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Gandhi and Gaddafi: The Nonviolent Road to Revolution? BY GAUTAM ADHIKARI

After being wondrously jolted by the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, the world watches Libya anxiously. Its neighbors on either side have carried out the once unthinkable. They have toppled sturdy old Arab dictatorships in weeks flat through, by and large, nonviolent civil disobedience. Is it now Libya's drive on the same road?

It would seem so at first glance. We, or most of us, would like to wish the Libyan people success. And then? Maybe Bahrain and Yemen and, dare we speculate, Saudi Arabia? But a closer look at each country shows circumstantial, economic, and power-structural differences that make nonviolent revolution hard to achieve in those places and indeed in a few other societies yearning to topple tyrannical rulers.

Gautam Adhikari, FICCI-EWC
Visiting Fellow at the East-West Center in Washington and formerly Executive Editor of *The Times of India*, probes how nonviolent civil disobedience can—and cannot—prevail over tyranny. “You can stand up to a regime’s violence with massive nonviolent protest in the footsteps of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. but only up to a point.”

The Libyan ruler has chosen to dig in instead of giving in to the demands of masses assembled in peaceful protest. He has gone all out against protesters with ruthless armed might. His penchant for violence may make it near impossible for the Libyans to follow the admirably successful Egyptian or Tunisian model of civil disobedience.

Which raises some questions. How do you brew a revolution? No simple recipe there. You can stand up to a regime’s violence with massive nonviolent protest in the footsteps of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. but only up to a point. When the regime faces no accountability for its actions, can you sustain nonviolent protest long enough to force change, unless you have external help? And, after you have drunk the elixir of freedom, how do you get life around you back to normal?

With almost the entire Arab world in turmoil and various non-Arab tyrants watching events in the Middle East warily, thoughtful people everywhere are trying to formulate answers. The questions are not new. They have been hanging over revolutions for a couple of centuries. Today, the debate is no longer so much between those who want violence and those who advocate a nonviolent path. It now revolves around the idea of nonviolent civil disobedience, its efficacy as a revolutionary tactic and whether it should have an expiry date. Inevitably, Gandhi’s and King’s ideas and prescriptions figure prominently in the discussion.

The young revolutionaries of Egypt and Tunisia did not noticeably invoke Gandhi’s name when they organized a tactically brilliant movement against a despot by using Twitter, Facebook, and texting via mobile phones. Emerging research suggests they drew inspiration from many sources, including the tactics of Serbian youth who had mobilized against tyranny a decade ago by using the Internet and the cell phone. But the young Arab organizers worked hard to ensure that matters did not take a violent turn through errors on their part. And some reportedly drew ideas from an obscure, 83-year-old American academician, Gene Sharp, who has studied Gandhi closely and listed 198 methods of nonviolence in his book *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*.



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It worked for them. But does nonviolent civil disobedience always work? Clearly not. It worked for Gandhi and the Indian nationalist movement even as it took decades to achieve its goal and was aided to an extent by a growing incapacity of the British rulers to sustain a far-flung empire after a draining world war. Besides, the British imperial rulers were answerable to growing democratic discomfort at home with their tactics, a feeling that even Winston Churchill, contemptuously opposed as he was to the idea of Indian independence, could not ultimately counter. Ditto for King’s civil rights movement in the United States, where he turned public opinion in his favor.

It did not work in Budapest in 1956, in Prague in 1968, or in Tiananmen Square in 1989, where the authorities employed violent might to stifle the cry for democracy. Thus, we might have to gauge a regime’s internal accountability as well as vested interests of its armed forces when assessing the likelihood of revolutionary success.

Then again, it worked in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s when, starting with Poland, dictatorship after dictatorship collapsed before the onslaught of mass mobilizations by the people. A crucial element there, however, was Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev’s decision not to use the army to stop the revolution in its tracks.

Therefore, which way the military swings remains a pivotal question of revolutionary change. A recent Oxford University study, titled “Civil Resistance and Power Politics: The Experience of Nonviolent Action from Gandhi to the Present,” suggests that nonviolent movements hardly ever succeed on their own. A web of interconnections exists between civil resistance and other forms of power.

That is why the young Tunisians and Egyptians took care to persuade the army not to squash their movement by force. They made friends with soldiers. In Egypt, they even sowed a divide between the army and the regime’s hated secret police; at one point the army intervened to stop Mubarak’s police thugs from attacking protesters. They also cleverly used a mainstream medium such as satellite television along with a new vehicle like YouTube to propagate their message worldwide. In nonviolent movements of protest these days, coverage by the media plays a vital part in their success. Of course, not everywhere. In China, the party makes sure it does not.

In short, there is no simple formula for revolutionary success through nonviolent civil disobedience. What works in one society may not in another. But today it is increasingly apparent that nonviolent resistance has acquired critical mass as a preferred option in places where people are gasping for liberty. With the media, new and old, now a globally linked tool for persuading and organizing, the chances of nonviolent revolution succeeding are way more than in Gandhi’s and King’s time.

That still leaves a question: when does civil disobedience stop? When does revolution cease and democratic consolidation begin? Here Gandhi’s answer of creating a decentralized rural economy with diffused governance has proved neither cogent nor feasible. In India, civil disobedience continues as a style of political action despite available options offered by democracy resting on a fine Constitution. But the Egyptian and Tunisian youth, for the moment at any rate, seem to know how important it is to follow revolution through with a patient effort to consolidate. They are watching and waiting for the army to manage the transition.

John Lennon and Paul McCartney, those quintessential poets of the heady sixties, perhaps had it right when they advised caution over the methods and intentions of revolutionaries everywhere in their song *Revolution*. Today’s young protesters in Egypt and Tunisia seem to have heard Lennon’s skeptical cry to revolutionaries: “You say you got a real solution, well, you know, we’d all love to see the plan.”