

MOBILIZING CIVIC ACTION TO END CORRUPTION

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For over a century, civilian-based movements have ended oppression, challenged inequity, achieved self-rule and produced just, democratic societies. People power has been a source of liberation and reform all around the world. Over the past twenty years, from the 1986 “People Power” uprising in the Philippines to the 1997 “Citizen Initiative for Constant Light” campaign in Turkey to the “color revolutions” in the former Soviet Union, corruption has been an important mobilizing issue of nonviolent civic campaigns and movements.

Moreover, corruption is often at the nexus of efforts to achieve good governance, democratic rule, civil liberties, human rights, and social and economic rights. In some instances, such as the Philippines and Georgia, it has been a galvanizing issue tapping deep public discontent in broader struggles against authoritarian regimes and semi-authoritarian governments. In other instances, such as Turkey, corruption has been the sole focus of civic action. What is common in these struggles has been the use of people power to force change that leads to curbing corruption.

People power can therefore be an essential mechanism in fighting corruption. Not only is it a direct cause of political change, it can also complement and reinforce other strategies, such as enacting legislation, enforcing transparency statutes, conducting trials and judiciary investigations, creating monitoring systems, defending independent democratic institutions such as electoral boards as well as government officials confronting corruption, whistle-blowing, implementing procurement guidelines, etc.

Nonviolent Resistance

There is a valuable body of knowledge about nonviolent civic resistance – including nonviolent theory, strategies, methods, research and historical cases – that the anti-corruption community can apply to its efforts. The first step is to define the phenomenon. Nonviolent struggle entails the use of civilian-based strategies – using strikes, boycotts, civil disobedience, mass actions and other nonviolent tactics -- to disrupt and dissolve the oppressor’s system of control and support. Mohandas Gandhi said, “Even the most powerful cannot rule without the cooperation of the ruled.”¹ People power becomes possible when the population withdraws this cooperation, refuses to obey, and uses nonviolent tactics to make “business as usual” impossible.

Civic action is not passive, much less a form of conflict resolution. It develops and applies pressure to authorities and others who are unwilling to change oppressive or corrupt practices. In studying successful and unsuccessful nonviolent movements throughout the 20th century, Peter Ackerman, an expert in this realm, has found that success is not contingent on situational conditions or even the degree of the adversary’s repression, but rather on the skills and strategies of the civic campaign or movement.²

According to Ackerman, there are three prerequisites for success. 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. This requires framing issues in a manner that taps public alienation and reflects daily realities. Author Jack DuVall, calls this a “unifying proposition” that “defines the reasons why the time has come for the people to act – it conveys the basic *raison d’etre* of the movement, which ordinary people come to accept as expressing how they also feel about the necessity for change.”³ One example from the past is Gandhi’s well-known statement – the British “are ruling this country for their own benefit, so why should we help them?”⁴

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 government has institutional sources of support, anti-corruption campaigns must be representative of the civilian population that opposes corruption. This means getting backing from civil society organizations, unions, professional and business groups, religious institutions, parts of the media, parts of the government (national, state or local), and also international NGO’s and institutions. Successful nonviolent campaigns targeting corruption have built such alliances, and involved many disaffected parts of society, often where there was no prior cooperation.

The second principle for success is planning. It’s not enough to gather spontaneously on the streets. Such activities can degrade into riots or result in repression, which can reinforce fear and apathy, deter the wider participation of ordinary citizens, and undermine the credibility and perceived effectiveness of anti-corruption efforts.

Planning involves the selection, organization and sequencing of a range of nonviolent actions based on a strategy to de-legitimize 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. For anti-corruption campaigns, this would involve:

- i. setting an overall goal(s) and possible interim objectives;
- ii. defining the target, for example, a government ministry, specific branches of the government, state or local governments, crime syndicates, corporations, etc;
- iii. identifying and analyzing the target’s various pillars of support;
- iv. developing a communications strategy focusing on the pillars of support on the one hand, and the general public on the other hand;
- v. designing a set of nonviolent tactics that reinforce the communications strategy, target the pillars of support, reduce fear and apathy among the population and involve their participation.

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).

Lastly, we would add that nonviolent movements cannot be created or directed by external actors; they have to be homegrown to be credible, to build alliances within society, and to enlist ordinary people. This applies, as well, to civic action against corruption, particularly when those

defending or practicing corruption include government leaders. The latter will not hesitate to attack the legitimacy of the campaign, by alleging that it receives support from foreign sources.

Philippines: A Corrupt Dictatorship Versus People Power

What can be learned from nonviolent movements against authoritarian rule - in which corruption was a salient issue? The case of the "People Power" uprising in the Philippines provides valuable insights on forging unity, overcoming fear and apathy, using diverse nonviolent tactics, maintaining nonviolent discipline, and undermining the loyalties of key pillars of support.

Corruption played a key role in weakening the credibility of Philippine dictator, Ferdinand Marcos, and it strengthened the ability of the opposition to organize nonviolent resistance leading to his ouster. In 1986, he attempted to steal a presidential election from Corazon Aquino, widow of the assassinated opposition leader Benigno Aquino. For the poor majority of the country, this act of political corruption only mirrored the economic corruption of Philippine politics, from which they had suffered even during more democratic periods.

Prior to the February 1986 uprising that forced Marcos from power, there were a series of general strikes (known as *welgang bayans*) against the regime, most of which challenged government corruption and related economic issues. For example, on May 2-3, 1985, there was a massive *welgang bayan* throughout Mindanao, which, according to Philippine Armed Forces regional commander Gen. Dionisio Tangatue, paralyzed two-thirds of the large southern island.⁶ Most people stayed at home, but tens of thousands took part in rallies, marches, and barricades. The lengthy list of demands included: a cessation of "development" programs which bypassed human needs and instead went to dubious projects for various Marcos cronies; a rollback in the high prices for fertilizers, feed grains and other agricultural inputs that benefited businesses with close ties to the regime; and an end to foreign control of Philippine fishing grounds, made possible in part by bribes to Filipino officials.⁷

One of the more notable *welgang bayans* took place over the controversial nuclear power plant under construction on the Bataan Peninsula, believed by many experts to be potentially one of the most dangerous nuclear facilities in the world, being located on the slope of the Natib Volcano near seven geological fault lines. In addition to safety concerns, there was widespread opposition to what was perceived as the misplaced economic priorities of the Philippine government in moving ahead with this \$2 billion facility, made possible in part by U.S. Export-Import Bank loans and an alleged \$35 million bribe by the Westinghouse Corporation, the manufacturer of the facility, to Marcos through an intermediary.⁸

There was a broad grassroots campaign against the facility during the early 1980s, despite the arrest, torture, and killing of several prominent organizers by government forces, followed by a series of large-scale nonviolent actions against the plant, the largest taking place June 18-20, 1985. Many parts of society were involved – a show of unity that is notable. A *welgang bayan* called against the government's nuclear energy policy was organized by 22 regional and national organizations in which 10,000 people rallied against the plant and a strike by transport workers paralyzed the province. In addition, classes were suspended as a result of a student boycott, and stores and businesses were closed. Most significantly, 6000 workers from the Bataan Export Processing Zones, representing 29 of the 34 factories, walked out en masse and joined the

general strike. Thousands more came to join the protests from nearby provinces in contingents of marchers and by motorcade, including representatives of women's groups and professional organizations in Metro Manila. An estimated 4000 local residents offered support, providing food and water to the marchers and erecting barricades against soldiers sent in to stop the march, which proceeded through the heavy rains of a tropical storm.⁹

Despite harassment and threats by police, nonviolent discipline was maintained. There were a number of arrests, and virtually all protestors were searched and photographed by the military before it was over. However, 20,000 marchers managed to arrive at their destination in Balanga in the final day of the action. For nearly three days, the normal activity of the entire province was halted by a sustained nonviolent campaign.¹⁰ This action rivaled the efforts of better-publicized protests against nuclear energy in West Germany, the United States, and other industrialized democracies of that era in its magnitude, a feat made all the more impressive given the repressive nature of the Marcos government.

The success of the People Power revolution against the U.S.-backed regime the following year can be attributed to a number of factors, such as the experience from such mass protests in the years leading up to the uprising, the country's democratic tradition prior to Marcos' imposition of martial law fifteen years earlier, the role of the Catholic Church, and the commitment to nonviolence by the leadership of the opposition. An often-overlooked factor, however, was how the corruption of the regime had alienated much of the country's business community.

Though nearby Singapore was at least as authoritarian as the Philippines, the Singapore regime had long recognized the importance of cracking down on corruption, both as a means of making the island city-state an attractive place for foreign investment, as well as a means of maintaining support from the business community. By contrast, Marcos had alienated much of the business community and the middle class through his corrupt practices, which had not only discouraged some foreign investors, but rewarded Filipino firms not for the quality of their products or their ability to cut costs, but their connections with the regime and their willingness to pay bribes. As a result, opposition to the Marcos regime was strong not only within the country's poor majority and from liberal and leftist elements opposed to its failure to meet the economic needs of much of the population, but by more conservative middle class elements as well.

The embrace of nonviolent action by middle class opponents began in earnest at the funeral of democratic opposition leader Benigno Aquino, assassinated at the airport upon his return from exile in August 1983. Massive demonstrations in the financial district of Makati, showered with ticker-tape, were in sharp contrast to the protest in the cities and towns of the rural Philippines and in Metro Manila's less affluent areas where nonviolent resistance had once been centered. While segments of the poor majority did take part in some of these demonstrations, it was also apparent that the perceived need to escalate the opposition to the Marcos regime had reached even the relatively comfortable segments of society.

This paralleled the growing disillusionment among the Filipino elite over the Marcos dictatorship. Apart from those who lost political opportunities from the suspension of the normal rotation of power among the Filipino elites, many of the better-off elements of society initially welcomed martial law as a means of countering the growing unrest, nationalist sentiment, and radical economic demands from below. Yet the corruption, arbitrariness, and general

incompetence of the Marcos regime was clearly taking its toll among some of these erstwhile allies, most of whom had been so only reluctantly.

While most of the brutality of the martial law period was directed towards radical opponents, Marcos was clearly not averse to using force against elite opponents as well. Some responded with petitioning and mild criticism. Others chose exile. However, with traditional outlets closed off, there appeared to be few options.

Among the nonviolent tactics adopted by the pro-democracy opposition immediately after the stolen election were those specifically targeted at the corrupt practices of the government. This included a withdrawal of funds from seven banks controlled by Marcos cronies, a boycott of media controlled by the government or by Marcos cronies, and a boycott of products of the San Miguel corporation and its subsidiaries, also controlled by Marcos and his cronies.

In the Philippines, like many countries in the developing world, the financial situation was so precarious and support of the middle class was so crucial to maintain a minimum of government functions, that even such modest tactics jeopardized the regime's stability. The cash-starved utilities could not stay in business very long if ratepayers refused to pay their bills. Wealthy Filipinos began to panic and started to shift large amounts of personal savings out of the country, dramatically escalating a trend that had been taking place for the previous two years.¹¹ For an economy already in a serious decline, these seemingly modest forms of nonviolent resistance advocated by the Aquino camp appeared to be on the verge of causing major repercussions.

Finally, when an unsuccessful military revolt on the outskirts of Manila was on the brink of being crushed by armed units loyal to the Marcos regime, hundreds of thousands of unarmed Filipinos surrounded the threatened base. Combined with mass nonviolent actions elsewhere in the capital, they brought down the dictatorship in three days.

In subsequent years, Philippine elections brought to office a series of relatively clean and democratic governments, though many of the country's fundamental social and economic problems remained unaddressed. In 1998, Filipinos elected Joseph Estrada, a popular actor who had served a term as vice-president under former general Fidel Ramos, one of the leaders of People Power uprising. Estrada campaigned as an economic populist and reformer from outside the country's traditional political establishment, though many on the left questioned his actual commitment to the country's poor.

Once in office, Estrada found himself under attack for widespread corruption, including illegal gambling, taking money from a subsidy fund for the tobacco farmers' marketing cooperative, and maintaining secret bank accounts. His propensity for heavy drinking, womanizing and keeping company with shady crime bosses led to increased popular outrage. In November 2000, he was impeached by the House of Representatives but senators allied with Estrada successfully prevented the trial from moving forward that January. In response, hundreds of thousands of protestors massed on the streets demanding his resignation. This led to the military formally withdrawing its recognition of his presidency which, combined with mass resignations from his cabinet, led him to flee the presidential palace and power was handed over to his vice-president, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo.

This January 2001 uprising has since become known as the Second People Power Revolution. Though Estrada, unlike Marcos, had not assumed dictatorial powers, his corrupt practices and related abuses of office, combined with the failure of normal constitutional mechanisms to challenge such illegality, led Filipinos to once again take to the streets in a nonviolent campaign which forced a president from office.

Turkey: Mass Mobilization Against Corruption

The Citizen Initiative for Constant Light mobilized millions of Turkish citizens in a national nonviolent campaign against corruption.¹² It involved clear objectives, new alliances, a sophisticated publicity campaign, and the strategic use of a low-risk, mass action tactic that overcame apathy and fear through collective acts of defiance.

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 media. Extra-judicial killings were common, some linked to the mafia and some political. On November 3 of that year, one event encapsulated the entire nefarious system. A speeding luxury car crashed into a truck near the town of Susurluk. Among the passengers were: a police chief and police academy director, a member of Parliament who is a large landowner, and an escaped criminal and paramilitary member wanted by the Turkish courts, Swiss police and Interpol. He possessed a fake ID signed by the minister of internal affairs. The car contained a bag of money, cocaine, weapons, ammunition and silencers. All but the parliamentarian died. The wounded truck driver was taken into custody and later to court. The next day students held unplanned protests throughout the country, but were harshly repressed by police, while other students already on trial for previously breaking the “demonstration law” were sentenced to 15 months in prison. Thus, among the pillars of support for this system of corruption were the police, judiciary, Parliament and senior government officials heading ministries.

A group of progressive lawyers decided that this scandal provided an opportunity to tap public disgust, mobilize people to action, and push for definable changes. They made a strategic choice from the outset that citizens should feel a sense of ownership in the effort. They initiated discussions among personal contacts, including public relations experts, political activists, and intellectuals, who together formed the Citizen Initiative for Constant Light. They remained staunchly apolitical, in order to build a broad alliance, protect against government smear attacks, and attract the widest possible base of citizenry. They adopted a leaderless organizational structure, both to defend themselves from reprisals and to reinforce the notion that this campaign belonged to everyone.

Prior to taking any action, the group carefully planned the campaign. They identified clear goals: removing parliamentary immunity, prosecuting the founders of the criminal groups; protecting judges trying such cases; and revealing the crime syndicate relationships. They systematically built a coalition by reaching out to non-political groups, first and foremost the Istanbul Coordination of Chambers of Professions, and then the Bar Association, unions, NGOs, and the professional associations of pharmacists, dentists, civil engineers and electrical engineers. A publicity strategy was developed with a message that encapsulated something akin to a unifying proposition: “We know everything...Nothing will be the same after Susurluk!”

Organizers also analyzed the media, researching and identifying people who would be interested or sympathetic to the issue of corruption. Because the mafia had recently been taking control of a major broadcasting corporation through manipulating legislation and business links, parts of the media were concerned about their image. The press and National Broadcasters Association were looking for ways to improve the media's image, and prior to the Susurluk crash, had hired a PR expert to help them. Following the crash, he personally became involved in Citizen Initiative for Constant Light.

The organizers sought to create an innovative nonviolent action that would overcome real obstacles, such as violent crackdowns, imprisonment, and public fear and feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness. A teenage daughter of one of the lawyers came up with the idea - turning off lights. A chain of mass faxes and press releases signed by "an anonymous aunt" got the word out. On February 1, 1997, citizens in Istanbul and many other cities began to turn off their lights at 9:00 p.m. for one minute. Each day the numbers grew, and after two weeks, approximately 30 million people participated throughout the country.

Feeling empowered, people quickly spontaneously started to embellish upon the light switching. They began to open their windows and bang pots and pans, blink their lights on and off, and drivers on highways blew their horns at the appointed time. By the second week, neighborhoods engaged in street actions, which had a festive and celebratory air. In the successive months, follow-up actions maintained pressure to prevent Prime Minister Necmettin Erkeban from using legal loopholes to block the inquiries.

In the short-term, the campaign succeeded in breaking the taboo over confronting corruption. It empowered citizens to fight corruption and forced the government to launch judicial investigations. What was not anticipated was that the military would remove its support for the government, which was forced to resign. Prime Minister, Erkeban, remained in power until a new government was approved by the parliament six months later.

The next prime minister continued the court cases, handed out verdicts, and set up an investigative committee, which prepared a report listing the names of all people murdered by the crime syndicate. A parliamentary committee was also created to document the syndicate's activities. In 2001, the interior minister launched a series of investigations. In cooperation with the Banking Regulation and Supervision Agency, widespread embezzlement was exposed, and well-known business executives were arrested. What was not achieved – one of the original objectives – was the removal of parliamentary immunity. In 2003, Mehmet Agar, the sole survivor of the car that crashed near Susurluk, was still in parliament. However, by 2003 most of old guard was voted out. Analysts believe that voters punished both the political establishment and the military by electing the AK (White) Party, the moderate Islamic party.

In conclusion, struggles to end corruption and win rights, justice and democratic rule are linked in significant ways. On the one hand, corruption is often a core rallying issue in people power movements for democratic, accountable governments, justice and rights. 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.

Endnotes

1. Peter Ackerman and Jack DuVall, "A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict" (Hardback: New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000; Paperback: New York, Palgrave-Macmillan, 2001)
 2. Personal conversations with and public presentations by Dr. Peter Ackerman, Founding chair, International Center on Nonviolent Conflict
 3. Personal conversations with and public presentations by Jack DuVall, President, International Center on Nonviolent Conflict
 4. Public presentation by Jack DuVall, President, International Center on Nonviolent Conflict
 5. Robert Helvey, "On Strategic Nonviolent Conflict: Thinking About the Fundamentals," (Boston: Albert Einstein Institution, 2004)
 6. quoted in Ang Bayan, May 1985
 7. Ibid.
 8. William Branigan, "Marcos Aims at Ex-Rival," Washington Post, Jan. 13, 1986, p. A15
 9. The Mobilizer, October 1985
 10. John Miller, "People's Power in the Philippines: The Challenges Ahead", The Nonviolent Activist, June 1986
 11. Newsweek, March 3, 1986 CVII (9): p. 33
 12. The section on the Citizen Initiative for Constant Light is based on the following report: Ezel Akay, edited by Liam Mahony, "A Call to End Corruption: One Minute of Darkness for Constant Light" (Minneapolis: New Tactics Project, Center for Victims of Torture, 2003)
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