On realpolitik and its limitations

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Last year saw the commemoration of two symbolically important, but very different anniversaries. The first, of course, was the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989 which became associated with a whole wave of democratic revolutions, both in the communist world and beyond. The more sombre anniversary fell on 4 June that same year, when peaceful demonstrations in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square were ruthlessly suppressed. Today, more than two decades later, this episode effectively remains a forbidden topic in the Chinese media.

These events got extensive media coverage, not least on television. The present book provides a different perspective—that of academics and historians. The topicality of the subject requires no explanation. Given the largely non-violent collapse of dictatorships or elites which seemed to have an unshakeable grip on power, the basic question arises: how far and in what circumstances is it true that ‘might is right’? The question is of great practical importance, especially for political leaders.

The authors of this book do not offer any grand theory. They set out instead to produce a series of specific case-studies from different countries of the world—each chapter written by an expert on the country concerned. All in all, the book includes 22 contributors. Sir Adam Roberts, who until recently held the chair of International Relations at Oxford, has for many years made a study (sympathetic though critical) of this subject. Professor Timothy Garton Ash, also of Oxford, is an expert on Central Europe, notably Poland and East Germany. He was ahead of most others in predicting the demise of the old regimes.

For several reasons, however, this subject is hard to get a grip on. To begin with, the enormous quantity of information in the book defies summary, given the very different situations it covers, ranging from Poland to South Africa. Furthermore, non-violence is rarely practised in its pure form. Even Mahatma Gandhi once said that there would be ‘a sacred duty’ to kill a madman who was running amok killing other people (p. 13). Another problem is the vast and almost unmanageable
literature—of direct or indirect relevance—which now exists. It dates back a long way: Gandhi, for example, was influenced by Tolstoy. Apart from that, there is a sometimes devastating confusion of terminology—as shown by such expressions as ‘hard power’, ‘soft power’, persuasion, communication and much else.

In the introductory chapter, therefore, Roberts provides a definition of terms. ‘Civil resistance’ (a term first used by Gandhi in 1921) refers to non-violent action in pursuit of goals widely shared in a society. In contrast to ‘passive resistance’, it may include forms of coercion (pp. 2–3). The term ‘power politics’ is used in the sense which Woodrow Wilson denounced in 1918, when he condemned the concept of the balance of power as opposed to ‘policies based on justice and democracy’ (p. 4). Roberts does not minimize the importance of power politics; but insists that it is an inadequate explanation of political behaviour since it ignores the very different ways in which countries or leaders use their power.

The collapse of the Soviet bloc was due to multiple causes (Gorbachev, the economy, the role of the United States and so on). But in some countries, at least, civil resistance was also important, as this book demonstrates with its coverage of Czechoslovakia, Poland, East Germany and the Baltic states. The mass demonstrations in East Germany in the autumn of 1989, accompanied by the mass exodus of its citizens to the West via the recently opened Austro-Hungarian border, were a major factor in the opening of the Berlin Wall. In Czechoslovakia, the dissidents, despite having made little visible impact on the regime until the very end, created a body of organized opposition with which the regime, in 1989, could negotiate a smooth and legal handover of power. The Solidarity movement in Poland, founded in 1980, became the first officially recognized organization (apart from the Church) that was independent of Communist Party control. Although later banned under martial law, it provided a regime in crisis with its only negotiating partner. And in June 1989 it provided the authorities with an exit strategy. It signed an agreement with the then government for partially free elections, but without regime change. However, the opposition won all the contested seats, thus paving the way for the eventual dismantling of communist rule by constitutional means.

Four other chapters deal with the post-communist revolutions in the rump Yugoslavia, Kosovo, Ukraine and Georgia. In all these cases, civil resistance, although home-grown, did receive assistance from outside. In Serbia, where Milosevic’s aggressively nationalistic policies had majority support during the 1990s, civil resistance largely failed until the very end when the security forces refused to endorse electoral fraud. However, the opposition was very real: there was a massive evasion of the military draft and Milosevic never won any election in Belgrade. In Kosovo, by contrast, so it is argued, non-violent opposition to Serbian rule among the Albanian majority would have had a better chance of success had there been bolder leadership. But its leader, Ibrahim Rugova, favoured a strategy of extreme risk avoidance (for example, by opposing even peaceful student demonstrations), and it was this which contributed to the final explosion of ethnic hatred into violence and war.
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The ‘colour revolutions’ in Georgia in 2003 and in Ukraine a year later were not aimed at regime change, but were basically directed towards the establishment of clean, genuinely democratic government. And in both cases, the catalyst was the detection of election fraud—with the help of western monitors. The sequel to these events is well known. The new Georgian leader, Mikheil Saakashvili, did express the popular will, although he later used force against his opponents. One basic difference between the two countries was that whereas the mass of Georgians genuinely wanted to come under western protection, the Ukrainians were divided, with the majority opposed to NATO membership. In 2010, the anti-NATO Viktor Yanukovych came back into power on a plurality of votes; and the conflict over NATO membership remains unresolved. The book rejects the often repeated charge of western orchestration: these revolutions were very much grassroots affairs; and Russian interference in Ukraine was clumsier and on a very much larger scale. However, the protesters received substantial funding and technical advice from abroad—for example, on how to use the media and how to organize effective peaceful demonstrations.

The strategy of non-violence did not, however, originate in the communist world. Its most famous proponent was of course Mahatma Gandhi, whose philosophy of Satyagraha or ‘truth force’ was intended as an agency of moral transformation. But Gandhi’s civil disobedience campaigns, as this book shows, were more limited than is sometimes supposed. His campaigns were intermittent, focusing on specific issues; and his philosophy was not widely shared by India’s nationalists. However, he was at all times a skilled negotiator, ready to give way on matters of detail without sacrificing principle. None of his campaigns demanded that Britain should ‘Quit India’—until 1942 when his civil disobedience movement was effectively put down. His campaign was not the basic reason for the eventual British withdrawal. His main achievement, apart from becoming a national icon, was to build up the Congress Party to which power could eventually be transferred.

Gandhism was one source of inspiration for Martin Luther King and the US civil rights movement launched in the 1950s. Racial segregation in the American South had been entrenched for the previous 80 years; but the political climate had been slowly changing. Large numbers of black people had migrated to the North, where for the first time they gained the opportunity to vote. Nevertheless, civil rights legislation was still impossible, largely because of the power wielded in Congress by the Dixiecrats. The campaigners therefore appealed to the predominantly liberal Supreme Court. And when it ruled in a series of cases that segregation was unconstitutional, the federal authorities were obliged to intervene to enforce the law. At this stage, the civil rights activists took care to enlist media attention, for example by ensuring television coverage of local police beating peaceful demonstrators. This was a powerful form of pressure, since, for the first time, it placed the grievances at the centre of international attention.

Despite its eventual success, the campaign did have one unintended effect. It triggered off a white backlash in the South, which, as a result of Richard Nixon’s
‘Southern Strategy’, led Dixicrats to switch their votes to the Republicans—thus producing a major and long-lasting right-wing realignment in American politics.

A rather different case-study in this book is that of Northern Ireland—where the Nationalists, partly influenced by American experience, founded their own civil rights movement in 1967, directed against the discrimination to which Catholics were then subjected. The book is uncertain as to how far the later violence was inevitable, but argues that one reason lay in the conflation of the proclaimed goal—civil rights, which could have commanded sympathy—and an underlying goal—Irish reunification—which the Unionist majority implacably opposed. The misjudgement of the Nationalists, so the argument runs, lay in supposing that it was the British army rather than the Unionist majority which constituted the main obstacle to reunification.

A further revolution in which civil resistance played a role was the military coup in Portugal in April 1974 which ended the right-wing and quasi-fascist dictatorship that had ruled since 1926. Unusually, this was a coup by left-wing army officers (initially supported by the right-of-centre General Antonio de Spinola) with the aim of ending the country’s colonial wars and installing democracy. In this case popular power had initially played no part at all. But the coup unleashed a wave of popular enthusiasm which astonished even the military. The presence of communists in the caretaker government prompted the then US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to predict a communist seizure of power. A key factor which helped to save the situation was the free elections to a constituent assembly held in April 1975. They produced a remarkable 91.7 per cent turnout and revealed an electorate which, although strongly divided between left and right, was clearly against any return to dictatorship. The democratic parties (benefiting from financial support from Europe, particularly West Germany) proved strong enough to thwart two subsequent coup attempts (from both left and right). In the end, Kissinger himself rather grudgingly admitted that his fears had been wrong, observing that ‘I do not often make mistakes of judgment’ (p. 161).

A contrasting example is that of the 1979 Iranian revolution where civil resistance was indeed a prime moving force. The evidence presented here is that—in its origins at least—this was indeed a ‘people’s revolution’. The Shah’s regime, brought to power in 1953 by the CIA, had become hated, not least because of its human rights violations. Most of the violence came from the regime’s forces: the British ambassador was impressed by the protesters’ courage and discipline. In the end the troops and police refused to fire on the demonstrators, or went over to their side—a hallmark of true revolution. Future protests, the book argues, will be directed not at the overthrow of the Islamic Republic, but at its democratization. This chapter was, however, written too early to cover the bitterly contested re-election of President Ahmadinejad in 2009.

Chile and the Philippines are two further examples of pro-western dictatorships supported by the United States for strategic reasons. In Chile, the Pinochet regime was—in the end—peacefully dismantled. In 1988, Pinochet, faced with economic crisis and massive discontent, agreed to a referendum on whether he should
remain as president. The democratic parties seized their chance and mobilized the voters. This resulted in his defeat, even though, as a compromise, he remained as commander-in-chief. The United States accepted the dictatorship’s demise.

Similarly with the Philippines, where the corrupt President Ferdinand Marcos had long held onto power by devices ranging from martial law to ballot-rigging. The US had backed him, fearing that his overthrow would result in the loss of American bases. When Marcos agreed to hold elections in 1986, his democratic opponents arranged for the close monitoring of the vote, with the help of foreign observers. Faced with overwhelming proof of fraud, Marcos was forced to resign—under strong pressure from the US which then backed the opposition candidate, Corazon Aquino. The sequel has, however, been less happy: ballot-rigging continued under Marcos’s successors.

The ending of apartheid in South Africa by constitutional means is the subject of another chapter. Here, there was a combination of both violence and non-violence; and the book is uncertain as to which was more decisive. The ANC had long practised sabotage and sometimes resorted to extreme violence against black citizens suspected of collaborating with the authorities. However, the violence was selective, targeted where possible against property rather than people. During the mid-1980s, however, the ANC became interested in a negotiated transfer of power; and held talks in Zambia with white businessmen who had a similar interest. Mandela himself later conducted negotiations while still in prison. The regime was under pressure as a result of international isolation, economic crisis and the fear of losing foreign investments. It had been severely weakened by the collapse in the 1970s of Portugal’s African empire. A decisive positive factor was the fall of the Berlin Wall: the disappearance of the Soviet threat destroyed one of the main arguments, or pretexts, for resisting reform. All this formed the background to the decision by the recently appointed President F. W. de Klerk announced on 2 February 1990 to legalize prohibited organizations and to release Nelson Mandela from prison. This was not the end of the road: it was another four years until the transfer of power took place, and this was a period of serious violence, mainly between the forces of the ANC and Inkatha. Nevertheless, 1990 was the point of no return.

It remains to examine the two cases of total failure—Burma and China. The peaceful Buddhist revolt in 2007 against the widely detested military junta was precipitated by drastic increases in fuel prices. It might well have succeeded had the country’s most powerful neighbours, India and China, been willing to impose sanctions. They were unwilling to do this—in China’s case for fear of encouraging dissidents at home; and in both cases because of business or economic interests.

Finally, as to the events of 1989 in China itself. In this case, the Chinese leaders delayed acting for several weeks during which they allowed the demonstrations in Tiananmen Square and many other cities to continue. But it seems that the top leaders feared a repetition of the events of Eastern Europe. In China as in Poland the protesters represented an alliance between students and workers, and this was more than the rulers were prepared to tolerate. Perhaps the basic reason for the
regime’s continuing stability, so the book suggests, is the exponential rise in living standards, as a result of the Party’s free market economic policies.

After all these often very different case-histories have been sifted, how far is it possible to discern any general pattern—and how far were the successes simply attributable to luck or chance?

Non-violence is certainly no panacea. Unarmed demonstrators are no match for disciplined troops. Nevertheless, dictatorships of whatever kind are more vulnerable to peaceful pressures than is often supposed. They do not like bad international publicity; and events such as economic crises or popular discontent may compel them to make compromises and may cause splits among the leaders between hardliners and reformers or quasi-reformers. If the rulers hold elections that turn out to be demonstrably fraudulent, they undermine their own legitimacy both at home and abroad.

However, the task of undermining dictatorships is only half the problem. A sometimes even more difficult challenge for civil resisters is to recognize their opportunities and seize them in an intelligent and constructive way so as to attract mass support. One of the keys to success here is to combine pressure and insistence on principle with a talent for flexible negotiation in a spirit of give and take, and to avoid demands for unconditional surrender. Mandela and the Solidarity movement in Poland in 1989 both demonstrated such talents—when facing governments which were already looking for an exit strategy. The existence of a constructive opposition will also have a highly important international impact. In Portugal, for example, it persuaded the US to withdraw its support for the right-wing dictatorship, which it had previously backed as ‘the lesser evil’.

Even so, there are caveats to be added. Non-violent campaigns do not always have the intended results: the success of the orange revolution in Ukraine in 2003 failed to resolve the country’s domestic divisions; the book contains a number of similar examples. This is worth remembering at a time when the ‘technology’ of protest is being widely imitated in many parts of the world. It does not always have happy endings.

It may be argued that some of these dictatorships were doomed to collapse in any case, regardless of civil resistance. But effective civil resistance was sometimes crucially important. In Poland and Czechoslovakia, to take only two examples, it played a key part in avoiding what might have turned into terrible bloodshed.

The authors of this book are justifiably cautious. But this reviewer would be inclined to a somewhat more positive ending. People power, when it genuinely operates—with mass support and a clear moral dimension—is marked by its optimism and friendliness, as this reviewer saw in Portugal in 1974 when reporting for the BBC World Service. It is the very reverse of mob rule. Its importance has, in the past, been grossly underrated. Dictators with a contempt for public opinion have—sometimes at least—paid a heavy price for their arrogance. In the West, it was generally assumed that non-violent protest would succeed only in democratic, free societies. This has been proved wrong; and it was the major reason for the failure to foresee the collapse of the Soviet bloc.
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But the lessons go wider. This book is a timely reminder that *realpolitik* is by no means always the best way to consolidate power. And this may prompt a rethink as to the very nature of power itself.