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Nonviolence in Ethnopolitics: Strategies for the Attainment of Group Rights and Autonomy

During the early 1990s, the integrity of the Russian Federation was threatened when many of its constituent republics declared that they were sovereign states independent of Moscow's control. The most populous republic to do so was Tatarstan, where radical nationalists mobilized supporters for a self-determination campaign that began with mass demonstrations. What followed was not ethnic war but protracted negotiations between Russian and Tatar officials that culminated, in February 1994, in a power- and revenue-sharing treaty that gave Tatarstan virtual independence and preempted open rebellion.

In April 1999, the Canadian government took another step away from its long-standing opposition to autonomy for Native Americans and gave self-government to the newly created, resource-rich territory of Nunavut, which

occupies 20% of the country's land and is home to 22,000 Inuits. No violence or civil disobedience contributed to this outcome. Rather, it was the result of decades of political activism by and on

behalf of Canada's indigenous peoples.

Late in 1999, the German government passed legislation making it much easier for two million legal Turkish residents, most of whom have long resented their and their children's second-class status, to gain German citizenship. The new law provides that children with foreign-national parents who have lived eight years or more in Germany will hold dual citizenship until the age of 23, when they can choose between German citizenship or that of their parents. German and Turkish activists have pushed for such reforms for many years, but the only acts of violence that accompanied the conflict were neo-Nazi attacks, some of them fatal, on Turks and other visible minorities.

These three examples show that ethnonationalists and minority rights

activists can successfully pursue their collective objectives through conventional politics and nonviolent protest. The American public's media-driven preoccupation with ethnic violence in Kosovo, Indonesia, Central Africa, and other worst-case scenarios obscures the fact that most of the gains made by minorities during the latter half of the twentieth century have been achieved by peaceful means. Violent strategies are usually chosen only after other means have been tried and found wanting.

For comparative evidence about strategies of ethnic conflict, consider the 1998 cross-section of 275 politically significant ethnic groups shown in Table 1. More than one-third of the groups monitored by the Minorities at Risk project engaged in no overt political action. Like Inuits in Canada and Turks in Germany, these peoples relied on conventional politics to pursue group objectives. More than 40% used less conventional means—such as symbolic opposition, movement-building, and mass demonstrations—which are the classic techniques of nonviolent struggle. At the other end of the spectrum, one-fifth of the groups were in open rebellion, but, for the most part, their violence was limited to terrorism and small-scale guerrilla actions. Only 21 of the 57 rebellious groups were fighting medium- to large-scale guerrilla or civil wars like the KLA in Kosovo and militant Hutus in Burundi.¹

I treat three important analytic questions about nonviolent strategies of ethnic politics in the pages that follow. First, how does nonviolent political action relate to conventional politics, on the one hand, and violent conflict, on the other? Second, under what circumstances do the leaders of ethnic groups choose strategies of nonviolence? Finally, when are such strategies likely to succeed, why, and with what long-term consequences?

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TABLE 1
Strategies of Political Action among 275 Minority Groups
in 1998

World Region (number of groups)	Highest Level of Political Action Reported		
	No Political Action ^a	Mobilization, Mass Action ^b	Terrorism, Rebellion, Civil War ^c
Western Democracies, Latin America (n = 62)	24 (39%)	31 (50%)	7 (11%)
Post-Communist States (n = 59)	32 (54%)	23 (39%)	4 (7%)
South, Southeast, and East Asia (n = 59)	11 (19%)	36 (38%)	20 (21%)
Africa and the Middle East (n = 95)	39 (41%)	36 (38%)	20 (21%)
Totals (n = 275)	106 (38%)	112 (41%)	57 (21%)

Note: Groups are categorized according to the highest level of open conflict with public authorities reported in 1998. Conflict with other groups is not taken into account in this tabulation. For more detailed information and finely graduated distinctions, see Gurr (2000a).

^aProtest and rebellion both coded 0

^bVerbal opposition, symbolic resistance, organizing activity, demonstrations, or riots

^cPolitical banditry, terrorism, local rebellions, guerilla activity, or protracted civil war

Nonviolence as a Strategy in Ethnopolitics

Leaders of movements for minority rights and national self-determination make choices about how best to pursue the interests of their peoples. Nonviolence is one kind of choice: it is a bundle of strategies and tactics midway between electoral and interest-group politics and organized violence. Nonviolence is, in some respects, a misnomer. While these in-between strategies are nonconventional, hence dramatic, ways of making political demands without resort to physical attacks on authorities, violence nonetheless shadows them. 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. Leaders may also encourage observers to fear that if nonviolent claims for justice go unmet, violence will follow. Such a threat gains credibility if some individuals in the aggrieved community riot or burn or plant bombs. Small doses of deniable violence can strengthen the hands of leaders of nonviolent movements.

The specific strategies of nonviolence are varied. "Repertoire" is Charles Tilly's useful term for the strategies of collective action that are known to people at a given time and place. A key strategy for most contemporary nonviolent movements is a public assembly of large numbers of demonstrators or marchers,

showing officials and opponents that many people support a cause and, not incidentally, signaling their capacity for disruption. Gandhi's *satyagraha* movement for Indian independence, shaped by a distinctive ideology of nonviolent resistance to injustice, was a major addition to the repertoire. The success of civil rights activists in the American South provided another widely emulated strategy.

How different were these movements from the politically-inspired marches and demonstrations common in European and North American cities from the eighteenth century onward? Or from the strategy of the general strike developed by revolutionaries in late nineteenth-century Europe? Nonviolent movements of the late twentieth century differed from preceding movements in at least three important ways. First, reliance on non-violent resistance gives protesters a moral advantage. Demonstrations and general strikes have always had the potential for escalating into violent confrontations; participants in explicitly nonviolent actions could claim moral superiority by disavowing overt violence from the onset. Second, because the tactics of nonviolent movements were creatively disruptive of public order

and economic activity, authorities were compelled to respond to disorder in ways that almost invariably placed them at a moral and political disadvantage to the protesters. Third, the participants in nonviolent movements of the twentieth century effectively used the news media to project their messages and images far beyond the immediate sites of confrontation. Whereas the primary audience for nineteenth-century demonstrators and strikers was public officials and employers who could redress their grievances, a principal audience of nonviolent activists has been a distant but potentially sympathetic public comprised of people who might be enlisted as allies and agents of reform.²

Choosing Nonviolent Strategies

As I wrote above, leaders of social movements choose nonviolence when they find it to be more attractive than the alternatives of armed rebellion or conventional politics. Leaders must assess the potential costs and gains of different strategies of collective action, and their coethnics must choose whether to follow or defect depending on whether they are convinced the leaders have chosen wisely. Ethnic warfare is invariably costly and its outcomes are highly uncertain, which is probably the most important reason why less than a tenth of minorities that were

politically active in the late 1990s fought large-scale rebellions.

Decisions to rebel are seldom taken unless a significant segment of an aggrieved group gives up on other strategies. Striking evidence of this comes from two analyses I conducted of the antecedents of political violence by minorities. I first examined what led groups in Western democracies to rebel between 1945 and 1989 and I found an average of 13 years elapsed between the first recorded instances of political activism by a minority group and the group's first resort to violent protest or terrorism (Gurr 1993, 145-46). More recently, I examined the global rash of ethnic rebellions that began between 1986 and 1998. Most of the 52 new uprisings—all but a half dozen—proved to be outgrowths of longer-term conflicts. In the typical (median) case, a decade elapsed between the emergence of protest movements, or a previous violent episode, and the outbreak of new rebellions.

Such long time lags lend themselves to alternate interpretations. Optimists may see them as evidence that civil and international authorities could have addressed underlying group grievances but failed to do so. Pessimists might conclude that the underlying issues are intractable and that escalation is inevitable. My impression, gained from case studies of conflicts that escalated from conventional politics and protest to rebellion, is that public policies during the intervening years are mostly inconsistent and expedient, often mixing limited and partly implemented reforms with repression. The implications for understanding why movement leaders choose the strategies they do are pretty clear. Usually, activists choose rebellion only after experimenting with nonviolent strategies and finding that they do not work very well.³

If rebellion is the last resort of those seeking minority rights and self-determination, does that imply that conventional politics is their first resort? Sometimes yes, but minorities often are closed out of conventional politics. Dominant groups in multiethnic societies and empires have preconceptions about who belongs to the political community and who does not. Few nineteenth-century Southerners, even after the Civil War, thought that African Americans were legitimate participants in the political process. Similarly, few British men living in the nineteenth century thought that women, or the urban poor, or colonial peoples had political rights equivalent to their own. Until the early 1960s, Aborigines in Australia were legally defined as wards of the state; they had neither citizenship nor the right to vote. Until the late 1980s, Russian communists paid lip service to the political rights of non-Russian peoples but made sure that Russian Communist Party members vetted the decisions made by the titular leaders of the non-Russian republics.

If the political rules of the game exclude or marginalize ethnic and national minorities, then engaging in conventional politics constitutes a poor strategic

choice for their leaders. Metaphorically, and sometimes literally, advocates of minority rights are left standing outside the chambers of government, petitions in hand, hoping that someone will take up their cause. It is at this point that strategies of nonviolence become thinkable. They may be seen as the only viable alternative to passive resignation or bloody rebellion and repression.

The question then becomes, "What's in the repertoire?" The group's own repertoire may be empty of strategies that fit its current situation, in which case its leaders are likely to borrow and adapt others' strategies. So it was that Freedom Rides, modeled on the voter

registration drives of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, were organized in New South Wales by Australian Aborigines and their white student allies in an effort to desegregate private clubs and thus call attention to discrimination. Similarly, nonmilitant Catholic activists in Northern Ireland took their cues from the SCLC and SNCC. More directly, the efforts to secure civil rights for African Americans created a political climate in which a new generation of Native American activists could found the Red Power movement and design creative new tactics of disruptive but nonviolent struggle.

The ideas and examples of successful nonviolent movements travel. In Sidney Tarrow's term, they are "modular," capable of being adapted to different causes in different settings (1998, chap. 2). But where are they most likely to settle in and reshape the landscape of the politically possible? The short and most obvious answer is "in democracies." The U.S. Civil Rights Movement exercised its greatest influence over minorities in other Western democracies, in which governments were expected to be responsive to minority demands as a matter of course. Political movements can be organized in democratic countries at relatively low cost. Democratic elites are (again, expected to be) responsive to organized groups with a grievance and elected leaders are susceptible to political pressures. Finally, doctrines of individual and collective rights are codified in the national laws and international covenants of Western democracies.

As evident as this seems now, until the mid- to late twentieth century, visible minorities and indigenous peoples lacked effective access to the political system in even the most liberal countries and were pressured to assimilate to the dominant society or to accept second-class status. During the Cold War, international human rights doctrine focused mainly on individual rights. The principles that ethnic minorities have collective rights to protect their culture and to pursue local and regional autonomy were not widely accepted in most Western countries until the early 1990s (see Preece 1997).

It also bears mentioning that nonviolent political movements affect the thinking of elites as well as

Ethnic warfare is invariably costly and its outcomes are highly uncertain.

aggrieved minorities--indeed they are intended to do so. With the *satyagraha* campaign for Indian independence, Gandhi sought to capitalize on the British sense of fair play. The movement's success in doing so was demonstrated when India's British Viceroy told Gandhi, when they began discussions, that "You have reduced me to helplessness . . . how can we lay hands on you without being villains?"⁴ The British were not reduced to helplessness in an absolute sense; one can well imagine what Stalin's response to a hypothetical nonviolent campaign would have been. Rather, the British were inhibited by their norms about what means of governance were acceptable and which were unacceptable.

More important than procedural restraints, in the long run, was a gradual shift in British thinking toward acceptance of the basic rightness or justice of Indians' demand for independence. What began in India in the 1930s and spread throughout the British political establishment during the 1940s and 1950s was the principle that colonized people had the right to self-governance. This norm shift followed from acceptance of the twin democratic principles that people should have the right to political participation and that leaders should be responsive to popular demands. Once a country's elite accepts these principles, there is no intrinsic or logical barrier to applying them in dealing with all those they rule. Thus, suffrage expanded in European democracies during the last two centuries from upper to lower classes, from men to women, from majorities to minorities, and, ultimately, from metropolitan populations to subjugated peoples. Social movements have been the engines driving much of this norm shifting. Thanks to the agitation of subordinate groups, what had been unthinkable became not only thinkable but obvious.⁵

The Successes of Nonviolence

Success, like conflict itself, has two sides. For participants in minority and ethnonational movements, success entails attainment of some of their objectives. For public officials dealing with calls for social change, success means maintaining the state, staying in office, and securing public order. These are not necessarily incompatible outcomes. In optimum circumstances, ethnonational conflict produces "win-win" outcomes that have positive payoffs for both parties.

Let me begin with the perspective of public officials, because they usually have the last word about outcomes. They do not like to be "reduced to helplessness" by minority and ethnonational challengers. Their most basic choices involve whether to rely mainly on strategies of repression or accommodation and, if they choose the latter, what specific accommodations to make in what ways. Government officials, like movement leaders, learn from their own and others' experiences. Within the realm of the expedient and the acceptable, officials look for cues about what has worked either to defuse other movements or to respond to them in ways that incorporate antagonists into the

political system in a nondisruptive way. In other words, officials have repertoires of responses, just as those in ethnic movements have repertoires of political action, and those responses may be capable of being copied and adopted to new situations. The microhistory of each ethnonational conflict resembles a game—a very serious game—of moves and countermoves chosen from each side's repertoire. Over time, it becomes clear to most players that some sets of mutually-interdependent choices are more likely to have win-win outcomes. When efforts are made to coordinate these choices, it is best to think of them as scenarios for accommodating ethnic conflict rather than deployments of tactics drawn from repertoires.

Let me be more concrete. Three types of ethnonational movements have lent themselves to win-win resolutions in the past 40 years. The U.S. Civil Rights Movement exemplifies one kind: the demand by disadvantaged minorities for greater political and economic rights and benefits. Efforts to win the legal and political incorporation of African-American individuals into the political and economic system have been channeled into and diffused across local, state, and federal systems and educational and economic opportunities have been opened up for those with the personal skills to take advantage of them. The Canadian federal government, alternatively, has pioneered multiculturalism as a solution to a similar problem. This strategy treats non-Anglo Canadian individuals as members of cultural collectivities and gives each group some of the political and economic means to maintain their separate collective existence.⁶ A similar communally-based strategy seems to be working, after 30 years of violent conflict, in Northern Ireland.

The specific policies of incorporation vary widely across countries, but all are designed to respond to minority interests and to avert the threat of disruptive collective action by giving minorities a stake in the system. One can question just how "equal" minorities become with the adoption of these policies, but it is undeniable that the targeted groups think they have made relative gains, that collective action by minorities is at a low ebb in Western democracies, and that most public officials are committed to maintaining the policies that contributed to these outcomes.

The strategies of demanding and granting minority rights have traveled widely. Guarantees for minority rights are incorporated into the constitutions of virtually all the post-communist states and also in the new democracies established in Asia societies and Southern Africa during the last 15 years. Practice lags behind constitutional precepts, but the general pattern, documented in analyses of the data on group discrimination in the Minorities at Risk study, is a slow but steady global improvement in the political and cultural status of politically active minorities during the 1990s (Gurr 2000a, chap. 4).

Nationalist struggles by ethnic minorities represent the second type of ethnonational struggle that has increasingly been resolved peacefully. Demands for separate statehood by conquered people are nothing new. When they emerged during the 1960s among

Basques, Bretons, Catalans, Corsicans, Scots, and Quebecois in established Western democracies, however, political leaders in the respective national capitals were shocked. The most ardent regional nationalists sought independence, like that won by colonial Africans and Asians, but generally were outnumbered by moderates who proved willing to settle with reformers at the center who offered packages of regional autonomy, cultural rights, and reallocation of development resources. For most ethnonationalists in Western societies, the attainment of autonomy within existing states by peaceful means is more attractive than the quixotic pursuit of complete independence through armed struggle. For government officials, devolution of central authority within an otherwise strong state is less costly than fighting a protracted conflict. If substate autonomy fails to satisfy the nationalists, most democratic leaders—like those in Prague in 1993 and Ottawa today—seem to prefer divorce to war.

The negotiated settlement of ethnonational conflicts has become increasingly common throughout the world. During the 1990s, 16 ethnonational wars were settled by peace agreements and 10 others were checked by cease-fires and ongoing negotiations. Fewer separatist wars were being fought at the beginning of 2000—18 by my count—than at any time since the early 1970s. Calling attention to this steep decline helps put the rebellion of Kosovar Albanians in perspective. The armed conflict that began with a few bombings and ambushes in late 1997 was the only ethnic war in Europe begun after 1994. Moreover, rebellion began only after eight years of nonviolent Albanian resistance to Belgrade's dissolution of Kosovo's regional government in 1989. Wars of independence in Western and post-communist states in the twenty-first century seem out of time and place, a vestige of the past that is being superseded by newer strategies of accommodation and negotiated devolution of power.⁷

The third wave of conflicts that has reconfigured ethnopolitics emerged out of indigenous claims for cultural recognition and land rights. The contemporary indigenous rights movement originated in North America in the late 1960s and had gone global by the 1980s. Indigenous people do not usually seek to establish independent states as ethnonationalists do. Instead, they want the physical and political space in which to protect and recreate their distinctive ways of life. The U.S. and Australian federal governments were innovators in devising positive, low-cost responses to indigenous claims such as self-determination for tribal governments in the United States and recognition of traditional land rights (including subsoil mineral rights) in Australia. Officials responsible for what used



India. Gandhi with Mrs. Sarojini Naidu on the Dandi March, April 1930. Photo courtesy of Dinodia Picture Agency.

to called “native policy” in English-speaking democratic countries watched and learned from one another's innovations. Indigenous activists learned from and taught lessons to each other. Since the 1970s, activists have held periodic international meetings, also attended by government officials, out of which have emerged a common doctrine of indigenous rights, an evolving list of best practices for making demands, and transnational networks of alliances with environmental and other activists. Road blockades and demonstrations have been used by members of First Nations in Canada to contain logging operations, by Sami in northern Scandinavia to resist construction of dams, and by Aborigines in Western Australia to stall mineral exploration. The similarity of the issues and tactics illustrates vividly the modularity of indigenous activism at the end of the twentieth century (see Brysk 1994; Wilmer 1993).

Most governments in the Americas, and some in East and Southeast Asian countries, have accepted the basic principles of indigenous rights and have taken legal and practical steps to implement them. Open confrontations still do recur between indigenous activists and government agents, as in Chiapas and Ecuador, but the general

pattern is one of grudging cooperation in implementing a common agenda.

A Cautionary Conclusion

Nonviolent politics is not a sovereign remedy for all disadvantaged minorities and hopeful ethnonationalists. In some countries and situations, nonviolent ethnic movements are very likely to fail. In Slobodan Milošević's Serbia there is little respect for minority rights and no accommodation with national minorities. In Iran, the Baha'is' doctrine of political passivity has not protected them from persecution by Islamists. Indeed, throughout most of the Islamic world, the rights of non-Muslims and members of "heretical" sects are restricted by religious doctrine and public policy. In Turkey, the Kemalist doctrine of secular nationalism justifies the government's exclusion of Islamist parties and Kurdish nationalist parties alike from what is in principle a democratic political system. The Beijing government has adamantly opposed accommodation with Tibetan, Uigher, and Mongol "splittists," the Chinese epithet for regional peoples who want greater autonomy or independence. Nonviolence is a nonstarter for warring Hutus and Tutsis in Central Africa. The irony of genocide in Rwanda and ongoing ethnic

warfare in Burundi is that both followed the failure of attempts, promoted by international actors, at democratization and accommodation of ethnic rivalries.

Nonviolent movements in the last half of the twentieth century proved very effective for advancing the rights of minorities and ethnonationalists in democratic societies. They added greatly to the repertoires of collective action in democracies, old and new. And they have evolved hand in hand with strategies of public response that rely on incorporation and accommodation. It also is true that successful management of ethnic conflict inevitably requires parties on both sides to make compromises. As Gandhi recognized, political movements "can't have everything at one stroke"—indeed, they may never achieve everything. Moreover, accommodation in plural societies has the disconcerting consequence of prompting opposition from people in the majority who resent policies designed to guarantee "unfair advantages" for minorities. Some disillusionment with the compromising outcomes of ethnic conflict is, thus, inevitable and adds to the potential for the organization of new ethnopolitical movements. Chances are, though, that future ethnic activists will rely on the nonviolent strategies that proved effective in the recent past.

Notes

1. The data in Table 1 come from the Minorities at Risk project's ongoing survey of politically significant ethnic groups, which includes groups actively pursuing a political agenda plus those that are disadvantaged as a result of discrimination, past or present. For a comparative analysis of these and other data on ethnopolitical groups, see Gurr (2000a). Profiles of each group can be found on the project's web site (www.bsos.umd.edu/cidcm/mar).

2. Gene Sharp (1973; Sharp and McCarthy 1997) has identified a great many contemporary and historical instances of nonviolent action and analyzed their impacts.

3. Most of the 52 rebellions began in the late 1980s and early 1990s and had ended by 1998. The analysis of their antecedents is reported in Gurr (2000a, chap. 2).

4. This and the following quotes about Gandhi's movement are from *A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict*.

5. I thank Victor Assal for sharing his ideas about the importance of norm shifts for expanding the scope of democratic suffrage to minorities and other groups. For a general analysis of norm shifts and their political consequences, see Finnemore and Sikkink (1998).

6. Pursuing multiculturalism as a self-conscious strategy grew out of a number of policy experiments undertaken during the 1960s and 1970s that were designed to smooth the incorporation of European and Third World immigrants into Canadian society. It may be that Canadians are accustomed to dealing with minorities-as-collectivities because separate French and Anglo communities have coexisted in the country for over 200 years.

7. The settled and ongoing ethnonational wars are identified in Gurr (2000a, chap. 6). For a discussion of the emerging international doctrine and practice of "managed ethnic heterogeneity," see Gurr (2000b).

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