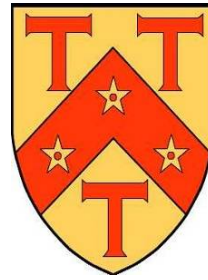




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Skills or Conditions: What Key Factors Shape the Success or Failure of Civil Resistance?

by Peter Ackerman

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Before I begin, I'd like to thank Sir Adam Roberts, Timothy Garton Ash, Tom Davies, my colleague Berel Rodal, and the other organizers of this extraordinary conference. This must be the first time such a diverse international group of distinguished scholars and writers have gathered to extend our understanding of civil resistance, or what many of us refer to as nonviolent conflict.

A conference of this stature aiming to assess such a sweeping historical force is long overdue. The impact of that force was suggested by a 2005 study by Freedom House, entitled "How Freedom is Won," which evaluated 67 transitions to democracy over the previous third of a century.¹ The study found that only 17 transitions were the product of accommodation among political elites – while 50 were driven in large part by civil resistance, featuring strikes, boycotts, civil disobedience, and mass protests. These 50 "bottom up" transitions occurred in every part of the world, including the Philippines, Chile, Poland, South Africa, East Timor and Serbia. And these nonviolent confrontations keep happening, most recently in Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan and Lebanon.

As we continue to discuss many of these cases, I hope that we'll bear in mind that what animates civil resistance is the passionate desire of people to be free -- of brutal and corrupt rulers, military occupiers, and injustice of all kinds. Desmond Tutu said, "When people decide they want to be free...there is nothing that will stop them."² What do people do, once they make that decision, if they don't choose violent struggle? That's the question. But we should not confine our answer to the idiosyncratic features of each case. Instead, we have an unprecedented opportunity, given the number of cases from the last several decades, to propose new explanations based on rigorous *comparative* analysis. I am hopeful that not only will our deliberations help to identify new possibilities for civil resistance movements, but that we'll also recognize how events propelled by these movements have begun to change the international system in the 21st century.

To do any of this, we have to confront the reality that civil resistance is not only a political and social phenomenon operating under various conditions. It is also a course of human action taken by tens and hundreds of thousands of people, whose skills in engaging in these conflicts have a substantial impact on the outcomes. What I want to do is to offer a framework for considering how these skills and conditions interact to yield results in conflicts driven by nonviolent strategies.

Civil resistance occurs when people cannot make progress on fundamental issues of life, liberty, and property solely by conventional politics, where permitted, or by discourse and mediation. Instead, a popular movement or campaign chooses to battle with nonviolent methods, while the antagonist relies on its institutional authority and, when necessary, its military and police to maintain control.

At this conference, many people have discussed whether in various cases particular conditions are propitious for civil resistance. They have referred to structural factors identifiable at the outset of a conflict that they believe place boundaries on the possible outcomes. Conditions of this kind are typically thought to fall into two categories. The first are conditions that supposedly handicap the launching of a civil resistance movement, including cultural passivity, ethnic divisions, political fractiousness, and economic hardship. Conditions are considered more “ripe” for nonviolent resistance based on the absence of such factors.

The second category includes variables that affect the trajectory of a conflict once it begins. One such variable is how aggressive the goals of civil resisters are. Can their adversaries be pressured to negotiate or accept such goals, or does achieving them require a full victory – what some refer to as “regime change”? Another variable, which some believe is the most crucial, is the degree of political “space” that exists before civil resistance begins. We often hear that nonviolent resistance gets traction only if the political system is no worse than semi-authoritarian, so that resisters have at least some room to maneuver. But if Lord Action was correct to suggest that those who have power always want more, it is likely that a “semi-authoritarian” regime is not so much practicing generosity in granting space to opponents as it is constrained by other political forces to do so.

There are three categories of skills common to civil resistance movements. The first is the capacity to engender and sustain a mass mobilization against a determined ruling group willing to use repressive acts to keep order. What is required is a leadership and organization that a majority of the population considers legitimate and representative. Also needed are goals that unify the movement and subordinate traditional differences to the common purpose.

A second category of skills is the capacity of the movement to marshal resources to engage in the widest possible variety of tactics. Gene Sharp famously described 198 methods of nonviolent action. Whatever the number, when tactical options reach the point that those who enforce the status quo cannot be sure what will come next, civil resisters can then plan a sequence of engagements that maximize what Liddell Hart called “strategic dislocation.” That can put in jeopardy the reliability of the ruler’s pillars of support, especially the loyalty of the security and police services.

A third category of skills is the capacity to execute each tactic in a way that maximizes disruption of an unjust order while maintaining strict nonviolent discipline, so that no justification is given to the use of repressive violence and no threat is offered to men at arms defending the regime. Lenin believed in 1905 that if resisters shot at the Tsar’s soldiers, they would be encouraged to defect; instead, it had the opposite effect.

With these definitions laid out, the question then is which set of factors are most decisive in influencing the outcome of a conflict driven by civil resistance -- skills or conditions?

I come out clearly but not exclusively in favor of the importance of skills over conditions. While this violates the conventional wisdom, I hold this view more strongly today than at any previous time during my 30 years of studying civil resistance. As the pace of change accelerates in a world with fewer boundaries on the movement of people and ideas, every form of human endeavor must adapt or falter. Those waging civil resistance are not exempt from the necessity of mastering the best practices in the form

of conflict they have chosen. And regimes do not get a free pass: They too must improve their game, or they will lose.

Let me offer one caveat. I am not saying that skillful civil resisters can trump the most unfavorable conditions in any nonviolent conflict without exception. Neither do I believe that failure in every case is always attributable to the lack of skills alone. So to anticipate the most likely criticism, I don't believe that frustrated democratic movements -- in places like Belarus, Burma, and Cuba -- can suddenly be victorious merely by acquiring a more skillful leader or a burst of new training. But neither am I willing to concede that these struggles are inevitable failures and should be flagged as hopeless. Even in desperate circumstances it is still possible to stop making bad choices. The result can be increased pressure on rulers or occupiers who are suppressing the people's rights, and any increment of unblocked pressure can infuse resisters with new hope and release their imagination about what can be done next.

There are three reasons why I believe that an inventory of pre-set conditions has had more explanatory appeal to many traditional observers than a careful assessment of the skills brought to bear in developing and applying a strategy of civil resistance.

First, analysts preoccupied with conditions such as a regime's propensity for brutality or the political consequences of its commodity-based wealth often dismiss the possibility that it can be challenged by a civil resistance movement. Consequently they are caught off guard when confronted with the energy and ingenuity of an opposition that they previously considered to be moribund.

Second, analysts focused on pre-existing conditions typically assume that the opposition has fixed goals and finite choices of action. In contrast, they assume that the regime's capacity for violent repression remains undiminished, regardless of the higher cost of maintaining control that resisters' disruptive tactics can generate.

In a peculiar twist, as analysts recover from the shock of surprise when nonviolent movements force dramatic change, they tend to see what happens as a fluke, unlikely to be repeated in the future. But the dexterity of civil resisters keeps recurring. Polish shipyard workers outwit communist party negotiators and win the right to a free trade union. A million Filipinos defend a rebellious army camp from a dictator's tanks and he loses the ability to intimidate. General Pinochet calls a plebiscite everyone assumes he will win or steal, but the opposition organizes a parallel vote count showing its victory, and the General's fellow junta members switch sides. Ukrainian army and secret service commanders, after months of meeting and hearing from civil resisters, refuse orders to clear demonstrators from the heart of Kiev and the last real obstacle to the Orange Revolution dissolves. Unfortunately most analysts see no pattern in these successes and make no effort to foresee new cases in which the skills of resisters may undo their opponents.

The third reason that traditional observers give primacy to conditions over skills is that they don't realize that conditions can never completely impede the development of skills that may prove over time to be decisive in shifting the course of a conflict. Movements do not proceed in a straight-line progression. Their fortunes wax and wane; momentum is lost and gained. Still, the talented execution of even the simplest nonviolent tactics can alter the psychology of a population and the behavior of a regime. Small victories followed by larger ones can dissipate the image of a regime's invincibility. The

cumulative effect of the operations of 600 civic groups like the one that engineered the Port Elizabeth consumer boycott eventually extinguished the belief of South Africans, even many within the regime, that apartheid could be sustained indefinitely.

I suggested earlier that elevating the explanatory value of skills over conditions runs counter to the conventional wisdom. The intellectual traditions of nonviolence theory and the early strains of social movement theory, when transposed into analysis of civil resistance, have been the source of confusion for decades. Neither offers a cogent general explanation of the body of social science data of concern to this conference.

I don't think it would be a surprise to anyone here if I said that it was Tom Schelling, the Nobel Prize-winning American economist and strategic theorist, who took the first key step in moving the debate over skills versus condition into proper balance. Here is what he concluded in an essay titled "Some Questions on Civilian Defense" in a volume edited by Adam Roberts in 1969:

"The tyrant and his subjects are in somewhat symmetrical positions. *They* can deny *him* most of what he wants – they can, that is, if they have the disciplined organization to refuse collaboration. And he can deny them just about everything they want – he can deny it by using the force at his command. They can deny him the economic fruits of conquest, he can deny them the economic fruits of their own activity. They can deny him the satisfaction of ruling themselves. They can confront him with chaos, starvation, idleness and social breakdown, but he confronts them with the same thing and, indeed, most of what they deny him they deny themselves. It is a bargaining situation in which either side, if adequately disciplined and organized, can deny most of what the other wants; and it remains to see who wins."³

"And it remains to see who wins" – and how and why – should really be the central analytical concern of this conference. Schelling discerned a symmetry between violent and nonviolent adversaries reflecting the strategic reality that civil resistance is an interactive contest in which each side can impose costs that the other would bargain to avoid. The key is "organization" or the relative skillfulness with which pressure is applied. We should also be clear we are referring not only to the skills of nonviolent resisters. One only has to read the letters of Lord Irwin to his Secretaries of the State in 1930 on the best way to deal with Gandhi to understand that the imperative for skillful behavior also applies to regime actors. One feature of the current backlash to democracy promotion is the sharing of best practices in repression, to deal with the contagion effect of the "colored revolutions." When Hugo Chavez visited Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus, he told him: "There are many possibilities now for forming a strategic alliance to save the world from madness, wars, and color revolutions."⁴

Some may contend that while in theory it's true that both sides have weapons to fight with, in practice the contest is often so lopsided that theory lacks relevance. The relevant image may be a basketball game between school boys with heights averaging 5'10" and world champions with heights averaging 6'9". Sure the kids may occasionally score but let's not pretend they can win. Perhaps a more accurate metaphor would be a basketball tournament between five world champion players and 500 high schoolers played simultaneously on 100 different courts. The game has more to do with maneuver than with muscle.

One might express the general limitation on the value of excess military capability against nonviolent protagonists this way: The use of violent force against a population to deter unwanted behavior makes it harder – if the opposition is skillful in sustaining the conflict – to use that same violent force to compel wanted behavior. Wanted behavior generally means acquiescence to existing routines – by tax-payers, by students earning degrees, or by workers in critical industries.

Continued globalization will make conditions even less central than skills in shaping the outcome of future civil resistance movements, for two reasons. First, when we think of the factors that define ripeness for a civilian resistance movement, we speak in terms of that nation's history, culture, politics and economy. And the societal model tends to be a closed feedback loop relatively untouched by external actors. As more people cross borders and more information is shared at no cost, it is more difficult to believe that closed, controlled societies can sail on undisturbed, their people ignorant of the legacy of what people in twenty or thirty other societies have done to free themselves.

Second, the new global commons may also weaken structural factors that could otherwise circumscribe action during a nonviolent conflict. For example, in a world of proliferating NGO's devoted to shared causes such as defending human rights, fighting corruption and slavery, and teaching democracy, the goals of a civil resistance movement may have resonance outside the ambit of the conflict -- giving legitimacy and lift to the indigenous nonviolent protagonists. Part of the reason that Jenni Williams of Women of Zimbabwe Arise keeps on organizing nonviolent actions against Roberto Mugabe's hold on power, despite having been arrested dozens of times, is that she knows that dozens of similar groups around the world are engaged in similar struggles. She learns from them, they learn from her, and organizations like the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict accelerate the learning.

Another example of the global additive to civil resistance is represented by the authoritarian ruler who wants to travel, consume and deposit funds outside his country. President Gayoom of the Maldives Islands, in power since 1978, is fond of arresting and beating dissidents. But he is even more fond of staying in hotels in Singapore and attending international conferences where Amnesty International's condemnation of his human rights abuses is unknown. When his police killed a demonstrator in custody two years ago, that condemnation finally made the home pages of many news organizations' web sites, and the British and other governments demanded that he tolerate open opposition if normal relations were to continue – and he relented. We now know that not everyone in Gayoom's government is happy with its reputation for repression. Rising global transparency may make it possible for outsiders to identify differentials in likely behavior between actors at the pinnacle of a regime that can be exploited by both indigenous civil resisters and external organizations calling for sanctions.

Here is another case in point. Freedom House does an annual survey of political rights and civil liberties of every nation. The country with the consistently worst scores is North Korea – the archetype of unfavorable conditions for civil resistance. Who would have believed that the simple act of shutting down Kim Jong Il's accounts in Macau, which only have \$24 million in assets, may be what brought him back to the negotiating table to dismantle weapons of mass destruction? And now we know that the North Korean-Chinese border can be crossed by anyone able to pay border guards a sufficient bribe. The demographer Nick Eberstadt, also a North Korea expert, along with his colleague

Christopher Griffin, suggests that a simple informal agreement to regularize exit routes on the China-North Korea border to allow new emigrants immediate access to South Korea could accelerate defections and destroy the internal cohesion of Kim's regime.⁵

As global conditions help attenuate internal conditions, developing indigenous skills in civil resistance may boost its potential even more. The International Center on Nonviolent Conflict was created as a direct result of the demand for learning how to develop these skills, which were depicted visually for the first time in Steve York's outstanding documentaries *A Force More Powerful* and *Bringing Down A Dictator*. These films have been translated into nine languages and seen in over 80 countries. Nonviolent activists or groups in over 25 countries, having seen or heard of these films, have sought more information so they can learn how to produce equivalent results in their own struggles. We respond to all such requests, and they have come from islands in the Pacific, from the highlands of Central America, from the cities of East Africa, and from the villages of Southeast Asia, as well as from the Middle East and Central Asia.

Our Center has also collaborated with several international organizations that furnish seminars and workshops in nonviolent tactics and that independently disseminate this knowledge to activists, such as the Centre for Applied Nonviolent Action and Strategies (CANVAS) in Belgrade, Nonviolence International in Washington, and the Center for Victims of Torture. CANVAS is led by veterans of the movement that ousted Milosevic in Serbia, and they will soon make universally downloadable their comprehensive curriculum in strategic nonviolent action.

Our Center is also making every effort to improve the substance and scalability of training tools. Yet we do not give specific advice to civil resisters or other parties to a conflict. We refuse to do so because only the protagonists in a civilian-based struggle can intelligently adapt generic know-how to their needs and circumstances. Indeed, the record shows that it is only when nonviolent strategies are indigenously developed and such movements indigenously led that they succeed.

As many of you know, we have also created a computer video game to enable activists to simulate all facets of their conflicts including geography, demography, ethnicity, ideology, key institutions and personalities -- in order to map the effects of different strategic choices under complex circumstances. This tool not only helps produce better decision-making skills but also more confidence to act. Using these tools has also led to inspiring examples of how learning from past cases can improve the performance of civil resisters. The day after Shevardnadze left office, one of the leaders of the Rose Revolution was quoted as follows in the *Washington Post*. "Most important was the film," said Ivan Merabishvili, general secretary of the National Movement party that led the revolt, referring to the film *Bringing Down a Dictator*. "All the demonstrators knew the tactics of the revolution in Belgrade by heart because they showed...the film on their revolution. Everyone knew what to do."⁶

It is certain that the number of nonviolent conflicts that can be influenced by the improvement of skills is growing. Disseminating this knowledge should not have to await urgent requests from those in the midst of these conflicts. Familiarity with the subject should be taught in many ways. So another constituency for this knowledge is students and teachers the world over. Our Center held a symposium last year at Colorado College called "People Power and Pedagogy". One of our goals is to multiply the academic locations for the teaching of civil resistance, beyond peace studies and conflict

resolution programs to strategic studies, politics and other disciplines that readily see this kind of conflict for what it is, namely, a struggle to transfer power from decayed elites to people who want to be free.

Yet this teaching cannot be predicated only on existing knowledge. Promising new research on the skills of civil resistance is beckoning. For example, Anika Binnendijk of the Fletcher School is writing her dissertation on how civil disruption can produce loyalty shifts in the military and police. And Dr. Maria Stephan, who coordinates our work with the academic community, has partnered with Erica Chenoweth at the University of Colorado to do what we hope will be a ground-breaking statistical study on the relative efficacy of violent and nonviolent resistance. Since opposition groups decide which types of tactics to employ, new dimensions of strategic choice are likely to be explored by both these studies.

Recognizing that skills influence outcomes in civil resistance is even more critical for the media, so that their habit of depicting resistance as merely spontaneous protest can be replaced with a more sophisticated view of reality. It was a sad moment when a CNN anchor queried that channel's reporter in Belgrade on the night that a half-million demonstrators besieged the Serbian parliament. She said, as I recall: "I don't understand. How could this have happened? Milosevic was in complete control only a few days ago." Well we know he wasn't, because an increasingly united opposition had been eviscerating his base of power for months, but few Western reporters bothered to notice. The sad admission, "if it bleeds it leads," needs to be replaced by recognizing that political change is manufactured not only by violence or by mobs but also by disciplined movements. Once the media finally comprehend this, the goals, the self-organization, and the strategies of civil resisters will finally begin to be accepted as the source of their success, rather than imagined funding by nefarious intelligence agencies or the last-minute mistakes of the rulers they displace. This will in turn foster hope and the courage to resist in places where these qualities of the public mind are still dormant.

The last constituency that will embrace the linkage of skills to the outcome of civil resistance is the policy-making community. By temperament, this group is preoccupied with elite interactions in international affairs and finds it hard to take seriously the gravity of what ordinary people can do to change their own fate. Two years ago I was a member of the Council Foreign Relations Task Force on Iran led by Zbigniew Brzezinski and Robert Gates. The working assumption then – still widely held today – was that the West had two choices on Iran: negotiate, or go to war over Iran's nuclear program. And since war was unthinkable, the only option is to strike a "grand bargain," even with an Iranian leadership that couldn't be fully trusted. Any suggestion to augment that policy by stimulating international support for indigenous campaigners for democratic reform was rejected as an inappropriate and futile effort to do "regime change". Besides, as the Task Force reported confidently "revolution is not imminent" in Iran.⁷ But as we have seen before, those who make historical verdicts about the limits of civil resistance before it reaches critical mass are often capsized by historical waves they just don't see coming.

Those who wish to modify the actions of the Iranian government should recognize that such changes may not only be a function of external military or diplomatic initiatives. In light of the considerable civil dissent in Iran, it should be remembered that the West's support for nonviolent activists and dissidents in the Soviet sphere – sanctioned by the Helsinki agreement – furnished hope, legitimacy and solidarity to indigenous forces which ultimately unhinged every regime in that region. Why should the West not now

exert comparable pressure on the Iranian government in conjunction with support for indigenous resisters -- as was also done so precisely and successfully in South Africa? If international pressure to oppose apartheid was right at that time, why is similar pressure against injustice or tyranny elsewhere in the world wrong at this time? We should never be selective about supporting civil resisters who campaign for basic rights and that applies to the struggles for rights or self-rule in Egypt, Palestine, and West Papua, as well as in Iran, Belarus or Cuba.

If this perspective were to inform policy-making even to a small degree, the full potential of diplomacy could also be released. You cannot successfully negotiate with an adversary consumed with retaining his monopoly of power by ignoring the leverage on that monopoly held by the people of his own society. Michael McFaul, Larry Diamond and Abbas Milani (two of whom are at this conference) wrote a groundbreaking *Washington Quarterly* article on Iran, "A Win-Win Strategy for Dealing with Iran," which concludes that by expanding the agenda with Iran to include democracy and human rights as well as sanctions and the nuclear program, "policymakers could radically change the very limited parameters of the stalemated debate with Iran in a way that would serve arms control and democratization."⁸ I look forward to tomorrow's session on the role of external actors, where these issues can be more fully explored.

Whatever we conclude, the subject of our conference has the potential to reverberate at the highest level of global statecraft today – because few disagree that international relations are increasingly shaped by forces and actors other than interactions between states. So it is fair to say that the full impact of civil resistance on world affairs has yet to be expressed. We will not reach that point, however, unless we all recognize that the skills involved in waging nonviolent conflict – the ability to plan, mobilize and maintain civic pressure on unjust power – can overcome structural conditions heretofore considered insurmountable. Why? Because strategies of civil resistance are incremental and their effects cumulative. The versatile use of nonviolent tactics can unfreeze unfavorable conditions and so raise the temperature underneath autocrats. Unlike the results of failures in violent struggle, the capacity and willingness of oppressed people to resist are never fully eradicated. The limited case where a regime seeks not to compel obedience but is willing to practice genocide is really a null set of conditions, because if a government wants to kill everyone who will not submit, it would already have done so and the case would not be worthy of study.

When my friends at CANVAS conduct a workshop on nonviolent struggle they ask participants to prepare a power graph. This is an original analytical tool they have developed to enable students to trace changes in a regime's internal and external position over the recent past. Inevitably students are surprised to see so much variation in their adversaries' capabilities. This prompts them to realize that while current conditions might be discouraging, they are hardly immutable. The past may partly be prologue, but only if its vicissitudes as well as its continuities are acknowledged. Things change, and in that context, the old Roman motto is still current today, when it comes to civil resistance: "Ad Astra, Per Aspera." Through our endeavors, the stars.

¹ Adrian Karatnycky and Peter Ackerman, "How Freedom Is Won: From Civic Resistance to Durable Democracy," Freedom House, 2005.

² Desmond Tutu, videotaped interview by Steve York for the documentary television series *A Force More Powerful*, Atlanta, Georgia, August 27, 1999.

³ Thomas C. Schelling, "Some Questions on Civilian Defence," in Adam Roberts, ed., *Civilian Resistance as a National Defence*, 351-52.

⁴ "Venezuelan president promotes 'strategic alliance' in Belarus," RIA Novosti, Russian News & Information Agency, July 24, 2006.

⁵ Nicholas Eberstadt and Christopher Griffin, "Saving North Korea's Refugees," *The New York Times*, February 19, 2007.

⁶ Peter Baler. "Tbilisi's 'Revolution of Roses' Mentored by Serbian Activists," *Washington Post*, November 25, 2003.

⁷ "Iran: Time for a New Approach," Council on Foreign Relations, July 2004.

⁸ Michael McFaul, Larry Diamond and Abbas Milani, "A Win-Win Strategy for Dealing with Iran," *The Washington Quarterly*, December 1, 2006.