

Daniel P. Ritter: The Iron Cage of Liberalism: International Politics and Unarmed Revolutions in the Middle East and North Africa

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How can the toppling of repressive rulers by unarmed citizens be explained? Cases in which dictatorial leaders were overthrown include the Philippines 1986, Eastern Europe 1989, Serbia 2000 and Egypt 2011. Within the traditional approach used by political scientists, the main emphasis is on structural conditions, for example economic weakness, changing international connections and political rivalry at the top. In contrast, scholars of civil resistance put much greater emphasis on the capacities and strategies of nonviolent campaigners.

Until recently, the traditional approach dominated scholarship, so much so that it was commonplace to read analyses of the collapse of the Soviet Union focusing on the politics and economics of the regime, including its internal contradictions, with citizen action unmentioned or relegated to an afterthought. This one-sided perspective has been met with a new generation of scholarship, of which the most influential contribution has been Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan's 2011 book *Why Civil Resistance Works*. They provide statistics showing that unarmed movements are more likely to be effective against repressive regimes than armed ones. Furthermore, they conclude that the superiority of nonviolent resistance seems not to depend much or at all on the level of repression. The implication is that the methods and strategies used by resisters are keys to success.

Within this matrix of scholarly endeavour, Daniel Ritter's book *The Iron Cage of Liberalism* is an innovative contribution. Ritter wants to combine insights from structural and strategic perspectives, and proposes that a crucial factor in at least some cases is the degree to which a dictatorial regime has developed connections with Western governments, especially the US government, and adopted liberal trappings, including political parties, elections and a rhetoric of human rights. The reality can be different: opposition political parties may be hindered, elections may be fraudulent and the regime's actual practice may contradict its human rights rhetoric. Ritter calls such regimes "façade democracies."

He argues that this sort of false liberalism has real effects. It makes armed opposition less likely to succeed, because legitimate channels for opposition appear to exist: armed resistance gains legitimacy when injustices are great and there seems to be no alternative. At the same time, Ritter argues, the façade of liberalism opens doors for unarmed opponents. They can use human rights rhetoric to mount criticisms of the government and mobilise support. When the opposition gains strength, Ritter says the regime is inhibited from using brutal repression by the concerns of Western government leaders and human rights groups. The combined effects of forging government-to-government connections and adopting a seemingly superficial coating of liberal democracy constitute what Ritter calls the "iron cage of liberalism."

Ritter applies this framework to three nonviolent revolutions, in Iran, Tunisia and Egypt. He provides detailed accounts of the prior history of each country, government relationships with the West (especially the US government) and the events leading to overthrow of a dictator. In each case, he traces the role of human rights rhetoric, with Western governments and human rights organisations providing pressure leading to liberalisation, for example legalisation of opposition political parties and approval of the formation of domestic human rights organisations, that were used as levers by regime opponents to push for more changes. When protests escalated, Ritter says that in each country the ruler's Western connections prevented the use of excessive force.

In terms of the poles of structure and agency, Ritter draws attention to one particular facet of structure, namely links with Western governments, especially the US government, and associated steps adopted to give the appearance of moving towards liberal democracy. This aspect of structure puts constraints on rulers: they are in an "iron cage." It undermines the option of armed struggle and opens political opportunities for unarmed opponents, who can use the regime's own rhetoric against it. Ritter thus could be considered to be advancing a version of the approach to social movements based on political opportunity structures, with an emphasis on the role of human rights rhetoric. Unlike most studies in this area, Ritter has oriented his analysis to the phenomenon of unarmed revolution.

How important is the iron cage?

Ritter recognises that human rights rhetoric only becomes a cage when there are groups, such as foreign governments and human rights organisations, that can use the rhetoric as a lever against the regime. But how potent can a rhetorical lever be? After all, governments are masters at image management. From the viewpoint of a structural analysis, looking at economic and political structures, rhetoric is not a powerful battering ram. From this viewpoint, Ritter might have better titled his book *The Discursive Cage of Liberalism*.

Discourse can sometimes be influential, and here Ritter's analysis ties with research on civil resistance, in particular Gene Sharp's theory of power: all it takes to bring down a dictator is for subjects to withdraw

their consent from the ruler, through various forms of protest, noncooperation and nonviolent intervention. Ritter recounts the importance of rallies and strikes in the three nonviolent revolutions. The question then is the influence of each of the governments' liberal façades and connections with Western government in enabling a people power revolution.

Political jiu-jitsu

Ritter attributes the hesitancy of rulers to use all-out violence to their democratic façade and their reluctance to upset Western government supporters. For example, in describing the actions of Ben Ali, Tunisia's autocratic leader, in the face of escalating protests in January 2011, Ritter writes:

Ben Ali and his domestic allies' international obligations caused the government to vacillate in the face of popular, unarmed protests. In the absence of repression the population's fears diminished, which in turn allowed the demonstrations to grow beyond what the state could manage. ... Overwhelming violence might have saved Ben Ali, if only temporarily, but ... it would have come at the high cost of international condemnation. (p. 154)

Some might suggest that most rulers would rather stay in power despite international condemnation. Setting this aside, this example highlights contrasting differences between Ritter's analysis and one built on civil resistance ideas. It is useful to look to Gene Sharp's "dynamics of nonviolent action," a set of facets or stages of nonviolent campaigns: laying the groundwork, making a challenge that brings repression, maintaining nonviolent discipline, political jiu-jitsu, achieving success and redistributing power. In relation to the culmination of the Tunisian struggle, two keys are maintaining nonviolent discipline and political jiu-jitsu. The protesters, for the most part, avoided violence, thus accentuating outrage from any violence used against them. When governments use violence against peaceful protesters, it can cause greater outrage, leading to greater commitment and new participants, a process Sharp calls political jiu-jitsu. Earlier, Ritter recognised this process, writing "When protests turned deadly, which happened on a relatively small scale considering the

extent of the protests and the high political stakes, this tended to only outrage the population further and generate additional demonstrations.” (p. 152). Yet Ritter does not follow through with this insight, for example when he suggests that “overwhelming violence might have saved Ben Ali.” It might just as well have hastened the collapse of the regime.

Then there is the question of what inhibits governments from using overwhelming violence against peaceful protesters. Ritter attributes this to adherence to the iron cage of human rights rhetoric, ties with Western governments and a façade of liberal democracy. Sharp, in contrast, does not rely on any of this. His “dynamics of nonviolent action,” part three of *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, was published in 1973, prior to the rise of human rights as a prominent feature in international discourse. So what could be triggering the phenomenon of political jiu-jitsu, if not concerns over human rights? The answer is an instinctive human concern about injustice (Moore, 1978), shown in practice in dozens of struggles where formal human rights rhetoric, groups and international linkages were absent.

There is one more crucial factor involved: the loyalty of the regime’s functionaries, especially the police and military. The assumption that “overwhelming violence” can succeed relies on troops being willing tools of their commanders and ultimately the country’s ruler. But willingness to obey can waver when protesters remain nonviolent: troops may be reluctant to use extreme force, and commanders may refuse orders. This is precisely what has happened in case after case. Sharon Nepstad (2011) has argued that undermining the loyalty of troops is a key factor in nonviolent revolutions.

Unfortunately, Ritter gives little attention to this aspect of the struggles in Iran, Tunisia and Egypt. His examination of the regimes’ international linkages and the sequences of events leading up to the revolutions focuses on actions by leaders, both in the regimes and in Western governments. It would be informative to know how façade democracy affected commanders and troops tasked with defending the regimes and, in particular, being asked to control public protest.

In other nonviolent revolutions, such as East Germany in 1989, government leaders decided not to use force against protesters, even without any concern about Western government opinions. This reluc-

tance could be due to unwillingness to cause massive bloodshed, awareness that troops might not obey orders, a calculation that repression would not succeed, or something else. Ritter recognises that such examples show that ties with Western governments and development of façade democracy are not necessary for the success of civil resistance.

Ritter says, concerning his three case studies, "... repression of massive crowds became nearly impossible since it would likely have forced a response from the government's Western allies" (p. 169). But in all the major nonviolent struggles, successful or unsuccessful, in all sorts of contexts, it is hard to find any in which tens of thousands of peaceful protesters have been killed. (It is easy to identify many armed liberation struggles involving hundreds of thousands of deaths.) The explanation provided by scholars of civil resistance is that nonviolent protest seems on its own to inhibit massive use of force by regimes. Furthermore, in the face of heavy repression, opposition movements often shift to other nonviolent tactics.

The US government: beacon of freedom or ally of repression?

Ritter focuses on the role of Western governments, especially the US government, as promoters of liberal democracy. Yet there is another side to the story. Western governments, and especially the US government, have been instrumental in arming repressive governments around the world. This includes both conventional armaments and what is called the "technology of repression," including instruments used for torture and surveillance. Many of the weapons used by police and security personnel in countries around the world are made in the USA. Furthermore, US advisers provide training in surveillance and interrogation, including so-called "enhanced interrogation," otherwise known as torture.

Although most US citizens are unfamiliar with this role of Western governments, it is certainly known in recipient countries. Some of the anger driving opponents of repressive regimes is against the security apparatuses in their own countries and, by proxy, alliances with the parallel apparatuses in Western countries. How this has affected nonviolent revolutions would be a worthy topic, providing a perspective complementary to Ritter's.

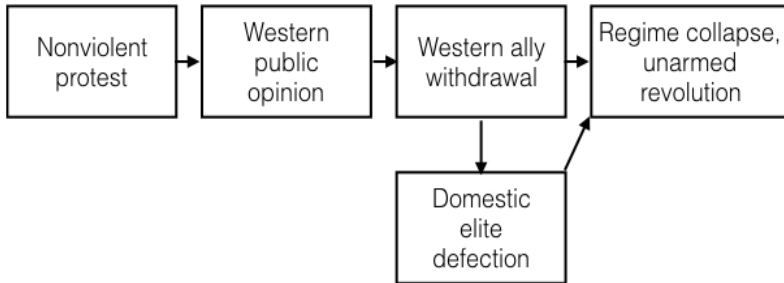
The US military has bases or a military presence in over 100 countries, and has been involved in dozens of wars and military operations in the past century, many of them causing a major backlash in world opinion. The 2003 invasion of Iraq was disastrous for the reputation of the US government, which had risen to unprecedented heights in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. For the US government to lead an invasion, illegal in international law and based on false claims about weapons of mass destruction and al Qaeda connections, tarnished the image of Western benevolence. Yet Ritter refers to speeches by members of the Bush administration shortly before and after the 2003 invasion as playing a role in building the iron cage of liberalism. A cynic might say that the invasion, and the subsequent exposure of abuse and torture by US guards at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, created a countervailing “iron cage of liberal hypocrisy.”

In his accounts of nonviolent revolutions, and the antecedent international and domestic circumstances in each country, Ritter relies on conventional political accounts. He presents a case for the relevance of the iron cage, but does not examine alternative explanations from the civil resistance literature. For example, although he cites Chenoweth and Stephan’s *How Civil Resistance Works*, Ritter does not discuss their detailed account of the Iranian revolution.

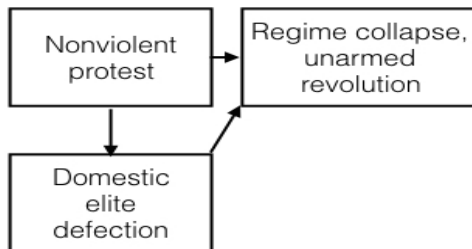
Ritter’s failure to examine civil resistance perspectives is most apparent in his treatment of the failed struggles in Libya and Syria in 2011. He notes that regime opponents turned to violence, and does not examine other options they might have pursued. Among other options for the opponents are (1) continuing with public protests in the face of repression and (2) switching to a strategy of dispersion, for example strikes and boycotts. Ritter, though, ignores strategic options and simply reports, in the case of Libya, “In the face of state brutality, protesters armed themselves ...” (p. 178), seemingly assuming some sort of inevitability to the switch from nonviolent to armed resistance. As Sharp and others have documented, maintaining nonviolent discipline is crucial to the success of civil resistance, and it has been argued that the resistance in Libya and Syria would have had a better chance of success by avoiding armed struggle (Chenoweth, 2011; Zunes, 2013).

Further research needed

Ritter's model of how nonviolent protest can lead to unarmed revolution is portrayed in a diagram (p. 170), shown below, which is a straightforward sequence of influences.



It may be contrasted with a simpler diagram closer to the usual model used in civil resistance studies.



The question concerns the two additional elements in Ritter's chain: Western public opinion and Western ally withdrawal. How important are they, and are they needed at all?

First it should be noted that Ritter's model is compatible with what Johan Galtung calls the "great chain of nonviolence." This involves an indirect influence on regimes, via one or more intermediaries. So Ritter's model is plausible. But Galtung did not specify a single sort of chain. There are various possibilities, some of them involving domestic elites, some involving international groups, and so forth.

Consider the collapse of Eastern European communist regimes in 1989. There were no Western allies, so Ritter's model is of limited relevance, as he acknowledges. Would it be plausible to speak of an "iron

cage of socialism” based on commitments to equality? Or is it better to go directly to the civil resistance picture?

Consider the Hungarian resistance to Austrian repression in the mid 1800s or the Finnish resistance to Russian domination from 1898 to 1905. These were well before the rise of human rights rhetoric. Then there were the 11 cases in which dictators in countries in South and Central America were overthrown as a result of civic strikes in the period 1931–1961 (Parkman, 1990). Again, façade democracy and ties to the US government seem not to have played major roles. The second figure seems more relevant.

Ritter writes, “Representatives for democratic countries like France simply cannot justify the support of a dictator when the people rises up to seemingly demand the precise values the West sees as its political foundation” (p. 155). Campaigners against Indonesian repression in West Papua wish that “representatives for democratic countries” would withdraw their support, and indeed that the elected government of Indonesia itself would do likewise.

Conclusion

Ritter has provided a fascinating argument, backed up by a careful analysis of the three cases of Iran, Tunisia and Egypt. However, in doing so, he has relied on assumptions common in the study of politics and international relations, including the effectiveness of unrestrained repression. Ritter’s claims about the importance of democratisation and liberal rhetoric for the success of nonviolent struggles need further investigation. While ties with Western governments may play a role, positive or negative, so will other factors.

Lawrence Wittner (1993–2003), in his comprehensive study of movements against nuclear weapons, provides evidence that government leaders were affected by anti-bomb protests even though in public they claimed not to be. Perhaps in the future, further information will become available about private discussions and correspondence by leaders of Iran, Tunisia and Egypt so that it will be possible to see how much they were worried about responses from Western governments or about adhering to their own liberal rhetoric.

It is hardly a surprise that international alliances, economics, rhetoric and many other factors affect the prospects for nonviolent struggle. Indeed, it is the task of shrewd organisers to take these factors into account when developing strategies. Military campaigns need to be assessed in the light of alliances, opportunities and opponent tactics, and so likewise do nonviolent campaigns. The elements of façade democracy are not just conditions affecting the success of nonviolent struggle, but rather are part of the social environment considered in strategic planning. Unfortunately, Ritter does not address this dimension of civil resistance.

Ritter's goal, like that of most political scientists, is to *explain* political dynamics; his specific goal is to explain the success of nonviolent revolutions. However, there is another possible goal for scholars: to provide insights for campaigners. Until there is a more solid case, activists would be unwise to wait for or rely on liberal rhetoric as a basis for their campaigning.

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