

# Civil Resistance

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The term civil resistance is used by some - alongside the term nonviolent resistance - to describe political action that relies on the use of non-violent methods by civil groups to challenge a particular power, force, policy or regime. Civil resistance operates through appeals to the adversary, pressure and coercion: it can involve systematic attempts to undermine the adversary's sources of power. Forms of action have included demonstrations, vigils and petitions; strikes, go-slows, boycotts and emigration movements; and sit-ins, occupations, and the creation of parallel institutions of government. Civil resistance movements' motivations for avoiding violence are generally related to context, including a society's values and its experience of war and violence, rather than to any absolute ethical principle. Cases of civil resistance can be found throughout history and in many modern struggles, against both tyrannical rulers and democratically elected governments. The phenomenon of civil resistance is often associated with the advancement of democracy. (See also the section below on "The term 'civil resistance': merits and concerns".)

### Historical examples

Adam Roberts and Timothy Garton Ash in their book *Civil Resistance and Power Politics: The Experience of Non-violent Action from Gandhi to the Present* include accounts of many historical examples they label civil resistance. These include:

Mohandas K. Gandhi's role in the Indian independence movement in 1917-47  
the US civil rights struggle in the 1960s, led by Martin Luther King Jr.  
aspects of the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland in 1967-72  
the Revolution of the Carnations in Portugal in 1974-5, supporting the military coup of 25 April 1974  
the Iranian Revolution in 1977-79, before Khomeini's advent to power in February 1979  
the People Power Revolution in the Philippines in the 1980s that ousted President Marcos  
the campaigns against apartheid in South Africa, especially in 1983-94  
the mass mobilization against authoritarian rule in Pinochet's Chile, 1983-88  
the various movements contributing to the revolutions of 1989 in central and eastern Europe, and to the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991  
Egypt, 25 January 2011: marchers in Cairo with 'OUT' signs on the 'Day of Anger' against President Mubarak. On 11 February he left office. Photo: Muhammad Ghafari from Giza, Egypt  
the campaign against Serbian domination in Kosovo, 1990-98, that was followed by war  
in this century, the revolutions in Serbia in 2000, Georgia in 2003, and Ukraine in 2004, all of which involved successful resistance against an incumbent government that had refused to acknowledge its defeat in an election and had sought to falsify the election results.

Roberts and Garton Ash's book also has accounts of certain movements that have been repressed, including China in 1989 and Burma in 2007. Numerous other campaigns, both successful and unsuccessful, could be included in a longer listing: for some examples, see

nonviolent resistance.

The "people power" revolutions in Tunisia in December 2010 and January 2011 and Egypt in January and early February 2011 can be considered examples of civil resistance. These revolutions followed large mobilizations of citizens, reflecting deep-seated dissatisfaction with their authoritarian governments. New communications technologies facilitated these developments.

### **Effectiveness of civil resistance**

It is not easy to devise a method of proving the relative success of different methods of struggle. Often there are problems in identifying a given campaign as successful or otherwise: the answer may depend on the time-frame used, and on necessarily subjective judgments about what constitutes success. In 2008 Maria J. Stephan and Erica Chenoweth produced the most thorough and detailed analysis of the rate of success of civil resistance campaigns, as compared to violent resistance campaigns. After looking at over 300 cases of both types of campaign, from 1900 to 2006, they concluded that "nonviolent resistance methods are likely to be more successful than violent methods in achieving strategic objectives." Their article noted particularly that "resistance campaigns that compel loyalty shifts among security forces and civilian bureaucrats are likely to succeed."

### **Relationship to other forms of power**

Aung San Suu Kyi, Burmese pro-democracy leader, in Rangoon, Burma, February 2009. She has urged adherence to non-violence for moral reasons.

The experience of civil resistance suggests that it can at least partially replace other forms of power. Some have seen civil resistance as offering, potentially, a complete alternative to power politics. The core vision is of non-violent methods replacing armed force in many or all of its forms. Some leaders of civil resistance struggles have urged the use of non-violent methods for primarily ethical reasons. For example, Christine Fink has written that Aung San Suu Kyi, the Burmese pro-democracy campaigner, as a practising Buddhist also deeply inspired by Gandhi, has "insisted on non-violence for moral rather than tactical reasons."

By contrast, regimes facing opposition taking the form of civil resistance often launch verbal attacks on the opposition in terms designed to suggest that civil resistance is simply a front for more sinister forces. It has sometimes been attacked as being planned and directed from abroad, and as intimately connected to terrorism, imperialism, communism etc. A classic case was the Soviet accusation that the 1968 Prague Spring, and the civil resistance after the Soviet-led invasion of August 1968, were the result of Western machinations.

Although such accusations of sinister power-political involvement are often presented without convincing evidence, there can be some more plausible connections between civil resistance and other forms of power. If civil resistance can sometimes be a substitute for other forms of power, it can also operate in conjunction with them. Eight ways are identified here:

Civil resistance is often a response to changes in constellations of power. Leaders of civil resistance campaigns have often been acutely aware of power-political developments. For example, in some countries there has been a growth of civil opposition after, and perhaps in part because of, a state's setbacks in war, whether against conventional armies or guerrillas.

Civil resistance campaigns frequently lead to a situation of partial stalemate, in which negotiation between civil resisters and those in positions of governmental power is perceived as essential. Hence 'round table talks' were critically important in the Indian independence struggle up to 1947, in Solidarity's campaign in Poland up to 1989, and in Ukraine in 2004.

The relation between civil resistance and the military coup d'état can be especially multi-faceted. In some cases a civil resistance campaign has been an effective response to a military coup. In other cases a campaign could succeed in its final objective - e.g. the removal of a hated regime - only when there was the reality or the threat of a military coup to bring about the desired change. Thus in the Buddhist crisis in South Vietnam in 1963 a long civil resistance campaign against the government resulted in change only when the South Vietnamese army coup of 1-2 November 1963 toppled President Ngo Dinh Diem. At least one non-violent campaign, the Revolution of the Carnations in Portugal in 1974-5, was in support of a military coup that had already occurred: this campaign helped to steer Portugal in a democratic direction.

Some non-violent campaigns can be seen as reluctant or unwitting harbingers of violence. For example, if they are perceived as failures, or are repressed with extreme violence, they may be followed by the emergence of groups using armed force and/or by military intervention from outside the territory concerned. This was the case, for example, in Northern Ireland in 1967-72, and in Kosovo in the 1990s. The possibility of such developments can be an inducement to a government to bargain with a non-violent movement before things get out of hand.

Václav Havel, impresario of civil resistance in the years leading up to the 1989 Velvet Revolution. In April 1991, as President of post-Communist Czechoslovakia, he praised the NATO military alliance; and on 12 March 1999 the Czech Republic (with Havel still as President) joined the alliance. He is seen here on 26 September 2000. Photo: IMF

There have also been some cases of certain uses of force by civil resistance movements, whether against their adversaries, or to maintain internal discipline. For example, on 2 February 2011, in the generally peaceful Egyptian struggle against President Mubarak, some groups among the crowds in Tahrir Square in Cairo did use certain forms of force for a defensive purpose when they were attacked by pro-regime thugs, some of whom were riding on horses and camels. In the subsequent days the crowds in Tahrir Square reverted to using non-violent methods.

Some civil resistance movements have sought, or welcomed, a measure of armed protection for their activities. Thus in the US civil rights movement of the 1960s, the Freedom Ride of May 1961,

having been opposed violently, received armed protection for part of its hazardous journey; and the Selma to Montgomery March of March 1965 only succeeded in reaching Montgomery, Alabama, at the third attempt, when it was protected by troops and federal agents.

Some campaigns of civil resistance may depend up the existence of militarily defended space. A life-saving example of an effective civil resistance enabling threatened people to reach a defended space occurred with the Rescue of the Danish Jews in 1943 when thousands of Jews were spirited out of German-occupied Denmark and across a narrow stretch of sea (the Sound) to Sweden.

When leaders of even the most determinedly non-violent movements have come to power in their countries, they have generally accepted the continued existence of armed forces and other more or less conventional security arrangements. For example, in 1991 Václav Havel who had been a leading figure in civil resistance in communist Czechoslovakia from the founding of Charter 77 to the Velvet Revolution of 1989, in his new capacity as President of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic paid tribute to the NATO alliance. On 12 March 1999 the Czech Republic, along with Poland and Hungary, became a member of NATO.

### **Proposals for defence by civil resistance**

The promise of civil resistance as a means of opposing oppressive rule has led to many proposals that countries might rely, in whole or in part, on civil resistance as a means of defence against external attack (for example, invasion) and internal usurpation (for example, coup d'état). Preparations for such resistance are sometimes seen as potentially helping to deter such threats in the first place. Various terms have been used to describe either the policy of relying on such non-military action by a society or social group, or the general phenomenon of sustained country-wide campaigns against outside attack or dictatorial rule. These terms - all near-synonyms - include "defence by civil resistance", "non-violent defence", "civilian defence", "civilian-based defence", and "social defence". For further information and references to some relevant literature, see social defence.

### **The term "civil resistance": merits and concerns**

Gandhi in South Africa in about 1906-1909. Referring to his years there, he later wrote: "... I found that even civil disobedience failed to convey the full meaning of the struggle. I therefore adopted the phrase civil resistance."

The term is not new. Gandhi used it in many of his writings. In 1935 he wrote: "... I found that even civil disobedience failed to convey the full meaning of the struggle. I therefore adopted the phrase civil resistance." It is a near-synonym for nonviolent resistance, civil disobedience, people power and satyagraha. While each of these terms has its uses and connotations, "civil resistance" is one appropriate term to use in cases where the resistance has a civic quality, relating to a society as a whole; where the action involved is not necessarily disobedience, but instead involves supporting

the norms of a society against usurpers; where the decision not to use violent methods is not based on a general philosophy of nonviolence, but on a wide range of prudential, ethical and legal considerations; and where the technical and communications infrastructure of modern civil societies provides a means of organizing resistance. Because of such considerations, the term has been used in this century in many analyses in academic journals.

What exactly are the advantages of the term "civil resistance", as distinct from its near-synonyms "non-violent action" and "non-violent resistance"? All these terms have merits, and refer to largely the same phenomena. Indeed, there is a long history, in many languages, of using a wide variety of terms to describe these phenomena. The term "civil resistance" has been used increasingly for two main reasons:

It emphasises the positive (civic goals; widespread civil society involvement; and civil as distinct from uncivil conduct) rather than the negative (avoidance of the use of violence).

It conveys, more effectively perhaps than such terms as "nonviolent resistance", that a movement's avoidance of violence in pursuit of a particular cause is not necessarily tied to a general belief in "nonviolence" in all circumstances, nor to a philosophy of "Gandhism", but rather arises from the particular values and circumstances of the society concerned.

There have been concerns that the term "civil resistance" might on occasion be misused, or at least stretched in a highly controversial way, to encompass acts of violence. Thus, arising from experience within the anti-globalization movement, one participant-observer has seen "new forms of civil resistance" as being associated with a problematic departure from a previously more widely shared commitment to maintaining non-violent discipline. Because of these concerns, those who have used the term "civil resistance" have tended to emphasise its non-violent character, and to use it in addition to - and not in substitution of - such terms as "non-violent resistance".