Can Non-Violent Resistance Be an Effective Strategy for Challenging State Power?

Under What Circumstances and Why Might Non-Violent Resistance Be an Effective Strategy for Challenging State Power?

The so-called Arab Uprisings that took place across the Middle East and North Africa in 2011 demonstrate the effectiveness of non-violent resistance movements for challenging state power. Particularly, the revolutions that took place in these various countries show the importance of people power and its ability to undermine sources of state power and bring about change. This paper analyses the circumstances under which and reasons why, non-violent resistance has proven to be an effective strategy for challenging state power and argues that non-violent or civil resistance movements represent an effective strategy due to their ability to harness the power of varied representation in order to maximise points of leverage associated with the various sources of state power. Section one provides an overview of key definitions and a theoretical review of the ideas of power and resistance. Section two identifies examples in which non-violent resistance has challenged state power, focussing on the significance of mass mobilisation and varied representation. Section three examines how non-violent movements are able to harness the power of varied representation in order to maximise points of leverage associated with the military and the economy. Finally, section four concludes by explicitly summarizing why non-violent approaches represent an effective strategy under certain circumstances.

There exists an enormous variety of definitions for non-violent or civil resistance. It would be impossible to list them all within the scope of this essay. However, for the purposes of the argument, this paper defines non-violent resistance as:

a technique of socio-political action by which a population can restrict and sever the sources of power of their rulers or other oppressors and mobilise their own power potential into effective power[1]

It is important to acknowledge the ubiquitous nature of the term 'effective'. For this paper, effective will be understood as having an effect on the state (be it positive or negative) rather than being successful.

A key reason for the disagreement over the significance, or so-called 'effectiveness', of non-violent resistance as a strategy for challenging state hegemony relates to the contrasting definitions that different analysts have applied to notions of power and resistance. Better understanding of the relationship between power and resistance is important as it sheds light on how the individuals who organise non-violent resistance movements comprehend the type of power they are up against. Gramsci proposed the idea of modified structuralism; the idea of hegemony as capturing both structural forms of power and the ways these structures lodge themselves in people's imaginations[2]. He argues that power is not just something you can take, but that society in fact lends itself to a certain way of thinking – that sustained coercion from the state can only take place under the guise of voluntary acceptance[3]. Foucault built on the ideas of Gramsci and argued as well that power is not just a visible manifestation of the state but also society itself. Foucault sees power as an everyday phenomenon, diffused and embodied in discourse, knowledge, and 'regimes of truth'[4]. Some of his work moves away from a state-centric approach, which sees power as an instrument of coercion, towards an understanding of power as accepted forms of knowledge, without agency or

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structure[5]. Therefore, if we are to understand resistance movements as mirroring the institutions of power they seek to oppose, and understand power as ubiquitous and all encompassing[6], then in order to have an effect on the state, resistance movements must also be universal and representative of a population. In other words, since power is "spread throughout society and not localised in any particular place, the struggle against power must also be diffuse"[7]. Individuals need to rethink power and its sources in any given society or polity. Although power is often interpreted as only a state's military or economic capacity, this paper argues that the power of the state actually depends on the extent of consent from the civilian population, consent that can be withdrawn and reassigned to more legitimate or compelling parties at any time[8]. Here, the advantage of non-violent or civil resistance movements is that they are highly participatory and thus encourage the active participation of large numbers within a society.

In seeking to explain why non-violent resistance can have a greater effect on a state than violent resistance, Chenoweth and Stephan focus on the advantage that non-violent campaigns have over violent ones, in terms of mobilisation. Mobilisation, according to Schock, refers to the process of acquiring resources, people, and support for a campaign[9]. Non-violent movements are able to mobilise large numbers of people because they lower the barriers to participation and provide a greater number of opportunities for everyday citizens to get involved. Rather than being reserved for young men, or those in the military forces, civil resistance allows the participation of people with different levels of physical ability including the elderly, people with disabilities, women and children[10]. Non-violent resistance moves beyond barriers of a physical or informational nature and offers individuals with varying levels of commitment or risk tolerance greater opportunities to get involved[11]. Furthermore, being non-violent in nature, these movements are also able to mobilise entire populations without addressing the issue of moral barriers[12]. Lohmann speaks of this phenomenon in terms of a theory of "informational cascades" in revolutionary settings[13]. She points out that individuals will rarely decide to go against a regime unilaterally. Instead, the incentive for people to participate "depends on their expectations about how many others will turn out"[14]. In terms of having an effect on the state, the more people you have involved, the more costly it becomes for opponents to maintain the status quo. This can result in governments meeting some of the demands of the resistance movement or, as is perhaps more common, it leads to loyalty shifts amongst former supporters of the regime which subsequently tips the balance of power away from authoritarian rulers[15]. In Egypt and Tunisia for example, as opposition to the regime spread amongst more and more people in the community, different social classes and sub-groups began to resist also, including professional organisations, labour movements, human rights activists, bloggers, nationalists, and Islamists[16]. Similar to Lohmann's model, Kuran argues that the cost of getting involved in resistance decreases as the size of the movement increases[17]. Kuran believes that regime change is unlikely to occur unless political opposition to a regime reaches a critical level[18]. When the opposition reaches this critical level, non-violent resistance movements are able to undermine the power of the state by taking away their legitimacy and withdrawing support from key groups within society upon which the state depends. Interestingly, it becomes a question not only of mass participation, but also of varied participation. In their analysis of non-violent resistance movements, Chenoweth and Stephan conclude that non-violent movements will be ineffective if they are "unable to overcome the challenge of participation [and] fail to recruit a robust, diverse, and broad-based membership that can erode the power base of the adversary and maintain resilience in the face of repression" [19].

Although volume is important, there must also be active participation from a wide range of different societal groups; men and women, factory workers and farmers, rich and poor, young and old, atheists and religionists. Sharp was one of the first scholars to argue that real and lasting liberation requires significant changes to the power relationships within society, not simply a replacement of personnel[20]. This involves the participation of people from all levels of society and is based on the premise that the more broad the movement, the more likely it is that there will be links to multiple areas of society, such as the political, economic, military, or religious elite[21]. Since power depends on the implicit consent of the people, once this is taken away, a state is no longer able to function. For example, non-violent resistance in Tunisia during the Revolution of Dignity saw popular participation from a wide variety of levels within Tunisian society, from labourers and those in the working classes, to women, children, and even intellectual and religious elite[22]. The presence of varied participants also helped to shape the outcomes of the Egyptian revolution in much the same way. In Egypt, the protesters were already working off the assumption that broad-based resistance movements offered a viable option for change. In other words, the repertoire of techniques and methods used were "known and established"[23] and did not just develop spontaneously. Egyptians called for economic justice alongside political rights and in doing so, they were able to link the aspirations of both youth and labour activists through a

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common cause[24]. It is not enough to say that nonviolent resistance is effective simply because it involves large numbers of people. It is varied representation that strengthens the impact of the resistance movement, as no regime can exist isolated from its own population. If we understand power according to Sharp's definition as being based on the support and cooperation of its subjects[25], then it follows that by severing the state from its sources of support, non-violent resistance movements can promote political change. What we see are members of a previously dominated population reclaiming their agency within the hegemonic institutions of a state and obtaining greater capacity to influence events. With this newfound agency comes the ability to hold leverage over one's opponent, which is crucial when confronting a more resource superior opponent, which will be discussed in the following section.

Even when states appear to have an advantage in terms of resources or military power, non-violent movements are able to have an effect by maximising leverage over their opponent[26]. Leverage, according to Schock, is "the ability…to mobilise the withdrawal of support from opponents or invoke pressure against them through the networks upon which opponents depend for power" [27]. One example of leverage used by non-violent movements to have an effect on state power involves the role of the military and specifically, military defections. Military support is needed to uphold the protective structures and sanctioning power of a regime[28]. While authoritarian leaders often resort to repressive tactics to retain power, they rarely impose these punishments themselves, relying instead upon the police or military to do it[29]. This observation has led some (Sharp, 2007) to suggest that a regime's repressive capacity is contingent upon the loyalty of troops[30]. Consequently, civil resistance movements are more likely to have an effect on the state if they can solicit the support of the military and security officials and convince them to abandon the regime. While the same could be said for violent regimes, it has been established that non-violent movements are able to attract the active participation of a wider variety of people and different societal groups. The broader the resistance movement, the more likely there are to be links between those who are standing against the state, and those who are repressing on behalf of the state. Gould and Moe refer to this as "dilemma actions" – a set of actions that force a regime to either violently repress a non-violent movement comprising people they could potentially know personally, or concede and side with the resisters[31]. Either way, the regime is weakened as violently supressing a non-violent movement also undermines state legitimacy in the eyes of the wide population and the international community[32]. Again, it comes back to the importance of mass participation – not only in broadening the base of resistance, but also in raising the moral costs for regimes, and their military and security forces, in maintaining the status quo[33].

In Tunisia, with the exception of the presidential guard, President Ben Ali did not trust the military and relegated their role and influence to the very margins of society[34]. They received limited funding and were rarely included in the political functions of the state. As such, when it came to the revolution, they had little interest in preserving the regime. Reports from the ground suggest that very early on in the protests, many soldiers actively interposed themselves between the police and nonviolent demonstrators[35]. When the protests reached Tunis itself, the chief of staff of the armed forces, General Rachid Anmar, ordered the army not to fire on the protesters and vowed that the military would "protect the revolution" [36]. Similarly, but for different reasons, the Egyptian military also decided to side with nonviolent protesters during the Egyptian revolution. Although there was a combination of factors, the Egyptian military's decision was ultimately due to the perception of a weakened regime and economic motivations (Nepstad). More specifically, the Egyptian military did not want to lose their lucrative military aid and arms deal with the United States, which has been upwards of USD1.3 billion per year since 1979[37]. Egyptian military realized that in order to continue relations with the West, they could not afford to restrict popular participation in the revolution. They needed to be seen as facilitating the process of democratization in the country and so they sided with the civilian protesters.

There are some who would argue that nonviolent movements were only effective during the Arab uprisings, due to either the support of the military or the perceived threat that these large groups would turn violent. This idea is based on a fundamentally different understanding of power and civil resistance than the view of power adopted in this paper. As power is ubiquitous and ever-present[38], the advantage of non-violent resistance is that such movements are able to leverage not only military power, but other sources of power as well, such as economic dependence. Nonviolent resistance can leverage immense economic pressure because regimes rely on their citizens for labour and expertise. Economic leverage might involve a withdrawal of labour in key sectors such as transportation or energy, citizens refusing to pay their taxes, or simply a refusal to carry out duties to which a competent replacement

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is not readily available. For example, after labour unions joined the protest movement in Egypt, and service workers at the Suez Canal went on strike, Mubarak was quickly ejected by the Egyptian military. Another example was the 1978 Iranian Revolution were oil workers went on strike in October, which resulted in the closing down of the oil industry in December that same year[39]. Despotic regimes do not rely solely on military institutions, or their ability to use violence, for generating power and support. The structure of the economy, particularly the extent to which regimes are dependent upon industries that create cross-cutting economic linkages is a potentially important factor. Butcher hypothesizes that states dependent upon industries demanding a high level of organized, unionized, domestic labour for revenue, such as manufacturing, agricultural or service industries, are more likely to have created the conditions for (and tolerated the presence of) economic networks that are useful for political mobilization.[40] This increases the opportunities for broad-based movements in maximising points of leverage and thus further undermines state power.

The final section of this paper will now look explicitly at why non-violent resistance represents an effective strategy. Non-violent resistance movements represent an effective strategy because they use their newly reclaimed agency to their advantage by reversing the coercive logic of the dominant power. This is based on the assumption that nonviolent means are used, according to Sharp, for their "anticipated effectiveness"[41]. In other words, nonviolent resistance groups make a conscious choice to use nonviolent methods for practical purposes, i.e. to undermine the violent states they are seeking to oppose. This also serves to keep attention focused on the specific grievances themselves and not, as is the case with violent resistance, on violence[42]. Nonviolent movements therefore no longer risk mirroring institutions of power; they deliberately go against them for strategic reasons in order to have a greater effect on the state. However, sometimes these movements will strategically use the same channels to reclaim individual agency, for example the reclaiming of public spaces such as Tahir Square, which undermines a states dominance and hegemony[43].

According to Schock, coercion refers to intimidation backed up by the threat of force[44]. Since states depend on the constant replenishment of their power, and since power is understood as being everywhere in society, it follows that it is not necessary to overpower the state to promote political change[45]. It can also be done by denying the regime its sources of support, i.e. the people. Varied actors are key and can undermine regimes economic, social and political institutions of power. If non-violent resistance movements followed the coercive logic of the states they were seeking to oppose then only sources of military power would be targeted. This is based on a misconstrued understanding of power as being derived from violence and would lead to a replacement of new people within an old system, which as we know from Sharp, does not lead to lasting liberation[46]. Coercive capacity of non-violent movements is non-violent by its very nature and is not based on forceful disruption of social order; rather, it is based on removal of adversary's key sources of power through sustained acts of protest and non-cooperation[47].

 In conclusion, by focusing on the significance of mass mobilisation and varied representation, it has been argued that non-violent or civil resistance movements represent an effective strategy for challenging state power due to their ability to harness the power of varied representation in order to maximise points of leverage associated with the various sources of state power. Furthermore, by strategically deciding to uphold non-violent principles, they are able to avoid reproducing the coercive logic of state tactics. Although power is often interpreted as a state's military or economic capacity, this paper argues that power actually depends on the extent of consent from the civilian population. And while these institutions are indeed important, because power is everywhere and rests upon the cooperation of the people, this consent can be withdrawn and reassigned to more legitimate or compelling parties at any time[48]. If we understand power to be a ubiquitous concept that is present on every level of society, and understand resistance movements as mirroring that power, then it follows that the effectiveness of non-violent movements comes down to its ability to erode the states diffuse channels of power through various methods.

Footnotes

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[4] Foucault, M. *Discipline and Punish: the birth of a prison* (London: Penguin Publishing, 1991), 21

[5] Foucault, M. *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge* (London: Penguin Publishing, 1998), 63.

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[7] Ibid, 458.

[8] Chenoweth, E. & Stephan, M. J. *Why Civil Resistance Works: the strategic logic of nonviolent conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 25.

[9] Schock, K. 'The practice and study of civil resistance', *Journal of Peace Research,* Vol. 50, No.3, (2013), 277-290 at 282.

[10] Chenoweth, E. & Stephan, M. J. op.cit. 10.

[11] Ibid, 36.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Lohmann, S. "The Dynamics of Informational Cascades: The Monday Demonstrations in Leipzig, East Germany. 1989–91", *World Politics*, Vol. 47, (1994), 41–101 at 47.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Gerges, F. 'Introduction: A Rupture' in Gerges, F. (ed.)*The New Middle East – Protest and Revolution in the Arab World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 1-40 at 14.

[16] Ibid, 16.

[17] Kuran (1989) as cited in Schock, K. 'The practice and study of civil resistance', *Journal of Peace Research,* Vol. 50, No.3, (2013), 277-290 at 282.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Chenoweth, E. & Stephan, M. J. op.cit. 11.

[20] Sharp, G. op.cit. 27.

[21] Chenoweth, E. & Stephan, M. J. op.cit. 10.

[22] Gelvin, J. *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 43.

[23] Tripp, C. 'The Politics of Resistance and the Arab Uprisings' in Gerges, F. (ed.)*The New Middle East – Protest and Revolution in the Arab World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 135-154 at 137.

[24] Gelvin, J. op.cit. 44.

[25] Sharp, G. op.cit. 30.

[26] Chenoweth, E. & Stephan, M. J. op.cit. 40.

[27] Schock, K. *Unarmed Insurrections – People Power Movements in Nondemocracies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 142.

[28] Nepstad, S. E. 'Mutiny and nonviolence in the Arab Spring: Exploring military defections and loyalty in Egypt, Bahrain, and Syria', *Journal of Peace Research,* Vol. 50, No. 3, 337-349 at 337.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Gould & Moe (2012) as cited in Nepstad, S. E. op.cit. 337.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Chenoweth, E. & Stephan, M. J. op.cit. 10-11.

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[35] Ibid, 12.

[36] Saleh, Heba. 'Tunisian army chief vows to guard revolution' in *Financial Times,* (24 January 2011), available at <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/e01ffbc4-27e5-11e0-8abc-00144feab49a.html#axzz3qo9vWYDU>, accessed on 7 November 2015.

[37] Gelvin, J. op.cit. 61.

[38] Pickett, B. L. op.cit. 445.

[39] Schock, K. *Unarmed Insurrections,* 2.

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[41] Sharp, G. op.cit. 20.

[42] Ibid, 390.

[43] Hibou, B. *The Force of Obedience – The Political Economy of Repression in Tunisia* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), xvii.

[44] Schock, K. *Unarmed Insurrections*, 15.

[45] Ibid, 38.

[46] Sharp, G. op.cit. 27.

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[48] Ibid, 25.

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