

Three Applications of Nonviolent Action: Social Change, Social Defense, and Third-Party Nonviolent Intervention



Millions of people have engaged in nonviolent action in this century, resisting oppressive systems, forcing changes in economic and social institutions, even bringing down tyrannical governments. By “nonviolent action” I follow researcher Gene Sharp in referring to dozens of specific methods of protest, noncooperation, and intervention, in all of which the actionists conduct the conflict by doing -- or refusing to do -- certain things without using physical violence.¹

Paradoxically, it seems easier to do nonviolent action than to understand its nature! There are hundreds of cases now fairly available, at least in a journalistic form. It’s clear that those doing nonviolent action frequently fail to achieve their objectives. It’s also clear that they many times succeed, which creates the greater puzzle. How can unarmed people prevail in a contest with sometimes heavily armed opponents? The cases of success fly in the face of conventional wisdom; a paradigm shift is necessary to appreciate how the “impossible” can happen.

Nonviolent action has three major applications:

- social change
- social defense
- third party nonviolent intervention.

Social change is the most popular application, and best known. Usually the campaigners have reform goals: they are seeking change in policies or conditions but not a change in the power structure. Sometimes, however, nonviolent action is used for revolution. In South Africa the ANC obviously wanted to replace the white monopoly of formal power with a new system. The Solidarity movement in Poland used nonviolent action to throw out the Communist dictatorship, and the Philippines dictator Marcos also fell to "people power."

Social defense is not as popular but it is growing in recent years. In this application, nonviolent action is not used for change, but instead used to defend the status quo. In Northeast Thailand, villagers and monks have been fighting to save the

¹ *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1973).

forest by using nonviolent action. This is *environmental* defense. There are also many cases of *community* defense:

Some urban black neighborhoods in the U.S. use nonviolent action to fight the invasion of drug dealers; they march, prevent drug dealers from using favorite street corners, and even use sledgehammers to beat down the doors of crack (cocaine) houses and chant their way inside while the dealers run out the back!

Another version of social defense is using it on a *national* level, either against invasion from outsiders or against a coup d'etat from insiders. In Russia in 1991, for example, much of the KGB, army, and Communist Party leadership decided to seize the state. They arrested top leader Gorbachev, took over the media and mobilized tanks. They also ran into such major noncooperation from the people that the waverers in the middle turned against them and they lost their coup. Similar events happened in Argentina in the mid '80s; a million people demonstrated in Buenos Aires, the fence-sitters turned against the military plotters, and civilian government remained.

National-level social defense -- called by researchers civilian-based defense -- is now being incorporated into the defense planning of some governments (Sweden and Austria, for example). These governmental defense planners mainly are interested in resisting invasions, and have put research and development funds into creating nonviolent strategies that will prevent a military occupation from succeeding in their countries. Even though this application (civilian-based defense) is among the least-known uses of nonviolent action, it has received the most funding for research (because of governmental interest).

Third Party Nonviolent Intervention is the attempted physical intervention of a third party into the arena of the conflict in such a way as to reduce the level of violence. Mediation and arbitration are also done by third parties, but they are not nonviolent third party intervention; here are some differences:

- nonviolent third party intervention is unilateral (does not require both parties to participate in structured interaction),
- expresses the value of process, rather than determination/judgment,
- enables the struggle to continue (rather than shutting down the struggle).

This application of nonviolent action is the least researched and written about, I am giving it extra attention in this paper. There are four forms of third party nonviolent intervention (TPNI) I have so far identified: accompaniment, interposition, observation/monitoring, and presence/modeling.

1. Accompaniment

The threats from the drug pushers had worried her somewhat, but the Philadelphia neighborhood leader shrugged them aside until a bullet nearly hit her and her children. That was too much.

"What shall I do?" she demanded to know in the meeting the night after the gunshots. The response from her neighborhood was heartfelt: we will protect you, they said, by holding a demonstration at your house and accompanying your children to the school bus. They did just that, and the threats stopped.

Accompaniment has recently become sufficiently developed as a technology so that a specialized agency offers this service globally. Called Peace Brigades International (PBI), the agency has since the early '80s sent to El Salvador and Guatemala volunteers who go with human rights activists threatened with assassination. The international volunteers put the local activists in a glare of publicity which reduces the chance of assassination, and not one of the activist leaders has been killed while accompanied by PBI. In 1989, during a wave of killings of lawyers in Sri Lanka, the national bar association invited PBI to send a team there to do the same, and, while death threats continued against the lawyers, none of those accompanied by PBI was killed. The author was a member of the first team.

2. Interposition is used when two forces are moving into battle and a third force (often a crowd) intervenes physically -- and nonviolently -- to prevent or reduce the violence. In 1986 Philippines dictator Marcos was shaken by the pro-democracy campaign and General Ramos decided to rebel with the troops under his personal command. The Ramos troops took cover in an army base, and Marcos sent the main force of the army to Ramos to destroy the rebels. The Catholic radio station broadcast urgent messages to the people to go to Ramos' base as well. Tens of thousands converged between the two armies and stopped Marcos' forces in their tracks through nonviolently and forcefully confronting the soldiers.

3. Observation/monitoring is increasingly used in election situations where violence is expected. Rather than *interpose* themselves between violent individuals or groups, observers/monitors are expected to carry cameras, notebooks, and in other ways provide a physical reminder that “the whole world is watching,” thereby restraining the violence. The author participated in the international observation/monitoring force in the Nicaraguan election of 1990.

4. Presence/modeling consists of individuals and teams entering a situation of open conflict and, through body language, acts of service, and words, assisting people to choose other-than-violent behaviors. This form differs from interposition in that the third party teammates do not physically place themselves directly between the fighters, but use other behaviors, like active listening, to embody values of decency and respect. The Russian group Memorial reportedly has substantial experience in this form of intervention in inter-ethnic battles, entering the “conflict field” and, in largely subtle ways, refusing to cooperate with the prevailing atmosphere in the field of hostility and violence.

Conclusion

Nonviolent action is given a variety of names: "soul-force" (Dr. King), "people power" (the Filipinos), "positive action" (Kwame Nkrumah who used it to lead Ghana's independence struggle). Whatever the name, it is a social technology growing rapidly in oppressive situations where violence is inadequate or too costly. Its growth as an empowering technology, whether used for social change, social defense, or third party nonviolent intervention, is a major feature of the political landscape of activists.

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