

A nonviolent plan to oust Saddam

Harsh sanctions and threats of aggression unify Iraqis around Saddam. Nonviolence has been proven as a more effective way to bring about regime change.

RATHER than war or sanctions, there's a better way to get rid of Saddam Hussein: strategic nonviolent action.

The soft underbelly of any dictatorship is the ability of the population, including soldiers, to withdraw consent. Take away that consent and the regime will collapse. This may seem like wishful thinking but there are plenty of historical examples to show how it can actually happen.

In 1989, most Eastern European regimes were toppled with little or no loss of life. There were no foreign attacks, no guerilla struggles, no sabotage. Instead, there were rallies in the streets, initially small but before long massive, causing entrenched communist rulers to lose their nerve and resign without a fight.

A similar thing happened in the Soviet Union in August 1991. In the face of a coup, citizens rallied around the Russian parliament building, a symbol of resistance. The plotters sent in tanks but opponents of the coup talked with the soldiers, convincing them to hold fire or defect. Many media workers got around the ban on independent reporting by producing their own broadsheets and using posters and email. The Alpha Group, an elite anti-terrorist team, drew up plans to capture the parliament but they knew many civilian protesters would die in the attack and as a result the planned assault was never launched. In a matter of days the coup dissolved and soon after so did the Soviet Union.

The same methods can be applied against Saddam Hussein. There are opposition

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groups in Iraq that can tap into widespread anti-Saddam sentiment. There are oil and electricity workers who, if they abandon their jobs or gum up the works, can bring the regime to its knees. There are security units that can be persuaded to switch allegiance.

Unfortunately, aggressive Western policy actually helps Saddam maintain power. The sanctions have led to hundreds of thousands of Iraqis dying, causing resentment against the West and thus undermining opposition to Saddam. Similarly, military strikes and the threat of war unify the population, especially the Iraqi military and security forces, and weaken the prospects for internal resistance.

In 1999 there was a massive NATO air attack against Serbia but it did not dislodge dictator Slobodan Milosevic. He was unseated the next year only through popular protests. Nonviolence worked better to bring about "regime change".

So what could be done to undermine Saddam? Instead of dropping bombs, drop technology for independent broadcasting and secure communication. Instead of sanctions, open the borders and promote trade that benefits the people. Encourage Western tourism, including visits by people trained in nonviolence skills. Welcome Iraqi defectors, offering them safe haven, perhaps even payment. Broadcast information on a range of methods of resistance, including slogans, fraternisation, religious processions, teach-

ins, stay-at-home, tax boycotts, strikes, boycotts of government departments, go-slows, sit-ins, alternative communication systems, alternative markets and many others. (Nonviolence researcher Gene Sharp has documented hundreds of different methods of nonviolent action.)

Nonviolent action has been the key to bringing down dictatorships in many countries, including the Philippines (the people power revolution of 1986), Iran, and many African and Latin American countries. There have been failures, too, such as the 1989 Beijing massacre that halted the Chinese pro-democracy movement. Nonviolent struggles continue in many countries, such as Burma.

Many peaceful protesters have been killed or injured in these struggles. The British killed hundreds of people in the course of the Indian independence struggle. In comparison, though, in opposing the violent Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya, British colonists killed far more as well as setting up concentration camps and using torture. Violence promotes counterviolence.

Despite the promise of nonviolence, most governments seem reluctant to support it. For 10 years in Kosovo, there was an effective nonviolent resistance to Serbian rule but it received little attention elsewhere. It was the rise of the terrorist Kosovo Liberation Army that led Western governments to get involved.

Even worse, governments continue to support dictators and repressive policies when it suits them. Western governments supported Saddam Hussein's brutal regime in the 1980s, funded the Mujaheddin, and now support repressive states around the world, such as nuclear-armed Pakistan. Until governments consistently support democracy and oppose human rights violators, there is faint hope of their supporting nonviolence against repression.

Nonviolent action can be used to oust Saddam Hussein. The people of Iraq just need the tools and encouragement to do it.

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