

# What is nonviolent struggle?

**T**he choice of nonviolent action is sometimes ridiculed, often misunderstood, always in need of explanation. No wonder. It is a radically different technique of battle. Perfected over millennia to challenge abuse and bring about major reforms and revolutions, only recently have nonviolent methods been recognized as a conscious framework of struggle, and a deserving field of study.

Used by people all over the world, even in the deepest recesses of brutal empires, nonviolent campaigns have been successful at improving economic justice, achieving national independence, ending racial segregation, saving people targeted by genocide, weakening and toppling authoritarian regimes, stopping environmental devastation, bringing social and political liberation, and righting structural wrongs.

## THE POWER TO SAY NO

Nonviolent struggle is based on removing consent. Nonviolent methods can be highly disruptive, as when people blockade government buildings, or sit in corporate offices. Used by enough people, nonviolent action can shut down an entire economic system, for example with country-wide days of mourning, mass protests or a general strike. Nonviolent uprisings have brought down dictators.

## THE POWER TO SAY YES

Nonviolent action also creates the collective YES of empowerment: the "WE CAN DO IT!" force of acting together. Through the use of methods for social empowerment and betterment, nonviolent struggle can lead to the creation of positive replacements to unwanted institutions. Boycotts, for instance, can also build self-reliance by setting up alternative systems rooted in the community.

## THE HORSELESS CARRIAGE

Before the word "automobile" was invented, people saw the self-propelled vehicle and called it the "horseless carriage". Today, people see nonviolent action and call it "Public Defiance", "Mass mobilization", "People Power", "Militancia Pacifica", "Action citoyenne", "Satyagraha", "Civil Resistance", "Positive Action". These name the same reality that difficult opponents and acute social conflicts can be overcome with a strategy that does not rely on a willingness to injure, murder, torture, or even fight police in the streets.

**The vehicle of nonviolent struggle has been given different names. And yet it runs. With sparks from the great causes of our time, it propels movement. It drives social power. Open up and take a look: you'll see fired up people, working like an engine.**

## NO NEED FOR SAINTLY LEADERS

Although closely identified with great religious men such as M.K. Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., most nonviolent movements have not been based on religious or moral principles. In reality, nonviolent action is chosen because it is simply the most practical way to succeed, by movements whose leadership is often much more decentralized.

Around the world, many groups adopt nonviolent struggle because it appears as the best or the only technique available to them. Some chose it not wanting to repeat the painful history that guerilla warfare has brought them. Others, still, choose nonviolent

means because they do not want to compromise the ends that they seek.

## HOW DOES NONVIOLENT STRUGGLE WORK?

Nonviolent struggle is not about melting the heart of the enemy. That's not how it operates. Through the strategic use of means that strike at the roots of power, nonviolent struggle removes the need to physically threaten, injure, or destroy the opponents, because it can simply constrain them, or make them impotent. And that is enough.

The nonviolent technique of struggle relies on a refusal to let the threat of violence dictate obedience. The main ingredient of nonviolent campaigns is the formidable capacity of human beings to be stubborn, defiant, disobedient, and courageous, whatever the price. The strategy of nonviolent action can thus be defined as one that chooses terms totally independent from those preferred by the violent oppressor.

When used against nonviolent resisters, violent repression is clear for all to see. Paradoxically, such violence by the opponents can turn against them. Under the right circumstances, especially when the movement has trained and prepared for it, repressive violence can undermine, even disintegrate support for the perpetrators.

Nonviolent combatants understand the need to win over key groups of people who, under threat of violence, would otherwise fall behind "enemy" lines. Those aboard the nonviolent carriage know the shortest, most strategic route to victory is to stay away from the detours of injurious force.

