

12th IACC WORKSHOP REPORT: 8.1

MOBILIZING CIVIC ACTION TO FIGHT CORRUPTION

For over a century, civilian-based movements have challenged oppression, corruption and inequity, achieved self-rule and helped create just and democratic societies in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe -- showing how people power can be a force for liberation and reform. In recent years, from the 1997 “Citizen Initiative for Constant Light” campaign in Turkey to the “color revolutions” in the former Soviet Union, corruption has been an important and central issue for nonviolent civic campaigns and movements.

Jack DuVall, President and founding Director of the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, identified the question at the core of all struggles against oppression – including corruption, occupation and authoritarian rule. He said, “*On whose behalf is power being exercised? With corruption, power is exercised by a few for a few, not for the many.*” Civic actions activate a different source of power – people power.

MAIN WORKSHOP OUTPUTS

I. Key Concepts

People Power

What exactly is people power? It’s the use of civilian-based strategies – using strikes, boycotts, civil disobedience, mass actions and other nonviolent tactics – that are designed to disrupt and dissolve the oppressor’s system of support and control. Such strategic utilization of nonviolent means of conflict is distinct from ethical nonviolence, passive resistance, conflict resolution or peacemaking. Nonviolent movements and civic campaigns have an extraordinary history of delegitimizing and undermining oppression, and with it, the apparatus of state and other forms of corruption.

Based on the lessons of past people power movements, including Solidarity in Poland, the anti-apartheid campaigns in South Africa, the nonviolent uprising against Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia and the “color revolutions” in Georgia and Ukraine, Dr. Peter Ackerman, founding Chair, International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, identified a few insights germane to the fight against corruption:

- I. Contrary to common belief, corruption is not impervious to public opposition and can be curbed when civic power is harnessed, which is to say, when ordinary citizens are involved through the use of nonviolent tactics and mass actions.
- II. Unaccountable governments are far more vulnerable than they seem – no matter what their capacity for repression, as for example in the case of the Philippines in this report.
- III. Although success is never completely certain, a well-conceived campaign of civilian-based action or resistance can provide the “margin of victory”.
- IV. Just as military leaders learn from historic battles, past people power movements can inspire successful strategies and tactics that are applicable to civic campaigns against corruption.

Principles for Success

In studying nonviolent conflicts, Dr. Ackerman has discerned three ingredients needed for success - that are all applicable to civic action to fight corruption. *The first is unity*, which includes unification around goals as well as the unification of all or most groups wanting change. Civic anti-corruption campaigns need to have goals that win the support and participation of the majority. The second element is unity of all kinds of people – young and old, middle class and poor, rural and urban, male and female. Just as a corrupt system has institutional sources of support, anti-corruption campaigns must be representative of the civilian population that opposes corruption.

The second principle for success is planning. Planning involves the selection, organization and sequencing of a range of nonviolent actions based on a strategy to delegitimize the adversary and undermine its sources of support and control, namely, the organizations, institutions and uniformed services that either make decisions or carry out orders. *Third, nonviolent discipline is absolutely essential.* It builds longevity into the life of the campaign or movement. Violent groups involve a minority and sideline the majority. Only nonviolent action can enlist the active participation of average citizens and permit a movement to spur defections from the other side (since it is not possible to co-opt those you threaten to harm).

Additionally, *nonviolent movements and civic anti-corruption campaigns need to be homegrown* in order to have credibility, to build alliances within society, and to enlist the participation of ordinary people. While the international community can provide valuable support – for example, by drawing attention to abuses, sharing general knowledge and best practices, and providing third-party protection, election monitors and assistance with technology and communication – any attempt to influence or direct domestic campaigns can be counter-productive. It will not only backfire but can seriously harm the integrity and legitimacy of grass-roots initiatives.

II. Lessons Learned From Cases

What can be learned from nonviolent movements against authoritarian rule - in which corruption was a salient issue? The Philippines and Georgia provide valuable experiences.

Philippines

Dr. Stephen Zunes, Professor of Politics, University of San Francisco, discussed the case of the “People Power” uprising in the Philippines against the brutal dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos – which was characterized by autocratic rule and systemic corruption that touched virtually every facet of people’s lives. This case provides valuable insights on forging unity, overcoming fear and apathy, using diverse nonviolent tactics, maintaining nonviolent discipline, neutralizing severe repression, and undermining the loyalties of key pillars of support to the regime.

Prior to the February 1986 civilian-based uprising that forced Marcos from power, there were a number of general strikes (called *welgang bayans*) and civic campaigns

challenging government corruption and related economic issues. Two-thirds of the island of Mindanao was paralyzed following a *welgang bayan* over a number of issues. This included foreign control of Philippine fishing grounds that were negotiated in part by bribes to officials, and so-called development programs, which actually financed dubious projects run by Marcos cronies. The Bataan peninsula was the site of mass civic actions opposing plans to construct a dangerous nuclear facility on the slope of a volcano near seven geological fault lines. Large-scale general strikes were complemented by a student boycott, business closings, marches and nonviolent blockades – all during a time of martial law and brutal crackdowns.

Sometimes government-linked corruption – by destroying a country’s financial stability, economic well-being and basic government functions -- can end up weakening the government itself. As a result, seemingly modest nonviolent tactics can undermine the corrupt regime’s hold on power. Such was the case in the Philippines. In addition to the poor, ultimately the middle-class and even the elites were affected. When Marcos attempted to steal the elections in 1986, the pro-democracy movement ingeniously launched a mass withdrawal of bank funds and a boycott of products from companies controlled by him or his cronies. People stopped paying utility bills, which threatened the cash-starved enterprises. This prompted wealthy Filipinos to panic and they began shifting large amounts of money out of the country. Such withdrawal of support was instrumental in the success of the People Power movement which forced Marcos to flee the Philippines and return the country to democratic rule.

Georgia

Giorgi Meladze, Rule of Law Program Director, Liberty Institute, Georgia, spoke from first-hand experience about lessons from his country during the rule of what was called the “kleptocracy” of President Eduard Shevardnadze. Corruption was the focus of a number of civic action campaigns - for example in the energy sector and the university system - which provided an important impetus for the Rose Revolution that culminated in November 2003 after fraudulent parliamentary elections.

In 1998, power blackouts were the norm, and public discontent was high. The electricity utility was state-owned. Inefficiency and cronyism were endemic, and electric power was first channelled to oligarchies and friends of Shevardnadze at the expense of the general population. During the long, cold winter, civic activists and students spurred ongoing, large-scale nightly mass demonstrations and “sit-ins” around campfires, since people had little or no electricity and heat inside their houses. The government was finally pressured to privatize the energy sector.

In 2000 - amidst this new atmosphere of empowerment coupled with general social distrust and disillusionment with the government - six students launched a targeted campaign to tackle corruption in the university system. Within one year, they grew to 2500 in number with branches in higher education centers around the country. They chose an autonomous structure, whereby no one group was in charge, there was not a principal leader, and diverse people were involved. Among the nonviolent tactics used were: communication through posters, leaflets and newspapers; demonstrations; street

theatre and other kinds of visible low-risk actions; and disruption through road blockades. They succeeded in holding the first independent, democratic student elections, and forced the implementation of administrative reforms, including a system of good governance and transparency of budgets. These victories were known throughout the country, and the campaign proved to be an inspirational lesson in democratic engagement both for young people and the general population. Some members later went on to found KMARA (“enough” in Georgian), the student movement that focused on civic education and engagement (particularly among youth), government oversight, and nonviolent mobilization for free and fair elections.

What can be learned from these two cases? First, youth played a vital role. Second, civic action not only diffused a general sense of public alienation from the government, it directly changed corrupt practices. Third, nonviolent tactics were the means through which to involve ordinary citizens. Fourth, numbers matter – civic mobilization was necessary for success. Finally, both campaigns were characterized by clear demands. Small victories were crucial for building up to the final goal.

Turkey

Civic action has successfully undermined systemic corruption involving many parts of society. In 1996, Turkey was plagued by a nationwide crime syndicate that involved paramilitary entities, drug traffickers, the mafia, businesses, government officials, Members of Parliament and parts of the judiciary and media. Shaazka Beyerle, Senior Advisor, International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, highlighted the “Citizen Initiative for Constant Light”, which mobilized 30 million Turkish citizens in a national campaign against corruption lasting six weeks. It involved clear objectives, new alliances, a sophisticated publicity campaign, and the strategic use of a low-risk, mass action tactic (switching lights off) that overcame apathy and fear through collective acts of defiance.

In 1996, a speeding car crashed. Among the passengers were a police chief and police academy director, a member of Parliament, and an escaped criminal and paramilitary member (wanted by the Turkish courts, Swiss police and Interpol) who possessed a fake ID signed by the minister of internal affairs. The car contained cash, cocaine, and weapons. The next day students held unplanned protests throughout the country, but were harshly repressed.

A group of lawyers decided that this scandal provided an opportunity to tap public disgust, mobilize people to action, and push for definable changes. They formed the Citizen Initiative for Constant Light. They made strategic choices from the outset – citizens should feel a sense of ownership in the effort and the campaign would be apolitical -- in order to build a broad alliance, protect against smear attacks, and attract the widest possible base of people. Prior to taking action they defined goals, built a coalition, analyzed the media’s views on corruption, and developed a publicity strategy.

The organizers created an innovative action that would overcome crackdowns, imprisonment, and public fear and powerlessness. A chain of mass faxes and press releases got the word out. On February 1, 1997, citizens began to turn off their lights at

9:00 p.m. for one minute. After two weeks, approximately 30 million people participated throughout the country, adding their own embellishments such as banging pots and pans and staging street actions. In the short-term, the campaign succeeded in breaking the taboo over confronting corruption. It empowered citizens to fight corruption, forced the government to launch judicial investigations which resulted in verdicts, and exposed crime syndicate figures and relationships.

CONCLUSIONS

Struggles to end corruption and win rights, justice and democratic rule are linked in significant ways. On the one hand, corruption is often a fundamental rallying issue in people power movements for democratic, accountable governments. Anti-corruption campaigns can learn from these cases and apply the general theory and practice of strategic nonviolent struggle. On the other hand, nonviolent civic action has been used effectively by anti-corruption campaigns, and can both complement and reinforce other methods to fight corruption.

The anti-corruption community can learn from the strategic analysis and approach of nonviolent struggle as it has been developed in recent conflicts. There is a body of generic knowledge about nonviolent strategies and methods that can be applied to civil society empowerment and civic mobilization to fight corruption.

Such knowledge is available through multiple sources. This includes: best-practices and lessons learned from veterans of successful civic campaigns; general workshops on people power and nonviolent strategies, tools and tactics; books; case-studies; research; documentary films; and the new “A Force More Powerful” nonviolent strategy game, which includes an anti-corruption scenario.

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