

# Nonviolent Action and Pro-Democracy Struggles



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*The United States has done for the cause of democracy what the Soviet Union did for the cause of socialism. Not only has the Bush administration given democracy a bad name in much of the world, but its high-profile and highly suspect "democracy promotion" agenda has provided repressive regimes and their apologists an excuse to label any popular pro-democracy movement that challenges them as foreign agents, even when led by independent grassroots nonviolent activists.*

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In recent months, the governments of Zimbabwe, Iran, Belarus, and Burma, among others, have disingenuously claimed that popular nonviolent civil insurrections of the kind that toppled the corrupt and autocratic regimes in Serbia, Georgia, and Ukraine in recent years – and that could eventually threaten them as well – are somehow part of an effort by the Bush administration and its allies to instigate "soft coups" against governments deemed hostile to American interests and replace them by more compliant regimes.

This confuses two very different phenomena.

The U.S. government has undeniably provided small amounts of money to various opposition groups and political parties through the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the International Republican Institute (IRI) and other organs. Such funding has at times helped a number of opposition groups cover some of the costs of their operations, better enabling them to afford computers, Internet access, fax machines, printing costs, office space and other materials. Assistance from foreign governments has also helped provide for poll watchers and other logistical support to help insure free and fair elections. In addition, the United States, through the NED, the IRI and other U.S.-funded projects, has also provided seminars and other training for opposition leaders in campaign strategies.

What is controversial about these endeavors is that they have been directed primarily at helping conservative, pro-Western parties with a free-market orientation and generally not parties of the democratic left. Nor are they aimed solely at pro-democracy struggles challenging autocratic regimes. Indeed, U.S. agencies have also backed opposition parties in countries such as Venezuela, despite it already being a democracy.

Some opposition groups in some countries have welcomed U.S. assistance while others have rejected such aid on principle. There is no evidence, however, to suggest – even in cases where this kind of limited U.S. support for opposition organizations has taken place – that the U.S. government or any U.S.-funded entity has ever provided training, advice, or strategic assistance for the kind of mass popular nonviolent action campaigns that have toppled governments or threatened the survival of incumbent regimes.

## How Democratic Change Occurs

The United States remains the world's number one supplier of armaments and security assistance to the world's dictatorships. There is little reason to take seriously the idea that U.S. foreign policy, under either Republican or Democratic administrations, has been based upon a sincere belief in advancing freedom and democracy as a matter of principle. History has shown repeatedly that the U.S. government, like most Western powers, supports democratic rule only if it is seen to promote perceived economic and strategic interests. Conversely, the U.S. government has frequently opposed democratic rule if it is seen to be contrary to perceived economic and strategic interests. Since the vast majority of Americans, according to public opinion polls, do support democracy as a matter of principle, however, support for "democracy" has long been used as a rationalization for various U.S. foreign policy initiatives, even when these policies end up supporting authoritarianism and repression. As a result, though support for democratic change in countries ruled by autocratic regimes is certainly a worthwhile goal, skepticism over the Bush administration's pro-democracy rhetoric is indeed warranted.

In any case, true democratic change comes from within. Recent years have witnessed the emergence of a series of broadly based nonviolent social movements that have succeeded in toppling dictatorships and forcing democratic reforms in such diverse countries as the Philippines, Chile, Bolivia, Madagascar, Nepal, Czechoslovakia, Indonesia, Serbia, Mali, and Ukraine. Even the relatively conservative Washington-based Freedom House, after examining the 67 countries that have moved from authoritarianism to varying degrees of democratic governance over the past few decades, published a study concluding that these transitions did not come as a result of foreign intervention and only rarely through armed revolt or voluntary elite-driven reforms. In the overwhelming majority of cases, according to this report, change came through democratic civil society organizations engaging in massive nonviolent demonstrations and other forms of civil resistance, such as strikes, boycotts, tax refusal, occupations of public space, and other forms of non-cooperation.

Whenever governments are challenged by their own people, they tend to claim that those struggling for freedom and justice are traitors to the nation and agents of foreign enemies. In previous decades, opposition activists challenging U.S.-backed dictatorships in Latin America, Southeast Asia, and elsewhere were routinely labeled as "communist agents" and "Soviet sympathizers." Today, pro-

democracy movements within U.S. client states in the Middle East are depicted as "Islamic fundamentalists" and "Iranian agents." Similarly, opposition activists in Iran, Belarus, Burma, and Zimbabwe have been labeled as "supporters of Western imperialism" and "American agents."

In reality, the limited amount of financial support provided to opposition groups by the United States and other Western governments in recent years cannot cause a nonviolent liberal democratic revolution to take place any more than the limited Soviet financial and material support for leftist movements in previous decades could cause an armed socialist revolution to take place. As Marxists and others familiar with popular movements have long recognized, revolutions are the result of certain objective conditions. Indeed, no amount of money could force hundreds of thousands of people to leave their jobs, homes, schools, and families to face down heavily armed police and tanks and put their bodies on the line unless they had a sincere motivation to do so.

### **Conspiracy Theories**

A number of regimes facing popular opposition have gone so far as to claim that certain small independent non-profit organizations and supporters of nonviolent action from Europe and the United States who have provided seminars and workshops for opposition activists on the history and dynamics of nonviolent resistance are somehow working as agents of the Bush administration. Some Western bloggers and other writers critical of the Bush administration and understandably concerned about U.S. intervention in the name of "democracy," have actually bought into some of the claims by these governments. These conspiracy theories have in turn been picked up by some progressive websites and periodicals and even by some in the mainstream press, which then repeat them as fact.

Virtually all of these seminars and workshops, however, come at the direct request of opposition organizers themselves. And at least as many of them have been on behalf of pro-democracy activists struggling against right-wing dictatorships as there have been on behalf of pro-democracy activists struggling against left-wing dictatorships. Over just this past year, for example, my colleagues and I have worked with Egyptians, Maldivians, Palestinians, West Papuans, Sahrawis, Azerbaijanis, and Guatemalan Indians struggling against repressive U.S.-backed governments. In addition, virtually all of these groups have a strict policy of refusing support from the NED or any other government-funded entities. As a result of my own involvement in a number of these groups and personally knowing most of their principal workshop leaders, I recognize that charges that Gene Sharp, Jack DuVall, Bob Helvey, Ivan Marovic, the Albert Einstein Institution, the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict (ICNC), and the Center on Applied Nonviolent Action and Strategies (CANVAS) are somehow in cahoots with the CIA or are serving as agents of U.S. imperialism are totally unfounded.

Unfortunately, even Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez – echoed by some of his North American supporters – has apparently fallen for these false charges and has accused some of these individuals and groups of plotting with his opponents to overthrow him. Chavez has every right to be a bit paranoid, given the very real U.S. government efforts to subvert his regime, including support for a short-lived coup in 2002. In reality, however, the only visit to Venezuela that has taken place on behalf of any of these non-profit groups engaged in educational efforts on strategic nonviolence was in early 2006 when I – along with David Hartsough, the radical pacifist director of Peaceworkers – led a series of workshops at the World Social Forum in Caracas. There we lectured and led discussions on the power of nonviolent resistance as well as offered a series of screenings of a film ICNC helped develop on the pro-democracy movement in Chile against the former U.S.-backed dictator Augusto Pinochet. The only reference to Venezuela during those workshops was how massive nonviolent action could be used to resist a possible coup against Chavez, not foment one. In fact, Hartsough and I met with some Venezuelan officials regarding proposals that the government train the population in various methods of nonviolent civil defense to resist any possible future attempts to overthrow Chavez.

### **Workshops on Strategic Nonviolence**

The American and European groups that share generic information on the history and dynamics of strategic nonviolence with civil society organizations in foreign countries are not unlike the Western private voluntary organizations that share environmentally sustainable technologies and agricultural techniques to farmers in developing nations. Both offer useful tools that, if applied consistently and effectively, could improve the quality of life for millions of people. There is nothing "imperialistic" about it.

Just as sustainable agricultural technologies and methods are more effective in meeting human needs and preserving the planet than the conventional development strategies promoted by Western governments, nonviolent action has been shown to be more effective in advancing democratic change than threats of foreign military intervention, backing coup plotters, imposing punitive sanctions, supporting armed rebel groups, and other methods traditionally instigated by the United States and its allies. And just as the application of appropriate technologies can also be a means of countering the damage caused by unsustainable neo-liberal economic models pushed by Western governments and international financial institutions, the use of massive nonviolent action can counter some of the damage resulting from the arms trade, military intervention, and other harmful manifestations of Western militarism.

Development based on Western models usually means that multinational corporations and the governments of wealthy capitalist countries end up exerting a large degree of control over these societies, whereas appropriate technologies allow for genuine independence and self-sufficiency. Similarly, unlike fomenting a military coup or establishing a military occupation – which relies on asserting control over the population and potential political opponents – successful nonviolent civil insurrections are necessarily based on a broad coalition of popular movements and are therefore impossible for an outside power to control.

It is ironic, then, that some elements of the left are attacking those very individuals and groups who are trying to disseminate these tools of popular empowerment against the forces of oppression and imperialism.

### **People Power**

Another difference between these people-to-people educational efforts and U.S. intervention is that, unlike the NED and other government-backed "pro-democracy" efforts, which often focus on developing conventional political initiatives led by pro-Western elites, these workshops on strategic nonviolence are primarily designed for grassroots activists unaffiliated with established political parties who seek to make change from below.

Historically, individuals and groups with experience in effective nonviolent action campaigns tend to come from leftist and pacifist traditions which carry a skeptical view of government power, particularly governments with a history of militarism and conquest. For example, my own background in strategic nonviolent action is rooted in my involvement in the late 1970s as a nonviolence trainer for the anti-nuclear Clamshell Alliance and the nonviolent revolutionary group Movement for a New Society, both of which were radically decentralist in structure and decidedly anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist in orientation. More recently, my fellow workshop leaders have included a South African veteran of the anti-apartheid United Democratic Front, a leading Palestinian activist from the first intifada, and former student leaders from the left-wing Serbian opposition to Milosevic.

Conversely, large bureaucratic governments accustomed to projecting political power through military force or elite diplomatic channels have little understanding or appreciation of nonviolent action or any other kind of mass popular struggle. Indeed, what would CIA operatives know about nonviolence, much less grassroots organizing?

In short, not only is it naïve to assume that an external power could provoke a revolution of any kind, it should be apparent that the U.S. government does not know the first thing about fomenting a nonviolent civil insurrection. As a result, the dilemma for U.S. policy-makers – and the hope for all of us who support democracy as a matter of principle and not political expediency – is that the most realistic way to overthrow the world's remaining autocratic regimes is through a process the U.S. government cannot control.

The U.S. government has historically promoted regime change through military invasions, coup d'etats, and other kinds of violent seizures of power that install an undemocratic minority. Nonviolent "people power" movements, by contrast, make regime change possible through empowering pro-democratic majorities. As a result, the best hope for advancing freedom and democracy in the world's remaining autocratic states comes from civil society, not the U.S. government, which deserves neither the credit nor the blame for the growing phenomenon of nonviolent democratic revolutions.

### **Strengthening the Bush Agenda**

The emergence of civil society organizations and the growing awareness of the power of nonviolent action in recent years have been among the most positive political developments in what has otherwise been largely depressing political times. It is most unfortunate, then, that supposedly "progressive" voices have chosen to attack this populist grass roots phenomenon as some kind of Bush administration conspiracy.

It is also ironic that so many on the American left – after years of romanticizing armed struggle as the only way to defeat dictatorships, disparaging the potential of nonviolent action to overthrow repressive governments, and dismissing the notion of a nonviolent revolution -- are now expressing their alarm at how successful popular nonviolent insurrections can be, even to the point of naively thinking that it is so easy to pull off that it could somehow be organized from foreign capitals. In reality, every successful popular nonviolent insurrection has been a home grown movement rooted in the realization by the masses that their rulers were illegitimate and the current political system was incapable of redressing injustice. By contrast, no nonviolent insurrection has succeeded when the movement's leadership and agenda did not have the backing of the majority of the population. This is why the 2002-2003 "strike" in Venezuela's oil industry failed to bring down Chavez while comparable disruptions to economies elsewhere have often forced out less popular leaders.

"Leftist" critics of nonviolent pro-democracy movements parallel right-wing supporters of U.S. intervention in that both denigrate the power of individuals to take their destiny into their own hands and overthrow oppressive leaders and institutions. Instead, both appear to believe that people are passive victims and that social and political change can only come through the manipulation of foreign powers.

### **Reagan Redux**

For example, despite President Ronald Reagan's insistence during the 1980s that the popular armed insurgencies that challenged repressive U.S.-backed regimes in Central America were the result of a Soviet "hit list," the reality was that the revolutions in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala were homegrown popular movements. The Soviets provided a limited amount of assistance and obviously wanted to take political advantage of the possible overthrow of pro-American oligarchs by having them replaced with leftist revolutionaries who would be friendlier to their interests. But the oppressed peasants and workers of those Central American countries were not following the dictates of Moscow. They were struggling for basic rights and an end to repression.

Similar claims heard today that the United States is somehow a major force behind contemporary popular movements against

dictatorships in Burma, Iran, Zimbabwe, and Belarus or that the United States was somehow responsible for the successes of previous movements in Serbia, Georgia or Ukraine are equally ludicrous. This attitude parallels claims by those on the right who disingenuously credited Reagan's dangerous and militaristic Cold War policies for the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe and tried to depict the union activists, peasants, students, priests, and others martyred in the course of popular struggles in Central America as Soviet agents.

In addition, it is important to remember that the vast majority of successful nonviolent civil insurrections have not been against dictatorships opposed by the U.S. government, but dictatorships supported by the U.S. government. Right-wing autocrats toppled by such "people power" movements have included Marcos in the Philippines, Suharto in Indonesia, the Shah of Iran, Duvalier in Haiti, Pinochet in Chile, Chun in South Korea, and Numeiry in Sudan, to name only a few.

Another problem with this kind of simplistic reductionism is that when nonviolent civil insurrections do succeed in bringing democrats to power in countries previously under anti-American dictatorships, the new often-inexperienced leaders are faced with plaudits from the American right and suspicion from the European and North American left. This could lead them to wonder who their friends really are and reinforce the myth that those of the right, rather than the left, are the real champions of freedom.

The conspiratorial thinking and denigration of genuine popular movements appearing increasingly in some leftist circles serves to strengthen the hand of repressive regimes, weaken democratic forces, and bolster the argument of American neo-conservatives that only U.S. militarism and intervention – and not nonviolent struggle by oppressed peoples themselves – is capable of freeing those suffering under repressive rule.

### How Change Occurs

Successful nonviolent revolutions, like successful armed revolutions, often take years or decades to develop as part of an organic process within the body politic of a given country. There is no standardized formula for success that a foreign government or a foreign non-governmental organization could put together, since the history, culture and political alignments of each country are unique. No foreign government or NGO can recruit or mobilize the large numbers of ordinary civilians necessary to build a movement capable of effectively challenging the established political leadership, much less of toppling a government.

Trainers and workshop leaders like me and my colleagues emphasize certain strategies and tactics that have been successful elsewhere in applying pressure on governments to change their policies and undermining the support and loyalty required for governments to successfully suppress the opposition. In some cases, local activists may try to emulate some of them. However, a regime will lose power only if it tries to forcibly maintain a system that the people oppose, not because a foreign workshop leader described to a small group of opposition activists certain tactics that had been used successfully in another country at another time.

In maintaining our steadfast opposition to U.S. interventionism and exposing the hypocrisy and double-standards of the Bush administration's rhetoric in support of democracy, we must also challenge those who denigrate popular indigenous movements as creations of Washington or slander reputable non-profit groups that share their generic knowledge of nonviolent strategies and tactics with like-minded organizations overseas.

Finally, both to maintain our credibility and because it is the right thing to do, progressives should recognize the moral imperative of opposing repressive regimes regardless of their ideology or their relationship with the United States. Progressives should also embrace strategic nonviolent action in the cause of freedom as an ethical and realistic alternative to U.S. interventionism.

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