

Gandhi on the Nile

CIVIL RESISTANCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Never before have people in the Middle East mobilized in such vast numbers to shake off the chains of autocracy. Whether Egypt and Tunisia succeed in creating genuinely democratic societies remains to be seen—but already we can identify important lessons.

The democratic uprising that brought down the Mubarak dictatorship in Egypt stands as one of the most dramatic expressions of “people power” in history. The people’s victory in Egypt was preceded by the downfall of the Ben Ali regime in Tunisia and has inspired movements for freedom and democracy throughout the Middle East. Never before have people in the region mobilized in such vast numbers to shake off the chains of autocracy. Pundits have called the revolutions a political “Tunisami,” a massive wave of social ferment shaking the foundations of Middle East and global politics. Organizers of the Cairo protests claim a “historic achievement that has not happened since the era of the pharaohs.” Whether Egypt and Tunisia succeed in creating genuinely democratic societies remains to be seen, but already we can identify important lessons.

Conventional wisdom assumes that nonviolent action can work only in societies that are lawful and democratic. But the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia show that nonviolent civil resistance can succeed in even the most oppressive systems and against ruthless regimes that do not hesitate to torture and kill their opponents. During the protests in Egypt, hundreds of demonstrators were killed, most at the hands of security forces and pro-Mubarak thugs. Yet people continued to pour into the streets day after day to demand their freedom. The victory of the protesters was virtually total, and was all the more amazing because it was so unexpected and seemingly spontaneous.

At least four factors help to explain the success of the movements in Tunisia and Egypt: mass numbers, nonviolent discipline, befriending the military, and effective use of social media. We know from other examples of nonviolent resistance (the “people power” movement of the Philippines, the “velvet” revolutions of Eastern and Central Europe, the “colored” revolutions of Georgia and Ukraine) that the size of the protests matters. Protesters must mobilize very large numbers of people and be able to sustain a mass presence for weeks if necessary. In Egypt the movement mobilized hundreds of thousands of people on an almost daily basis, despite decades of repression, Internet interdiction during the protest, and lethal attacks by progovernment goon squads. When Mubarak tried to co-opt the movement and then refused to step down, the protesters mobilized in even greater numbers. As the protests grew larger they spread to other political groupings and social sectors. The Muslim Brotherhood did not start the movement but joined the demonstrations and provided important organizational capacity. In the final days, trade unions also entered the fray.

The uprisings were impressive not only for their scale, but also for their restrained manner and discipline. The people taking to the streets faced repression with remarkable courage, refusing to be provoked into overreaction. The organizers constantly emphasized the need to remain peaceful. A few had participated in workshops sponsored by the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict and had read the works of nonviolent strategist Gene Sharp. They knew that violence on their part would be contrary to the strategy of effective resistance. Gandhi, King, and other pioneers of social transformation emphasized the necessity of nonviolent discipline not merely as a moral choice (it's the right thing to do), but as a practical requirement for winning the sympathy both of bystanders and of the military and police (it works).

A widely cited 2008 study published in the journal *International Security* found [that civil resistance is twice as effective as armed struggle in achieving significant political change](#). A [2005 study](#) [PDF] by Freedom House noted that nonviolent forms of resistance are more likely than armed struggle to move a society toward greater freedom and democracy. It is doubtful that the demonstrators in Cairo knew of these studies, but they acted with an intuitive knowledge that violence would play into the hands of their adversaries and make it more difficult to win political support.

The resisters in Egypt were remarkably effective at reassuring and ultimately gaining the support of the military. They scrupulously avoided violent or confrontational tactics that might force the armed forces to choose sides against them. Mubarak had used the military as the bulwark of his oppressive rule, but as the protests gathered momentum, military leaders began hedging their bets. Protest organizers urged demonstrators to “hug a soldier,” to show that the struggle was against the dictatorship not the military. They brought food for the soldiers and tried to win their friendship. On the eve of the massive march planned for February 1, the armed forces declared they would not use force against “our great people.” This was a decisive breakthrough for the movement. It was followed ten days later by the military’s break with Mubarak.

Nonviolent movements in other historical settings also featured successful appeals to the armed forces. During the military coup in Moscow in 1991, Boris Yeltsin famously climbed aboard a tank and urged soldiers not to attack their own people. During the overthrow of Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, resistance leaders negotiated with commanders and kept the military on the sidelines.

Many commentators have highlighted the importance of social media in sparking the revolutions. The protests in Tunisia began when organizers created a Facebook page and asked friends to join a demonstration. They vowed to proceed if fifty thousand pledged to participate. More than twice that number signed up. In Egypt, hundreds of thousands of mostly young people used Facebook to mobilize the protests and to communicate the message of nonviolence. In the preceding months, bloggers helped to articulate the rising social discontent. In the heat of the struggle Twitter became a vital means of coordination and communication. Sympathetic coverage from Al Jazeera brought live footage of the protests to rapt audiences around the world. The value of an open exchange of information was never more vividly displayed.

The demonstrated power of nonviolent resistance in the heart of the Arab and Muslim world helps to undermine the central narrative of Al Qaeda. Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri

claim that terrorist violence is necessary to bring down autocratic Arab governments. If these regimes can be transformed instead through peaceful democratic means, the appeal of Al Qaeda diminishes. As Mohamed ElBaradei said, "If we get Egypt right, it could be the best medicine to get rid of radicalism." The same point was made by Juan Zarate, former senior counterterrorism official during the Bush administration. "There's part of this that's dangerous to Al Qaeda," said Zarate. "If the street protests lead to a peaceful, pluralistic transition, that does huge damage to the Al Qaeda narrative."

It was in Mubarak's jails that al-Zawahiri was tortured; it was there that he developed the hatred that led him to join bin Laden and become Al Qaeda's senior commander. The dream of overthrowing his tormentors has now been achieved, not through bombings and assassinations, as he imagined, but through nonviolent action. The significance of this ironic twist will not be lost on potential recruits, who can now see a different and more successful path toward ending oppression, having already witnessed, in contrast, the utter failure of Al Qaeda to achieve anything but the killing of countless fellow Muslims.

The opening of democratic political space is the best antidote to terrorism. It provides alternatives to those who might otherwise be tempted by the lure of militancy. It gives aggrieved people legitimate outlets for addressing political demands, making it less likely they will turn toward violent extremism. A 2008 RAND Corporation study shows that terrorist groups usually end when people gain a political voice and can participate in democratic institutions. Think of Northern Ireland and the transformation of the IRA. Supporting democratic transitions and defending the right of free expression are effective ways of countering terrorism.

Democratic politics are never predictable. An open political process in Egypt or other Arab countries may bring to power those who will be less friendly to U.S. and Israeli interests. The Muslim Brotherhood is likely to assume a greater role in Egypt, as will the Renaissance Party in Tunisia. Cairo's 1979 treaty with Israel is not in danger for the simple reason that the agreement is in Egypt's self-interest, as the military has made clear. On the other hand, the once-cozy relationship with Mubarak that protected Israel's flank will be gone, and democratically elected officials in Cairo may be less likely to participate in the isolation of Gaza or to turn a blind eye to the mistreatment of the Palestinian people. Israel will need to recognize that its security ultimately depends on accepting a just political settlement in Palestine and making common cause with the democratic wave sweeping through the region.

The challenges ahead for Egypt and the region are daunting, but the democratic revolutions there have opened the way to a freer future. They have demonstrated, once again, that nonviolent resistance can change the course of history.

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