The Art and Science of Civil Resistance

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Abstract

My introduction to civil resistance was accidental. In June 2006, I was a doctoral student at the University of Colorado-Boulder in the United States, where I was in the final stages of writing my dissertation in political science. The topic was a fairly typical one for a traditional security studies student like myself. I was curious about why terrorism occurs so often in democratic countries, and I had endeavored to develop a novel explanation for why this was the case and to test that explanation using quantitative analysis of large-scale observational data (my particular skill set at the time).

Earlier that summer, I received an email invitation to an academic workshop called "People Power and Pedagogy," which aspired to introduce social scientists to the literature on nonviolent or "civil" resistance—a method of conflict where unarmed civilians use a variety of methods like strikes, protests, boycotts, stay-aways to actively confront an opponent without using or threatening to use violence.

I was totally unfamiliar with the concept of civil resistance. In my four years of graduate school, the emphasis had been on developing our skills of hypothesis-testing and inquiry and, in my particular subfield, understanding violence and its uses. Nonviolent action was entirely sidelined from this conversation. In all of my time researching social movements, political power, and organized violence, I had never been exposed to scholarship that explored the pragmatic techniques of Mahatma Gandhi, the leaders of the U.S. Civil Rights movement, or other similar cases. I had not once come across a single reference to Gene Sharp, the author of the seminal three-volume text *The Politics of Nonviolent Action,* nor any related research that had come afterward. [1] Needless to say, taking nonviolent resistance seriously as a subject of inquiry was a somewhat foreign concept.

The Science of Civil Resistance

Nevertheless, I was intrigued and applied to the workshop. Hosted at Colorado College, the workshop was sponsored by the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict (ICNC), a private educational foundation dedicated to the dissemination of knowledge about the theory and practice of civil resistance. Its co-founders, Peter Ackerman and Jack Duvall, had written a book and produced a documentary series called *A Force More Powerful,* which catalogued a number of inspiring cases in which nonviolent action had succeeded in confronting truly brutal opponents (2000). Their aim at the workshop, I understood, was to present the most current academic material on this topic to try to get skeptics like me to teach about it in the classroom.

Soon after I applied to the workshop, I received an acceptance letter from ICNC followed by a FedEx package full of books and papers on civil resistance, its theoretical and strategic dimensions, and the ways people power movements had accomplished in many cases what violent rebellion could not. There were cases like Serbia, where the Otpor movement had initiated the downfall of Slobodan Milosevic; Poland, where the Solidarity movement had successfully challenged the entrenched Communist Party; the Philippines, where the People Power movement had removed Ferdinand Marcos from power; and the U.S. Civil Rights movement, where lunch counter sit-ins, boycotts, and marches had successfully desegregated dozens of cities in the Jim Crow South. These works made the claim—sometimes implicit, other times explicit— that civil resistance in these cases was as effective or even more effective than armed struggle in achieving major political concessions.

Although I did find the various cases of successful civil resistance interesting, I thought they were exceptional. For every case like Serbia 2000, Poland 1989, or the Philippines 1986, I could recall a case like Tiananmen Square, Hungary 1956, or Burma 1988. After all, even Mahatma Gandhi's dubious victory in expelling the British from India had ushered in a period of violent turmoil, punctuated by India's bloody partition with Pakistan. In essence, my concern was that scholars arguing that nonviolent resistance was more successful than violent resistance were essentially selecting on the dependent variable—examining primarily cases of success rather than cases of failure—and therefore were drawing fallacious inferences from them about their effectiveness.

Even more persistent was my suspicion that successful cases could be explained by other factors—weak states incapable of suppressing unarmed actors, international actors willing to patronize them, moderately democratic institutions that accommodated them, social, economic, or demographic characteristics that predisposed some populations to embrace nonviolent action where others would turn to violence, or plain old government incompetence. As such, my view was

that those who argued that nonviolent resistance was effective must take such factors into account systematically.

I voiced these concerns repeatedly throughout the workshop and expressed my desire for more and better data on the phenomenon. Maria Stephan, then academic outreach coordinator for ICNC, was receptive to my concerns but was also eager to challenge me: "Well, how would we know if civil resistance was as effective as armed struggle? How would one develop a study that tested your hypotheses about structural factors explaining the outcomes?" Maria had just completed her own doctoral thesis on the topic of "extending the nonviolent battlefield," or how nonviolent self-determination movements could solicit third-party support to increase their leverage (2005).

In response, I developed what I thought would be a reasonable research design that could assess—systematically and empirically—both the relative rates of success of nonviolent and violent mass movements as well as the underlying causes for these successes, while controlling for a variety of other factors that might influence campaign outcomes. The study, I ventured, would have to be much broader in scope that the limited number of cases examined by much extant literature on nonviolent resistance. It would have to include all known cases—both successes and failures—rather than making inferences from a relatively small number of cases. It would have to feature wide geographic and temporal scope so as to increase the number of observations in a way that would provide more statistical power to the study. Given Maria's recent fieldwork, familiarity with different cases, and vast knowledge of the canonical literature, we decided to combine our skill sets and conduct a study on whether it was indeed the case that nonviolent resistance was a relatively effective form of political struggle. Maria and I agreed that if it turned out that civil resistance was not very effective, then we had better find that out sooner rather than later.

My own reservations about the effectiveness of nonviolent action directed me to take a particularly skeptical approach to the data collection and analysis, applying a "hard test" to nonviolent action wherever possible. This is reflected somewhat in the sample population itself. I decided we would only include cases where the insurgents were seeking the removal of the incumbent regime, territorial self-determination, or the expulsion of a foreign military occupation—I saw these as "maximalist" goals that fundamentally altered the shape of the state and would therefore be more difficult to achieve. Data coverage would be global and cover the time period 1900-2006. Whether it was nonviolent or violent, we would only code a case as "successful" if it achieved the full removal of the incumbent leader, de jure and de facto secession, or the expulsion of a foreign military. The campaign had to achieved this objective within a year of its peak, and it had to have had a discernable impact on this outcome. Moreover,

we could collect data on a variety of features of the campaign's structural environment—including features of the regime, socio-economic trends, ethno-linguistic characteristics of the population, international support for the campaign or the regime, region, and time period—and we would account for these factors when identifying the correlates of success.

To obtain the cases of violent insurgency, we included cases of intrastate conflict from the Correlates of War dataset, which features cases of organized armed actors using violence against one another that results in at least 1,000 battle deaths. I then turned to collecting data on analogous nonviolent campaigns. Drawing on thousands of source materials—including encyclopedias, bibliographies, case studies, historical documents, news reports, and other scholars' published lists of popular revolutions—I assembled a list of cases of nonviolent mass mobilization featuring at least 1,000 observed participants seeking maximalist goals from 1900-2006. I circulated this list to experts of nonviolent action—including some of ICNC's staff and academic advisors, as well as subject experts like Doug Bond—to ask for any additions and to get their sense of whether we had properly characterized the outcomes of these campaigns (e.g. successes, partial successes, or failures). At the end of this often tedious process, we had produced the Nonviolent and Violent Campaigns and Outcomes (NAVCO) data set (version 1.0)—the first dataset of 323 maximalist campaigns over 106 years with global coverage.

Then I ran the numbers, and I was shocked. More than 50% of the nonviolent campaigns succeeded whereas about 26% of the violent ones did. Moreover, when I ran a variety of regression models that included features of the regime as control variables, I could find no systematic statistical association between structural features of the country and the outcomes of the campaigns. Generally speaking, nonviolent campaigns were succeeding more often than violent campaigns *despite* a variety of structural factors that we typically associate with predetermining such outcomes. Other studies have since reached similar conclusions (Johnstad 2010).

Maria and I published our results in two phases (Stephan and Chenoweth 2008; Chenoweth and Stephan 2011). Our book, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*, hit the shelves during the height of the so-called Arab Spring, a series of upheavals that leant greater urgency to the need for even more systematic, empirical research on the topic. ICNC gave me a five-year contract to further develop the NAVCO Data Project to provide greater detail on the characteristics and tactics of different campaigns, resulting in the publication of the NAVCO 2.0 data set (Chenoweth and Lewis 2013). The NAVCO 2.0 data set contains annual data on a variety of organizational characteristics of 250 nonviolent and violent campaigns from 1946-2006. Additionally, ICNC's support will allow me to release NAVCO 3.0, which contains data on the tactical sequences of nonviolent and violent campaigns

in 30 countries from 1987-2012, in late 2015. At this point, the release of the NAVCO data set has catalyzed a number of new studies on civil resistance (see Chenoweth and Cunningham 2013; Shock 2013; Stoddard 2013).

It would be wholly inaccurate to claim that the NAVCO Data Project project was the first to apply scientific principles to the study of civil resistance, nor would it be accurate to claim that the quantitative approach is superior to more qualitative approaches. Indeed, decades of scholarship on the topic had produced volumes of high-quality research (see Carter, et al., 2006 for a compilation), and many more were pursuing compelling projects at the same time Maria and I were conducting our study (e.g. Ackerman and Kruegler 1994; King 2007; Lakey 2012; Martin 2007; Mattaini 2013; Nepstad 2011; Roberts and Ash 2010; Schock 2003; Schock 2005; Sharp 2005; Zunes, et al 1999). It is from these careful and persuasive works that Maria and I drew our main insights and—indeed—many of the cases in our analysis. However, our study devotes considerable attention to the potential reservations of the most skeptical reader—the person who believes that violence is effective, who sees nonviolent resistance as hopelessly naïve, or who sees advocates of nonviolent action as people who fundamentally believe that only nonviolent action is morally justifiable and cherry-pick examples from history to make this point.

The way we constructed our study—as observers who are interested in the strategic utility of nonviolent action compared with armed struggle, regardless of the ethical dimensions at play—and the results that we obtained—dealt head-on with these critiques and showed them to be groundless. The skeptical, scientific approach seems to have resonated within many people and created acceptance of nonviolent resistance as a viable method of political change, even among many people who ordinarily would not take it seriously (Howes 2013).

Regardless, I find it unsatisfying to suggest that the purely empirical approach to nonviolent action is somehow inherently superior to practically-oriented or even principled approaches. This is partially because in practice, it appears that civil resistance is as much an art as it is a science.

The Art of Civil Resistance

In our qualitative analysis of what makes nonviolent campaigns succeed or fail, Maria and I identified a few essential tasks that nonviolent movements must achieve. These observations are based on our comparative case studies of nonviolent campaigns in Iran, the Palestinian Territories, the Philippines, and Burma.

The first essential task is to develop an alternative vision of the future that has widespread appeal among the population. Although this may seem like an obvious step in the development of any civil resistance campaign, the degree to which movements are able to achieve this unified vision greatly influences the second essential task—whether the movement can maximize the participation of a broad-based following that cuts across social cleavages. Mass participation across diverse sectors of society is a key determinant of whether a campaign succeeds (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011).

Mass participation allows the movement to achieve another essential task—provoking defections among regime elites. Erstwhile regime functionaries are much more likely to abandon the power holder when it appears that massive numbers of civilians support his ouster. When economic and business elites, media figures, intelligence officials, civilian bureaucrats, security forces, and other pillars of society withdraw their support from the power holder, even the most diabolical dictator cannot hold onto power.

At the same time, nonviolent movements must minimize participants' exposure to repression, sometimes in the face of considerable brutality by the regime (Summy 1994; Martin 2007). One way to do this is to engage in education, training, and preparation so that participants are able to maintain nonviolent discipline in the face of the violence directed against them. Another way is to shift between methods of concentration (where people congregate in a particular space, as with a public protest) and methods if dispersion (where people stay away from public spaces, as with a stay-at-home demonstration) (Schock 2005; Burrowes 1996).

Moreover, movements actually have to develop techniques to maintain resilience during times of great confusion, uncertainty, and adversity—while maintaining realistic expectations about what the movement can achieve and when. The average nonviolent campaign, for example, lasted for about three years. This means that nonviolent movements must anticipate a multi-year campaign—and prepare for this accordingly.

The six tasks are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Six Essential Tasks of Nonviolent Movements

1. Develop an alternate vision of the future with widespread appeal
2. Maximize diverse participation
3. Provoke defections
4. Minimize risk of repression
5. Shift between methods of concentration and dispersion
6. Anticipate and prepare to wage a multi-year campaign

I would classify these six elements as "more art than science" because it is quite difficult to ascertain exactly why some campaigns are able to achieve them while others do not. Previous analysis suggests that it is not necessarily structural or environmental conditions—like political culture, regime type, demographics, or world region—that that predetermine which movements achieve these tasks (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011).

Although leadership may play a key role, current scholarship does not reveal which types of leadership models are most likely to animate nonviolent movements. Conventional wisdom suggests that a single charismatic leader is required to animate nonviolent movements, but we know that some movements, like the Otpor movement in Serbia, achieve these essential tasks without a highly concentrated or hierarchical leadership steering events in a predetermined sequence. Because such characteristics are so context-specific and subjective, moreover, it is difficult to imagine systematic empirical studies that can identify common features across movement leadership (or the lack thereof).

For the time being, it appears that the achievement of these essential tasks are better explained by phenomenal skill and creativity on the part of activists, as well as a widespread belief within society that the movement's goals are righteous, moral, and fair. This is not to say that using nonviolent action is always justified. It is, after all, a sort of "weapon" in a loose sense. As a consequence, I believe it is worth returning to the fundamental question of when the use of nonviolent action is legitimate—an avenue of further inquiry that I hope many scholars, artists, and citizens with will pursue.

Conclusion

The past ten years of scholarship on civil resistance has vindicated many advocates of nonviolent resistance. Some, as with Sharp (1973, 2005), Ackerman and Krusgler (1994), and Ackerman and Duvall (2000), and Zunes, et al (1999) had long argued that nonviolent resistance was superior on strategic grounds. Others have long argued that nonviolent action made sense not only morally but also strategically. Given recent findings—that nonviolent action as a category of contention is more effective by far than violence—few of these advocates remain open to criticisms of naiveté. Instead, as Dustin Howes notes, it appears that advocates of violence are the ones who are tragically naïve (2013). Although nonviolent resistance does not always succeed, it appears to be more effective than violent alternatives, and it is certainly more effective than detractors of nonviolence would have us believe.

Despite recent advances in empirical scholarship, however, it is crucial to note that while there are consistent patterns among successful nonviolent campaigns, there is simply no universal formula for creating a viable or effective civil resistance movement. In my mind, this is fortunate. We know considerably more about *why* civil resistance works than we did a decade ago. Yet the inability to identify clear patterns in *how* civil resistance works protects its practitioners from real manipulation by outside actors. It also prevents small, cynical minorities from exploiting such knowledge to manufacture a movement that has no widespread backing. In other words, the lack of a universal formula ensures that nonviolent movements will remain homegrown, grassroots movements, despite many authoritarian governments' attempts to claim otherwise. Despite my view that recent empirical advances have bolstered the case made by those who champion nonviolent action both on strategic and principled grounds, I therefore take comfort in knowing that the outcomes of these campaigns will be determined not by numbers, charts, and formulas, but rather by moral inspiration, human creativity, and shared conviction.

Endnote

(1) Despite my training in Boulder, CO, I had not exposed myself to the august legacy of scholar-activists like Kenneth and Elise Boulding.

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