



1 - civil resistance and realpolitik

Chapter 1: Civil Resistance and *Realpolitik*

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'Power', according to Mao Tse-Tung's famous dictum, 'comes out of the barrel of a gun.' In much the same vein Stalin is said to have retorted when warned of the strength of Catholicism in Eastern Europe - 'How many divisions does the Pope have?'

Brezhnev had cause to reflect bitterly on those words of his predecessor as he faced the problem of Solidarity in Catholic Poland in 1980-81. Nor did the problem disappear with the imposition of martial law in December 1981 and the banning of the Solidarity movement. Indeed the emergence of the movement can be seen in retrospect to have signalled the beginning of the end for communist power not only in Poland, but throughout Eastern Europe, and finally in the Soviet Union itself.

But Stalin and Mao were being disingenuous. Had they relied on the gun alone rather than upon a whole gamut of persuasive, manipulative and coercive strategies neither would have achieved top leadership positions within their respective communist parties, or retained them to become two of the most powerful political leaders of the twentieth century. This is not, of course, to deny that violence, and the threat of violence, frequently plays a key role in regulating power relationships, especially those between the state and the citizen, and between one state and another. It is to recognise first that violence is not the only kind of coercive sanction available, and second that other factors can be important, even decisive.

Not only does the crude equation of power and violence fail to explain the relatively non-violent overthrow of dictatorial regimes of left or right over the last decade or so, it does not even explain the success of other revolutions and anti-colonial struggles where armed force did indeed play a major role. For if power came simply from the barrel of a gun, the enormous disparity in the modern era between the means of violence available to the state and the population would make successful rebellion highly improbable, and the very attempt to rebel an improbable and foolhardy adventure.¹ But rebellions are undertaken, and do succeed. Moreover it is sometimes repressive and authoritarian regimes that prove most vulnerable. How is one to account for this?

The short answer is that a government is only as powerful as its ability to command the loyalty and obedience of key state institutions - the army, the police, the civil service and, beyond that, to secure the cooperation or at least the compliance of the majority of the population. Other things being equal, the greater the degree of voluntary cooperation the government enjoys, the more secure it will be. Conversely, a government that relies to a major extent on naked violence to secure the reluctant compliance of the population is particularly vulnerable to sudden overthrow precisely because its power base within society is so narrow. Even Machiavelli, the founding father, so to speak, of *realpolitik*, emphasised the underlying weakness of rulers who rely solely on coercion and violence.

In her seminal work *On Violence*, the American political scientist Hannah Arendt insists that power is rooted in voluntary cooperation. It refers, she says, 'to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power, is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together.'² This capacity to 'act in concert' makes civilisation, makes society itself, possible.

The relationship of violence to power is a complex one. Hannah Arendt goes so far as to claim that violence is not only different from power - in the sense in which she defines it - but its very antithesis. This somewhat overstates the position. Even in societies which do not have any kind of central authority, sanctions play a role in maintaining group cohesion and establishing the norms of social behaviour.³ It is true, however, that violence is the extreme and exceptional sanction, for were it not so the group would soon tear itself apart. Inducements, such as the fulfilment of basic physical and social needs which require working in cooperation with others, and sanctions, such as verbal censure, social ostracism, economic penalties - indeed all the myriad routine pressures of everyday life towards group conformity - count for far more.



But if the ultimate *source of power* is the group acting in concert, the institutions which coordinate and direct group activity can place enormous power in an executive or leadership structure. This is true even of many institutions within civil society, such as trade unions, political parties, Churches. It is true in a special sense of governments, which have the coercive institutions of the modern state at their disposal, and access to human and material resources unrivalled by any other corporate body. Governments, corporations, classes, individual leaders within movements and institutions, are powerful in so far as they command the loyalty of large numbers of people and can induce them to act in concert for a given end. The base of power lies within society, but it is the individuals and organisations who have the capacity to wield that power which we normally think of as powerful.

Power may be invested in a leadership in a purely voluntary way, as for instance when an individual is chosen to speak and act in a certain way on behalf, say, of a trade union branch or political movement. The lines of power in such a case are open and transparent. But power may also take the form of *domination*, that is to say *power over* others. Probably all governments to some degree, and dictatorial governments in the extreme, exercise power in this sense. It is a common feature too of hierarchical institutions within society, from the corporate firm to the patriarchal family. Manipulation and sanctions of various kinds are by definition associated with domination. Nevertheless, even the most arbitrary government requires a minimum of group loyalty to maintain its position and ensure that its commands are enforced.

In exercising control over state institutions, and over society as a whole, governments rely not only on sanctions on the one hand and the freely given cooperation of their committed adherents on the other, but on another key element in power relationships - *authority*. Authority denotes the capacity to command obedience to orders, or the acceptance of one's judgement, not because of the threat of sanctions but because of position or status. The cultural norms and traditions of a society determine, at least partially, where authority resides and how absolute it is. Governmental authority depends critically on the strength of its claim to *legitimacy* in the eyes of the population, and its assumed right to command obedience within the limits of a given constitutional or traditional framework. In a parliamentary system, the government claims its legitimacy from the outcome of an election. It may nonetheless forfeit that legitimacy if it is regarded as having defaulted on its responsibilities, or if it acts outside the rules of the constitution, or uses its power in ways that are widely considered as unacceptable.

Third parties can be an important prop - or conversely a significant threat - to the power of governments or other groups. Thus a government depends to a greater or lesser extent not only on the cooperation of its own citizens but on that of other states with which it has diplomatic and trading relationships, and increasingly of other outside institutions and associations. Hence, in the case of a major confrontation with a section of its own population, a government is likely to expend a great deal of energy trying to convince the outside world of the legitimacy of its case. Its opponents, as resources permit, will attempt to do likewise. Similarly in disputes between groups within society, it will be important to both sides to enlist and retain public support.

Sensitivity to the reactions of Third Parties, and of its own power base, can act as a constraint on the use by a dictatorial government of extreme violence against its own subjects. This is one reason why publicity can be a lifeline for those seeking to challenge arbitrary power. Both internal and international pressure, for instance, contributed to the gradual undermining of the apartheid regime in South Africa and to General Pinochet's loss of authority in Chile. At the beginning of Pinochet's period of rule, after the coup d'état of 1973, he was able to round up and massacre hundreds of his political opponents, and to imprison and torture many more. By the time he was forced to resign his dictatorial powers, this was no longer a real option.

Dictators are often more aware than their critics of the fact that they cannot rule by violence and terror alone. This is demonstrated by the lengths they go to silence dissent and impose uniformity of thinking on the population through propaganda and indoctrination. Not that one should underestimate the effectiveness of a combination of verbal assault and the threat of dire punishment in repressing opposition. Ultimately, however, these methods breed cynicism and stagnation. The slogans will be faithfully repeated in public, but laughed at in the privacy of the home or the company of trusted friends. The stagnation of economic and cultural life, and endemic corruption in the administration, is frequently the outcome when a government relies primarily on violence and terror to maintain its position. Open defiance may be too costly, but there is no longer the will among the population to make things happen. There is a genuine dissipation of power in the sense defined by Arendt. One of the incentives for de-Stalinisation, following the death of the dictator, was probably the need to get the economy and society moving again. Unfortunately the reforms did not go far enough, and were ultimately halted and partially reversed when Brezhnev replaced Khrushchev as Soviet leader.



When disaffection is sufficiently widespread among the population, it is liable to spread to the army, the police, and other public servants who can never be entirely immunised against the current of opinion and feeling in society as a whole. One then has a potentially revolutionary situation. The disparity between the means of violence available to the government and its opponents diminishes, and the balance of power may shift decisively in favour of the latter. In some instances a bloody revolution or civil war results. In others the old leadership is overthrown in a coup staged by disaffected officers who are more in tune with what is happening in society, and may wish to avoid large-scale bloodshed, or perhaps to forestall a more thoroughgoing revolution. Sometimes the regime or polity under attack disintegrates altogether as its sources of power are removed. In still other instances, the government, realising the game is up, resigns and negotiates a peaceful transfer of power to its opponents. Disintegration and/or negotiated transfers of power occurred throughout most of Eastern Europe in 1989. Only in Romania was the change accompanied by organised violence when the *Securitate* forces loyal to the deposed dictator staged a bloody last-ditch stand against the Army. It is not a coincidence that the *Securitate* was manned primarily by former inmates of state orphanages whose contacts with the general population had been deliberately kept to a minimum.

Such a progression from dictatorship to democracy is not, of course, inevitable. It is not historically determined. Stalinism in its extreme form prevailed until the dictator's death, and was not finally eradicated until the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union in 1991. It took the death of Salazar in Portugal, and of Franco in Spain, to open up the way to parliamentary democracy in those two countries. Thus it is important not to overstate the 'voluntarist' basis of state and government power. Under highly repressive regimes, the choice open to the individual in normal circumstances is a stark one: either comply (or at least go through the motions of complying) or face the loss of the means of livelihood, imprisonment, perhaps torture and death. The regime may be vulnerable to *collective* defiance, and may ultimately provoke it. But historically the erosion of dictatorial power to the point at which insurrection becomes a real possibility, and a significant threat, has frequently taken years or even decades. One of the major political challenges of our time is to develop methods and techniques whereby the citizen, ideally in cooperation with the international community, can more swiftly and effectively bring dictators to heel, and prevent coups d'état or slides to autocratic rule. Stated more generally, the task is to ensure that state power is brought and remains under democratic control. The further task beyond that is to develop an effective method of contention and resistance to empower groups, sections and classes within the community suffering disadvantage and discrimination.

Democratic constitutions are designed to control state power through a system of checks and balances. These characteristically involve the notional separation of executive, legislative and judicial functions, and the requirement to hold general elections at regular intervals. Often there is also a written constitution which sets out the functions of various branches of government and may include a Bill of Rights guaranteeing certain fundamental rights for all citizens. Where there is a written constitution, laws and directives can be challenged in the courts and declared void if they are judged to be in breach of the constitution.

These are important, but not sufficient, safeguards. They do not obviate the need for a further remedy in the hands of the population in the case of an abuse of power by the executive - or, of course, the violent overthrow of the constitution. Hitler, after all, came to power by constitutional means, proceeding thereafter by the use of street violence and state power to dismantle the democratic safeguards against dictatorial rule. The high-sounding declarations embodied in the constitutions of the Soviet Union and the 'peoples democracies' in Eastern Europe did not prevent the horrors of Stalinism or the modified forms of autocracy which succeeded it. The framework of constitutional rule remained, but it was largely devoid of content.

Even in well-established parliamentary democracies, however, the power of the executive may be extended incrementally to the detriment of genuine democratic control. Already, with the advent of the modern party system, the notion of an independent legislature holding the executive in check is largely fictional in many Western countries. The independence of the judiciary, too, may be eroded in practice by the way judges are appointed and through various Establishment pressures. Thus the character of the Supreme Court in the United States was radically altered by the appointments made during the Reagan and Bush administrations. This resulted in a Supreme Court which reversed previous decisions that the use of the death penalty was unconstitutional, and in a spate of executions in the early 1990s. Similarly, during the Thatcher years in Britain, when Lord Hailsham was Lord Chancellor, the judiciary became markedly more conservative.

A government may also circumvent the law by misusing the intelligence and security services. It is now clear that both the CIA in the United States, and MI5 and MI6 in Britain have engaged at times in illegal and wholly indefensible activities against their own citizens and those of other states, sometimes on their own initiative, sometimes with the connivance, and under the direction, of government ministers. Finally, even a democratically



elected government and parliament can introduce laws, or pass enactments, which discriminate against, and deny the fundamental rights of, individuals or whole sections of the community. Britain's discriminatory immigration laws are a case in point. The internment of 'enemy aliens' in wartime is another example. Even more scandalous was the internment in the US of thousands of American citizens of Japanese origin during World War II.

The power of the state *vis-à-vis* the citizen has increased exponentially with the evolution since the nineteenth century of the modern state bureaucracy, making it all the more necessary to re-examine the adequacy of traditional safeguards against the abuse of state power. The modern state is a potentially dangerous instrument in any hands. In the hands of Hitler and Stalin, it enabled the construction of tyrannies without parallel in previous history.

In classical constitutional theory, the ultimate sanction of the citizens faced by a wholesale abuse of power is armed rebellion. As noted earlier, one of the serious problems with that solution is the disparity in the means of violence available to the state as against that at the disposal of its rebellious subjects. Only when the government is already seriously weakened and can no longer depend on its army and security services have the insurgents a realistic chance of succeeding.

Guerrilla warfare has been proposed, in such extreme circumstances, as a technique of armed struggle which could overcome the imbalance of military force between the two sides. It was a particularly favoured solution in some circles during the 1960s and 1970s following the successes of guerrilla warfare in a number of 'Third World' countries - China, Cuba, Algeria, Vietnam, Zimbabwe. It has indeed significant points in common with the notion of civil resistance discussed in this book, notably in its emphasis on the importance of the political struggle and the need to undermine the opponent's power. Yet a prolonged guerrilla war can have dire consequences for a society, particularly perhaps in a highly urbanised society. In such a setting, where there is no clear battle line between the two protagonists, and where the urban guerrilla operates in effect in the disguise of civilian dress, severe repression by the state's forces is virtually inevitable. (There may even be an intention to provoke repression as a means of politicising the population.)

Urban guerrilla warfare is likely also to be deeply divisive. As the security forces increase their precautions against attack, the temptation is for the guerrilla to shift to the softer target of 'collaborators'. But since large numbers of people are inevitably drawn into some degree of cooperation with the *de facto* authority, the front line comes to be drawn deeper and deeper within the community. At this stage, guerrilla warfare tends to become increasingly indiscriminate and to spill over into outright terrorism. That progression is indeed tragically apparent in the Provisional IRA campaign in Northern Ireland since 1970.

Finally, the expectation, or hope, that guerrilla warfare would have a decentralising effect politically in the post-revolutionary society has not been borne out in practice. Indeed, Gene Sharp has argued that it would have the opposite effect because of the centralising impetus of the military struggle,⁴ especially in the latter stages of a guerrilla campaign when, according to the prescription of Mao, Guevara and other exponents, it takes on the character of full-scale conventional warfare. Centralisation, however, in the case of countries like China, Vietnam and Cuba, is also traceable to the political ideas of the revolutionaries.

Civil resistance is a method of collective political struggle based on the insight that governments depend in the last analysis on the cooperation, or at least the compliance, of the majority of the population, and the loyalty of the military, police and civil service. It is thus grounded in the realities of political power. It operates by mobilising the population to withdraw that consent, by seeking to undermine the opponents' sources of power, and by enlisting the support of third parties. Its methods range from protest and persuasion to social, economic and political non-cooperation, and finally to non-violent intervention.⁵ Demonstrations, vigils, the organising of petitions are some of the characteristic actions associated with protest and persuasion. Strikes, go-slows, boycotts, civil disobedience are among the methods of non-cooperation. And sit-ins, occupations and the creation of parallel institutions of government are among the methods of non-violent intervention.

Two important characteristics of civil resistance, as defined here, are that it is *collective* action, and that it avoids any systematic recourse to violence. Thus it is differentiated from individual dissent on the one hand and forms of collective resistance involving military action on the other. This is not to imply that civil resistance requires the acceptance of a pacifist or non-violent ethic, but simply to distinguish it as a social phenomenon from armed insurrection, guerrilla warfare, or conventional war. Whether it is ever practicable or desirable to combine civil



resistance with military and para-military action is a separate question which we will consider later.

Civil resistance needs to be placed within the broader concept of *non-violent action*. The latter includes acts of individual resistance, such as conscientious objection; transnational initiatives, such as the non-violent direct action by Greenpeace to prevent nuclear tests in the Pacific, whale-hunting, or the dumping of toxic wastes; and the imposition of economic and diplomatic sanctions by individual states or organisations, such as the European Community or the United Nations. Evidently, civil resistance conducted inside a particular country may be combined with other forms of non-violent action. Indeed, assistance from third parties, in the form for instance of sanctions by international bodies, can be crucial to the success of the internal resistance.

The goals of civil resistance may be reformist, such as the removal of a particular injustice, or the amendment of a particular law. Gandhi's campaigns in South Africa on behalf of the Indian community, the suffragette campaign in Britain in the early years of this century, the civil rights movement in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, and the anti-poll tax campaign in Britain in the early 1990s are examples of such reformist campaigns. Sometimes the methods of protest and persuasion - now the common currency of every democratic society - will be all that is necessary or appropriate in such campaigns. But more severe pressure may be necessary and legitimate. Moreover, apparently reformist demands may have much more sweeping political implications, for instance entailing the resignation of a government pledged to resist them.

The goals may be more encompassing and even revolutionary from the start. They may be aimed at the overthrow of a particular government or *de facto* authority, or the demise of a whole political and social system. The goals of the non-violent insurrections in Eastern Europe in 1989 were revolutionary in the sense that they sought systemic political and social change. Sometimes, however, even there, the initial demands were related to civil rights, or the protection of the environment, and escalated into a full-scale confrontation with the regime. It is a characteristic of regimes which outlaw any open expression of dissent that they rapidly lose their authority if they are successfully defied even over an issue that does not in itself directly challenge their right to govern.

The methods of civil resistance may be employed in confrontations between different interest groups within society. Many of the characteristic weapons of civil resistance, such as strikes and boycotts, were forged in the labour movement in the struggles with employers in the nineteenth century, or in struggles between landlord and tenant. Such disputes between different groups or sections of society may draw in the state authorities on one side and develop into full-scale political and social confrontations. The British General Strike of 1926 is an example of this.

This study focuses on civil resistance in specifically political contexts, and, within that, pays particular attention to confrontations aimed at ending dictatorial, arbitrary or foreign-imposed rule. The reason for this is firstly that cases in which the resistance confronts the full force of state power demonstrate most effectively its potential and limitations; and, secondly, that the problem of providing effective remedies against the extreme abuse of state power is a central political issue of our times. In a later chapter we will also be considering the notion of 'defence by civil resistance' or 'civilian defence' (also called variously 'civilian-based defence', 'social defence', 'popular non-violent defence') in which a state or society would prepare systematically for civil resistance as a substitute, in part or in whole, for military defence.

The actors, then, in the kind of civil resistance mainly considered here are the government - or some other official authority - on the one side, and a movement or organisation of civil society on the other. It can also, however, involve the contention of rival claimants to state power, for instance where an existing legally appointed government coordinates resistance to an attempted coup or foreign occupation. Thus Yeltsin and the Russian Parliament acted as a centre for resistance against the anti-Gorbachev coup in the Soviet Union in August 1991. An even clearer case was the resistance to the attempted Kapp putsch against the Weimar Republic in Berlin in 1920, where the legitimate Ebert government withdrew first to Dresden, then to Stuttgart, and directed a successful campaign of total non-cooperation against the putsch.

In a confrontation between state authorities and a civilian-based movement, each side will seek to undermine the power base of the other. For, as noted earlier, power structures are not unique to governments and state institutions; they permeate every institution of civil society - the family, the trade union, peace, civil rights or environmental movements. The elements of such power within the institutions of civil society are not different in kind from those analysed earlier except that the sanction of violence may be absent altogether or mediated through the courts. Thus within, say, a civil rights campaign, the cohesion and commitment at the base is the original, the defining source of power. The power and authority of its leadership - whether formal or informal - will depend on the degree to which it is regarded as legitimate and/or effective. Its leverage may also be enhanced by the support of



third parties. Indeed, in a confrontation with the state, success or failure may hinge on winning over initially neutral or uninvolved parties - political groups, churches, sections of the media, and perhaps international bodies and foreign governments.

The organisational structure of civilian organisations may, of course, be kept deliberately informal and as non-hierarchical as possible to ensure that all important decisions are made by the membership as a whole rather than a leadership élite or the bureaucracy. Yet some delegation of decision-making is probably inevitable once the group gets beyond a certain size, and this may be particularly important in a situation of conflict where quick decisions have often to be made. Moreover, an *informal* leadership tends to emerge in every organisation comprising people with greater experience, knowledge or commitment than the majority of members.

As the earlier discussion indicated, psychological and moral factors are crucial elements in the kind of political warfare which civil resistance represents. 'Moral factors' here have the double sense of factors affecting morale, and factors having to do with moral and ethical issues. An important part of the explanation for the dramatic collapse of communist power in Eastern Europe is that communist parties and governments lost their morale and self-confidence. But this in turn was due in large measure to the dissipation of that sense of having an historic mission which fired the leaders of the October Revolution in Russia, and some at least of the communist leaders and governments in Eastern Europe after World War II. Similarly the European colonial powers in the inter-war and postwar years lost faith in their 'civilising mission' - instructed largely, it must be added, by the civil or armed resistance of their imperial subjects.

This is not to suggest that the protagonists with justice on their side necessarily carry the day. Nevertheless, in the political and ideological battle aimed at winning support from third parties, and strengthening and extending one's own power base, the central argument is almost inevitably cast in moral terms. The side that wins that argument stands greatly to strengthen its hand.

The moral question also permeates the debate over means. For those engaging in civil resistance, as much as for the government side, the question of means is a crucial moral-cum-strategic issue. It relates not only to the question of whether or not to use violence against persons or property, but to the issue of which non-violent sanctions it would be legitimate and politic to employ in any given situation. Thus, in a parliamentary democracy, while non-violent obstruction and civil disobedience may sometimes be justified, these are not methods to be embarked upon lightly. If they are used in circumstances where they cannot be justified, and especially where they are widely regarded within the society as unacceptable, they are unlikely to be effective. Moreover, the disapproval of the public will strengthen the government's hand in using force to repress its opponents.

The dynamic inter-relationship between power, coercion and authority is demonstrated by events in Thailand in the spring of 1992, events which also provide an interesting example of civil resistance in action. A summary of what occurred may help to clarify some of the rather abstract distinctions set forth in this chapter.

During April and May of 1992 a pro-democracy movement gained strength in Thailand. This followed a *coup d'état* in February of the previous year by an army general, Suchinda Kraprayoon, who declared himself Prime Minister. A coalition government formed after elections in March 1992 continued to accept his premiership. The larger background to the movement was decades of domination of political life in Thailand by the military, which continued even during the period of civilian rule that preceded the coup. The protesters demanded not only the resignation of Suchinda, but changes in the constitution to ensure that future prime ministers could only be chosen from among elected MPs, and to curtail the powers of the military-dominated Senate.

The demonstrations were met with repression and massacre. On two successive nights, Monday, 18 May and Tuesday, 19 May, as some of the protesters began looting and rioting, the Army opened fire indiscriminately. At least one hundred people were killed (some reports suggest a much higher figure) and several hundred injured. Over 3000 were arrested. The massacres and the brutal handling by the Army of those arrested were shown on Thai television, but far from cowing the population this appeared to strengthen the determination to see Suchinda removed.

After two nights of massacre and mass arrests, the declaration of a state of emergency, the imposition of a dusk-to-dawn curfew, and the banning of gatherings of more than ten people, it seemed reasonable to assume that the demonstrations would come to an end, at least for the time being. Instead the protesters once again took to the streets in their tens of thousands on the Wednesday evening, barricading themselves into the university area.



At this point Thailand's king, Bhumibol Adulyadej, intervened. Calling for national reconciliation, he prevailed upon Suchinda to release the opposition leader, Chamlong Srimuang, from prison, and summoned both men to his presence. Thai television showed them shuffling on their knees before the King, and that evening Suchinda ordered the release of more than 3,000 people arrested during the demonstrations and agreed to support the changes in the constitution demanded by the protesters. Chamlong for his part appealed to demonstrators to call off their protests. These, however, continued, and on Sunday, 24 May, Suchinda resigned. Next day the Thai Parliament agreed to amend the constitution to restrict eligibility to the premiership to elected MPs, and to curtail the Senate's powers. Subsequently a civilian prime minister, Anand Panyarachun, was appointed by Parliament pending a general election.⁶ The election duly took place on 13 September.

The *power* of the opposition was demonstrated by its ability to bring tens of thousands of people onto the streets, including many in Thailand's rising middle class. It was met with the naked *violence* of the military-dominated government which might well have destroyed it, at least in the short term. But two days of massacres, beatings and mass arrests failed to deter the opposition. The brutality of the repression, and the courage and persistence of the demonstrators, began to undermine the *authority* of the military-backed government. Some cabinet ministers made statements distancing themselves from the repression, and there were rumours too of troops stationed in other parts of the country starting to move towards the capital to back the demonstrators' demands. Finally the King exerted his own extraordinary authority in the context of Thai society to bring the immediate crisis to a halt.

The popular power which ended, temporarily at least, the military-dominated rule did not arise purely spontaneously. It was preceded, as one leading opposition activist and theoretician, Sulak Sivaraska, has recalled, by years of organisation and the study of methods of non-violent action.

We cooperated with other Buddhists, with Christians, with Muslims, internationally, to learn how to resist non-violently. I joined non-violence trainings in Mexico and Philadelphia, and other trainers came to Thailand. This sort of thing was going on for 15 years. So when the demonstrations came this time, it was this hard core that has been trained for so long that took charge, very modestly, behind the scenes, and used fasting, prayer and so on. That's why it was very, very effective; for so long they held the people to peaceful behaviour. That's why the government and the military became very upset, they wanted to break it and they didn't know how to break it. They used their own gangsters disguised as demonstrators, throwing bricks, throwing bottles, and that's how the violence started.⁷

Whether or not the looting and rioting that accompanied the demonstrators was the work of government *agents provocateurs*, as Sulak contends, it was marginal to the political outcome - though of course it did provide the pretext for the massacres and mass arrests. What counted politically was that upward of 100,000 people took to the streets, brought the capital and other major cities to a standstill, and refused to be cowed or intimidated until they had won their immediate demands.

Of course, things might easily have turned out differently, and for a time it seemed almost inevitable that they would. The parallels with Tiananmen Square almost four years earlier are obvious. Nor should the grim lessons of previous struggles to establish a stable democracy in Thailand be overlooked. In 1973 a student-led revolt brought down the two-man military rule which had been in power for ten years. Three years later, however, amid further student demonstrations, one of the deposed leaders was brought back and a terrible revenge wrought on the protesters. Whether or not something similar happens again will depend in part on how far the opposition in Thailand retains its capacity to mobilise mass opposition, and in part on the evident determination of the international community to apply severe sanctions in the event of another attempted military takeover.⁸

Hannah Arendt predicted that in a head-on clash between violence and power, the outcome would hardly be in doubt. 'If Gandhi's enormously powerful and successful strategy of non-violent resistance had met with a different enemy - Stalin's Russia, Hitler's Germany, even pre-war Japan, instead of England - the outcome would not have been decolonisation, but massacre and submission.' But she goes on to add, perceptively: 'To substitute violence for power can bring victory, but the price is very high; for it is not only paid by the vanquished, it is also paid by the victor in terms of his own power.'⁹

What the Thai example shows, as did the overthrow of the Shah of Iran in 1979, is that in favourable circumstances the authority of a government which resorts to naked violence may be eroded so rapidly that it loses the ability to command the instruments of state violence. When that occurs, people power can prevail over state violence, even in the short term. Under still more favourable circumstances, the army and police may refuse from the start to carry



out orders to massacre civilians, as happened in the victory of people power in the Philippines in 1986. In the former German Democratic Republic, too, there is clear evidence that Eric Honecker wished to suppress the mounting demonstrations in November 1989 by military force but simply lacked the authority to carry out this policy.

But victory in a campaign of civil resistance is no more assured than in a military one. As in any war, the overall balance of forces will affect the outcome. So too will the understanding, organisation, and strategy of those engaged in civil resistance. These are among the issues we consider in greater detail in the chapters which follow.

Notes:

- [1.](#) A point well made by Hannah Arendt. See, *On Violence*, Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1970 edition, pp. 47-50.
- [2.](#) Hannah Arendt, *op. cit.*, p. 44.
- [3.](#) See for instance Michael Taylor, *Community, Anarchy & Liberty*, Cambridge University Press, 1982, the chapter headed 'Social Order without the State', and especially pp. 80-90.
- [4.](#) Gene Sharp, 'Popular Empowerment', in *Social Power & Political Freedom*, Porter Sargent, Boston, 1980, pp. 331-3.
- [5.](#) The categorisation is Sharp's. See his *Politics of Nonviolent Action*, Porter Sargent, Boston, Mass, 1973.
- [6.](#) *Guardian*, 15 June 1992, p. 11.
- [7.](#) Sulak Sivaraska interviewed in *ACTivist* (Toronto), in May/June 1992. Reproduced in *Peace News*, July 1992, p.5.
- [8.](#) Again a point emphasised by Sulak in his interview with the *ACTivist*.
- [9.](#) Arendt, *op cit*, p.53.

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