Learning from failures in the 2011 uprisings

Thomas Davies

Department of International Politics, City University London

Until recently the study of strategic nonviolent action has, as Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan argue, been considered to be 'something of a pariah' in strategic studies.[1] It is in this context that literature on the subject has tended to concentrate on apparently successful cases of nonviolent resistance, which has helped to secure its position alongside traditional military strategic analysis in a growing array of literature.[2]

In his response my article on strategic nonviolent action in the 2011 uprisings in Bahrain, Egypt, Libya and Syria, Brian Martin observes that 'many lessons' may be learned from instances of failure. His analysis is particularly helpful for pointing towards a number of aspects of nonviolent strategic thought that may be reconsidered and improved in the light of the experience of the 2011 uprisings.

Among the key contributions in Martin's analysis is its elaboration on the need for more sophisticated consideration of the relationship between nonviolent actors and armed forces. A central claim in literature on strategic nonviolent action has been that persuading loyalty shifts among the armed forces can be crucial to success of a nonviolent campaign.[3] As my article indicated, the experience of the 2011 uprisings indicates key potential problems in this relationship, such as legitimation of military pre-eminence in Egypt, and helping to facilitate splits in the armed forces that contributed towards civil war in Libya and Syria. Martin's analysis helpfully indicates some of the potential methods of

---

[1] Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 17.
[2] See, for instance, Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), chapter 23.
[3] Maria J. Stephan and Erica Chenoweth, 'Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict", *International Security* 33:1 (2008): 42.

more effective fraternisation with armed forces that deserve far greater attention than they have received to date.

Martin's analysis is also helpful for its clarification of the roles of dispersion and concentration in nonviolent action. A key distinction that is sometimes overlooked is between methods of concentration that are widely dispersed, such as protests in multiple cities, and methods of dispersion such as strikes and symbolic actions. As my article notes, the 2011 uprisings involved both methods of concentration that were widely dispersed and methods of dispersion such as the strike actions in Bahrain, Egypt and Syria. The distinction Martin highlights with respect to forms of dispersion is a significant one, but adoption of both strategies was insufficient to prevent the failures in the uprisings in these countries.

There is a significant contrast between understandings of the definitions of success and failure for strategic nonviolent action in Martin's analysis, and those put forward in my article. Strategists of nonviolent action need to consider carefully whether use of force legitimated with reference to attacks on peaceful protesters is merely 'one particular technique in a wider package of outrage management methods' or a mode of failure that nonviolent strategists should seek to avert.

According to Martin, 'most nonviolence scholars would concur' that the 2011 uprising in Egypt was a success for strategic nonviolent action, with a 'reasonably free election' taking place in 2012. This appears to be in sharp contrast to analyses from beyond their discipline, where it has been emphasised that the aftermath of the uprising was not regime change, but rather 'appears to have amounted to an intra-regime coup, with the military faction prevailing over a rival business faction.'[4] If the criteria Martin uses to deem the Egyptian uprising to be successful were to be applied to violent strategy, it could be argued that the military invasion of Iraq in 2003 was a 'success', given the

[4] Ewan Stein, 'Revolution or Coup? Egypt's Fraught Transition', *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, 54:4 (2012): 45-66.

'reasonably free' elections that took place subsequent to the invasion, a conclusion with which many would not concur.

If it is the aim of strategists of nonviolent action to be considered on the same terms as strategists of violent action, the failures of strategic nonviolence need to be subjected to the same critical scrutiny as the failures of violent strategy. In his conclusion, Martin suggests that the reader should return to Gene Sharp's original formulation of the dynamics of nonviolent action, especially laying the groundwork and ensuring nonviolent discipline, rather than the dynamics of failure set out in my article. However, the role of nonviolence in legitimating the use of force by other actors, is not, as Martin argues, 'a secondary issue', but instead should be a key concern in nonviolent strategic analysis. In elaborating on effective methods of fraternisation with armed forces, Martin makes his most helpful contribution to advancement of non-violent strategic thought. We should also take into account the interplay of geopolitical and societal factors with the dynamics of failure, elaborated in my article but in need of further testing. As Martin argues, the expectations set in my article with respect to the diverse array of circumstances and dynamics that protesters need to take into account demands much more of nonviolent strategists than traditionally put forward. However, the invigoration of dictatorial rule in Bahrain and Egypt and the escalating violence in Libya and Syria since 2011 reveal how disastrous the consequences of failing to do so can be.