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Lessons from the Orange Revolution

John Dear | Jul. 22, 2008 On the Road to Peace

Imagine this - a rigged national election. The popular candidate garnered more votes and precincts but still did not win. Now imagine the population refusing to sit back, to throw up their collective hands, to give in to apathy. Such is the story of the "Orange Revolution," the 2004 presidential election in the Ukraine, a tale with lessons for us.

The Ukrainian people foresaw the worst and when it happened, they nonviolently obstructed the functioning of the government until justice was done. Their story can teach us a thing or two.

Things began as President Leonid Kuchma, widely regarded as corrupt, was winding down his last term. His heir apparent, championed by the president and more corrupt yet, was Viktor Yanukovych. Stealthy plans were afoot, by hook or crook, to get Yanukovych elected. And when a journalist exposed the foul play, he turned up dead. Evidence linked the killing to the government, to the president himself.

The opposition candidate was Viktor Yushchenko, a Bill Clinton-like figure widely supported because of his perceived sincerity. Put at great disadvantage, denied air time and media coverage, he nonetheless led widely in the polls and attracted huge crowds.

Then, some eight weeks before the election, while dining with aides, he took ill and nearly died. The diagnosis was poison. It left him disfigured and with lingering pain. But he battled back and made a few public appearances.

It was, charged the government, a hoax. And not too long after, their own candidate staged an assault against himself, fake injuries and all, and tried to lay it at the feet of Yuschchenko.

But support for Yuschchenko swelled. Nightly he appeared at massive rallies with cheering crowds and popular rock bands. The media blackout had little effect. People flocked from the four corners to see him in person. And on election day, October 31, 2004, Yushchenko clearly won by a large margin.

On second thought, not so, said the Central Election Commission. They announced that the votes were too close to call, and a "second round" election date was set for November 21.

Now young people across the country started organizing. The Youth Resistance movement staged clever nonviolent protests. For example, they placed televisions in public places, their screens painted with the words "Big Lies," then pummeled them with hammers. The gesture caught the imagination of the nation.

As the second election approached, the government stepped up pressure against anyone who would vote for Yushchenko. Vote for him, and you just might lose your job. Bosses were dispatched to examine workers' ballots. But Yushchenko won again, by a margin of 11 percent. Then, late that night, the government came out with a surprise announcement - they had just discovered 1.2 million votes for their man. Yanukovych rather than Yushchenko was declared the winner.

Here's when everyone should have given up in despair. But the story doesn't end there. Yushchenko called for protests and all over Kyiv, Ukraine's capital, students poured into the central plaza. The nights crackled with cold rain and snow, yet untold thousands camped out and took the government on. They had become fed up with the oligarchs, the censored media. They had voted for change, and the power holders barred it. The people decided then to enforce their will. Through the bitter cold and snow, they stood their ground, blockaded official buildings and demanded another election.

For the next 17 days, demonstrators controlled Kyiv in what has become known as "the Orange Revolution" because of the color used by the Yushchenko campaign.

They held marches and concerts and around-the-clock blockades. They chanted, "Together we are many, we cannot be defeated." And they chanted, "Shame! Shame! Shame!" As for Yushchenko, he encouraged the protest on two conditions - that it include the participation of as wide a sampling of the population as possible, and that the protest remain utterly peaceful. "One person's life," he affirmed, "is worth more than my presidency."

As for Yanukovych, his handlers said, "We're just doing what President Bush did to become president."

As the days lengthened out, fears grew of military retaliation. The government drew up plans for a crackdown, and they did not rule out firing on the crowds. The police balked and said they wouldn't without a direct, signed order from President Kuchma, a prospect he himself balked at.

The military, then, received orders to at least take back the government buildings, which they made a pretense of doing, barely going through the motions. The people had won over the military and the police.

Meanwhile, Yushchenko took the matter to the Supreme Court, presenting strong evidence that the election was rigged. The Supreme Court agreed, ordered a new election for December 26, and at last, on the third try, Yushchenko was elected president. "If the people didn't go into the streets," Yushchenko said, "we wouldn't have won. The judges only did this because of the crowds."

"The Orange Revolution" is chronicled now on a superb DVD film. I urge you to get a copy and watch and discuss it with your church and peace groups.

Sad to say, the story doesn't end altogether well. Yushchenko never lived up to the glory of those days. Like Corazon Aquino of the Philippines or Luiz Lula da Silva of Brazil, he succumbed to internal squabbles and his early promise faded. The Ukranian people, however, are another matter altogether. They're a model for the whole world, especially for those of us who have deep apprehensions about a falsified U.S. election come November.

And what do the Ukranians teach us? To take a public stand for democracy, justice, peace. To resist our government's lies, corruption and wars. To resist with meticulous nonviolence. To say "No" to the manipulation of the election process. To get organized and keep at it - before, during and after the election. To do it for a new world without war, poverty, nuclear weapons or global warming. For the rest of our days.

We can never again assume a world of peace, justice, democracy and equality. The days have overtaken us when we must demand it. Positive social change only comes through steadfast nonviolent struggle. And such struggle is the key to our humanity, to the spiritual life.

If we want a new society that serves the poor, protects the earth, abolishes weapons and establishes justice, we'll have to refuse to walk away until we get what we want. Such was the contagious spirit of our heroic Ukrainian sisters and brothers. How fortunate for us if we catch it.

John's autobiography, A Persistent Peace (with a foreword by Martin Sheen), will be published by Loyola Press on August 1 and can be ordered now at **www.persistentpeace.com** **[1]**. The DVD "The Orange Revolution" can be ordered through **www.orangerevolutionmovie.com** **[2]**. See also: **www.johndear.org** **[3]**.

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