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Egyptian revolution impels us toward nonviolence

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

The whole world rejoiced Friday when Hosni Mubarak stepped as down as Egyptian president after eighteen days of massive protest throughout the country. It was thrilling to see nonviolent "People Power" topple a dictatorship which only four weeks ago seemed impenetrable.

I thanked God when I heard the news because I see the Egyptian revolution as the work of God. From Moses to Martin Luther King, Jr. and the thousands of nonviolent movements in between, the God of peace is always trying to liberate us, push us to confront tyranny, and give us nonviolent justice and peace.

I'm sad yet grateful for the hundreds who died and the thousands who suffered for this political and spiritual breakthrough.

I hope and pray that Egypt does not start a new military dictatorship; that all political prisoners will be freed; that the billions Mubarak stole will be returned to feed, house and heal the poor; that the unjust 1972 emergency laws and blockade of Gaza will be lifted; and that free elections will be held and freedom of the press allowed.

If Egypt refuses all U.S. military aid, it would truly be free from slavery to the Pentagon and could embark on a new road to peace with justice.

Yes, the Egyptian people have inspired the world. They tell us that dictatorship, tyranny, and empire do not last forever. They can be toppled. Breakthroughs toward greater nonviolent democracy, justice and peace can happen if ordinary people demand it, struggle for it, and give their lives for it.

Moreover, the Egyptians remind us that we have a power to bring true social change without the use of violence. As Gandhi and Dr. King and the hundreds of movements in the last fifty years have shown, active nonviolence works. When ordinary people organize themselves, mobilize their energies, shake off their fear and give their lives, nonviolent change becomes unstoppable.

85 autocracies have fallen in the last few decades; about half of them have moved toward democracy.

I always see these nonviolent revolutions as God's doing. This week, I've been preaching about the Sermon on the Mount at the little parish where I serve on the Mexican border.

It's always astonishing to hear Jesus' fifth antithesis -- "Offer no violent resistance to one who does evil?" -- and to ponder the examples of creative nonviolent resistance he teaches (Mt. 5:38-45).

Jesus teaches and practices nonviolent revolution, and gave his life in that campaign to resist imperial injustice and welcome God's reign. He knew more than any of us that pursuing the truth of justice and peace through nonviolent love was God's will.

"Nonviolent people power operates on the assumption that systems of violence and injustice are not absolute and implacable," Ken Butigan, noted teacher of nonviolence, wrote on Friday at www.wagingnonviolence.org:

Rather, they are kept in place by pillars of support. These props include the police and army; the media; economic forces; cultural and ideological structures; and the general population. The job of a nonviolent resistance movement is to remove this support. Key to this process is alerting, educating, and mobilizing a growing number of people throughout the nation or society to withdraw their consent -- and to overcome their fear of the consequences for doing so.

By staying this challenging course over the past three weeks -- in the face of jailings, torture, organized thugs, demonization by state media, as well as a series of government half-measures designed to prevent real change -- the Egyptian pro-democracy movement pulled down these pillars of citizen consent, economic viability, a number of elites, and even state media. As each of these supports gave way, the Mubarak presidency, despite its hubris and long-time projection of invincibility, was rendered powerless.

The crowds in Tahrir Square showed us how the powers-that-be become powerless because of the power of ordinary people. I hope this lesson inspires people around the world to study the methodology of nonviolent social change, for the world needs more nonviolent revolutions -- in Colombia, Saudi Arabia, Zimbabwe, Burma, Pakistan, Israel, England, China, India, Pakistan, Mexico, Vatican City, and, yes, right here in the U.S.

Our own state media seems to think this mass protest sprung up overnight, out of the blue. They cannot grasp how much the Egyptian people have been suffering, or how well organized the movement was. Behind the scenes hundreds of people helped bring about these demonstrations. At pivotal moments, some people took bold stands at great personal risk which then inspired countless others.

The Egyptian movement challenges us here in the U.S. not to be discouraged but to keep on organizing, speaking out and working for change. If we pursue this struggle, one day our nonviolence will win out, for God wants to liberate us too -- from war, nuclear weapons, corporate greed, hunger, homelessness, militarism and environmental destruction.

We have more than enough money not only to feed the world, but to educate everyone on the planet in nonviolence as a way of life. We could easily create a global culture of peace if we wanted to.

I found it mind-boggling to hear President Obama praise "nonviolence" in his Feb. 11 press conference after Mubarak's resignation.

"Egyptians have inspired us," Obama said, "and they've done so by putting the lie to the idea that justice is best gained by violence. For Egypt, it was the moral force of nonviolence, not terrorism, not mindless killing, but nonviolence, moral force, that bent the arc of history toward justice."

If the president can applaud the power of nonviolence in the Egyptian revolution, why does he refuse to apply it to our own nation's policies? Why do we as Americans tolerate our government's violence, and refuse to accept the power, the moral force, of nonviolence?

According to his own statement, justice for September 11th -- or in Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan -- cannot be gained by violence, by the terrorism of our drones or by our troops. Justice is gained by active nonviolence, by moral force alone.

I want to tell Obama and our military leaders to turn from imperial violence -- which supports the likes of Mubarak and bombs the world's children -- to the wisdom and truth of nonviolence, to moral force. That's what authentic democracy requires.

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But I know that the only way Obama and his administration can hear this truth is if we speak together as a grassroots movement for change. As Egypt reminds us, change comes from the bottom up. We ordinary people are the ones with the real power to bring true lasting change.

I spoke about these things last week at the Center for Nonviolence and Peace Studies at the University of Rhode Island.

The Center, founded by Dr. Bernard Lafayette, one of Dr. King's lieutenants, is currently directed by Dr. Paul Bueno de Mesquita. There they teach the methodology of nonviolent resistance to confront systems of injustice, war and empire through social movements. They study the Civil Rights Movement and other nonviolent revolutions such as those which brought down the Berlin Wall and apartheid.

I watched with wonder as wide-eyed young students in one class discussed the way of active nonviolence and felt new hope. They gave me hope that one day more and more people in our own country will wake up and demand an end to our wars, corporate greed, nuclear weapons, executions, unjust healthcare and school systems and environmental destruction.

This is precisely the work that Martin Luther King, Jr. was engaged in during his last few months, as he tried to build a nonviolent people power movement, the Poor People's Campaign, to bring thousands of disenfranchised people to Washington, D.C., to shut down our government until it ended the Vietnam War and abolished poverty and hunger.

"These are revolutionary times," Dr. King said then. "All over the globe people are revolting against old systems of exploitation and oppression and out of the wombs of a frail world, new systems of justice and

equality are being born. The shirtless and barefoot people of the land are rising up as never before. Our only hope today lies in our ability to recapture the revolutionary spirit and go out into a sometimes hostile world declaring eternal hostility to poverty, racism and militarism. With this powerful commitment we shall boldly challenge the status quo and unjust mores.?

We rejoice with the Egyptian people, and give thanks for them, for Jesus, for Dr. King and for all who have given their lives in nonviolent revolution.

May we catch their Spirit and do what we can to hasten even greater breakthroughs for justice and peace.

To hear a new podcast interview with John Dear, go to www.jesusradicals.com. This week, John travels to the Middle East to give a keynote speech at the annual Sabeel Conference in Bethlehem, Palestine/Israel (see: www.sabeel.org). His latest book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Orbis), and other recent books, *A Persistent Peace* and *Put Down Your Sword*, as well as Patricia Normile's *John Dear On Peace*, are available from www.amazon.com. To contribute to Catholic Relief Services' Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund, go to: <http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn>. For further information, or to schedule a lecture or retreat, visit: www.johndear.org.

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