

When will peace prevail?

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The old calculation was simple and brutal: if you want to overthrow a tyrant, you must use violence. There was an occasional exception, like Gandhi's use of non-violent protest to gain India's independence, but people wrote that off as being due to the fact that the British empire, being ruled by a democratic government, was too soft.

And then, after bubbling underneath for four decades with a few partial successes like the American civil rights movement, non-violent tactics exploded into a kaleidoscopic range of peaceful revolutions in the later 1980s. From south and southeast Asia (The Philippines, Taiwan, Thailand, South Korea, Bangladesh) to Iran and the Communist-ruled countries in Eastern Europe, the technique seemed unstoppable.

Peaceful protest was drowned in blood in China in 1989, but it kept notching up victories elsewhere: the Soviet Union itself, most of France's sub-Saharan colonies, South Africa and Indonesia in the 1990s; Serbia, Philippines II, Georgia, Armenia, Ukraine and Lebanon in the 2000s; and Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, Ukraine II and Sudan in the 2010s.

But all the non-violent uprisings of the 2010-2011 'Arab Spring' except Tunisia's ended up being crushed by military coups or civil wars. And none of the current crop, in Belarus, Thailand and Algeria, are heading for a rapid or easy victory. Indeed, they might all fail. What is happening to this technique that once swept all before it?

It's more than three decades since this new technique startled the world, and dictators are not usually fools. They see what happened to their former colleagues who got overthrown, and start working out counter-strategies that weaken the determination and cohesiveness of the protesters.

For example, all but the stupidest dictators now know that while violence can scare individuals and small groups into silence, it is almost always a mistake to use it against very large groups. It just makes them angry, and they'll usually be back the next day in much larger numbers.

Your real objective, as a dictator, should be to trick the protesters into using violence themselves. Then the thugs who love a street-fight will rise to leadership positions in the protests while most other people withdraw, disgusted by the violence ? and then you can use massive violence against the violent protesters who remain.

Harvard politician scientist Erica Chenoweth is the go-to expert on this, and she has two very useful numbers for us. The first is that whereas non-violent movements to overthrow illegitimate regimes used to succeed half the time, now they win only one time in three. The other, more encouraging, is that if they can get 3.5% of the population out in the streets, they almost always win.

By this measure, the Belarus movement is still within reach of success. 3.5% of Belarus's population is about 300,000 people, and the Sunday demonstrations since early August, including those in cities outside Minsk, probably come close to that figure most weekends. People are not yet bored, cowed, or in despair.

The protests in Thailand against former general and coup-leader Prayuth Chan-o-cha have not yet spread significantly beyond Bangkok, and the mostly student protesters are certainly not even 1% of the population. The movement continues to expand, but its long-term prospects are doubtful.

As for Algeria, the recent election of a new president closely linked to the last one (whom the protesters forced to resign last year) has brought the students back out into the streets in force. The Covid-19 lock-down robbed the movement of its momentum, however, and it is unlikely to regain it.

So maybe one success in three for regime change, just as Erica Chenoweth predicts. But her most important insight is that the 3.5% number probably applies to any popular protest movement, including those in democratic countries. The goals of those movements need not be limited to overthrowing dictators.

As she told the Harvard Gazette last year: "(3.5%) sounds like a really small number, but in absolute terms it's really an impressive number of people...Can you imagine if 11.5 million (Americans) were doing something like mass non-cooperation in a sustained way for nine to 18 months? Things would be totally different in this country."