military action. Other reactions to the nonviolent chal-

lenge may include more indirect means of control and manipulation—and occasionally even counter nonviolent sanctions.

The sanctions, or punishments, the nonviolent resisters can expect will vary in form, intensity, and objective. These are the following:

- **Control of communications and information**, as by censorship, false reports, or interruption of contacts.
- **Psychological pressures**, as by verbal abuse, ostracism, encouragement of defections, threats, or retaliation against resisters' families.
- **Confiscation**, including seizure of property, funds, literature, records, correspondence, offices, or equipment.
- **Economic sanctions**, monetary fines, economic boycotts, dismissal from jobs, blacklisting, cutting off of utilities, and similar measures.
- **Bans and prohibitions** of certain activities or organizations, bans of public meetings or assemblies, curfews, court injunctions, and similar measures.
- **Arrests and imprisonment** on serious or minor charges, legal harassment on unrelated or fabricated charges, arrests of negotiators, delegations, or leaders, or varying prison sentences.
- **Exceptional restrictions**, including new laws or decrees, suspension of *habeas corpus* and other rights, declaration of martial law or states of emergency, or mobilization of special military or police forces. Prosecutions may be also initiated on more serious charges such as conspiracy, incitement, rebellion, or treason. Nonviolent resisters may be conscripted into military forces or court-martialed. Mass deportations may be imposed, while individuals may be exiled, detained without trial, or placed in concentration camps.
- **Direct physical violence**, varying in form and severity, planned or improvised. It will tend to grow if the nonviolent struggle movement gains strength or if earlier repression has not resulted in submission. Other countermeasures may be used by the opponents, including "disappearances," assassinations, official executions, or massacres.

Making the repression ineffective

In the face of direct physical violence, the key to success by the resisters depends on their refusal to submit and their maintenance of discipline.

Generally, the opponents' means of repression are more suited to deal with violent opposition than nonviolent struggle. Against nonviolent resisters not intimidated by fear of repression, the repression can tend to lose its power to produce submission. When imprisonment is not feared, it has lost its effectiveness in deterring certain behavior. The resisters may therefore openly defy laws and seek imprisonment, and may even dare the opponents to do their worst. If the number of defiant people becomes large enough, effective enforcement is rendered impossible and repression becomes ineffective. How large that threshold of participation is will vary widely depending on the particular situation.

Persistence

Faced with repression, nonviolent resisters have only one acceptable response: to overcome, they must persist in their actions and refuse to submit or retreat. *If the resisters show in any way that the repression weakens the movement, they will signal to the opponents that if they make the repression severe enough it will produce submission.*

Fearlessness, or deliberate control of fear, is especially important at this stage of the struggle. Firmness in the face of repression will make it possible for mass noncooperation to produce its coercive effects. Also, persistence may contribute to sympathy for the defiant nonviolent resisters. It is essential that the leadership of the nonviolent struggle be, and be perceived to be, courageous and unbowed in the face of repression and of threatened future punishments.

Sometimes, specific methods of nonviolent struggle will by their nature be both more difficult for the opponents to deal with by repression and less likely to provoke the most extreme brutalities. For example, it may be better not to march down the street in face of potential rifle fire, but instead for everyone to stay at home for 24 hours and thereby paralyze the city.

No change of tactics and methods, however, must be permitted to alter the basic nonviolent counteraction to repression: brave, relentless, and disciplined struggle.

Facing repression

Facing repression with persistence and courage means that the nonviolent resisters must be prepared to endure the opponents' punishments without flinching.

Not all suffering is the same, nor does it have the same effects. The results of the suffering of courageous resisters are likely to differ radically from that of submissive people.

Those planning to initiate nonviolent struggle will need to consider the degree of suffering the volunteers are willing to endure and how firmly they will be able to defy their opponents' repression. A bold action likely to draw a repressive response that the nonviolent resisters are not prepared to endure usually should not be taken. It is generally better to choose methods of action that do not set up resisters as clear targets when more effective and less provocative methods are available. The selected methods of action should be in accord with the degree of repression the resisters are prepared to suffer for such action. Very importantly, it should be understood, only methods should be selected that clearly help to implement the selected strategy for the struggle. This point will be discussed further in Chapter Thirty-six.

The resisters' persistence will have several effects. Two are:

- The numerical and quantitative effect of many defiant subjects refusing to obey despite repression will significantly limit the opponents' ability to control the situation and to maintain their policies.
- The nonviolent persistence despite repression may produce psychological or qualitative effects on the opponents, their supporters, third parties, and others.

In some cases of nonviolent struggle, the repression will be relatively mild or moderate. In other cases there will be brutalities. The nonviolent group should be prepared for either scenario.

Facing brutalities

Brutalities may arise because (1) the regime commonly uses terror; (2) a nontyrannical regime decides that only drastic action can crush the resisters; or (3) without orders from the regime, local officers or individuals in the army, police, or even the general public independently commit brutalities.

It is important to remember that beatings, killings, and massacres against nonviolent resisters do occur. The more dictatorial the regime and system generally, the more probable will be extreme brutalities against the nonviolent resisters. However, when challenged nonviolently, all regimes that depend to any degree on violence are likely to resort to violence. Resisters must determine how to respond according to the requirements for effectiveness of the nonviolent technique.

Informed resisters in crisis situations are not surprised by brutalities against the nonviolent group. For them, either to halt the action or to resort to violence would have serious, harmful consequences for the struggle. To be effective, the resisters must persist through the brutalities and suffering and maintain their fearlessness, nonviolent discipline, and firmness. Some time and considerable suffering may be required to demonstrate to the opponents that brutalities will not crush the movement. The price may be severe but, at times, required if fundamental goals are to be achieved.

However, the leadership in a nonviolent struggle will not, on the basis of any criteria, be wise to demand that the resisters undergo suffering or knowingly attract brutalities beyond their ability to bear them. All actions should serve a strategic purpose. If an unwise course of action has been started, it should not be continued out of dogmatism or stubbornness. Yet, when a firm stand or still more daring action is required, there should be no retreat—despite brutalities.

At times, a planned daring and risky action by a smaller group of resisters may be used to produce intense repression from the opponents. By demonstrating the resisters' initiative, courage, and persistence in face of great danger, the risky action may help to improve the resisters' morale and lessen their fear of repression. When this occurs, the harsh repression is usually inflicted on the

volunteers themselves, not on the general population, as has occurred in some cases of guerrilla warfare.

The operation of one or more of the mechanisms of change may in time lead to a reduction or a cessation of brutalities, as will be discussed in Chapter Thirty-two. Brutalities may also be reduced when it is clear to the opponents that their repression is rebounding against their own position by alienating their own supporters and provoking increased resistance. When this occurs, the opponents may realize that the extreme repression and brutalities are counterproductive and need to be restricted. It is possible that the worst repression may occur shortly before capitulation by the opponents. At other times, the worst repression from certain extremist members of the opponent group may even occur shortly after their leaders have conceded the claims of the resisters.

Defiance of the opponents' repression, of course, is not deliberately intended to incur suffering from the brutalities of repression. The point is to continue the resistance, and especially the noncooperation, that has the potential to sever the sources of the opponents' power, as discussed in Chapter Two, by using the methods of nonviolent struggle, enumerated in Chapter Four. If a political noncooperation campaign, or a massive strike, collapses as soon as there are arrests, beatings, or deaths, there is no time for the resistance to have an effect. All sacrifices will have been in vain.

If, however, the opponents' use of repression fails and the resisters are willing to persist, widespread noncooperation has the potential of gaining the objectives of the struggle and even of disintegrating the oppressive system.

Supporters of military warfare are well aware that a struggle often requires a cost to be paid. One of the major differences between military conflicts and nonviolent struggles is that, almost without exception, in nonviolent conflicts the cost—in lives, injuries, and destruction—is not paid by nonparticipants but by those who are waging the struggle. Also, the casualties and the destruction suffered by the resisters are almost always far lower in nonviolent struggles than in comparable violent conflicts.

It can be argued that generally nonviolent struggles, as compared to violent ones, produce greater chances of success and less extreme repression, and also that persons not participating in the

struggle are usually not seriously affected. This is in contrast to the situation that tends to prevail in guerrilla wars, conventional wars, and other applications of violence in conflicts. In violent conflicts, nonparticipating civilians will usually pay in lives and suffering as a consequence of the violent combat initiated and conducted by others.

The fact remains, however, that serious nonviolent struggle will very likely be met by repression, but the resistance must nevertheless persist.

