

Egypt's people show that nonviolence works

Colman McCarthy | Mar. 14, 2011



Thousands of Egyptians wave their national flag after Friday prayer in Cairo's Tahrir Square Feb. 25. (AFP/Khaled Desouki)

To the legions of skeptics who dismiss nonviolent conflict resolution as an admirable ideal but pathetically useless in the real world where might makes right, now comes a refutation: Egypt and Tunisia.

The throngs who massed in Cairo's Tahrir Square for 18 days, stitched together like thread that couldn't be cut, had no weapons of steel -- only superior ones, weapons of willpower. It was close to laughable that the suddenly enfeebled dictator, Hosni Mubarak, bunkered with a giant arsenal of U.S.-supplied planes, tanks, bombs and bullets, could apply a counterforce of only a gang of camel- and horse-riding thugs wielding machetes and sticks at fleeing demonstrators who quickly reassembled more empowered than before.

The fall of Mubarak followed a pattern described by Gene Sharp, America's leading theoretician of nonviolent force, who wrote in *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*:

?A ruler's power is ultimately dependent on support from the people he would rule. His moral authority, economic resources, transport system, government bureaucracy, army and police ... rest finally upon the cooperation and assistance of other people. If there is general conformity, the ruler is powerful. But people do not always do what their rulers would like them to do. ... When this happens, the man who had been ruler becomes simply another man, and his power dissolves.?

The routing of Mubarak is anything but the exception. In the past 25 years, one dictatorial government after another has been brought down by citizens who chose not to fight fire with fire but to fight it with water -- the water of nonviolent protests.

The deposed regimes include the Philippines (1986), Chile (1988), Poland (1989), Czechoslovakia (1989), South Africa (1994), Yugoslavia (2001) and Georgia (2003).

Twenty-five years ago anyone predicting that ruthless governments, adept at torture and abductions, could be driven from power by nonviolent force would be ridiculed as hopelessly naïve. Yet it happened, as it has now in Egypt and Tunisia.

After the dumping of Mubarak, the Egyptian protestors were hailed by Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, both of whom, bet-hedgers, held back meaningful support of the overthrow while it progressed.

Worse, no apologies were given to the Egyptian people for the 30 years that the United States, as an exporter of oppression, propped up the vile Mubarak with gobs of cash and the latest fighter planes off the production lines of the Lockheed Martins and Northrop Grummans. One administration after another -- Reagan, first Bush, Clinton, second Bush, Obama -- cocked a friendly ear to the Egyptian dictator's demands, all the while not niggling about his ruthlessness.

The people of Egypt, long victimized by crushing poverty and human rights abuses, are hardly the only ones who have paid the ugly and high price of America's foreign alliances. The list of coddled tyrants runs deep: Suharto, Pinochet, Somoza, Ríos Montt, Marcos, Mobutu, Noriega, Papadopoulos, Banzer, the Duvaliers, Trujillo and Pahlevi, to name a few. U.S. support of these serial despots, rarely pricked with restraint, is based on "defending America's vital interests." Decoded, this means defending the nation's vital privileges.

Which is the next government to fall? Pick your leader -- king, general, colonel, dictator, ayatollah, crown prince, president, shah, warlord, strongman -- and place your bets in the office pool. Pick, too, the methods of the downfall: strikes, marches, sit-ins, boycotts, civil disobedience, fasts, war- tax refusal, noncooperation, the toughness of patience.

Might it happen in the United States, run by a government that Martin Luther King Jr., on April 4, 1967, called the world's "greatest purveyor of violence." Six months after, on Oct. 21, 1967, a massive antiwar demonstration gathered at the Pentagon, with Defense Secretary Robert McNamara looking on from his office. Years later he recalled that stormy day: "I could not help but think that had the protesters been more disciplined -- Gandhi-like -- they could have achieved their objective of shutting us down."

Right would have made might.

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