

Defending without the Military

Published as a chapter in Geoff Harris, ed., *Achieving Security in Sub-Saharan Africa: Cost Effective Alternatives to the Military*, Institute for Security Studies, Pretoria, 2004, pp. 43-55. Reprinted, in a revised version, in *Peace in North-East Asia*, International Seminar, Seoul, Korea, 26-29 June 2005 (War Resisters' International, 2005), pp. 56-67 in Korean and pp. 144-156 in English.

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1 Introduction

When faced with the threat of organised violence, often the only option considered is 'defence.' This is assumed to be military defence, which is itself a form of organised violence. The result is arms races, military races or, more generally, violence races. The assumption that defence requires violence is so deep-seated that alternatives are seldom considered. Yet there is another, very different option: develop the capacity for struggle using nonviolent methods such as strikes, boycotts, rallies, sit-ins and setting up alternative institutions.

Historical examples show the potential of nonviolent action.

- In 1968 the Czechoslovak people used nonviolent resistance against the Soviet invasion, and were much more successful than military resistance would have been. They were able to convince many invading soldiers that the Czechoslovaks had a good cause. Czechoslovak solidarity was so strong that no one could be found for months to head a puppet regime. The nonviolence of the resistance had the important impact of undermining the credibility of the Soviet Union within communist parties around the world (Windsor and Roberts 1969).
- In 1986 in the Philippines, tens of thousands of people came onto the streets to oppose the Marcos regime and to defy his troops. Government soldiers refused to attack the civilians. This massive display of "people power" helped topple the dictatorship (Thompson 1995; Zunes 1999a).
- In 1989, East European regimes collapsed in the face of popular resistance (Randle 1991). For example, in East Germany masses of people emigrated to West Germany, while at the same time street protests became larger and larger. In the face of this vote of no confidence, the government resigned (Bleiker 1993).
- The most famous use of nonviolent action was the campaign for independence of India from Britain, led by Gandhi, involving mass civil disobedience and other techniques. It was the nonviolence of the Indian movement that inhibited the British from being more violent themselves (Gandhi 1927; Sharp 1979). In contrast, when British colonialists faced a violent rebellion in Kenya, they set up numerous concentration camps and ruthlessly killed thousands of people (Edgerton 1989).

There are numerous examples of popular nonviolent insurrections that have challenged and often overthrown authoritarian governments (Parkman 1990; Zunes 1994). Successful African examples include the toppling of Sudanese president Jaafar Nimiery in 1985, the overthrow of the military government of Mali over 1989-1992 and the overthrow of president Didier Radsiraka of Madagascar in 1991-1993. As well, there have been less successful but still significant unarmed challenges such as to Niger's military government in 1991-1992 (Zunes 1994). Nonviolent action played a key role in the ending of apartheid in South Africa, after earlier challenges by armed struggle had been defeated (Zunes 1999b).

The history of nonviolent struggle has been cast into a shadow by the attention given to battles and conquests. Even so, there is ample evidence to show that protest, noncooperation and nonviolent intervention have enormous potential (Ackerman and DuVall 2000; Cooney and Michalowski 1987; Crow et al. 1990; McAllister 1991; McManus and Schlabach 1991; Powers and Vogeles 1997; Sharp 1973; Weir et al. 1994). The key question is how to turn this potential into a viable option.

To tackle this issue, I outline how nonviolent methods can be used in a coordinated fashion as an alternative to military defence. This option, called social defence, has implications for skill development, technology policy, social organisation and external relations. These are described as components of a programme in which social defence is a process as well as a goal.

2 Social defence

Historical examples show the potential of nonviolent action, but it is hardly wise to rely on spontaneous protest, noncooperation and nonviolent intervention by the population. After all, spontaneous use of violence would have only a small chance of success against a well prepared military force. Successful military defence depends heavily on recruitment and training of soldiers, production and/or purchase of weapons, planning and preparation for a range of contingencies, collection of information about threats and potential enemies ("intelligence"), and maintenance of support systems based in the wider society, such as for military funding, transport, medicine, education and the like. To be effective, a nonviolent alternative needs a similar level of preparation.

Since the 1950s, a number of researchers and advocates have investigated and promoted popular nonviolent resistance to aggression as an alternative to military defence (Boserup and Mack 1974; Burrowes 1996; de Valk 1993; Ebert 1968; Geeraerts 1977; Keyes 1981; King-Hall 1958; Martin 1993; Niezing 1987; Randle 1994; Roberts 1967; Sharp 1990). This involves means such as strikes, boycotts, symbolic protests, noncooperation and setting up alternative institutions. This alternative is called by various names, including social defence, nonviolent defence, civilian defence, civilian-based defence and defence by civil resistance.

Social defence aims to defend the social fabric rather than territory. One way it does this is by reducing the benefits of aggression, such as by strikes and work-ins to deny economic advantages to the aggressor. Another way is by undermining the social support for the aggressor, such as by fraternising with troops and communicating with the people in the aggressor country.

What would social defence look like in practice? Imagine a limited invasion by foreign troops backed by an internal coup. In other words, key parts of the government and military are imagined to collaborate with the invaders so that no military resistance is mounted. Social defence to this political-military takeover might include:

- mass demonstrations and protests to show people's nonacceptance of the takeover;
- refusal by public servants and soldiers to do work for the new rulers, including resistance by strikes, go-slows or noncooperation;
- destruction of files on dissidents and other potential leaders of the resistance;
- disruption by telecommunications workers of communications by the new rulers, and use of media to mobilise the resistance;
- taking over of factory production by workers to sabotage production useful to the invaders and also make sure necessities are provided to the populace;
- attempts to win over the invading troops and social pressure applied through the families and friends of the collaborators;
- international communication to mobilise economic and political pressure on the new regime, and also to foment resistance in the country from which the invaders came.

With these and other methods of nonviolent resistance prepared in advance, potential invaders might well be reluctant to act. Social defence, just like military defence, has the potential to act as a deterrent.

Social defence has the potential to challenge the basic assumptions underlying military defence:

- instead of violent means, only nonviolent means of resistance are used;
- instead of defending a state, social defence methods can be used to defend local communities, ethnic groups, or social classes;
- instead of most combatants being young fit men, social defence is based on participation by all sectors of the populace, including women, children, the elderly and people with disabilities;
- instead of being planned only by elites, everyone can be involved in planning and preparing for social defence.

These features of social defence that challenge the military model are actually keys to its success. The nonviolence of the resistance allows much wider participation in the defence, and the refusal to use violence provides a strong moral appeal to the aggressors and third parties. Since the methods of nonviolent action can be used to push for the interests of workers against employers or women against men - rather than just the interests of the state against its challengers - social defence can draw on the energy released in struggles for social justice as well as providing energy to these struggles. By potentially involving all the populace, social defence is much more likely to be a true defence of the people's interests.

One of the key advantages of social defence is that it provides protection against government repression and military coups (Roberts 1975). In Africa, like most of the world, a country's troops are far more likely to be used against the local population than to defend against foreign enemies. Justified by the alleged need for 'defence,' military forces are most commonly used by governments to repress and exploit their own people.

Social defence does not have this defect. Social defence can only be effective if it is supported by all or most of the population, hence it provides no basis for repressive rule. It is this powerful antiauthoritarian dimension that makes governments neglect this alternative.

3 Objections and responses

Objection 1: Nonviolent action won't work against a ruthless aggressor.

Actually, nonviolent resistance can be quite effective against ruthless aggressors (Summy 1994), as shown by opposition to Nazis in occupied Europe (Semelin 1993). Nonviolence of the resistance can undermine the loyalty of the aggressing forces, whereas violent resistance often unifies the aggressors. The Iranian revolution was almost entirely nonviolent. It succeeded against the Shah's regime which was based on overwhelming military might, the routine use of state violence and torture to terrorise the population, and foreign support from every major power, including the United States, the Soviet Union, Israel and the Arab states (Albert 1980; Hoveyda 1980). (This is not to deny the militarism and many abuses of human rights of the clerical regime which took power after the revolution.)

It is a cruel illusion to imagine that building up military forces can be a protection against genocide, since genocide is almost always carried out by a state and its military forces against people under its own control, as in the case of the genocide of the Armenians by the Turkish government (1915), of the Jews by the Nazi government (1941-1945), of the Bangladeshis by the Pakistan government (1971) and of the Cambodian people by the Cambodian government (1975-1979). None of these genocides could have developed without substantial support among the people of the state undertaking the genocide. In the case of the Jews, there was little resistance - nonviolent or otherwise - and there was widespread complicity with or acquiescence to the Nazis, both by non-Jews and by leaders of some

Jewish communities who helped organise registration and deportations. Social defence is bound to be more effective than this.

A key to understanding the power of nonviolent resistance is avoiding the us-them dichotomy. In almost all cases of organised aggression, there is a political struggle going on: the struggle for supporters. Armies and genocidal programmes cannot be mobilised without numerous collaborators and many others who make no resistance. Active nonviolent opposition has a much greater scope for mobilising resistance to aggression, because it does not induce a counter-mobilisation among the aggressors the way that violence does, and because it allows everyone to play a part in a way that violent resistance does not.

Objection 2: Social defence won't stop an aggressor which just wants to make use of remote territory, for example for mining.

True: social defence is not designed to defend territory. But military defence is not very good at stopping attacks on remote territories either, as the Malvinas/Falklands war showed. Social defence cannot be conceived as a protection of territory; it operates through political, economic and social mobilisation. If an aggressor took control of a remote territory for mining purposes, then 'social attack' (Martin 1993) could be employed to mobilise international opposition, for example through boycotts and other forms of economic pressure, communications to the people of the aggressing country, and offers of amnesty and asylum to noncooperating troops of the aggressing forces.

Objection 3: Social defence won't deter an aggressor that has vital interests at stake.

It is true that even the best efforts of nonviolent resistance in Czechoslovakia in 1968 would probably have been insufficient to prevent reassertion of Soviet political control, since the Soviet rulers perceived Czechoslovakia as being vital to their whole system. But defence by the Czechoslovak military forces wouldn't have worked either and for this reason it wasn't even tried. Nonviolent resistance has a greater potential for undermining the popular support on which the aggressor depends. In 1968, Soviet troops had to be rotated out after only a few days because their reliability had been undermined by talking with the Czechoslovak people. In a situation in which no method can ensure full liberty, organised nonviolent resistance holds a great potential for maximising freedom.

Objection 4: Social defence won't work against a nuclear attack.

But then, neither will military defence. In addition, a society employing only social defence is less likely to attract a nuclear attack, since it does not pose a violent threat to anyone else.

There are many other possible objections to social defence, but answering them on logical grounds will be insufficient to convince some people, since their assumptions about violence and professionalisation of military defence are so deeply rooted. In this regard, two points are of importance. First, social defence is not a panacea. It cannot be expected to do everything desired by everybody, without hardship or death. It is not an easy road to a truly peaceful world. Second, social defence has not been developed yet, so the real question is whether it is promising enough to warrant further study and effort towards bringing it into being. If the answer is yes, the next question is, what can be done to help promote it?

4 Two approaches to transarmament

How could a conversion from military to social defence - a process called transarmament - be brought about?

One approach is through convincing government and military elites of the advantages of social defence, and also putting pressure on them through public support for social defence. In this approach,

social defence would be implemented by governments. This approach is flawed by its assumption that state elites would themselves ever promote significant aspects of an alternative that undercuts their own power. It is rather like trying to convince capitalists of the virtues of producing unprofitable goods. A few may be convinced, but they are likely to go bankrupt. Just as the behaviour of capitalists is a product of the wider capitalist system, the behaviour of state elites is a product of the system of competing states and the internal control exercised within states. As a result it is fruitless to expect social defence to be implemented by elites. This is indeed the experience in the United States, where the dedicated efforts of Gene Sharp and others to win support for civilian-based defence in government and military circles have had little success.

Another approach is through grassroots organising to promote and implement social defence. In this approach, social defence would come about in the face of apathy or opposition from state elites. It is this approach that I will adopt and describe here.

5 A social defence programme

A grassroots programme to promote and implement social defence could include the following components.

Promotion of the idea

Many people need to be exposed to the main ideas of nonviolent action and social defence, and also to relevant criticisms of military defence. Such a campaign of mass education is necessary for most social action campaigns. It can involve talking to individuals and groups, production and distribution of leaflets and articles, radio programmes, and publicity from related activities such as nonviolent resistance simulations. Once the idea becomes established, further publicity will become routine by means ranging from word of mouth to the mass media.

In most of the world, promotion of the idea of social defence is rudimentary or nonexistent. Only a limited range of literature is available, and knowledge of the idea is restricted mainly to sections of the peace movement.

Local planning

Ideas can have only a limited impact unless they are connected with practical activities. The most immediate practical activity towards implementing social defence is local planning, preparation and training in the methods of nonviolent action (Clark et al. 1984; Coover et al. 1981; Hengren 1993). Local groups can assess what they could do to nonviolently resist an invasion or coup. This might range from organising rallies, talking with aggressor troops, going on strike, hiding or protecting dissidents, organising communications through local radio or person-to-person networks, and arranging for distribution of food. Once such options are assessed and given priorities, steps can be taken to prepare for them. For example, communications networks might be set up, including telephone networks and local courier services. An inventory of local resources might be made, including food stocks and printing equipment. Skills could be developed, such as being able to speak any relevant languages (for fraternisation purposes), being able to operate telecommunications equipment, or knowing how to disable machinery. Systematic training could be used to prepare for various contingencies and to develop confidence and resourcefulness.

Immediate threats can provide an incentive for local planning. People can be asked what threat worries them the most: government repression, marauding gangs, military coups, forced conscription or nearby fighting, for example. After selecting one or two of these threats, various ways of responding and preparing can be canvassed. Usually the most effective methods for dealing with one sort of violent threat are also quite useful for dealing with others.

Infiltration of established institutions

Local social defence organising can take place in many areas, including villages, workplaces, and interest groups such as teachers. But in order to become a dominant mode of defence, the ideas and practices of social defence need to be taken into key institutions, including the military, the police, the government, corporate management and the state bureaucracies. Until significant numbers of people in these areas support the shift to social defence, nonviolent resistance can at most be a subsidiary form of defence.

Social defence can be taken into key institutions in the same way as it is spread elsewhere: through communication, organising and direct action. Personal persuasion will be a key factor: as mass involvement in local nonviolence organising develops, many people who also play roles in key institutions, or know people in them, will pass on the ideas and begin promoting the alternative. Direct organising in places such as the military will also be important: passing out information, arranging for inside discussion and action groups, and developing plans and making preparations for nonviolent resistance. Finally, direct action will be necessary in many cases. For example, workers might strike or work-in to encourage management to participate in social defence planning in factories.

Clearly, taking social defence into institutions such as the military means making a direct challenge to the power and prerogatives of institutional elites. Organising a workforce and converting a workplace for nonviolent resistance might require implementing workers' control - at least if managers are resistant to changes required for social defence planning. So the project to implement social defence from the grassroots cannot simply be tacked on to existing institutions, but has to be a component of a wide-ranging challenge to existing power relations in society.

Restructuring society

For a really powerful social defence, it is necessary to go beyond preparations for nonviolent resistance within the context of existing society. Eventually the restructuring of economics, politics, technology, communications and other aspects of society will be required. For example, economic production can be made more resistant to takeover by being decentralised, by being based on less hierarchy and narrow job specialisation, by providing a more egalitarian distribution of the economic product, and by providing greater participation in decision-making over economic goals. Centralised production facilities are susceptible to being taken over by an aggressor, who can use coercion or try to buy off a small group of workers. A decentralised and locally self-reliant economy would be much better suited to resisting nonviolently, and also would be less attractive to a potential invader since the possibilities for quick exploitation of the economy would be less. If workers are able to understand and run factory production, aggressors will have more difficulty obtaining acquiescence by threats or bribes.

A more egalitarian distribution of the economic product would reduce the social antagonisms resulting from unemployment, exploitative wages, or discrimination by sex or ethnic origins. Divisions in the population caused or fostered by economic inequality can be used by aggressors to divide and rule. And just as obtaining a fair share of economic output is important in promoting solidarity for nonviolent resistance, so is having the opportunity to do meaningful work.

Finally, widespread participation in decision-making over economic goals would aid social defence. Participation would increase the commitment people feel to the society as a whole and undercut the power of economic elites to dictate directions, thus removing the vulnerability of the elites to aggressors.

These are some examples of how restructuring of the economic system would fit into a programme to restructure society for effective social defence. Similar changes could be made in politics, technology, communications and other areas (Martin 1993, 2001). For example, the potential for popular

nonviolent resistance would be enhanced by non-hierarchical decision-making systems, by technologies which could be used or dismantled by anyone, and by decentralised communications networks.

It should be clear that such changes would not be undertaken solely to make social defence more effective. They would require popular initiatives to restructure power relations throughout society because of the advantages these changes would have for their own sake, such as job satisfaction and economic justice.

It should also be clear that such changes do more than protect against external aggression: they challenge the systems of unequal power and privilege that are so often protected by military forces and police against the people they are supposed to be guarding. In other words, social defence by grassroots initiatives can be linked to grassroots challenges to the institutional structures which underlie the resort to organised violence.

External affairs

The development of 'social defence in one country' is unlikely to be successful. The threat to the prevailing power structures could well provoke external attack. Therefore, just as important as developing local plans and preparations for nonviolent resistance is promoting social defence in other parts of the world, especially among the people in potential aggressor states. This means liaising with dissident and social action groups in other countries, building communications facilities, developing foreign language skills, learning more about other cultures and political systems, and developing strategies to deal with potential threats.

If this liaison and preparation is successful, then any foreign attack would be threatening to the attacker because of the risk of stimulating opposition in the aggressor country and undermining the loyalty of its armed forces.

6 Leading the change

A full-scale system of social defence may be the ultimate goal, but for practical purposes steps along the way are important in themselves. Anything that increases the capacity of people to resist violence is worthwhile. There are lots of ideas for how to do this, but who will lead the way?

Government initiatives could lead to rapid change. This could be through provision of information, inclusion of materials in school syllabuses, financial support for training programmes, setting up of decentralised communication systems, support for workplace committees and a host of other possibilities. However, governments are the least likely source of initiative for social defence. A few western European governments have sponsored studies of social defence but none has yet done anything really substantial in terms of implementation. The most that might be hoped for from governments is tolerance for initiatives by others.

Far more likely are initiatives by individuals and groups in a range of arenas. Individual teachers might raise ideas in suitable contexts, village leaders could hold meetings and encourage activities, and so forth. Already there are many initiatives that are supportive of nonviolent resistance, even though they are overtly about something else, such as developing local self-reliance in food production, building networks among local organisations and defending free speech.

Another source of initiatives is outsiders: visiting activists. One model is Peace Brigades International, who send trained teams to accompany local activists who are at serious risk of attack. Another model is peace teams that interpose themselves between warring forces or otherwise intervene directly in other countries (Moser-Puangsuwan and Weber 2000). But probably the most important role of

outsiders is the more routine one of sharing ideas, experience, contacts and inspiration. Local action groups can gain great encouragement just by knowing that outsiders know and care about their efforts.

7 Conclusion

News reports in the mass media give the impression that violence is what drives world affairs and that only the intervention of governments or international bodies like the UN can make a difference. The problem is that terrorism, massacres and wars are far more newsworthy than local efforts to build tolerance, participation and self-reliance. Nonviolent action receives little attention compared to violence: a violent incident involving a few individuals can overshadow the actions of tens of thousands of peaceful protesters. It is no surprise that nonviolent alternatives are off the mainstream agenda. Nonviolence has low visibility, yet poses a deep threat to the status quo.

Without waiting for government endorsement, there are many things people can do to build their capacity to defend their communities nonviolently, whether the communities are based in villages, neighbourhoods, workplaces, or ethnic or religious groups. The key first steps are making people aware of what they can do, increasing their skills and building solidarity and willingness to act. Medium term goals include greater economic self-reliance, use of appropriate technologies, systematic training and the establishment of transnational support networks. Long term goals include restructuring of political and economic structures to maximise the capacity for nonviolent defence.

None of this will be easy, and in a seemingly violence-drenched continent the obstacles can seem overwhelming. It is important to remember that the potential for nonviolent action plays a role even when it is seemingly invisible. Government leaders and military commanders are often restrained by their awareness of likely noncooperation or protest, but we seldom learn about coups or invasions not undertaken on these grounds. This possibility can offer encouragement for even small efforts to increase the capacity of people to defend themselves nonviolently.

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