

Book Review

Erica Chenoweth & Maria J. Stephan (2011) *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Resistance*. New York: Columbia University Press

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Due in large part to the recent salience and visibility of protest movements that have toppled or seriously challenged their governments, social science scholarship has seen an uptick in attempts to understand the causes and consequences of nonviolent civil resistance. Movements in, for example, Serbia (2000), Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004), Lebanon (2005), and Burma (2007) called for systematic analysis. The more recent events of the “Arab Spring” in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, and Syria underscore the importance of understanding the dynamics of nonviolent resistance, particularly in authoritarian contexts. A significant effort to this end is Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan's widely-cited *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Resistance*.

The book is an ambitious effort to categorize and quantify the success rates of major nonviolent resistance movements from 1900 to 2006 and to determine conditions that improve the chances of movement success. A key insight of the book is that the outcomes of nonviolent campaigns should be compared against violent campaigns in order to better gauge their relative success. Major campaigns of any sort are difficult to organize and sustain even under favorable circumstances, so one should expect a high degree of failure across all types of systemic challenges. To establish a quantitative picture, the authors code 323 violent and nonviolent resistance campaigns – over 100 of which are nonviolent – that sought to either overthrow a regime, drive out an occupying power, or secure territorial secession. The authors code a campaign as a “success” if all of its aims occurred within one year and the movement had a discernible

influence on the ultimate outcome, as a “failure” if it did not meet these criteria, and as a “partial success” if it fell somewhere in the middle. By this coding nonviolent campaigns were almost twice as likely to achieve full or partial success than were violent campaigns between 1900 and 2006. Furthermore the success rate of violent campaigns has declined in recent decades while between 2000 and 2006, roughly 70% of major nonviolent campaigns met with full or partial success. One exception can be found in succession campaigns, which appear to be more successful when waged violently. An implicit claim running throughout the book is that major nonviolent campaigns are often held to unfair standards and are therefore commonly thought of as ineffective, but when one understands their success relative to nonviolent campaigns, Chenoweth and Stephan find good reason for optimism.

The authors attribute the relative success of nonviolent campaigns to their ability to more easily induce widespread participation than violent movements. Nonviolent campaigns are physically easier to join since they do not demand fighting prowess and demand lower levels of commitment than joining a risky, secretive, and perhaps far-flung violent insurgency. Nonviolent revolts present potential members with fewer moral barriers that might deter them from participating and can more easily capitalize on cascade dynamics wherein people become more likely to join a movement when they see many others doing so. Widespread participation in a movement enhances its odds of success by (1) facilitating the ability to deny the regime its key sources of power, (2) rendering it more likely that tactical

innovation develops, and (3) improving the chances of regime defections due to increased breadth and depth of social networks available to pressure state actors. A regime appears cruel if it violently represses large numbers of nonviolent participants which can undermine both domestic and international support. Together, these factors help facilitate significant levels of defection from the security forces, which often decisively relieves the target regime of its ability to maintain power.

The authors defend their central arguments by considering alternative explanations for the apparent success of nonviolent movements. For example, they address the concern that nonviolent campaigns are more likely to emerge in “easier” democratic contexts by showing that the opposite is actually true: most nonviolent campaigns emerge in authoritarian regimes, or those which score between -10 and 0 on the widely-used Polity scale. Indeed, the authors do not address a curious finding: over 30% of all nonviolent campaigns in their dataset took place in states with a Polity score of exactly -7. In any case, it should not come as a surprise that more extra-systemic nonviolent campaigns occur in authoritarian regimes since in democratic systems citizens can organize through parties, ballot initiatives, pressure groups, and a range of other civil society channels. A more pertinent question than the influence of regime type may be the strategic dexterity of any given regime in squelching nonviolent activities not only after they emerge, but also before they coalesce. This latter aim may be achieved through methods such as targeting potential opposition groups at their early stages of formation, manipulating the media, and co-opting elite opponents. The book is therefore limited by its reliance on the dichotomies of democracy/autocracy and repression/non-repression, which cannot easily accommodate a more dynamic analytical approach that takes the timing of movement strategies and regime counterstrategies seriously.

In Part II of the book, the authors examine four case studies to better understand how

nonviolent campaigns succeed or fail: the Iranian revolution, the first Palestinian intifada, the Philippine movement to oust Marcos, and the Burmese uprising of 1988. The scholarly literature on nonviolent resistance already features a number of excellent qualitative studies of single cases (e.g. Kurzman, 2004 on the Iranian Revolution; Zhao, 2001 on Tiananmen Square), comparative case studies situated within particular regions (e.g. Boudreau 2004 on Southeast Asia), and comparisons of movements from different regions of the world (e.g. Nepstad, 2011 or Schock, 2005). While the mixed-methods approach in Chenoweth and Stephan's book is laudable, the case studies do not illuminate the dynamics of movements as much as one would hope. This is primarily because they focus largely on the activities and tactics of the movements themselves while relegating the countermoves of the regimes to the binary of repression or non-repression. This approach makes it difficult to capture the dyadic and dynamic quality of nonviolent movements that, for example, Nepstad (2011) and Boudreau (2004) discuss so effectively.

In Part III, the authors argue that if nonviolent movements are indeed successful in overthrowing a regime, the new order is more likely to be democratic and less likely to regress into civil war than if the movement had been violent. They even find that the long-term effects of *failed* nonviolent campaigns are more conducive to democracy and peace than *successful* violent insurgencies. The values, methods, and widespread participation of nonviolent campaigns, the authors argue, are more able to nurture democracy and peace than the exclusive, bloody, and secretive nature of violent rebellions. This is an interesting finding that would benefit from more study by considering, for example, the role of transitional justice in the aftermath of different types of campaigns, or the long-term impacts on political discourse of repeated and widespread street demonstrations functioning as a modality of political change.

In short, this is an important book that is a

must-read for anyone concerned with understanding nonviolent resistance. Those with an aversion to quantitative analysis need not be off-put as the authors' methods are not overly technical and they explain them clearly. Readers interested in case studies of nonviolent movements in rich detail would likely be better served by looking elsewhere, but those wishing to understand broad patterns in which to situate their own understanding and research will find this book indispensable.

References

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