



Ruthless regimes not impervious to civil resistance: A reply to Maged Mandour

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Maged Mandour’s article on openDemocracy, “[Beyond Civil Resistance: The Case of Syria](#)”, argues that civil resistance has been marginalized in the Syrian insurrection because it doesn’t work against “ruthless” regimes. But history doesn’t support that conclusion.

The outcome of a nonviolent insurrection against an autocratic regime is determined by any number of factors, such as its ability to mobilize a critical mass of the population, the overall strategy and skillful sequencing of tactics, the effectiveness in targeting the regime’s pillars of support, and the ability to cause divisions within the ruling elite and to encourage defections within security services. But as Drs. Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan note in their book, “[Why Civil Resistance Works](#)” (Columbia University Press, 2011), these dynamic actions are effective in part because they avert or minimize the effects of ruthless force by an oppressor.

Indeed, history is replete with examples of ruthless governments - such as apartheid South Africa, Suharto’s Indonesia and Pinochet’s Chile which, like the regime in Syria, demonstrated their willingness and ability to massacre opponents by the thousands - which have been ousted by movements using civil resistance as the driving vector of their struggle. There are many other cases, including the Philippines, East Germany, and Tunisia, in which dictators have ordered their troops to massacre protesters by the thousands yet - unlike in Syria - the troops defied their commands. There is little systematic evidence to suggest that “ruthlessness” is, in and of itself, a critical variable.

Chenoweth and Stephan cite powerful evidence to the contrary, based on their quantitative analysis of tactical actions and ultimate results by 323 nonviolent and violent insurrections between 1900 and 2006, [noting that](#) “in the face of regime crackdowns, nonviolent campaigns are more than six times likelier to achieve full success than violent campaigns that also faced regime repression.”

Mandour does suggest that dismantling a regime’s ideological base promotes civil resistance, and indeed unarmed civilian based movements are generally more effective at undermining an autocratic regime’s ideological credibility, through the conscientization and mobilization of broad segments of society necessary to forge a successful movement. This is a common theme in most of the scholarly literature of civil insurrections. George Lakey, for example, in his classic [Manifesto for a Nonviolent Revolution](#) and subsequent [writings](#), emphasizes the need for cultural preparation and organization-building prior to confrontation.

The failure of the nonviolent phase of the Syrian uprising was not in its choice of nonviolent resistance, as if it that were at an intrinsic disadvantage against violent repression, but rather in its rush to confrontation with a brutal state apparatus prior to the necessary steps of broadening citizen participation. Sometimes, the state can be so weak (Georgia as in 2003) or the resistance so massive (Egypt in 2011), that a regime can collapse prior to sufficient ideological transformation, opening the door to a democratic and progressive transition, but the subdued, disparate character of Syrian civil society and the opposition’s lack of unified strategic leadership made that unlikely.

Ironically, because nonviolent struggles are usually shorter and more successful than armed struggles, they can bring down a regime prior to a broader ideational transformation among the population as a whole. If the new system offers at least some semblance of liberal democracy, however, it may provide enough political space for the belated strengthening of civil society institutions capable of allowing a more systemic transformation to proceed. This is most evident in parts of Latin America, where two decades of domination by elite-dominated center-right but mostly democratic governments following the downfall of military dictatorships enabled the re-emergence of strengthened labor unions, the progressive church, student groups, human rights organizations, women's and indigenous groups, which paved the way for the election of a series of popular, representative governments.

The fragmentation of the Syrian nonviolent resistance which Mandour cites and which began in late 2011 was greatly exacerbated by the rise of armed opposition groups. Eventually hundreds of militias were vying for control, many of which have insisted that they alone are the true vanguard of the revolution. By contrast, the numbers of participants and the rate of defections in the security forces was far greater during the predominantly nonviolent phase. Armed struggle, with its martial values and military hierarchy, tends to bring to the fore autocratic tendencies and also offers a much more legible target to regime forces. This contrasts with nonviolent movements, which recognize that in order to effectively mobilize the people, they need to represent a broad cross-section of civil society in their ranks. Though armed revolutionary groups may provide greater ideological strength, they run the risks - as seen in any number of victorious Marxist-Leninist revolutions - of turning into new dictatorships upon coming to power.

Another pitfall of ideologically driven revolutions is that internal disagreements that could be resolved peaceably in non-militarized coalitions may lead to bloody factional fighting. In some countries, like Algeria and Guinea-Bissau, the more progressive elements of the revolutionary leadership fell victim to military coups not long after armed movements ousted European colonialists. Other victorious armed anti-imperialist struggles, like those in Angola and Mozambique, fell into bloody civil wars. Other armed anti-colonial struggles - such as that of Kenya - proved to be as accommodating to neo-colonial economic structures as the European-led elite-driven transitions of a number of other African countries.

The ideological heterodoxy of most nonviolent struggles not only minimizes the risks of new forms of authoritarianism, it can still be effective in undermining the ideological foundations of the regime. As long as the opposition can plausibly offer a more democratic, just, and transparent order - even when all sectors cannot agree on the details - it can be enough to invite resistance to the status quo. Indeed, if the movement is clearly open to input from the population, it should make participation more attractive. Furthermore, the waging of a civil insurrection itself, even in its early stages, can undermine the ideological foundations of the regime. For example, in forcing Poland's Communist government to recognize it as an independent trade union in 1980, Solidarity helped undermine the myth that Poland was a "workers' state," since a true workers' state would not need an independent trade union.

Furthermore, armed resistance can reinforce an autocratic government's ideological rationale for the need of a strong state to provide "national security," "law and order," and "defense against terrorism." By contrast, repression against nonviolent movements often backfires as it can unmask the security rationale as simply a means of maintaining an elite's hold on power.

One of the enduring and often misleading terms that can obscure the powerful record of civil resistance used by nonviolent movements is the innocent but promiscuous use of the word "revolution". More than a century ago, it carried the assumption that sudden or decisive political change driven by a forceful opposition involved popular unrest, street-fighting, barricades and bonfires, if not actual warfare. Today, the mind's scenery of revolution is still almost indelibly violent. But romanticizing violent revolutions, however often undertaken on behalf of the people, is increasingly questionable as a matter of history, and even less so in light of the latest wave of movements - from Bulgaria to Cambodia, and from West Papua to Western Sahara, almost all of which have chosen civil resistance as their means of conflict. Their rise has not been stopped by ruthless force, and their fate will almost surely be decided by an equation of force and strategy in which arms are only infrequently the pivotal factor.