

COULD THERE BE CIVIL RESISTANCE IN ERITREA WITHOUT POSSESSING THE TOOLS OF NONVIOLENT STRUGGLE?

By: Abdu Habib

sabbahar@rocketmail.com

“At no time in recorded history have people been more equipped to effectively resist injustice using civil resistance.” (Erica Chenoweth, **“How Civil Resistance Can Topple a Dictator”**, the Guardian, February 3, 2017)

World experiences have confirmed that no progressive cause has succeeded without civil resistance movement rallying behind it. It is also confirmed that no civil movement could succeed without the knowledge about the theory and practice of civil resistance. Today, we have a wealth of information and source material about civil resistance movement, including training manuals, strategy-building tools, facilitation guides, and documentations regarding the successes and mistakes of past nonviolent movements. Besides, there are many experienced activists who possess a great health of experience and wisdom to share.

Psychologists tell us that, as human being, we need some degree of fear. They go further to tell us that fear is a built-in defense mechanism in our bodies and that it protects us from harm. But they do warn us that our fear should not turn into a barrier with negative effects of preventing us from growing and transforming our life. It is when fear reaches this stage that it turns into everything that controls positive decisions and truthful behaviours in our life, preventing us from assuming responsibility for our thoughts and actions. Regarding the description of fear, we rarely come across anything better than what Jeff Bridges, the American actor, singer, producer, and winner of the Academy Award for Best Actor said when asked about his fear. He candidly put it saying, “Fear is your friend, it is like fire. It can warm your home or burn it down, you have to respect your fear but not let it control you.” Simply put, change is only possible when we face our fears,

recognize, accept, and deal with them or break the barrier they have created. This will lead us to the question: ***Could our people take the first step to break the barrier of fear? Are there clear signs that they have started doing that?***

The difficulty of breaking fear and the inevitability of that ultimate achievement was beautifully put by Aung San Suu Keyi, the leader of Burma's National League for Democracy and Nobel Peace Prize Winner, who wrote in her book **Freedom from Fear** in 1990:

“It is not easy for a people conditioned by fear under the iron rule of the principle that might is right to free themselves from the enervating miasma of fear. Yet even under the most crushing state machinery courage rises up again and again, for fear is not the natural state of civilized man.”

True to that quotation, news reports we hear from opposition radio shows and some written reports we read here and there confirm that there are clear indications that our people inside the country have already started taking the first step to break the barrier of fear by speaking out; an act we consider to be the bridge towards organizing civil resistance against the brutal regime. If Eritrean citizens living inside the country start having telephone conversations with radio shows like those of Radio Erena about the pains and sufferings of the people and what should be done to change the situation (the most recent example being the telephone conversation of a former Eritrean fighter from inside Eritrea with the Sunday Show hosted by Brother Yonatan Habte of April 2, 2017), we can say that healthy symptoms have already started showing up. But the most important question here is: ***What should our role as an opposition or justice seekers be towards this currently evolving phenomenon?***

For the process of breaking the barrier of fear to evolve fully and our people completely stop listening to their fears, it needs support and encouragement until we reach an advanced level of organization that makes the eruption of a people-powered resistance movement possible. As this desired and inevitable stage will be reached, no matter when, those of us who are lucky enough to live in Diaspora and have access to all necessary skills and tools of nonviolent movement, through

the Internet, books, films, records and others, need to equip our people with the necessary knowledge, using all possible means that could speed up the eruption of civil resistance and ensure its success. That is why this article is written to share some of the personal readings, hoping that the humble message would reach the right ears.

As there has been a long debate among the Eritrean agents of change for years about violent versus nonviolent struggle, it would be a waste of time to rewind the film. Nonetheless, only a couple of sentences should be said about violent methods of change. Many concrete experiences warn that a coercive style of change could tend to get a lot of attention initially. However, with time, it fails to retain much influence over the long-run. This means that it would not be able to garner the widespread and long-term support of the people needed for a sustained success.

Before winding up the issue of violent versus nonviolent method of struggle, it could be necessary to reflect on the realities we see in our region by raising the specific questions: *Does the killing of a dictator help a revolution? Does nonviolent method of struggle always work? What advantages does nonviolent method of struggle have over a violent method of struggle?*

Experience has shown that killing a dictator would only bring a bloody revolution, with rival factions competing for power. It should be noted here that the French Revolution of 1789, the Russian Revolution of 1917, and what is going on in Iraq, and Libya since the time of the physical liquidation of their leaders, are rich in lessons for mankind. The power vacuum to be created by the physical liquidation of the leader, even if it is for a short time, would be filled by someone in the wings ready to assume the authority. Particularly, we have many cases in Africa where power vacuum has led to bloodshed. With regard to the second question (if nonviolent resistance always work), it could be said that it may not work always. There could be short-term setbacks (like the counter-revolution in Egypt), but it could be emphatically said that for the long-run, change never comes with submission, resignation, or despair concerning the inevitability and intractability of the status quo. This means that the counter-revolution will ultimately be defeated, no matter when, and the revolution will finally be consummated. This is what history has repeatedly shown, and history never lies.

To wind up this issue, there is one more question to be considered. That is related to the advantages a nonviolent method of struggle has over a violent one. Here we need to see the views and conclusions of Professor Erica Chenoweth, one of the leading scholars on authoritarian regime and how to overthrow them, and author of: ***Why Civil Resistance works***.

Professor Erica Chenoweth compiled 323 cases of nonviolent and violent campaigns to study which were more successful in achieving the goals they had stated to bring about regime change. In a nutshell, we would ask: **What are Professor Erica Chenoweth's arguments? What did she discover in her studies?** Her arguments and conclusions include the following:

- She discovered that nonviolent campaigns were about twice as effective as armed campaigns over the past century.
- She argues that the most important factor in toppling a dictator is the number of the people participating in the movement and the degree of their diversity, concluding that the number of participants in nonviolent movement is greater and more diverse than activities perceived to be violent. If so: ***What does this conclusion mean to her?***
- The above conclusion means to her that nonviolence "...is not only a moral choice for an individual, but a strategic necessity for a movement."

As our discussion above has narrowed our choice to the nonviolent method of struggle or civil resistance movement, we need to see the questions: ***What is a civil resistance movement? What does its success depend on? How does property destruction affect the success of the movement?***

Civil resistance or people-powered resistance refers to a method of struggle against a dictator where people use a variety of coordinated actions to disrupt and confront the regime. The techniques of civil resistance are many and vary in their level of risk and disruptiveness. The techniques that involve higher risks and higher degree of disruptiveness include actions such as blockades, highway shutdowns, human barricades and nonviolent occupations. On the other hand, rallies, and marches involve moderate risks and disruptiveness. Regarding the

factors on which the success of civil resistance depend, four of them are identified by Waleed Shahid (an American freelance writer living in Philadelphia), who interviewed Erica Chenoweth, a leading scholar of authoritarian regimes. According to his article, ***“How to Topple a Dictator”*** (February 24, 2017, <https://w.w.w.thenationa.com/login/>), the four factors Waleed Shahid says are common in successful civil resistance campaigns are:

- The continual growth of the number and diversity of participants.
- The ability to bring about loyalty shift among the opponent elites and their supporters.
- The innovation of new methods rather than depending on a single method.
- The ability to remain resilient, disciplined, and united in the face of the brutal actions taken by the regime, expected to be escalating.

Our last question concerns the effects of property destruction on the success of civil resistance movement. As we are living in a world where private property is highly valued, destruction and vandalism of property isolate the movement from the popular support it is supposed to get, undermine loyalty shifts among the opponent elites, and give the regime a leverage to paint the movement black, associating it with violence and terrorism; consequently increasing repression against its activists and sympathizers. In addition, these acts of vandalism could also have longer-term consequences, deepening fragmentation and polarization over time. Simply put, property destruction is politically counterproductive in terms of strategic success and has nothing to do with a nonviolent movement.

Bearing in mind that the discussions above through which we have tried to lay the ground for the core issue of the article, it should be emphasized that people-powered resistance needs preparations, planning, tools and skills, that could mean the necessity of exposure to existing literature and experiences of other nations that have managed or tried to topple dictators. To use a contemporary movement as an example, it is important to see the question: ***How did the Syrian Revolution start as a peaceful protest before it changed into a violent movement?*** Our treatment of this question will almost constitute the framework for the major body of this

article: the tools and skills necessary for a successful Eritrean people-powered resistance.

The Syrian Nonviolence Movement was started in 2011 by a group of young Syrian activists, planning to topple Bashar Al Assad. This group of activists believed in a peaceful struggle or civil resistance as a way to achieve social, cultural and political change in the Syrian state and society. The first step this group of Syrian activists took was travelling to an isolated beach resort outside their country with the intention of having a week-long training on revolution. Their instructors were the two Serbian leaders of the student movement (known as Otpor, a resistance which started in October 1998) that became instrumental in overthrowing Slobodan Milosevic in 2000. These instructors were Srdja Popovic and Slobodan Djinnovic, who later founded the Centre for Applied Nonviolent Action and Strategies (CANVAS) after helping the democracy movement in Georgia and Ukraine. These two leaders finally travelled throughout the whole world and trained democracy activists from 46 countries in the methods of struggle they called the Otpor's techniques. To give a full picture about the core principles of the Otpor student movement, it is important to raise the question: *From what concept did these two Serbs start?*

They started from the concept of nonviolent movement of the American Academic and author of the book: *From Dictatorship to Democracy, A Conceptual Framework of Liberation* (Gene Sharp). They later developed the concept of nonviolence, adding refinements to it. In his book, *Blueprint for Revolution*, Popovic gives a detailed account of CANVAS's strategies and how they could be used. It was through the Serbian methods and the reading of this book (in addition to that of Gene Sharp) that the Egyptian youth could topple Mubarak in Egypt, in Lebanon the Cedar Revolution of 2005 (comes from cedar tree which is a Lebanese national emblem) could end Syrian control, and in Maldives the Otpor methods were key in overthrowing a dictator who ruled for 30 years. We will discuss below what Popovic calls in his book the "Myths about nonviolence" because of the interesting ideas we could learn from them.

But as regards Gene Sharp's book, it is a great resource any revolutionary needs to read. For the advantage of readers who might have not come across it, we cannot limit ourselves to a passing remark but we should reflect on its significance.

From Dictatorship to Democracy, A Conceptual Framework of Liberation is a book written by Gene Sharp in 1993 (born January 21, 1928), a professor of

Political Science at the University of Massachusetts. It has been published in many countries and translated into 31 languages. The Fourth United States Edition was published in 2010 by the Albert Einstein Institution of Boston, Massachusetts. It is also important to note the Gene Sharp is known for extensive writings on nonviolent struggle to the extent that he is called by some the “Father of Non-violent Revolution”. But the question remains: *What could we say in summary by way of presenting the merits of this book?* Few among the many merits of the book are:

- It is the book that influenced many movements including the Arab Spring of 2010-2012. In fact, some likened it to Karl Marx’s Communist Manifesto and Mao Tse Tung’s Little Red Book.
- One of the most inspirational things one would learn from this book is contrary to what many believe. That is the view of the author that the best way to remove a tyranny is for the people of the country to do it; not a neighbouring government or an external force.
- Further, the author of the book lists many weaknesses of a dictatorship that he says should be targeted by the nonviolent movement.

Going back to the discussion about the two Serb revolutionaries, it is helpful to mention that I had stumbled upon an article which is a must read for any Eritrean struggling for change. The article is entitled: **How to Topple a Dictator (Peacefully)**, and is written by Tina Rosenberg (an American Opinionator) on the opinion page of The New York Times on February 13, 2015. Tina has the following remark to say about the two Serb revolutionaries:

“I have lived in two dictatorships and seen dozens of democracy movements in action. But what the Serbs did was new. Popovic cheerfully blows up just about every idea most people hold about nonviolent struggle.”

The major contribution of Tina Rosenberg is that she lists some issues Popovic considered as misconceptions concerning nonviolent struggle, showing how he treated them as myths. For the advantage of the readers, I will paraphrase his arguments below, as Tina had reported and punctuating them with some remarks. For the convenience of the reader, I have numbered the myths and put them in a way easier to comprehend. The myths are eight in number and I could present them as follows:

Myth 1: *Nonviolence is synonymous with passivity.*

Tina says that the idea of nonviolence being synonymous to passivity is unacceptable to Popovic, who sees it is not true. She adds that, to Popovic, nonviolent struggle is a strategic campaign "...to force a dictator to cede power by depriving him of his pillars of support." To the Serbs, she explains, nonviolent struggle is a war with means rather than with weapons and that it should be carefully planned as others plan a military campaign. In this connection, she says that during the workshop, the Serbs taught the young Syrians, some of them having the belief that violence was the only way to topple Bashar Al Asad, the techniques they had developed for taking power, focusing on the following questions:

- How do you grow a movement from a vanload of people to hundreds of thousands?
- How do you win to your side the groups whose support is propping up the dictator?
- How do you wage this war safely when any kind of gathering can mean long prison terms, torture or death?
- How do you break through people's fear to get them out into the street?

Myth 2: *The most successful nonviolent movements arise and progress spontaneously.*

Here she says that the Serbs believe that no army general would leave a military campaign to chance, adding that a nonviolent war is not different.

Myth 3: *Nonviolent struggle's major tactic is amassing large concentrations of people.*

She reports that the Serbs believe that this idea is widespread because big protests are like the tip of an iceberg; the only thing people could see from a distance. But according to her, they explained that mass concentration of people is not the way movements begin. Here she cites them using the Egyptian example and asking: "Did it look like the ousting of Mubarak started with a spontaneous mass gathering in Tahrir Square? Answering this question, she says that the two Serbs explained that the occupation of Tahrir Square "... was carefully planned, and followed two years of work," waiting until they were sure they had the numbers.

With regard to numbers, according to Tina, the Serbs believed that concentrating people in protests is sometimes risky, showing that the protesters could be arrested or shot or even a government supporter could throw rocks at the police,

creating an event for the evening news. Here they warn that one failed protest could lead to the destruction of the movement. In this connection, she says that they suggest other tactics including the following:

- Pot-banging: a form of popular protest where people create noise by banging pots, pans and other utensils.
- Traffic-slowdown: here everyone drives at half speed.

Tina says that the Serb movement, Otpor, went from 11 people to 70,000 in two years. She gives an example of how things proceeded, saying 3-4 activists staged a humorous piece of anti-Milosevic street theater, which people watched, smiled for, and then joined.

Myth 4: *Nonviolence might be morally superior, but it is useless against a brutal dictator.*

Here Popovic is quote by Tina as saying: “My biggest objection to violence is the fact that it simply doesn’t work.” But: ***What are the details she conveys about Popovic’s views? What are her remarks on them?***

- He argues that violence is what every dictator does better than anybody else, suggesting that if one wants to compete with David Beckham [an English former professional footballer who won 19 major trophies in his 20-year career], he should not choose the soccer field but the chessboard.
- She remarks that the Syrians who attended this workshop had no major influence over the strategies that were later chosen by other opposition groups who rose against Assad, emphasizing Popovic’s view that violence often brings devastating results was what we have seen in Syria.
- It is interesting to note here that Tina brings our attention to the work of the scholars Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan (***Why Civil Resistance Works***) who had analyzed violent and nonviolent revolutions in which they concluded that a nonviolent movement showed double the success of a violent one and its achievements lasted longer. In this connection, she shows that only a handful of people join a violent movement, suggesting that a violent movement throws away the support of millions of people who could be won through a nonviolent movement. Regarding this issue, she cites a very interesting example (she does not say whether this story was originally cited by Popovic or it is her own argument) which could be summarized as follows:

According to Tina, Milosevic depended on senior Serbs as his base of support, but she tells the following story of how Otpor was able to win them:

- Otpor provoked the regime into using violence: that is arresting the youth and mistreating them.
- Once the movement learned that the regime released the youth after some hours, it staged actions so that the regime arrests greater numbers.
- When the grandparents saw that their grandsons and granddaughters imprisoned, after been labeled as terrorists and spies, they switched sides turning into a key pillar for the Otpor Student Movement.

Tina concludes this issue, arguing that, “..If there had been any truth to the accusations that Otpor used violence, the grandparents would have stayed with Milosevic.

Myth 5: *Politics is a serious business.*

Tina quotes Philosopher James P. Sullivan (best known by his nickname Sulley and is a laugh collector and former scarer at Monsters, and one of the protagonists of the Monsters, Inc. Series) as saying that laughter is 10 times more powerful than scream. She says that Popovic believed that “nothing breaks people’s fear and punctures a dictator’s aura of invincibility like mockery.”

Myth 6: *You motivate people by exposing human rights violations.*

Here she says that people care more about things related to their livelihood than human rights, mentioning electricity and housing as examples. A good example she mentions is Gandhi who “...began his campaign of mass civil disobedience by focusing on Britain’s prohibition on collecting and selling salt.” Here she is trying to say that talking about the miseries of the people under a dictator is not a good strategy for mobilizing activists because they know it all. Instead, she articulates that the movement should help people in their basic needs to attract them. My personal observation is that the experience of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt is a glaring example of how people could be won as supporters. Those who are familiar with Egyptian politics know that well. Their doctors treated the people with a nominal fee, had food banks, orphanage centres, senior homes, affordable housing for widows and the poor, and distributed winter clothing, to mention some.

Myth 7: *Nonviolent movements require charismatic leaders who give inspiring speeches.*

Tina says that unlike the traditional parties, Otpor had no speeches, indicating the following interesting facts:

- The strategies of the movement were meticulously planned.
- Those who did the planning were behind the scenes.
- Its spokesperson changed every two weeks, though it was usually a 17-year old girl.
- The movement had focus groups that tested the messages and the carefully planned strategies.
- Decentralization was very critical to the movement.
- It had only two rules: to be anti-Milosevic and absolutely nonviolent.
- Anybody who follows these two rules can do anything and call himself/herself Otpor.

Myth 8: *Police, security forces and the pro-government business community are the enemy.*

Tina says, maybe, it is smarter to see them as allies-in-the-waiting. Here she provides us with the following details:

- Otpor never threw stones at the police or made an insulting remark to anger, wound, or provoke them.
- On the contrary, its members cheered them and brought gifts of homemade cookies and flowers to the police station.
- When the members of the movement were arrested, they used the interrogations to turn the police interrogators into friends and demonstrated their commitment to nonviolence.
- That approach paid off because the police knew, if the opposition won, Otpor would see to it that they will be fairly treated.
- During the last battle, police officers withdrew from the barricades when the opposition asked them to do so.
- When a dictator doubts that his repressive orders will be obeyed, he is finished.

Tina winds up her article saying:

“I lived in Chile when the opposition to Augusto Pinochet made mistakes after mistakes; advice from Otpor might have shortened the dictatorship by

years. Had the Occupy movement [Occupy Wall Street Movement] in the United States adopted these tactics, it might still be a relevant force.”

But with regard to Syria, she concludes that the situation would have not been that much tragic, “...had the nonviolent activists in the opposition prevailed--- and followed Popovic’s blueprint...”

Through this piece, we have tried to explain that a civil resistance does not happen overnight or automatically. Although the campaign begins with a committed and experienced core, the successful ones among them will constantly increase their base of supporters, enlarge the diversity of the participants, build coalitions, maintain nonviolent discipline, expand the types of nonviolent actions they use, and build connections with those they think have good reasons to cooperate and betray the opponent network. Most importantly, it should be made clear that civil resistance does not work by bringing about change of heart in the opponent but by constraining its options and denying it its pillar support. We have seen in many cases around the world many civil resistance movements achieving victory in their last stage because the security forces ultimately refused to obey orders and decided to side with the civilians. A contemporary example was the defections and loyalty shifts among the security forces during Haile Selassie’s regime when the popular uprising, headed by university students, gathered momentum and clearly showed that people were determined to bring change and at any cost. Accordingly, we have no reason to believe what had happened elsewhere in the world cannot happen in Eritrea. In fact, there is a big opening to make the Eritrean security forces more sympathetic towards a civil resistance provided that it is well-planned, purely nonviolent, and followed all techniques we have tried to put together in this article. Indeed, a successful civil resistance needs a well-informed and well-prepared public. But: ***Who do we expect should enlighten and prepare the public for civil resistance except us? Are we seriously moving to that direction?*** Of course, there are some efforts here and there, though scattered, limited, and not inter-connected. ***Does this method of work achieve the desired goals?*** Addressing this question could hopefully lead to a breakthrough =====

