

**Article: “Nonviolence as Contentious Interaction”**  
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**Issue: Jun. 2000**  
**Journal: *PS: Political Science & Politics***



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# Nonviolence as Contentious Interaction\*

Scholarly discussions of nonviolent direct action have often been framed in normative or even explicitly moral terms. But moral commitments also have a strategic dimension. As Ted Gurr writes in his contribution to this symposium, "Demonstrations and general strikes have always had the potential for escalating into violent confrontations; participants in explicitly nonviolent movements could claim moral superiority by disavowing overt violence from the outset." We share most writers' normative preferences about nonviolence but, like Gurr, we are struck by its strategic dimension. One of the central contributions of the PBS series *A Force More Powerful* is its unique focus on this strategic perspective. Here, we build on this emphasis by offering our own thoughts on the strategic functions of

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nonviolent direct action, the regime contexts in which these strategic benefits are most apt to be realized, and some of the mechanisms that can activate and empower nonviolent social movements. In doing so, we build on a program of theoretical and comparative work that views nonviolence not as a distinct *sui generis* phenomenon, but as one of many forms of "contentious politics" (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 1997; forthcoming).

## Nonviolence as Contentious Politics

We think our contentious politics framework will offer three advantages over a view of nonviolence that isolates it from other forms of struggle. First, in contrast to the classical perspective, which tends to be static in focus, our perspective is dynamic. In particular, we look for the cognitive, environmental, and relational mechanisms that come together in complex processes empowering social and political change. In this, we join a number of sociologists (e.g., Hedstrom and Swedberg 1998) and

political scientists (e.g., Elster 1998) who have looked for mechanisms of change. But because our notion of contention is interactive, we tend to stress more "relational" than cognitive or environmental mechanisms (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly forthcoming, chap. 5; Tilly 1997). Second, while most analysts of contentious politics focus on a particular kind of contention (e.g., social movements, revolutions, nationalism, nonviolence, terrorism), we search for analogies among them. In other words, we seek to detail the workings of similar mechanisms and processes in widely varying forms of contention—from nonviolence to confrontational conflict to outright violence (Tilly forthcoming), from social movements to revolutions, and from democratization to ethnic nationalism. Third, following from this, and in contrast to the "most similar systems" designs popular in comparative politics, we employ a strategy of paired comparisons of unlike cases (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly forthcoming, chap. 5) We do this not because of a belief in general covering laws --about which we have deep doubts--but in order to probe the robustness of the mechanisms and processes we find.

In our view, movements, revolutions, and other instances of popular struggle typically emerge as the products of dynamic interactions among various parties to the conflict whose mutual orientation to each other defines a fluid, and socially constructed, "field of contention." By a field of contention, we mean a socially constructed set of adversarial relationships that is embedded in a legal/institutional system that effectively constrains the strategic options available to all contenders.

Among the actors who can comprise a field of contention are various state officials, challenging groups, nonstate elites, bystander publics, and representatives of the news media. The multiplicity and shifting composition of such fields makes for complicated strategic dynamics. Given space constraints, we will focus only on the iterative strategic interactions among challengers and the

mix of state and nonstate actors who normally make up the principal opposition to an emergent challenger.

## Nonviolence in Democratic States

The ongoing interaction between challengers and their principal opponents has a chess-like quality—what Gurr calls “a very serious game of moves and counter-moves.” Each move by either side constrains or shapes the response of the other. This is especially true in more democratic states, where state actors or other opponents can respond to challengers only within prescribed limits. The strategic choices made by the challengers condition these limits. As Gurr points out about ethnic conflict, “officials have repertoires of responses, just as those in ethnic movements have repertoires of political action.” This idea is best illustrated by identifying the broad types of social-control options available to opponents and then discussing how appropriate each is in light of the major strategic choices open to the challengers. Generally, opponents, especially state actors, have three broad categories of controls at their disposal.

*Normative or Symbolic Controls:* Why do people ordinarily abide by the normal routines of everyday life? The simple answer is that they have come to accept those routines as somehow proper, legitimate, or, at the very least, inevitable. This is true in regard to political life as well. These channels tend to be dominated by and, therefore, tend to favor those in power. The first line of defense against those who would challenge the status quo is the norms and symbolic controls that prompt people to abide by the “rules of the game.”

*Material or Political Controls:* Authorities and opponents generally have an array of material or political incentives they can deploy to control the actions of insurgent groups. These incentives can be positive or negative. Positive incentives would include such things as new welfare provisions or economic opportunities for the challenger’s target population or the granting of new political rights to the disenfranchised. Negative incentives might include the loss or threatened loss of employment for political activity.

*Physical Controls:* As a last resort, authorities and opponents can seek to control a challenger through some combination of legal threat and physical force. The use of the latter controls, however, poses serious risks for any opponent who tries to deploy them. Democratic states rest on the “consent of the governed.” If citizens sense their consent is being compelled, the legitimacy of the regime is apt to be fatally compromised.

The above represents an impressive array of controls. Challengers, on the other hand, typically have far fewer options and resources at their disposal. So how do challengers ever prevail in their confrontations with state and nonstate opponents? They often do not—and

often would be criminally negligent to try. When they do, they do so in part, by “choosing their own weapons system” (Zunes 2000). In other words, to achieve the changes they desire challengers often must choose tactics that simultaneously restrict the social-control resources that can legitimately be used by their oppo-

**To achieve the changes they desire challengers often must choose tactics that simultaneously restrict the social-control resources that can legitimately be used by their opponents while increasing the overall costs of these remaining options.**

nents while increasing the overall costs of these remaining options. To illustrate this dynamic, let us take the well-known example of the 1963 Birmingham civil rights campaign and sketch the series of tactical choices challengers made and discuss how those choices limited the range and increased the cost of control options available to their opponents

### *The Birmingham Campaign*

Launched in April 1963, the Birmingham civil rights campaign pitted a strong local movement led by Martin Luther King Jr. against an entrenched segregationist opposition headed by the city’s infamous commissioner of public safety, Eugene “Bull” Connor. Known for his extreme racist views and propensity for violence, Connor’s presence was likely the reason King and his lieutenants selected Birmingham as the site for a campaign in the first place. As Gurr points out in his contribution to this symposium, “movement leaders like Mohandas Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. accept, sometimes solicit, violent retaliation because, as victims, they will be better able to gain sympathetic support from bystanders.” In the words of Pat Watters,

The supposition has to be that . . . SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Conference], in a shrewd . . . stratagem, knew a good enemy when they saw him. . . . one who could be counted on in stupidity and natural viciousness to play into their hands, for full exploitation in the press as archfiend and villain. (1971, 266)

The results of choosing this field of contention are well known. After several days of displaying uncharacteristic restraint, Connor unleashed police dogs and trained fire hoses on the demonstrators, producing some of the most brutally memorable images of the Civil Rights Movement. Those images, transmitted around the globe, set off a firestorm of criticism of U.S. racial policies. In turn, the Kennedy administration was

forced to intervene in defense of King and his followers. Moreover, the public sympathy that accrued to the movement as a result of the campaign ultimately forced a reluctant White House to support a civil rights bill that, even in a much weaker form, had earlier been described as politically inopportune by administration officials. In welcoming King to the White House following the 1963 March on Washington, President Kennedy acknowledged the significance of the Birmingham campaign when he remarked that "our judgement of Bull Connor should not be too harsh. After all, in his own way he has done a good deal for civil rights legislation this year" (quoted in King 1963, 144).

Kennedy's ironic tribute to Connor implicitly acknowledged the chess-like interaction under discussion here and the special genius of nonviolent direct action. That genius owed much to the way in which SCLC's choice of tactics limited the legitimate options open to Connor. To better understand this dynamic, we will list the strategic choices made by SCLC and consider their implications for the social-control options remaining to Connor. Like participants in most movements, the Birmingham insurgents had to make three general strategic decisions.

*Institutionalized versus Noninstitutionalized Action:* Any challenging group seeking to advance its interests must first decide whether or not to do so within "proper channels." Doing so can perhaps gain a movement a measure of legitimacy, but at the cost of leaving opponents free to exercise most, and the least costly, of their control options.

*Legal versus Illegal Actions:* The next strategic choice challengers must make is whether to break the law in pursuit of their goals. By defying court orders barring demonstrations and marches and flouting local segregation ordinances, participants in the Birmingham movement opted to break a variety of laws. In doing so, they raised the stakes of the conflict and the costs of controlling it while granting their opponents no greater leeway to control the conflict. Having demonstrated their willingness to break the law, activists breached what for many challengers proves a formidable tactical and psychological barrier and freed themselves from the legal constraints on their actions. As long as the demonstrators remained peaceful, however, public officials were still normatively and morally constrained from using violence to control the campaign.

*Nonviolent versus Violent Actions:* What if the Birmingham demonstrators had themselves employed violence? In Birmingham, King took to the streets on at least one occasion to prevent this from happening (King 1963). What prompted him to act in this way? First and foremost, King believed in nonviolence as a way of life and found violence morally abhorrent. Second, he feared the increased loss of life and personal injury that segregationists would inflict on blacks were they given the excuse of having to quell movement-related violence.

King's desire to limit violence by black demonstrators also owed much to his savvy strategic appreciation of the tactical advantages of nonviolent activity. Had demonstrators met police violence with counter-violence, they would not have won the public sympathy

and support that helped them achieve their goals. Though the Birmingham campaign was fueled by a strong moral commitment and reinforced by pre-existing church networks, it succeeded as a result of strategic interaction among the challengers, their local opponents, federal officials, the media, and third parties that "certified" the movement even as they "decertified" the Jim Crow regime.

## Nonviolence in Nondemocratic Contexts

The strategic dynamic so evident in Birmingham applies with much less force in nondemocratic regimes. As Gay Seidman points out in her contribution to this issue, "attempts to use passive resistance in South Africa demonstrate how deeply such strategies rely on the oppressor's response and illustrate the limits of such a strategy when the oppressor rejects universal principles." Since governments in nondemocratic states do not govern by popular consent, they can repress movements with more impunity and tactical license than governments in democratic states.

Stephen Zunes' contribution shows that nonviolent actions can compel desirable changes in nondemocratic states, but also that the circumstances of successful nonviolent campaigns differ significantly in different states, as do the goals of the insurgents. Our second case illustrates how much the circumstances that favor the success of nonviolent insurgents lie beyond their ability to create and also shows that some of the same tactics employed in Birmingham can be effectively used by challengers to harsh and authoritarian regimes like that of Ferdinand Marcos' in the Philippines. The case study further illustrates how much participants in nonviolent campaigns have come to depend on sympathetic worldwide media attention.

### *The Philippine "Yellow Revolution"*<sup>1</sup>

When, in 1986, a coalition of democratic activists, nuns, business groups, human rights advocates, and insurgent factions of the military combined to peacefully overthrow the Marcos regime and install Corazón Aquino as a democratically elected president, advocates of nonviolent resistance rejoiced. Since taking power in 1971, Marcos had brutalized the Philippines and given himself and his cronies' enough opportunities to indulge their kleptomaniacal tendencies to destroy what had been one of Asia's most prosperous economies (Hawes 1987). By the early 1980s, dissatisfaction with Marcos had led to a growing communist insurgency in the provinces and an increasingly restive population in the capital.

Nonviolent advocacy for democracy worked in the Philippines, but the events that led to the overthrow of Marcos's regime in 1986 were expressions of broader strategic interactions that commenced as early as 1983 and took in many more actors than those who stood up to Marcos's armed forces. Moreover, not all members of the opposition coalition held strong beliefs in

democratic ideals and few of them had King's understanding of nonviolence. Some supported democracy because they had been excluded from Marcos's system of crony capitalism; others feared the ongoing communist insurgency more than they did the restoration of electoral democracy. Still others simply wanted a piece of the political pie.

The struggle that ended Marcos's rule had been set in motion by the assassination of Corazón Aquino's late husband and Marcos's longtime rival, Benigno Aquino, following his return in 1983 from three years of exile in the U.S. Public outrage over the assassination solidified and broadened the opposition to Marcos, setting in motion a series of institutional challenges that ended in Mrs. Aquino's winning the presidency. From one point of view Aquino's assassination was merely the culmination of a longstanding political rivalry between himself, his extended family, and the dictator and his cronies. Indeed, many believe that Marcos's declaration of martial law in 1972 was intended, in

part, to prevent his having to face Aquino in the presidential election scheduled for the next year. Subsequent to the imposition of martial law, Aquino was jailed for various "political crimes." Under pressure from the Carter administration, Aquino was eventually released and allowed to come to the U.S., where he continued to voice his opposition to Marcos at every opportunity. By all accounts, Aquino's return to the Philippines was motivated by reports that Marcos was in ill health. Indeed, Aquino thought it possible that he might be able to persuade Marcos "to arrange for a peaceful transfer of power to the opposition, or failing that, to assume leadership of that opposition himself" (Lande 1986, 15). In other words, Aquino's conviction that Marcos was vulnerable to challenge prompted him to come back to Manila, triggering the sequence of events that ended in Marcos's ouster.

If Aquino's actions were motivated by a sense of political opportunity, then his assassination represented an innovative—if ill-advised—tactical response by Marcos loyalists in the armed forces to the perceived threat of Aquino's return. In actuality, the assassination helped to create a generalized sense of uncertainty and flux rather than fearful acquiescence to Marco's continued rule (Boudreau 1997). Marcos increased his isolation when he packed an ostensibly neutral committee of inquiry into the murder with his own supporters. He multiplied his problems when he tried to neutralize U.S. opposition by unexpectedly calling a snap election.

Marcos's actions backfired terribly, not so much because they emboldened the regime's traditional opponents, but because they encouraged opponents *within* the elite with an opportunity to broker a coalition with sectors of the population that had previously supported the regime. These new critics included elements of the Philippine business community who had been excluded from Marcos's circle of kleptocrats, the mainstream Philippine press, key U.S. officials, and Cardinal Jaime Sin and the official hierarchy of the Philippine Catholic Church.

Marcos's relations with the Church had been strained since the mid-1970s and were further weakened in the early 1980s by the government's increasingly strident campaign against "communist infiltration" in Church ranks (Youngblood 1987, 352). But the rift was largely invisible, thus preserving the public perception of tacit Church support for the regime. Following the assassination, the situation changed dramatically. Cardinal Sin and other Church officials reacted strongly to Aquino's death, and immediately began sharply criticizing the regime both for its apparent culpability in the shooting and later for its clumsy efforts to pack the panel charged with investigating it.

By coming out so forcefully against the regime in the wake of the slaying, Sin gave public voice to sentiments felt privately by many members of



**Yellow Revolution.** Bayan students in Manila rally after Marcos flees the country in February 1986. Photo courtesy of Black Star.

the Philippine middle and upper classes. Institutions and networks normally wary of insurgent groups, like the Junior Chamber of Commerce, now joined them in protesting the regime and its corrupt practices (Hedman 1998). But none of these defections weakened Marcos as much as the slow withdrawal of support from Washington. Although President Reagan had certified Marcos as his “good friend,” others in the Washington establishment and the U.S. news media became increasingly critical of the dictator after the assassination. Alienated members of the Philippine middle class saw attacks on the legitimacy of their government emanating from American news agencies and began to believe that Marcos could, in fact, be ousted.

This is not to deny the importance of what happened in Manila in 1986. When the snap election gave Marcos a majority and Marcos’s opponent, Corazón Aquino, called for a general strike to protest the results, hundreds of thousands of demonstrators took to the streets. Six days later, Defense Minister Juan Ponce Enrile and Lt. General Fidel Ramos—heretofore Marcos allies—seized control of the military headquarters at Camp Aguinaldo in Manila. Fearing military retaliation by forces loyal to Marcos, Cardinal Sin called on citizens to surround the base and protect the military rebels. Denied the military option and with his domestic political support and external sponsorship collapsing, Marcos fled the Philippines and took up exile in Hawaii. Aquino’s victory was assured by the combination of mass nonviolence and elite defection triggered by the withdrawal of American support.

## Mechanisms of Change

We have sketched this familiar story not because we find it identical with the Birmingham movement—in fact, it was very different—but to bring home the strategic aspects of nonviolent resistance. The dramatic TV pictures of nuns, students, office workers, and others drawn up against the troops of dictator Marcos had much the same determinant effect on the movement for Philippine democracy as the images of school children being set upon by Bull Connor’s dogs and water cannon. As much as the individuals depicted, the images themselves came to influence the broader field of contention that included actors both domestic and international, mass and elite. The Catholic Church, the noncrony sector of the business community, parts of the military, and the all-important excolonial power were also major forces in this field of contention, as were the communist-led insurgents who frightened many of the former into grudgingly supporting electoral democracy.<sup>2</sup>

Nonviolence is best seen in a broader field of contention. As Gay Seidman points out in regard to South Africa, violence and nonviolence intersect in fields of contention—if only because authoritarian governments regularly reject such distinctions. For one thing, such

governments routinely claim that “any support for democratic goals . . . could be construed as support for armed struggle.” As Gurr points out in his contribution, “Gandhi sought to capitalize on the British sense of fair play. . . . One can well imagine what Stalin’s response to a hypothetical nonviolent campaign would have been.” Moreover, activists themselves do not always draw rigorous moral distinctions between violent and nonviolent actions taken in pursuit of a common cause. As Seidman points out, in South Africa, “even anti-apartheid activists with a strong moral commitment to nonviolence generally avoided condemnation of those who had taken a different route.”

Is there, then, not a single “thing” called “nonviolent resistance”? There is, but it shares with other forms of struggle mechanisms and processes that succeed or fail within complex fields of contention. Let us return to our two examples. The Yellow Revolution resembles the Birmingham campaign in its inscription in a broader field of contention and in the way it was powered by mechanisms of contention that are familiar from other forms of politics. We saw, for example, the “brokerage” of an electoral coalition among social and political groups with little in common but their opposition to Marcos.<sup>3</sup> Then too, there was the “certification” of this coalition by the Philippines’ powerful external sponsor and its quite deliberate “decertification” of Marcos once Washington determined that he could not survive.<sup>4</sup> Finally, the anti-Marcos movement illustrates the role of “social appropriation”—the transformation of preexisting networks and organizations into vehicles of collective struggle—in the emergence and development of social movements. Reluctant to risk social disorder until the behavior of the regime became so offensive, and pressure on Marcos became so great, the Philippine Catholic Church, much as the Protestant churches in the South that allowed their appropriation during the Civil Rights Movement, did eventually put its capillary structure at the service of the opposition. Once it did, it galvanized apolitical and conservative groups around the country to defect from the regime.

We do not want to be misunderstood. The fact that familiar mechanisms of contention are present in an episode of nonviolent resistance does not reduce it to politics as usual. In both Birmingham and Manila, courageous insurgents faced down brutal and hostile opponents before the world media and succeeded in moving oppressive regimes towards greater levels of democracy and equality. To succeed, nonviolent movements require bravery and conviction on the part of many ordinary people. But it should help to reinforce the central point of *A Force More Powerful* to observe that, in democracies and nondemocracies alike, nonviolent resistance is embedded in a strategic context. To understand it—and to employ it—requires not only an understanding of the moral superiority of nonviolent resistance but of the interactive dynamics of contention.

## Notes

\* This paper is a product of a larger collaborative venture of the authors with Charles Tilly, the results of which will soon be published as *Dynamics of Contention*. We are, as always, grateful for our collaborator's inspiration and critical insights.

1. This section draws on chapter 7 of our forthcoming *Dynamics of Contention*.

2. In fact, had the Communists and their allies not chosen to sit out the election, the results might have been very different (Kerklievet 1996, 9).

3. Three groups in particular helped to draw upper and middle classes into the struggle: BANDILA, a social-democratic organization

long allied with the Catholic Church; JAJA (Justice for Aquino, Justice for Ali), which emerged early in the struggle as a vehicle for coordinating the street demonstrations that came to serve as the movement's hallmark; and the National Movement for Free Elections, an ephemeral body formed less as an organized expression of sectoral interests than a temporary solution to a particular problem (Hedman 1998).

4. It was Reagan ally, Senator Richard Lugar (R-IN), returning from a fact finding trip to Manila, who convinced the president of Marcos's hopeless corruption and vulnerability (Lande 1987, 41).

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