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1
Introduction

Imagine living in a country where the government suppresses opposition and censors criticism. After a particularly appalling incident, people pour out onto the streets, despite the risks, despite beatings, arrests and even killings. Day after day, the protests continue — and after a matter of days or weeks, a seeming miracle occurs. The leader of the government steps down. The people have toppled a dictator.

It sounds almost too good to be true, yet events along these lines have occurred in dozens of countries, for example the Philippines in 1986, East Germany in 1989, Indonesia in 1998, Serbia in 2000, Georgia in 2003, Lebanon in 2005 and Tunisia and Egypt in 2011. These are examples of the power of popular resistance to repressive governments. The method of action is called by various names, including nonviolent action, people power and civil resistance.

What's actually going on in these sorts of events? The methods used by challengers include rallies, marches, strikes, boycotts, sit-ins and setting up alternative schools and markets. These sorts of methods are different from conventional actions like lobbying or voting. They are also different from armed struggle. However, nonviolent action is more than methods such as rallies and strikes: it is an approach to conflict and social change.

Many people think violence is the only way to bring down a ruthless regime. This means armed engagements with police and troops and perhaps also bombings, assassinations and taking hostages. There is a long tradition of armed struggle, for example in Algeria, China, Kenya, Malaya, Uruguay and Vietnam.

Surely using weapons makes success more likely! This is the assumption many people make: nonviolent methods might work against kindly, soft-hearted opponents, but if governments really get serious, the only possible way to succeed is through counter-violence. Yet the best evidence available says this view is wrong.

Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan compiled a database of 323 challenges to regimes from 1900 to 2006. They added in secession and independence struggles. They included both armed and unarmed challenges to governments; nearly all the governments used violence against the challengers. Chenoweth and Stephan then analysed the data statistically and discovered that for struggles against repressive governments, armed struggles were far less likely to succeed.[1] Surprise: violence doesn't work all that well.

Furthermore, they analysed the struggles to see if it made any difference how repressive the government was. Their finding: it didn't make much difference at all. Nonviolent challenges succeeded just as well against highly repressive regimes as against others.

1 Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

The usual idea is that toppling a dictator must be done by beating them with superior force, the way Allied military forces defeated Nazi Germany in World War II. But this is only one way to bring down a dictator. Another is to weaken internal support for the ruler, including support from the army and police. When soldiers and police decide they won't fight any more on behalf of the government, it collapses. That is exactly what happens when people power movements succeed.

Nonviolent action is widely used in social movements, for example the labour, feminist, environmental and peace movements: workers go on strike, feminists march against domestic violence, environmentalists chain themselves to trees and peace activists blockade shipments of arms. Very few feminists or environmentalists believe armed struggle can advance their causes.

The curious thing about nonviolent action is that it is often more effective than violence even though most people assume the opposite. This got me thinking. Perhaps there are other domains, quite different from the struggles against repressive regimes or for major social change, where this same thing occurs: there is a good method available but people don't believe it is superior. This thought launched me into the investigations reported in this book.

Specifically, I decided to see if the features of effective nonviolent action could be relevant to action in other domains, for example in conversations. The other domain needed to involve some sort of disagreement or struggle. After all, nonviolent action is a method of persuasion, protest and (nonviolent) coercion, intended to challenge an

injustice. So to apply it to a conversation, it wouldn't be to just any old conversation, but to ones where some disagreement, hostility or struggle is involved — for example verbal abuse.

The first step in this process is to identify the features of effective nonviolent action. That's the aim in chapters 2–4, which provide a bit more information about nonviolent action and how to determine whether it is effective. However, this isn't the definitive case for nonviolent action. Others have provided the evidence base and relevant arguments. Here I take as a starting point that nonviolent action, if done well, can be highly effective, and want to discern what makes this possible. My goal is limited: I sought to identify "transportable" features, namely ones potentially relevant in other domains.

Chapter 5 deals with how to respond to another person's verbal abuse, for example to comments like "Can't you ever get anything right?" It turns out that the features of effective nonviolent action are quite compatible with the advice from manuals for responding to toxic language.

Chapter 6 looks at a variant of verbal abuse: defamatory and damaging material on the web. When someone posts an uncomplimentary photo of you, accompanied by a nasty comment, what can you do? There are no definitive answers. The features of effective nonviolent action provide helpful guidance.

Chapters 7 and 8 deal with two controversial issues, euthanasia and vaccination. In each case, I have taken the point of view of those seeking to challenge the orthodox position supported by governments. So these struggles

have similarities with challenges to repressive governments, but with some important differences. In neither case is armed struggle a serious option: no one is proposing to take up arms against orthodoxy; nor, with rare exceptions, is the government so repressive that it is arresting, beating or killing campaigners. These are domains where physical violence against campaigners is highly unusual or absent. My goal is to examine the relevance of features of effective nonviolent action.

The issues of euthanasia and vaccination involve competing injustices and often ignite deep passions. The point here is not to support one side or the other, but to examine the struggles and see what can be learned in light of what is known about nonviolent action. Others might draw different conclusions. That's fine. The most important thing is the journey.