

# Rallying For Democracy

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## What is Non-Violent?

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Nonviolence is an ideology that rejects the use of violent action in a conflict over power to attain social and political objectives. The term nonviolence is complex and has varied meanings, among which it is important to draw distinctions. In general, the term has been interpreted as in the negative - an absence of violence. However, nonviolence, both in theory and practice can and should be viewed as a positive, an active and potent force for attaining certain goals.

Two categories of definition can be named: principled and pragmatic. In their application, these categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and some movements have utilized both concurrently to significant effect.

Principled nonviolence is often rooted in traditional or religious beliefs and customs, or in moral principles alone. It is based on a moral stand, an ethical code which disallows the practice of violence, often throughout all actions of life. Principled nonviolent practitioners do not necessarily utilize nonviolent actions and strategies, though they at times have.

For practitioners of principled nonviolence, the aim of any nonviolent endeavour is, as the Venerable Samdhong Rinpoche, Chairman of the Assembly of Tibetan's People's Deputies, Tibetan Government in Exile stated, "the establishment of truth and removal of injustice. It does not aim to eliminate or defeat anyone. For a true nonviolent activist, there is no enemy. It aims to end injustice by making the perpetrator of injustice see reason and undo the wrong done by him."

A significant question which principled nonviolence seeks to answer is: Is there a unity of ends and means; are the means of attaining goals, particularly those based on ideals such as equality, justice or peace, in concert with the ends?

Principled nonviolence includes such diverse beliefs as pacifism, a generally non-active form of resistance to violence; Tibetan Buddhist practitioners who eschew all forms of violence; and the commitment of the Quakers, a religious group, to use their deeply held belief in a nonviolent way of life to effect change, not only within themselves as individuals or in their immediate sphere of influence, but also in the world at large.

Pragmatic nonviolence is best understood as the decision to use nonviolence based upon practical strategic considerations. It does not rely on a fundamental commitment to nonviolence which extends to all situations; it may be limited only to the situation at hand.

Pragmatic nonviolence is based upon the use of proactive, positive nonviolent strategies and actions. It seeks to change the status quo, ranging in individual cases from specific policies which affect a specific group to the overall dynamics of power in a society.

With pragmatic nonviolence, a people or a movement can choose not to use violence even if there is no traditional or religious basis for that choice in their culture.

### Implementation of political nonviolence

For example, the Crimean Tatars, traditionally a warrior culture, have chosen to use nonviolence because of its practical worth in their struggle for their rights following their return to the Crimea after decades in exile. Likewise, the Native Hawaiians chose to use nonviolence when the Americans took over Hawaii a century ago. At that time, Queen Lili'uokalani, the Hawaiian ruler, counseled her people not to use violence and suffer certain devastating defeat.

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Some peoples employ both principled and pragmatic approaches. The Tibetan struggle for independence, which is deeply influenced by the nonviolent philosophy of Tibetan Buddhism, is also quite pragmatic in its approach. The Tibetans have used international diplomatic and public relations campaigns, and nonviolent resistance within Tibet, in their struggle for independence from the Peoples Republic of China. These nonviolent activities are linked to very pragmatic considerations: Tibetans are few and the Chinese are many, and perhaps more importantly, the Chinese are neighbors with whom the Tibetans must live into the future.

The question is raised of whether nonviolent movements are more effective if there is a traditional cultural base for them in a society.

Some traditionally nonviolent groups, including the Tibetans, have been very successful at remaining so in the face of severe repression. At the same time, others, such as the South African anti-apartheid movement, did not possess such a penetration in their culture of nonviolence as a principle, yet have been successful at attaining their goals.

It is notable that many indigenous cultures also possess traditional methods of conflict prevention and resolution which can be sources of strength when nonviolence is threatened. It would appear that the presence of a nonviolent tradition can support nonviolent action within a society, yet it is not a required prerequisite for success.

At the same time the question arises if a group, when pressed, will abandon nonviolence more readily if it does not possess a principled commitment to it. If nonviolence is seen only as a tactic, will not a people or movement drop that tactic when and if it is no longer expedient to pursue? As a tactic alone does it have the roots to sustain a long campaign?

Nonviolent action can be divided into:

- (i) conflictual actions used to wage conflict and;
- (ii) actions which are non-conflictual;

- Conflictual actions can be considered to include mass public mobilizations, such as economic and political non-cooperation; civil disobedience, such as strikes, hunger strikes, demonstrations, and vigils; grassroots mobilization such as letter writing campaigns; and campaigns designed to build political awareness among the people. In this sense, nonviolent action can be employed not just for defense, but also for offense.

- Non-conflictual actions can include such activities as negotiations and conciliation, which are carried out once the dynamics of power have shifted, and the group conducting the campaign has been successful in acquiring enough legitimacy with which to negotiate.

Governments are often reacting to a perceived loss of political and economic power, including profits from natural resources or access to foreign aid, when they respond violently to nonviolence. Using violence to maintain power is a traditional response, yet one which can lead to spiraling conflict.

In many cases, using violence, whether covert or overt, against groups does not destroy the movement. It can instead make the group stronger and more committed to its goals. It can also encourage the group to use violence, thus beginning a cycle of violence which, once begun, is difficult to stop.

In general, nonviolent campaigns can be at least as effective as violent ones, but they require sacrifice, patience and discipline, and great courage.