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Promoting Social Change in Authoritarian Regimes through Active Nonviolence

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February 1986 was a month of sudden, startling, and essentially nonviolent triumph over detested, violent dictators -- Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines and Jean-Claude Duvalier of Haiti. In just three months, events in both countries unfolded in dramatic fashion, ending in the dissolution of dictatorships which had seemed invincible as late as November, 1985.

Clearly something powerful was at work, and it was not the violent revolution both dictators had publicly described as the principal threat to the stability of their governments. In the euphoria prevailing after the dictatorships collapsed, many hailed these two transitions as proof of the power of nonviolence. According to this view, active nonviolence had been successful in traditionally violent cultures, proving its power as the proper strategy against entrenched, violent forces of oppression.

But do the events of February 1986 deserve their reputations as something unprecedented in the history of the two nations? Were they really triumphs of popular active nonviolence? What role, if any, was played by religious pacifism in encouraging active nonviolence as a strategy against authoritarian regimes? What lessons may be learned by those who would promote active nonviolence as a means to enhance democracy and social justice?
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These questions are difficult. To answer them I worked with Lon Fendall, Director of the Center for Peace Learning at George Fox College, to study the events in Haiti and the Philippines leading up to February 1986, talking to eyewitnesses and reviewing printed accounts. Possible historical and cultural precedents for the use of nonviolence in the two countries were identified, and attempts were made to trace the sources for the ideas of active nonviolence that were used in late 1985 and early 1986. This paper reports a summary of what we learned about the Haitian and Filipino experiences (note 1).

1. In both Haiti and the Philippines, the ideas and practices of principled active nonviolence were at the core of a democratic popular movement that took leadership in ousting the dictators.

The popular movements in the two countries were dissimilar in many ways. Haiti’s movement never developed visible political leadership, the role played so prominently by Benigno and Corazon Aquino in the Philippines. The Haitian movement was almost purely a "grass-roots" organization, initiated and sustained by lay and clerical leaders at the parish level (primarily in the Catholic Church), and by various local leaders in the community cooperative movement. Although some Catholic bishops played prominent roles in encouraging the Church as a whole to support the popular movement and its democratic aspirations, and in helping to publicize the movement’s views, the primary energy for the movement came from a decentralized and almost invisible network of local leaders.

In the Philippines, on the other hand, non-violence activists had direct access to the leaders of a powerful, centralized, elite-based opposition political organization. Wealthy politician Benigno Aquino was an advocate of non-violent strategy as part of his efforts to undermine Ferdinand Marcos. Corazon Aquino also came to embrace non-violence as a viable strategy in the struggle against Marcos, although she clearly never became a pacifist.

In choosing non-violence, Corazon Aquino allied herself with an organization called AKKAPKA ("Action for Peace and Justice"). AKKAPKA provided non-violence training, worked to develop nonviolent means of resisting oppression, and ended up counseling Aquino and Cardinal Jaime Sin on how they might organize a non-violent strategy to oust Marcos after he stole the February 1986 election. There was no counterpart to AKKAPKA in Haiti.
2. In both countries, it was crucial that fast and reliable means of communication were available among nonviolence activists at key junctures.

In both countries, activists in ecclesiastical and development organizations were also active in the nonviolent movement. But in Haiti, where visible national leadership was lacking and where the movement was not very active in Port-au-Prince, these other organizations were critical channels of information and coordination. Movement leaders communicated primarily through Church channels that had been established for other purposes.

Other communication was had by mail, and more significantly in the weeks leading up to Duvalier's departure, by radio --at times using coded messages. Access to independent radio stations like the Catholic Radio Soleil and the Protestant Radio Lumiere was crucial to the movement's success. Demonstrators around the country relied on these channels of communication for motivation and inspiration for their local protest activities.

National networks, ecclesial and otherwise, also existed in the Philippines. In fact, whereas in Haiti the Catholic Church was the only national institution other than the Army and the Duvalierist private security forces, the Tonton Macoutes, the Philippines was comparatively rich in non-governmental institutions. Yet they were not so critical in the Philippines, where the central events in the popular movement took place in Manila in conjunction with the military mutiny led by Fidel Ramos and Juan Ponce Enrile. In that situation, communication among key parties was face-to-face, and by telephone, even while Corazon Aquino was on the island of Cebu, far from Manila.

However, as in Haiti, independent radio stations were important to the popular movement. Without the Catholic-run Radio Veritas, it would have been difficult to issue an effective call for tens of thousands of people to surround the military rebel stronghold, frustrating nonviolently the government's attempts to attack the rebels. When Radio Veritas left the air in the midst of the crisis on Sunday evening February 23 (possibly to avoid its destruction by government forces), Catholic reporters found another outlet in radio station DZRJ (re-christened "Radio Bandido"), which proved to be a critical source of information until Marcos' departure on Tuesday.

3. Both countries had some historical experience with active nonviolent tactics. But these experiences had little conscious impact on the popular movements to bring down Marcos and Duvalier.
During Haiti's long history of independence (since 1804) there never has been a constitutional and democratic transfer of power. But on three occasions extra-constitutional transitions had been accomplished by concerted application of nonviolent tactics. In 1934, a series of nonviolent actions (strikes, boycotts, and demonstrations) succeeded in hastening the departure of U.S. Marines that had occupied Haiti since 1915. In 1946, another similar campaign led to the resignation of corrupt President Elie Lescot. And in 1956, General Paul Magloire lost his seat in the president's office as a result of demonstrations, riots, and strikes in Port-au-Prince. (Magloire's fall led to Haiti's only fair direct election of a president -- Francois Duvalier.)

But by 1985, 29 years had passed since the last of these "successful" nonviolent campaigns. The potential power of these experiences as inspiration to the movement against Duvalier seems to have been largely untapped. In several interviews with participants and Haitian observers of the anti-Duvalier popular movement, no one ever mentioned these earlier cases as precedent for their own work, even when asked to identify any precedents in Haitian history for active nonviolence. No reference to any connection between the mid-century movements and the movement of the 1980's has been recorded in the published material examined for this research.

This makes it difficult to assess the effects of previous Haitian experience on the fall of Duvalier. The movement in 1985-86 was starkly different from the earlier campaigns. They had all been confined mostly to Port-au-Prince in support of particular aspirants for the president's office. But the anti-Duvalier movement was decentralized to provincial cities, hardly affecting the capital, and was not supporting any particular candidate for president (note 2). In addition, according to at least one eyewitness to some of the earlier campaigns, the anti-Duvalier movement was much more principled in its conscious adoption of nonviolence as an overall strategy, while the earlier campaigns were just being pragmatic in what was possible without too much bloodshed. In any event, more contemporaneous influences were more important in shaping the anti-Duvalier popular movement than were Haiti's own historical experiences.

The Philippines had a more distant but more distinct historical experience of systematic and principled nonviolence. It was embodied in the life story of Jose Rizal, martyred in the 1890's for his advocacy of independence from Spain. The parallel between Rizal's nonviolent nationalism and that of Benigno Aquino was not lost on many Filipinos: both were exiled for their opposition to an authoritarian government, both became proponents of systematic nonviolence as the way to achieve liberations, and both were killed by
government forces soon after their return to the Philippines from exile. Another difference was the essentially nonviolent way in which the Philippines achieved independence from the United States in the 1940's after World War II, contrasted with Haiti's heritage of horrific violence leading to its independence. Yet, once again, more contemporary sources seem to have been uppermost in Filipino minds as they contemplated a nonviolent campaign to oust Marcos.

4. Although some aspects of indigenous culture in each country were useful in helping people understand principles of nonviolence, foreigners were the most important sources of the ideas that led to commitment to nonviolence as an overall strategy.

Of the two countries, Haiti had the most distinctly violent path to independence. The violent pattern had been repeated many times before the American Marines intervened in 1915 to stop a particularly ferocious cycle of domestic political violence. Yet Haiti under the Duvaliers was very tranquil, its domestic quiescence marred only by the occasional adventurer insurrection involving ludicrously small groups of fighters. (One of the insurrections in the early 1960's involved seven rebels, five of whom were American mercenaries.) The tranquility was enforced against opponents brutally and violently.

The Philippines' independence was less violent. But during the Marcos regime a nascent communist guerilla conflict had become deeply rooted in many parts of the Filipino countryside. The government also struggled with violent Moslem separatists on in some areas in the South. Marcos was also able to rely on some cultural concepts to condone his violence. Filipinos have traditionally considered violence acceptable as an exercise by the rich of their paternalistic power (lakas). Marcos was the beneficiary of Filipino tolerance of violence to counteract personal shame (hiya) for insults and defeats inflicted by the victim of the violence. In 1935, Marcos apparently killed a man who had defeated Marcos' father in an election. The Filipino Supreme Court excused Ferdinand's actions and ordered the charges against him dropped.

Haitian culture does not encourage overt violence against one's opponents. Rather, in keeping with the tenets of the dominant voodoo culture, Haitians prefer to resort to the spirits (loas) for help in defending themselves from threatened harms or inflicting harm on their enemies. If life is still unbearable, Haitians have historically chosen to flee the unpalatable situation, taking refuge in remote areas (a behavior known as marronage). This aversion to
public confrontation encourages a passive response to conflict that is directly contrary to active nonviolence.

Both cultures include some features conducive to a non-violent approach to life. In the Philippines, for instance, compassion (awa) is expected from the powerful for those vulnerable to that power. When the balance between lakas and awa is lost, cultural norms can be upset, costing the powerful person legitimacy in the eyes of his neighbors. Rural Haitians have long practiced communal forms of mutual assistance with major farming tasks, which helped them adapt to cooperative strategies against the Duvaliers.

But overall, the predominant source of inspiration about nonviolence in both countries came from sources external to either country. Gandhi and Martin Luther King were two prominent sources of inspiration (especially Gandhi in the Philippines and King in Haiti), as are many of the nonviolent exponents of liberation theology.

At the tactical level, there was also plenty of foreign influence, although local innovations proved to be the deciding factor in whatever success the popular movements enjoyed. The AKAPKA-sponsored workshops on nonviolence were led by representatives of the Fellowship of Reconciliation from the United States. Some of the tactics used in Haiti were adopted from models outside the country. But in each case, at critical periods in the campaign, tactics were devised by those on the scene. For example, when the crowds around the Filipino military rebels found themselves in confrontation with troops loyal to Marcos, observers record that people seemed to innovate on the spot means of communicating nonviolence to the heavily armed soldiers.

5. The Catholic Church was the most important channel of ideas about nonviolence from outside these two cultures. Non-Catholic sources were influential in a limited number of cases where there had been extensive involvement in and commitment to the community creating high levels of trust.

Liberation theology was a primarily Catholic invention, and the principal vehicle by which notions of active nonviolence entered these two countries. It provided a rationale and method of organization (in the base Christian communities), and an undergirding philosophy of concern for the poor and awareness of the social structures involved in oppression. The Catholic Church was in a position to transmit these ideas because of its central and trusted role at the heart of both cultures.

Yet the transmission was not without interference. In both countries, a relatively conservative Catholic hierarchy had to be converted along with the rest of the populace. Yet
converted it was, at least sufficiently to boost the movement until the dictators were dispatched (note 3). And the visible support of key elements of the hierarchy proved to be invaluable in generating broader support among the populace, so necessary in overwhelming the government's readiness to engage in violence against its own people. The key element was the trust placed in the Church by its millions of adherents.

Non-Catholic groups did not have the same level of built-in trust in either society. Some Protestants were influential with key individuals under circumstances where their long-term involvement in meeting human needs had established a basis for trust. Thus, Mennonites in Haiti, long active in development work in Verettes in the center of the country, impressed some activists in the popular movement with their witness for nonviolence, communicated in the course of common work on translating the Bible into Creole. The Fellowship of Reconciliation team that led workshops for AKKAPKA gained entry through personal contacts that established trust with AKKAPKA leaders. Yet Quakers are practically invisible in Haiti, and are hindered in the Philippines by their small numbers and lack of long-term engagement in the political process.

6. Those committed to nonviolence as a permanent way of life worked successfully with those adopting nonviolence as a possibly temporary strategy, with the understanding that violence would play no part in the campaign to oust the dictators.

Neither Corazon Aquino nor Cardinal Sin were unconditionally committed to nonviolence, not in the way that Bishop Francisco Claver or others in the Philippines were. And in Haiti, one eyewitness estimated that only about one third of the leading activists in the underground opposition were committed unconditionally to nonviolence. They were enthusiastic participants in the cause, however, because of the general consensus among all the activists that this campaign against the Duvaliers would be nonviolent. It was this consensus that made the cooperation possible -- but in both countries, unity after the dictators left was hindered by lack of underlying agreement about the legitimacy of violence in social change.

7. Although conscious application of the tactics of active nonviolence was a necessary cause of the fall of the two dictatorships, neither case can be described as a victory won entirely by nonviolence. In both cases disaffection with the
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government among key military leaders and foreign governments played a major part in the course of events.

In the Philippines, it is hard to imagine how Aquino could have prevailed over Marcos without the catalyzing effect of the military mutiny led by Enrile and Ramos. With a substantial but hugely outnumbered force camped in Manila, Filipinos had a symbol and focal point for their defiance of Marcos. Although shooting did not erupt between loyalists and the rebels, the potential was always there, especially after some key defections to the rebels strengthened their hand militarily. Would a focal point outside the armed forces, without the potential threat of a violent coup, have served the movement as well?

In Haiti, the popular movement did not have the open support of any elements of the armed forces, so its actions are less tainted by the potential for violence. Yet in the end, the movement was not the only force at work against Duvalier. As in the Philippines, the United States played a crucial role in finally convincing the dictator to leave. But there is substantial evidence that Duvalier was also undone by the loss of military support for his regime. The armed forces did not join the popular movement, but certain key officers (Gen. Henri Namphy and Col. Williams Regal among them) had decided Duvalier was on his way out. By late January, troops were doing nothing to prevent demonstrations, and Namphy apparently was working with the Americans to negotiate a post-Duvalier government.

8. Both cases offer compelling evidence that nonviolent campaigns which take a shortcut to their climax due to the intervention of military and/or diplomatic coercion achieve limited success in transforming the political conflict culture.

Certainly neither political conflict culture has been radically transformed. Haitian governments still appear to be based on superior force, and democracy is still a dream. Aquino's government contends with vigilante violence and armed insurrections, which have not yielded to her early attempts at peacemaking. Armed might is still necessary to retain power in both countries, and improvement is slow or nonexistent for the poor and powerless.

In Haiti, movement activists tend to believe that frustrations since Duvalier's fall are due in large part to a premature climax in the struggle against Duvalierism. By managing Duvalier's departure in a way convenient to Army officers and the United States government, the political maturation of the opposition may have been prevented, leaving it fragmented after the unifying goal of deposing Duvalier.
was achieved. Had the struggle continued for a few more weeks or months, political leadership might have emerged strong enough to prevent a reimposition of military rule. It is a little harder to make such a case in the Philippines. The strong political leadership was there in the person of Corazon Aquino. Yet one wonders whether another scenario might have been possible, leading to the ouster of Marcos without such obvious assistance from military rebels, and helping to reshape Filipino political culture into a stable democracy.

9. Foreign intervention in authoritarian-ruled systems can have constructive effect if it buttresses a democratic nonviolent conflict culture without reinforcing the authoritarian regime.

Although it seems that American intervention to ease the departure of the dictators may have stunted the development of democracy in these two countries, not all foreign intervention was debilitating. In Haiti, U.S. president Jimmy Carter's pressure for greater respect for human rights had a very positive effect on events. As a result of Carter's influence, Jean-Claude Duvalier relaxed controls on the press and on travel outside the country. It was during this "Carter spring" that the underground opposition blossomed, and became more familiar with and committed to ideas about active nonviolence that were circulating internationally.

The "Carter spring" was important as an element in the preparation for an even more dramatic turning point: Pope John Paul II's visit to Haiti in March of 1983. The Pope electrified his Catholic audience by issuing uncompromising calls for political and social change in Haiti. It was the key moment in unleashing Catholics who had been prepared during and after the brief "Carter spring" for more active opposition to Duvalierist dictatorship.

A similar visit by the Pope in 1981 was important to the Philippines. But the real catalyst for change was the assassination of Benigno Aquino on his return from exile in 1983. In this case, the American role was distinctly constructive, offering refuge to Aquino from Marcos persecution while he worked out his nonviolent strategy for change. In addition, American political freedom and connections to the Philippines allowed Aquino to remain in contact with Marcos opponents even from his exile, and may have been important in Corazon's development as a potential leader.
10. Foreign intervention to discourage mass emigration may help promote effective popular opposition to authoritarian regimes.

This point applies most directly to the Haitian situation. As noted above, one of the traditional Haitian responses to untenable injustice has been to flee the situation, finding refuge in some remote area of the country. This marronage served the country well prior to independence, and during the first century afterward. But as Haiti has become more densely populated, and the central government more adept at national social control, marronage has ceased to be available within Haiti. Instead, large numbers of poor Haitians who have been fleeing the country, especially over the last ten years.

But the “boat people” began arriving in the United States in numbers sufficient to burden this country’s ability to provide services. As a result, during the early 1980’s the American government cracked down on Haitian refugees trying to reach the United States by intercepting the leaky Haitian boats close to Haitian waters, and quickly returning them to Haiti.

Observers at the time anticipated that this policy would close an important safety valve for tensions within the country. The loss of the opportunity for escape accelerated the growth of pressures within Haitian society for improvement in living conditions and political freedoms. The unrest was focussed against Duvalier by the growing public criticism and opposition emanating from the cooperative movement and the Church, especially the tilegiz (Haiti’s version of the base Christian communities). With nowhere else to go, and no real prospects for economic opportunity, the poor who had moved to regional urban centers seeking work became the hotbed of opposition activity. Without the powder kegs in Gonaives, Cap Haitien, and other cities where squatters huddled in filthy slums, many of whom might otherwise have emigrated to the United States, the popular movement may never have gained enough energy to successfully pressure Duvalier to leave.

CONCLUSION

Mediator trainees are urged to be advocates for the process, but not for a particular outcome. To advocate for an outcome inserts the mediator into the relationship among disputing parties in a way that damages their ability to make their relationship work.

A similar principle seems to be at the heart of what we can learn from events in Haiti and the Philippines. Foreigners have had crucial and positive effects while
advocating forcefully for key process values: nonviolence, freedoms of speech, press and religion, and political processes that give equal voice to all social groups. These were the messages carried by Jimmy Carter, Pope John Paul II, and scores of individuals in religious conferences, development projects, and other contacts. The message can be conveyed by an individual who has earned respect through her commitment to the life of the people, or by a powerful political figure uncompromising in her steadfast insistence that people be given a voice in their own affairs. The message can help when it is received by the poorest members of society, or when the only direct listeners are the very oppressors themselves (as in Carter's message to Duvalier requesting greater respect for human rights).

But when the foreign peacemakers begin to move beyond advocacy for the process (e.g., for human rights, nonviolence, and democracy) to actually bringing about through their own influence specific political outcomes --even the removal of a hated dictator -- there is grave danger that true peace will get trampled in our rush toward our preconceived notions.

NOTES

1. A fuller report of our study of Haiti and the Philippines is contained in a monograph we have completed with support from the United States Institute of Peace.

2. In fact, the Filipino experience in 1986 bore a much stronger resemblance to the earlier Haitian campaigns than did the modern Haitian movement.

3. It is interesting to note that the Vatican was uncomfortable with the Church's partisan advocacy for Aquino in the Philippines, but apparently had no such feelings about the Church's activities in Haiti, where the movement was not supporting any particular contestant for power.

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