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# Nonviolent Action and Human Rights

Nonviolent action campaigns have been a part of political life for millennia. History records many instances of groups rising to challenge abuses by authorities, demand social reforms, and protest militarism and discrimination. In recent years, however, the number of such movements has increased, as has their success in advancing the cause of human rights and toppling or dramatically reforming repressive regimes. In the twentieth century, nonviolence became more of a deliberate tool for social change, moving from being largely an ad hoc strategy growing naturally out of religious or ethical principles to a reflective and, in many ways, institutionalized method of struggle.

Campaigns to reform discriminatory laws through nonviolent action—such as the civil rights movements in the United States—are one example of how human rights have been advanced through the use of nonviolent action. More significant, however, has been the remarkable upsurge in nonviolent insurrections

against authoritarian regimes. Many of the individual revolts have received major media attention—such as those in China, the Philippines and Eastern Europe—and

certain political consequences of these largely prodemocracy movements have been analyzed. However, there has been little recognition of the significance of the increasing utilization of nonviolent methods to affect change in nations where guerrilla warfare from below or gradualistic reform from above were once seen as the only alternatives. Despite the diffusion of nonviolence as a conscious strategy through movements around the world in recent decades, little is understood about how or why nonviolence works as a technique for securing social change. “Nonviolence” is not even a category in the mainstream academic lexicon.

Primarily nonviolent “people power” movements have led to the overthrow of

authoritarian regimes in nearly two dozen countries over the past two decades, forced substantial reforms in even more, and seriously challenged repressive or unjust systems in still others. These nonviolent insurrections are distinguished from armed struggles in that they are carried out by organized individuals who, either consciously or by necessity, eschew the use of weapons of modern warfare.<sup>1</sup> Nonviolent activists also distinguish themselves from participants in more conventional political movements by using tactics outside the normal political process, including strikes, boycotts, mass demonstrations, contestation of public space, tax refusal, destruction of symbols of government authority (such as official identification cards), refusal to obey official orders (such as curfew restrictions), and the creation of alternative institutions for recognizing political legitimacy and fostering social organization.

Although nonviolent conflict shares much with its violent counterpart, differences between the two have an important impact on both the means and consequences of a conflict. The theoretical assumptions underlying nonviolent struggle are significant and provide a challenge to a great deal of conventional thinking in the social sciences. The relative success of so many nonviolent social movements implies, as Gene Sharp noted, that political power is ultimately “fragile because it depends on many groups for reinforcement of its power sources” (Sharp 1973, I: 8). Because “nonviolent action cuts off sources of [the regime’s] power rather than simply combating the final power products of these sources,” it poses a much more severe threat to a regime’s authority than does armed rebellion (III: 454). Furthermore, the success of nonviolent movements implies that power is pluralistic; that a ruler’s power is determined by the degree to which subjects chose to follow orders. To the extent this is true, it is also true that even the most oppressive regime rules, to some degree, by consent. This trend indicates that revolutions/revolts grow

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out of the disintegration of concert, not simply the agitation of armed rebels.

However, some scholars familiar with civil resistance in authoritarian settings have argued that Sharp's theory of power relies too heavily on individual and voluntaristic behavior (Burrowes 1996; Martin 1989). For example, Souad Dajani, in her pioneering study of the Palestinian intifada, wrote that

Social power is deeply rooted in social relationships and patterns of social behavior that are institutionalized over time and are pervasive throughout society. Power is located in the social structures in which these patterns exist and are reproduced. In any given society, social class arrangements are the more likely manifestations of this distribution of power. Social classes intersect in turn with different ethnic, religious, and other socio-cultural elements of a given society. People's "obedience" to rulers, therefore, is not so much an element of free personal choice that can be reversed at will, but a characteristic of the way society is organized. (1994, 99-100)

Dajani does acknowledge that nonviolent action can be a powerful and effective means of overcoming oppression, but she also argues that there are processes of marginalization, dependency, and integration that need to be taken into account. As a result, power sources within established social patterns and structures must be identified and described before people can effectively discredit them and mobilize opposition to repressive regimes.

In short, Dajani and others consider Sharp's theory of "withdrawal of consent" an unsatisfactory explanation for why nonviolent movements succeed because it does not invite analysis of the structural roots of power in society. According to Dajani, one must account for such factors as the roots of social movements, the power and resources available to the regime and the resistance, and the means available for changing power relationships to tell the story of a movement. Cases show that only practitioners able to identify the structural and/or ideological sources of their opponents' power, as well as the political, social, economic, and ideological sources of power and methods available to them to target these sources of power, can conduct the kinds of powerful nonviolent campaigns Sharp envisioned. Since there is so often an asymmetry of power between nonviolent activists and their opponents, it may be strategically necessary to target the political will of the opponent rather than its structures of control; understanding the location and operation of power permits

social movement leaders to better design and implement tactics of civilian resistance and better assess those tactics' efficacy.

Nonviolent activists refuse to engage the repressive apparatus on the state's terms. Rather than staging a military confrontation, which government forces would almost definitely win, nonviolent insurgents choose their "weapons systems" with an eye toward making the regime's exercise of its power advantage a liability and winning popular support. Their efforts are aided by the fact that it is easier to mobilize people to demonstrate nonviolently than it is to ask them to pick up a gun or a hand grenade, a reality that creates a disequilibrium in which the unarmed group finds it easier to recruit supporters than does the government.

Not all prodemocracy nonviolent movements have been successful, of course. A number have been suppressed, as were those in El Salvador (1979-81), Burma (1987-88), China (1989), and Kenya (1989). What is surprising is not that some of them failed—as have many violent insurgencies around the world—but that so many of them succeeded. These have included Bolivia (1977, 1982), Sudan (1985), Haiti (1985), Philippines (1986), South Korea (1987), Chile (1989), Poland (1989), East Germany (1989), Czechoslovakia (1989), Mongolia (1990), Nepal (1990), Mali (1992), Madagascar (1993), Bangladesh (1996), and Indonesia (1998). Similarly, spontaneous nonviolent action have thwarted attempted military coups in Argentina (1987), Russia (1991), and Thailand (1992) and Paraguay (1996, 1999).

The world is no less conflictual than it has been in years past. Indeed, the debt crisis, ethnic strife, and environmental problems are all

worsening. However, there has been a dramatic expansion of civil and political rights over the past two decades and nonviolent activists have done much to speed this transition, including hastening the downfall of communist regimes in Eastern Europe and of right-wing dictatorships in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. There are several reasons why insurgents turned away from armed struggle and began using nonviolent means to affect change.

One is the growing awareness of the increasing costs of warfare. In a mirror image of Western national security managers who insisted during the 1960s and 1970s that guerrilla armies could easily be defeated, many left-wing propagandists in the Third World perpetuated a counter-myth of the invincibility of such groups, bolstered by examples from Vietnam, Algeria, and Mozambique. However, technology has given state powers an increasing advantage in recent years. Even when an armed insurgency is victorious, large segments of the population are displaced, farms and villages are

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destroyed, cities and much of the nation's infrastructure are severely damaged, the economy is wrecked, and there is widespread environmental devastation. An increasing realization that the benefits of waging an armed insurrection may not be worth the costs has led many proponents of human rights and social change to opt for nonviolent strategies.

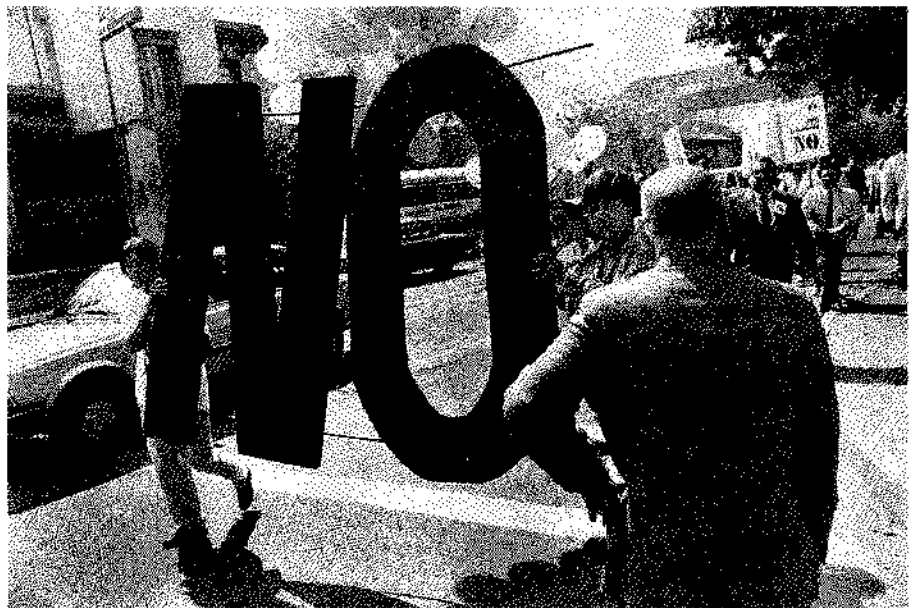
Another disincentive to launching armed movements against dictatorships is the poor record the leaders of such movements have for establishing pluralistic, democratic, and independent political systems capable of supporting social and economic development and promoting human rights once they displace the former regime. Although some revolutionary governments failed to deliver on promises of equality, freedom, and prosperity because they were forced to deal with natural disasters, foreign intervention, trade embargoes, and other circumstances beyond their control, it is worth noting that armed struggle tends to exacerbate these problems and also creates troubles of its own. For one, armed struggles are often led by a secret elite vanguard whose members come, over time, to value their power more than democracy and pluralism. When this happens, disagreements among rebel leaders that could be resolved peacefully in nonmilitarized contexts often devolve into bloody factional fighting. Some countries, like Algeria and Guinea-Bissau, experienced military coups not long after armed revolutionary movements ousted colonialists. Others, like Angola and Cambodia, experienced bloody civil wars.

Still another reason democratic activists might decide against armed revolt is their recognition that keeping a strong military requires dependence on outside benefactors for arms supplies. For much of the postcolonial period, revolutionary governments depended on the Soviet Union for arms and tactical aid, and that country—like any major power—traditionally tied strings to its aid. Acceptance of even relatively low levels of assistance during the course of armed struggle creates a dependent relationship that is hard to break. Worse, a movement's securing aid from one major power may drive the government to seek aid from a rival power, even after the old regime is defeated.

For example, having overthrown the Somoza dictatorship in 1979, the popular Sandinista Front—despite largely avoiding sliding into a Communist dictatorship—still faced attacks by armed mercenary groups trained and equipped by the U.S. government. American policymakers justified their support of the Contras on the (largely fabricated) grounds that the Sandinista military had aggressive designs on neighboring countries. The national security threat posed by the United

States strengthened the political position of the military wing of the Sandinistas, which siphoned precious funds away from desperately needed domestic programs and imposed military conscription and counter-insurgency measures that alienated some important segments of the population. The human rights situation, which had improved dramatically after the overthrow of Somoza, began to deteriorate. The Contra War led to widespread destruction, a collapse of the Nicaraguan economy, and the Sandinistas' electoral defeat in 1990.

The number and severity of problems affecting many Third World countries is so extensive that a successful armed movement against an authoritarian regime—even if it has a strong organization, proven mobilization skills, and a coherent ideology—simply lacks the monetary and institutional resources necessary to



**Chile.** Party for Democracy (PPD) march for "No" plebiscite in March 1988. Photo by Steven Rubin for Impact Visuals.

address the pressing concerns facing a country in transition after a devastating civil war. As a result, advocates of change have shown a growing interest in the utilization of tactics that will minimize the degree of dislocation in the country and maximize the segments of the population that can become contributing members of a postauthoritarian political system designed to help build a new society respectful of human rights.

The growing awareness of the power of nonviolent action grows out of several phenomena. First, present-day insurgents have repeatedly seen that armed resistance tends to push undecided elements of the population toward support of the government. When facing a violent insurgency, government officials can easily justify their use of repressive tactics. By contrast, efforts to use such measures to quell unarmed resistance movements usually create greater sympathy for the regime's opponents. Gene Sharp (1973, II: 110-14; III, *passim*) called this phenomenon "political *jiu jitsu*"

because it allows an opposition movement to use the weight of the repressive state to achieve the movement's ends. Second, people have proven much more willing to join unarmed movements than armed rebellions. Recruiting members from the ranks of women, seniors, and others beside able-bodied young males permits movements to broaden their base of support. Finally, unarmed resistance allows for the creation of alternative institutions respectful of human rights that undermine the status quo and form the basis of a new independent and democratic order.

Armed resistance often backfires by legitimating the state's use of repressive tactics, whereas the use of violence by authorities against unarmed dissidents often constitutes a turning point in nonviolent struggles. Attacks against unarmed demonstrators have often been the spark that turned periodic protests into full-scale insurrections.

Authoritarian governments often welcome violent opposition—and sometimes encourage it through use of *agents provocateurs*. Violent repression of nonviolent protests often transforms popular and elite perceptions of legitimacy and tends to increase the chances of divisions within progovernment circles (Sharp 1973, III: 676) for a number of reasons. First, security officials will likely disagree over how to effectively deal with the resistance, more so than in the case of an armed insurgency. Second, since nonviolent movements appear less threatening to personal security, some officials and progovernment elites may become less concerned about the consequences of a compromise with insurgents. Finally, soldiers and police officers sent to stop a protest are much more likely to defect or disobey orders to use violence against peaceful demonstrators than they are when faced with rioters or guerillas (Lakey 1970).

Nonviolent resistance divides supporters of the status quo, renders government troops less effective, and can also challenge the attitudes of people in a country and around the world. A good example of this comes from the South African struggle against apartheid. Pictures of whites, members of the clergy, and other “upstanding citizens” protesting discriminatory policies were broadcast on television worldwide, lending legitimacy to anti-apartheid forces and undermining the regime in a way that armed struggle never could. As nonviolent resistance within the country escalated, momentum grew for the imposition of economic sanctions by South Africa's biggest trading partners. Unable to meet the rising costs of maintaining the apartheid system, the white government agreed to pursue reform.

As global interdependence increases, parties to a conflict must tailor their messages to a nonlocal audience as well as to members of the immediate community. Just as Gandhi played to British citizens in

Manchester and London and organizers of civil rights campaigns in the U.S. South communicated their demands to those in Washington, news of strikes and marches throughout Eastern Europe during the 1980s was broadcast around the world, legitimating local protests and putting the lie to Moscow's claims that each campaign represented a unique local event organized by unstable dissidents. Likewise, global media attention to the anti-Marcos movement in the Philippines in 1986 was instrumental in forcing the U.S. government to withdraw its support of the dictator.

Television footage of Israeli repression of unarmed Palestinians during the 1980s had a similar sympathizing effect on Americans, which was significant because both private U.S. citizens and the U.S. government have done much to sustain Israel's military occupation of Palestinian land. As Rashid Khalidi observed, the Palestinians “succeeded at last in conveying the reality of their victimization to world public opinion” (1988, 507).

To succeed in advancing the cause of human rights, leaders of nonviolent movements must wrest political authority from state officials and, with popular participation, invest power in institutions of civil society. As institutions people can trust to provide services and represent their interests grow in effectiveness and legitimacy, the regime will become increasingly impotent and irrelevant. The presence of these parallel

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structures, and the independent spaces created by them, may be significant in affecting the outcome of a human rights campaign.

The creation of alternative structures provides moral and practical underpinnings for efforts aimed at bringing about fundamental social change. In the Philippines, for instance, Marcos lost power following a withdrawal of sufficient support of the regime. At the time he left office Marcos effectively controlled little beyond Malacanang Palace. In fact, the same day Marcos was sworn in for another term as president in an official ceremony, Corazón Aquino was taking the presidential oath simultaneously in another part of the city. Most Filipinos saw Marcos's election as fraudulent and gave their allegiance to Aquino. Conversely, the failure of the prodemocracy demonstrations in Beijing's Tienanman Square illustrates how the inadequate development of alternative institutions can make a movement vulnerable to repression.<sup>2</sup> It helps for



**El Salvador.** Friends and family members carry coffins containing the remains of loved ones murdered during a wave of government repression in the early 1980's. The bodies were exhumed from a mass grave in the town of Santa Rosa. AP Photo.

military. The goals of these death squads are to assassinate or otherwise silence leaders and participants in nonviolent movements and to terrorize the population into submission. Despite being sanctioned by key actors in the governing apparatus, the vigilante groups are far enough outside the official chain of command that government and military officials can plausibly deny responsibility for or knowledge of their actions. While most of the nonviolent activists still blame the government, neutral members of the population and foreign backers of the regime may accept the regime's portrayal of itself as a moderate force doing its best to curb violence

and extremism on all sides. When this happens, calls to stop government-sponsored violence will go unheeded.

Privatization of the repressive apparatus follows from adoption of the "low-intensity conflict" (LIC) counter-insurgency strategy developed by the U.S. military. A comprehensive strategy that comprises economic development programs, propaganda, and antiguerrilla military campaigns, LIC has been implemented in El Salvador, Guatemala, Colombia, the Philippines, and elsewhere. Recognizing that shooting into crowds merely strengthens opposition, U.S. strategists began working with foreign officials to develop means to combine repression with nominal civilian control of the national government aimed at converting the population from insurgents to supporters of the regime. The purpose of LIC is to neutralize dissent, not to kill dissenters. With this end in mind, American advisors trained and cleaned up the local armed forces in order to restore respectability to the most visible government institution. At the same time, they encouraged government officials to neutralize trade union, academic, and religious leaders; identify and silence grassroots supporters of the opposition; and limit and repress independent human rights groups.

some systems of dual power to be created prior to a successful culmination of a nonviolent struggle. Obstacles to the success of nonviolent action in support of human rights are still formidable despite the remarkable record of such campaigns in recent decades. Authoritarian governments use legal restrictions, terror, and their monopolization of news media to make it very difficult to effectively mobilize popular support for mass action. Decades of repression engender in citizens a sense of despair and a lack of empowerment. Members of ethnic minorities feel this acutely because they have particular difficulty winning majority support for their efforts against government repression. In impoverished societies—which seem most likely to spawn authoritarian regimes—many basic necessities are in short supply and access to them is controlled by local elites and foreigners. Where survival is people's greatest concern, unarmed groups simply may not be able to hold out long enough against their oppressors to succeed. In addition, governments with outside economic support can survive the near total collapse of their countries' domestic economies. The Salvadoran junta withstood a series of general strikes in the early 1980s because the United States government committed enough aid to finance most of the regime's budget.

Repressive regimes assured of substantial foreign assistance may be less likely to refrain from using violence to suppress dissent for fear of fatally damaging their legitimacy, though they still must be sensitive to how human rights abuses against nonviolent dissent may affect such support. In recognition that openly attacking their own citizens would cost them dearly, many regimes have pursued a kind of privatization of the repressive apparatus. In such countries, higher-ranking government officials have tacitly condoned the formation of progovernment vigilante forces, which often operate with the direct support of the police and the

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American military trainers emphasized responsible crowd control methods but also gave instruction in other forms of violence (see McClintock 1984). The now-famous secret Central Intelligence Agency report to Nicaraguan Contras units advocates "the selective use of violence" by paramilitary units as preferable to "indiscriminate" repression as a means of "decapitating" the leadership of the opposition (U.S. CIA 1985).

The privatization of the repressive apparatus has had a chilling effect on the prospects of successful advancement of human rights. For example, in Sri Lanka, where a nominally democratic government is facing two simultaneous insurrections, efforts by human rights

activists and others to salvage some semblance of rule of law are being met with widespread death squad activity. Fortunately, "nonviolent intervention" by teams of international volunteers organized by Peace Brigades International (PBI) and similar groups has been somewhat effective in protecting activists. Growing out of the Gandhian tradition, PBI and its similar groups have sent teams to Guatemala, El Salvador, Sri Lanka, Colombia, and the West Bank to accompany prominent nonviolent activists as, essentially, unarmed bodyguards. Because leaders of even the most repressive regimes do not want to deal with the diplomatic fallout from international observers, particularly North Americans or Europeans, being casualties of—or even just witnessing—death squad attacks, PBI teams have served as successful deterrents to some of the worst activities (Mahoney and Eguren 1997). These efforts have been extremely limited thus far. Yet, while they have yet to evolve the scape that would constitute an effective means for ending the threat from death squads, there is certainly some potential for further development.

Even if nonviolent movements succeed in bringing civil and political rights to their countries, their leaders may be unable to improve people's social and economic rights. Powerful transnational institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organization can essentially dictate key economic policies to newly democratic countries. Also, new regimes are generally held responsible for debts accumulated by previous dictatorships.

In the spring of 1997, when tens of thousands of Nicaraguans engaged in a general strike to protest the austerity programs of President Arnoldo Alemán's government, former Sandinista soldiers and former Contras left their guns at home to work together to set up roadblocks and march in protests during which they adhered strictly to a disciplined nonviolence. The government relented in the face of massive nonviolent resistance and withdrew the austerity measures. However, the United States, through the International Monetary Fund, forced the government to implement the austerity plan anyway. Alejandro Bandana, a leading Sandinista intellectual, asked an American audience a few months later, "Will the United States allow the people of Latin America to succeed with nonviolence?" (Bandana 1997).

For nonviolent action to be truly effective in the cause of human rights, it must be carried out within the context of a transnational movement that seeks solutions both in the localities where the worst manifestations of institutional violence and human rights abuses occur and at their source—which is often in the advanced industrialized countries, particularly the United States. Nonviolent campaigns in the U.S., Great Britain, and other Western countries against military aid and normal trade relations with repressive regimes have played an important role in advancing human rights. The massive nonviolent demonstrations during last year's World Trade Organization gathering in Seattle<sup>3</sup> and the demonstrations at this year's meeting of the International Monetary Fund in Washington are among the more dramatic examples of such transnational solidarity.

The internationalization of nonviolent movements in support of human rights has been sped up in recent years by the proliferation of international nongovernmental organizations and advances in communication technologies. Two decades ago, a labor leader in an autocratic country might be arrested and tortured to death by the time word of his disappearance reached anyone willing to secure his safety or freedom. Today, such an arrest would unleash a flurry of emails and faxes from the colleagues of the arrested leader to human rights groups and sympathetic labor unions in countries around the world. These groups would send email to their members, who would, in turn, contact officials of the offending government as well as their own to demand the activist's release. Within hours, threats of demonstrations against the regime, boycotts of the country's exports, and sanctions would reach those in power. Revolutionaries used to go to their outside supporters for weapons, ammunition, boots, and other combat supplies. Today's nonviolent revolutionaries ask for computers, fax machines, and copiers. The 1992 challenge to Thailand's military coup was nicknamed "the cell phone revolution" because coordinators of the massive street protests relied so heavily on this new means of communication.

Just five years ago, the apparently irreversible Indonesian takeover of East Timor was widely seen as a classic illustration of the triumph of *realpolitik* over international law and universal standards of human rights. The nationalist guerrilla army consisted of a couple of hundred poorly armed men who had to stand against tens of thousands of Indonesian troops, the United Nations had largely dropped the issue, and virtually all the great powers, key Asian states, and Islamic countries tacitly accepted Indonesia's annexation. Representatives of NGOs in Australia, Europe, and North America kept the issue alive, however. Few Indonesian dignitaries could travel abroad without facing demonstrators and loans and arms sales to Jakarta were often blocked in legislatures. As a result, when the Indonesian economy collapsed in 1997 and Suharto's tottering regime's need for international help became critical, foreign policymakers were prepared to make withdrawal from East Timor a condition of aid and Indonesia's leaders were prepared to comply (Zunes 2000).

There seems to be evidence that there is declining faith in both the efficacy and morality of armed struggle as well as a decline in faith in electoral politics. As a result, the time may be right to both explore and expound on the power of nonviolent action. Governments around the world spend billions of dollars developing military technologies for their own use and exporting their hardware and know-how to other countries, many of which can barely afford them. Perhaps those of us with an appreciation of the power of nonviolent action should, despite our more limited resources, be more aggressive in developing and disseminating what we know about nonviolence and be willing to use it ourselves to advance the cause of human rights.

## Notes

1. James Scott's 1985 study of the Malaysian peasantry's resistance stands as a model of research on long-standing and widespread traditions of passive resistance to authority. Such resistance tends to be quiet and individualistic, however and, therefore, would not be in the same category as large-scale nonviolent action campaigns for human rights.

2. That is not to say that the presence or absence of political parties or unions was the only difference between the China democracy movement and that in the Soviet bloc, but only that it was a major

factor. Also crucial, of course, was the attitude of the top-level leadership. Mikhail Gorbachev allowed and even supported certain forms of dissent. Deng Xiaoping most emphatically did not encourage dissent.

3. While scattered acts of vandalism by a few dozen self-described anarchists and street thugs received a disproportionate amount of media attention, the demonstrations and acts of civil disobedience by tens of thousands of anti-WTO protesters were overwhelmingly nonviolent.

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