

## Reflecting on Rosa Parks' International Legacy

By: Maria J. Stephan

Last week in the United States and around the world, the life and legacy of Rosa Parks, the great U.S. Civil Rights pioneer who died at the age of 92, was remembered and celebrated. Rosa Parks' act of defiance on 1 December 1955 when she refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white man in racially segregated Montgomery, Alabama was like the Salt March begun by Mahatma Gandhi in April 1930. Both were the sparks that set aflame powerful movements. By sitting down, and stubbornly defying the racist conventions of her time, the 42-year old Alabama seamstress stood up – not only for African Americans - but for all peoples around the world struggling against tyranny and oppression.

The proactive nonviolent methods used during the U.S. Civil Rights movement, including protests, strikes, civil disobedience, and non-cooperation, have been used by other peoples around the world to end authoritarian and arbitrary rule, drive out foreign occupations, stop exploitative economic practices, and win rights for women and minorities. In the past five years alone, nonviolent movements that mobilized mass constituencies to demand free and fair elections ousted two corrupt regimes in Georgia (2003) and the Ukraine (2005). The “Rose” and “Orange” revolutions were followed by a less organized “Tulip” revolution in Kyrgyzstan. In Lebanon, a massive popular uprising (known there as an “independence *Intifada*”) forced the withdrawal of Syrian occupation forces earlier this year.

Despite the remarkable successes of these and other civilian-based “people power” struggles over the course of history, there is relatively little known about how and why some movements have succeeded – and others have failed. It is often assumed that some combination of structural factors, geo-political forces, and external support were responsible for the outcomes – anything but the strategic and tactical decisions made by the indigenous nonviolent activists themselves. This is a distorted view of reality. In fact, indigenous movements make decisions that influence their environments. When key societal groups (youths, workers, business and religious groups, journalists, members of security forces) are mobilized engage in collective, nonviolent stubbornness, this can wield great power.

The disciplined nonviolent restraint shown by the protestors during the U.S. Civil Rights movement caused the brutal use of repressive force by the police forces to backfire. The bus boycotts and lunch counter sit-ins imposed significant costs on white business owners, in the same way that consumer boycotts and strikes in South Africa hit the bottom line of white business owners. Today, women from the organization Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA) are enduring arrests, beating, and torture to protest against the despicable practices of the Robert Mugabe dictatorship. Palestinians from villages in the West Bank, joined by Israeli and international activists, are engaged in active nonviolent resistance against the separation barrier and the Israeli occupation. The Sahrawis of Western Sahara, another group suffering under an unwanted occupation, have launched protests and hunger strikes that have been brutally put down by Moroccan forces.

Members of opposition movements in Belarus, Azerbaijan, China, Uzbekistan, Egypt, Syria, and Iran endure beatings, arrest, and torture on a daily basis. Journalists have been killed or disappeared for writing articles critical of the ruling elite. The Belarusian and Azeri governments have vowed that the types of popular movements that recently toppled corrupt regimes in Georgia, Ukraine, and

Kyrgyzstan will be prevented and they've tried to demonize popular resistance by attributing it to Western intervention.

Governments can help protect human rights activists whose lives are at risk by pressuring repressive governments to change. Other forms of outside assistance, such as technical trainings in election monitoring, were helpful in the Serbian, Georgian, and Ukrainian nonviolent revolutions. Regional organizations and international NGOs can help indigenous activists to create new political space for civilian-based resistance by supporting independent media and helping like-minded pro-democracy activists communicate with one another. By covering the campaigns and activities of nonviolent movements and interviewing their leaders, the mainstream media could help give them a mouthpiece while internationalizing their struggles.

Rosa Parks once said, "I would like to be known as a person who is concerned about freedom and equality and justice and prosperity for all people." What better way to honor Rosa Parks' legacy than to promote a better understanding of how nonviolent struggles are waged, and to support those fledgling pro-democracy movements that are fighting to liberate their people without picking up guns or detonating bombs.

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