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In Egypt, most powerful example of 'people power' in history

Claire Schaeffer-Duffy | Feb. 1, 2011

A protester gestures in front of a burning barricade during a demonstration in Cairo Jan. 28. (CNS photo/Goran Tomasevic, Reuters)

As reports came in that President Obama today asked Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak through diplomatic channels to step aside, *NCR* spoke with Gene Sharp, professor emeritus of political science at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth and renowned scholar of nonviolent struggle.

Following is that interview -- which covered the origins of power, the vulnerabilities of dictatorships, and important signs coming from the Egyptian military. The conversation has been edited for length.

For an interview Claire Schaeffer-Duffy had with Egyptian expert John Esposito yesterday, see: **Egyptian uprising 'far beyond what people expected'** [1].

***NCR*: Egypt is described as a security state, one in which the government relies heavily on its security apparatus for stability and legitimacy. These are not exactly ideal conditions for popular resistance. How could something like what we are witnessing in Liberation Square come about under a regime that has such a strong security apparatus?**

Sharp: People believe that violence is the most powerful tool. It is not true. These events [in Egypt] and past examples of [popular uprisings] in Eastern Europe, Central Europe, and many other places have demonstrated that dictatorships are highly vulnerable to these kinds of resistances.

Special circumstances must have facilitated this remarkable case. Your colleague described this as the most powerful example of ?people power? in the Arab world -- this may be, depending on how it turns out, the most powerful example in world history.

Why are dictatorships vulnerable to popular resistance?

Because they all have weaknesses. People who are so concerned about [dictatorships] -- the Nazi and the Soviet variety, for example, have focused only on the strengths, the power of the Gestapo and the power of military might -- and not focused on the weaknesses. Dictatorships have sources of power within the society and they can be identified and they can be removed.

What are some of these sources of power?

The belief that they have the right to rule; the moral and political authority; the masses of people who obey them and work for them and carry out their orders; the consolidation of the economic system and the communication system, and many others.

As of today, the Egyptian military has said that they will not use force against the demonstrators. What could this mean for this uprising? Have there been other examples of the military refusing to use force during a campaign of civil resistance?

I don?t know if there?s been a case of a military, as a whole, taking that remarkable decision that the Egyptian military has taken. On a smaller scale, for example, in 1986 in the Philippines, the military became unreliable for Marcos and some of them defended the nonviolent protesters.

There have been other, smaller cases where the military became unreliable. In Norwegian resistance, some German soldiers carried messages and provided assistance to people in German concentration camps. This is not an entirely new phenomena but I don?t know of another case on the scale of what is happening in Egypt.

At present, the uprising in Egypt seems to have no single leader. There seems to be, at least in Cairo, unanimity of demand for the removal of Mubarak. Beyond that, according to*Al Jazeera*, there are calls for constitutional reform and re-do of the previous election. What about this absence of a leader? Could that portend problems?

This phenomenon has been demonstrated before. Both in the Russian 1905 revolution and the February 1917 [Russian] Revolution, it was impossible to identify leaders. We have grown up with the myth that it requires a saint, or a Gandhi to make it work and it is simply not true. [What is presently going on in Egypt] is a remarkable demonstration of that truth, the truth that you don?t need leaders. In fact, leaders can become a problem because they can sell out the revolution.

As far as one can predict such things, would you have predicted a popular uprising happening in Egypt?

No, I would not have predicted this but then I don?t know Egyptian society. I had no basis for predicting anything. But certainly in this dynamic situation, I just keep my fingers crossed. I couldn?t advise them on what to do, that is out of the question. The Egyptians seem to be doing pretty well on their own.

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[1] http://ncronline.org/node/22586