

## THE STUDENT PROTESTS AND THE DANGERS THREATENING THEM

To the students in the blockade

The student protests in Serbia have reached a critical point. To maintain their movement's momentum, the students will need to intensify the pressure on the government. Meanwhile, the government—which has failed to devise an effective response to six months of relentless protests—will likely be compelled to break the university blockades sooner rather than later, but by the beginning of the next academic semester at the latest. If the government escalates violence in an attempt to restore order—something authoritarian governments are prone to do—it will be imperative for the protesters to demonstrate unwavering commitment to nonviolent resistance. Nonviolence is their only viable strategy.

### No Space for Complacency

A common belief among participants and observers of the student movement is that the government will not dare to employ significant force—doing so would amount to political suicide. Many assume the regime will fall soon, one way or another. These assumptions are misguided, in my view, and history offers ample evidence to the contrary. True, the demonstrators have already liberated themselves mentally, but the hardest part of the struggle—physical liberation—most likely lies ahead. It is advisable to prepare for the worst.

Until now, nonviolent resistance has meant organizing protests and interventions while refraining from vandalism and clashes with police or counter-protesters. This was the movement's honeymoon phase. The commitment to nonviolent resistance will be tested profoundly when the government attempts to violently break the blockades. The more violence escalates, the more sacrifices nonviolent resistance demands of its followers. I will revisit this point later, with reference to Gandhi's strategies for nonviolent resistance, but first it is crucial to examine why a violent response is not a viable alternative.

### The Argument Against a Violent Response

Many things can be said about why it is not advisable to answer violence with more violence. Noam Chomsky used to advise students not to wear helmets at demonstrations. Yes, the police are brutal, he would say, but if they see you wearing helmets, they will just get more violent. If you bring a rifle, they will bring tanks. Bring a tank, and they will deploy fighter jets. The state holds a monopoly on violence and in any violent confrontation with the citizens the government most likely wins.<sup>1</sup>

Hannah Arendt observed that before totalitarian movements gain total control and create a society according to their ideology, in which dissent is impossible, they construct an imaginary reality for their followers to find comfort in. She argued that “the force possessed by totalitarian propaganda ... lies in its ability to shut the masses off from the real world”<sup>2</sup>. One key part of this effort is the incessant portrayal of the protesters as

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<sup>1</sup> Noam Chomsky - Tactics, Boycott, and Nonviolent Resistance  
<https://youtu.be/2OVZXNKD-7c?si=CMB-NOWSiDZCxi8q>

<sup>2</sup> Arendt, H. (2017). *The origins of totalitarianism*. Penguin Classics. 462.

some fringe group of hooligans, working under the auspices of Western countries to overthrow the regime. The government will magnify the slightest act of violence by the protesters to reinforce this narrative. Another reason for the students to refrain from violent actions and critically evaluate support from allied groups, whose actions—however unintentional—could ultimately undermine the movement’s success.

The sight of veterans joining the protests and standing in solidarity with students is undeniably heartening—a powerful display of intergenerational unity. However, when they declare themselves guarantors of the students’ safety, they also suggest a willingness to confront state power. This is a commendable gesture if the goal is to discourage violent acts by counter-protesters or to foster unity within the movement. If the goal is to achieve concrete political outcomes, this tactic is inadequate and will only harm the movement. Any goals that might be achievable are more likely to be achieved with nonviolent means, and at a lesser cost to the movement—whatever the cost may ultimately be. Those committed to real political change do not move to the battleground their opponent prefers. In this case, the government would gain the most from a shift toward violent confrontation.

### **Nonviolence**

What then, should be done when the government resorts to violent means of oppression? In this case, nonviolent resistance remains the only viable response. Humanity has a proud history of nonviolent resistance to oppression—from the Indian anti-colonial struggle and the Civil Rights Movement in the United States to the fight against apartheid in South Africa.

Mahatma Gandhi is perhaps the most influential thinker on nonviolent resistance, and it is worthwhile to study his ideas closely in order to develop actionable strategies for today’s circumstances. Gandhi believed that “that which distinguishes man from all other animals is his capacity to be nonviolent.”<sup>3</sup> His two main arguments against violent resistance are:

1. Violence is a degradation of what it means to be human. It degrades you, he says, to the level of a beast.
2. When you use violence in the struggle for justice it is usually the most violent ones that come up on top. Even if you succeed in the struggle, you often end up replacing one set of violent, corrupt leaders with another.

Even if violent revolt were practically feasible, which it is not, it would likely yield less desirable outcomes than nonviolent resistance.

It is worth recalling what exactly Gandhi meant by nonviolent resistance. A common prejudice against nonviolence holds that it is unmanly and cowardly. According to Gandhi, nothing could be further from the truth. Nonviolent resistance to violent oppression is the highest form of human courage. Gandhi demanded of his followers to march unarmed into the line of fire “smilingly” and “cheerfully” and get themselves blown to pieces. Nonviolence is serious business; it must not be taken lightly. It means

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<sup>3</sup> Finkelstein, N. G. (2012). *What Gandhi says about nonviolence, resistance and courage* (1. print). OR Books. — Throughout this text I rely on Prof. Finkelstein’s research when referencing Gandhi’s ideas.

standing firm when attacked—not striking back, and, just as importantly, not fleeing and hiding cowardice behind the pretense of nonviolence. True nonviolence requires accepting harm, if necessary, for the sake of the movement.

Gandhi understood that the real goal of nonviolent resistance is not to “melt the hearts” of the wrongdoers, as he used to say, but to “quicken the conscience” of the broader public, who may be moved by the scenes of suffering of the nonviolent resisters. The more innocent people suffer at the hands of the regime the more rapidly the resistance will proceed toward its goal.

However, suffering alone is not enough—it must be recognized as suffering for a just cause for it to have an impact on the observer. And for that recognition to occur, the public must first be made aware of it. The importance of the last point cannot be overstated.<sup>4</sup>

Social media has thus far been an effective tool in amplifying the protests, but it will not suffice in the future, I am afraid. Beside the major liability which is that social media can be disabled by the government—a possibility that should not be underestimated—its reach is limited mostly to people who already are sympathetic to the movement. Other ways of informing the public, especially the part of the public which is in the grip of the regime’s media bubble, must be found, if those people are to be converted into allies. This is an interesting topic for another discussion.

If the movement wishes to succeed, it must show its opponents that they have nothing to fear if the power dynamics invert. For this reason, the principle of nonviolence must be upheld even when the protesters find themselves in a dominant position, such as when they vastly outnumber the police forces. It is in these situations that the protesters have the chance to demonstrate to the public that they are committed to peace and justice, and to their adversaries that those who defect will be welcomed with open arms. The goal is to convert, not to antagonize them. It should not be overlooked that behind the uniforms are fellow citizens, some of whom may have incipient sympathy for the students’ movement but lack the courage to disobey their masters. These people should be met with compassion instead of hate.

### **The Courage to Resist Nonviolently**

The future is more uncertain than ever, and the protesters must remain vigilant. If the government resorts to large-scale violence, it will be the impetus that the resistance movement needs to succeed. How the movement responds will determine its success or failure. Retreat will lead to quiet collapse; a violent reaction would spell catastrophe for Serbian society.

Violence must be met with nonviolence, love, and compassion. It is the only path forward. If the movement is to succeed, it must remain true to the principles of nonviolence that Gandhi articulated many years ago. The students must transform every act of violence committed against them into a source of moral power and use it to mobilize mass support among the citizenry.

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<sup>4</sup> The 2018-2019 March of Return in Gaza failed in large part due to its inability to garner the public attention it deserved.

The movement will have to give rise to those special individuals who will stand firm—accepting blows, tear gas, and rubber bullets “smilingly” and “cheerfully”—for the sake of their people and all of humanity. These exceptional individuals, who possess a form of courage most of us can only dream of, will suffer greatly at the hands of those who do not know what courage is.

History will judge them kindly.

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