

**CIVIL RESISTANCE SINCE 1989** Adam Roberts, PRESIDENT, BRITISH ACADEMY; EDITOR, WITH TIMOTHY GARTON  
ASH, OF CIVIL RESISTANCE AND POWER POLITICS: THE EXPERIENCE OF NON-VIOLENT ACTION FROM GANDHI TO THE PRESENT, OUP 2009



# People Power: Berlin to Burma

The end of the Cold War, symbolised by the fall of the Berlin Wall twenty years ago, appeared to be the greatest victory ever for civil resistance. But this has a complex interrelationship with other dimensions of power and success is far from guaranteed. Choosing the right moment can certainly help.

**G**REAT EVENTS SUCH AS THE END OF THE COLD War and the collapse of the Soviet Union have multiple causes. Political observers are not always good at encompassing the whole range, from the high politics of international diplomacy and force to the low politics of the street and changes in society.

While they were far from being the sole factors behind the events of 1989, popular movements did expose the weaknesses of the existing communist order, avoid armed confrontations which the regimes would have probably won, force the attention of outside powers, compel rulers to take decisions they would have preferred to avoid, and help to provide a relatively smooth through train to a post-communist order.

The decision of the East German authorities on November 9 1989 to open up the Berlin Wall was part of an extraordinary domino process. In one country after another, popular non-violent movements played a part in undermining communist regimes and assisting a transition to multi-party democracy.

Popular opposition to the latter-day communist coup d'état in Moscow in August 1991 also heralded the end of the Soviet Union. There have since been victories for civil

resistance in the post-Cold War period: the revolution in Belgrade that ousted Slobodan Milošević in October 2000, the 'Rose Revolution' in Georgia in November 2003, and the 'Orange Revolution' in Ukraine a year later.

Despite all this apparent success, people power has not achieved its objectives in many contemporary conflicts. How has a method of action that helped to bring down a nuclear superpower run into such difficulties?

## ROAD FROM COMMUNISM

In East Germany, the disciplined demonstrations in the streets of East Berlin and many other cities played a crucial and well-publicised role. Mass emigration from East Germany through Hungary to the west provided physical proof that the Wall no longer worked as a means of keeping the East German population in. Without the opposition movements there might never have been a decision to open up the wall.

Although the fall of the Wall is frequently taken as the decisive event of 1989, actually the demise of communism in Europe had begun earlier that year, in Poland. In August, as a result of the Polish round-table talks and the elections that followed, a non-communist became prime minister – the first in any communist country, and an epochal moment in the ending of the Cold War. This was proof that there could be a road from communism; and the fact it had happened relatively smoothly assisted peaceful transition in other countries as well.

The transition was largely due to the role of the Solidarity movement, formed in Gdansk in August 1980. It was Solidarity that organised and gave direction to workers' strikes in a workers' state; that survived martial law and detentions with its principles and support base intact; and participated with discipline and a clear sense of purpose in round-table negotiations with the Communist regime. Bronisław Geremek, a historian and one of the leaders of Solidarity, said many years later with justified pride: 'Solidarity was European history's greatest movement for change that did not resort to violence.'

Hungary, too, had broken the ice of the Cold War long before the opening of the Wall. Demonstrations in June 1988 – dispersed by the police – and again in June 1989 – assisted by the authorities – had commemorated Imre Nagy, former prime minister and a respected leader of the 1956 Hungarian revolution who had been executed in 1958.

By the end of June 1989 the party leader, Imre Pozsgay, announced acceptance of the principle of a multi-party democratic system. On September 18, after a marathon total of 238 sessions of talks between the party and opposition organizations, a compromise agreement provided for new presidential elections, a new constitution, and new electoral laws.

After all these striking retreats of communist regimes in Poland, Hungary and East Germany, other communist regimes in Europe sensed that their days were numbered, and knew that, with Mikhail Gorbachev at the helm in



the Soviet Union, they could no longer count on the Red Army to protect their system of rule.

The velvet revolution in Czechoslovakia in November-December 1989, involving mass demonstrations and a general strike, was another victory for people power – all the sweeter for avenging the defeat of civil resistance after the Soviet-led invasion of the country in 1968.

## CONSTELLATION OF POWER

To say that civil resistance played a key part in the end of the Cold War is not to deny the crucial importance of other factors. The tradition of seeing non-violent action and power politics as two entirely separate phenomena, each antithetical to the other, does less than justice to the complexity of events and the subtlety of actors.

The leaders of the various non-violent movements in central and eastern Europe were not absolute pacifists. They would have been horrified if NATO has ceased to exist while the Soviet Union still had preponderant power in their countries; and after 1989 many of them actively sought NATO membership.

Václav Havel had been a skilled impresario of civil resistance in Czechoslovakia from the founding of Charter 77 in 1977 to the Velvet Revolution in 1989; yet he could also, without any sense of contradiction, pay tribute to the work of the NATO alliance.

In March 1991, now president of his country, he told the



NATO Council: 'I am happy to have this opportunity to tell from this rostrum today the truth: the North Atlantic Alliance has been, and remains – pursuant to the will of democratically elected governments of its member countries – a thoroughly democratic defensive community which has made a substantial contribution to the facts that this continent has not experienced any war suffering for nearly half a century and that a great part thereof has been saved from totalitarianism.'

In the years up to 1989, the leaders of the various civic movements in communist countries showed an acute awareness of strategic realities. They sensed that communist regimes were running out of ideological steam; that this caused genuine self-doubt within communist parties; and that with Gorbachev in charge there was at least a chance that Moscow would not intervene militarily to defend

its allies, especially if the opposition remained disciplined.

In the Baltic states there was even collaboration between the leaders of civic movements and the ruling communist parties, who could agree on a platform of recovering national independence: the great 'Baltic Chain' demonstration of August 1989 – approved by the ruling communist parties of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – symbolised solidarity within and between the three republics as they sought independence from the Soviet Union.

Thus the circumstances surrounding the triumphs of civil resistance in 1989-1991 were special. However, they were not in all respects unique. Just as Gorbachev's role was crucial because he provided some degree of protection for peaceful change, so in other non-violent movements, the constellation of power, both domestic and international, has been all-important.

When the United States civil rights movement demanded equal rights for blacks, it did so against the background of a string of Supreme Court rulings – culminating in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 – that created a link between the power of the US government and that of demonstrators on the streets. Civil rights leaders exploited skilfully the argument that 'disenfranchisement of coloured people in the South is just as much an international issue as the question of free elections in Poland'. In some key moments of their brilliant campaign they depended on protection by federal forces to save them from the wrath of local police chiefs and state troopers.

## STEALING ELECTIONS

Even in the face of governments with dictatorial tendencies, non-violent movements have sometimes had effect, especially in cases where a democratic outside power had sufficient leverage to affect the outcome. This happened in South Vietnam under Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963, in the Shah's Iran in 1977-1979, and in the Philippines under Ferdinand Marcos in 1983-1986.

Indeed, it was the Filipino events that brought the term 'people power' into common usage. In all these cases, undemocratic rulers were toppled after mass demonstrations; but in each case the process was assisted by US willingness – usually belated – to ditch the more dubious local leaders of the vast US imperium.

A phenomenon linking many of these cases is the stealing of elections: blatant fiddling of election outcomes often leads to popular demonstrations aimed at stopping an unpopular regime from clinging to power. The Yugoslav revolution of 2000, and the 'colour revolutions' in Georgia and Ukraine in 2003 and 2004, all had this character, and all succeeded in showing the ancien regime the door. In these cases, as in many others, civil resisters undermined the adversary's power base, thus exerting powerful leverage. But in some of them, what came after was a disappointment, and last year Georgia got involved in a disastrous war with Russia.

## NO MAGIC WAND

There is no magic wand in politics. Even in the annus mirabilis of 1989 there was a warning. On June 4 1989 – the very day when elections in Poland rang the death knell for communist rule there – the Chinese Communist Party reasserted control in Beijing with a brutal use of force on peaceful demonstrators in Tiananmen Square. Since then, certain ruthless rulers – most notably in Burma, Iran and Zimbabwe – have checked opposition movements, often with great brutality both on the street and in prisons.

Such rulers commonly try to discredit civil resistance by asserting that it is part of a western imperialist plot. It is a partial answer to such accusations that back in 1968 the East German leader, Walter Ulbricht, repeatedly condemned western plots for a 'non-violent uprising'. In the long-run it did him and his successors little good to conceal the strong domestic roots of reform movements in the communist world.

Sometimes civil resistance may be defeated and may, in the process, provide an unintended proof of the continuing role of power politics in human affairs. Yet 1989 – and some of the revolutions that followed – constitutes a landmark.

Movements, some of which had seemed only a few years before to be lost causes, chose their moment, when the constellation of forces was favourable, to achieve notable victories of people power. They will not be the last. The question of how to assist such movements, while avoiding the accusation of outside plotting, is a key challenge for the conduct of international diplomacy today.

