

# Can nonviolent resistance topple a government?

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*Former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir is famous for this bold statement: in a recent posting in his blog, he said it is possible for Malaysians to topple the ruling regime – with one condition: the protest has to have the element of violence which, in short, means violent resistance.*

I recall how during the height of Reformasi movement in 1998, Mahathir provoked the individuals involved to transform into a political party so that it could compete on the same par with the ruling regime.

His intention in 1998 was to “kill off” a movement that had the potential to topple the ruling regime.

His calculation was right, as the Reformasi was eventually transformed into a political party. The Reformasi was a half-failed movement.

And now, what Mahathir is suggesting is that nonviolent resistance in Malaysia is not effective.

Instead, violent resistance has the potential to bring change to the extent of toppling the ruling regime.

Again, I see this as an attempt to influence the strategies of pressure groups in Malaysia.

There have been scholarly debates over methods to challenge repressive regimes, which are basically divided into violent or nonviolent means.

Violent resistance could be an effective way to get rid of authoritarian regimes, as Mahathir said.

However, a recent study carried out by political scientists Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan in their book "Why Civil Resistance Works" suggests otherwise.

The basis for their analysis is derived from a database of 323 campaigns, between 1990-2006. They found that violent resistance succeeded in only 26% of all cases, compared to 53% for nonviolent resistance.

They write, "Nonviolent resistance ushers in more durable and internally peaceful democracies, which are less likely to regress into civil war."

So why are nonviolent strategies more effective?

Chenoweth and Stephan argue that one of the main keys is greater participation. This is because the nonviolent strategy involves the public and not just a group of people with weapons, as that is tactically more limited.

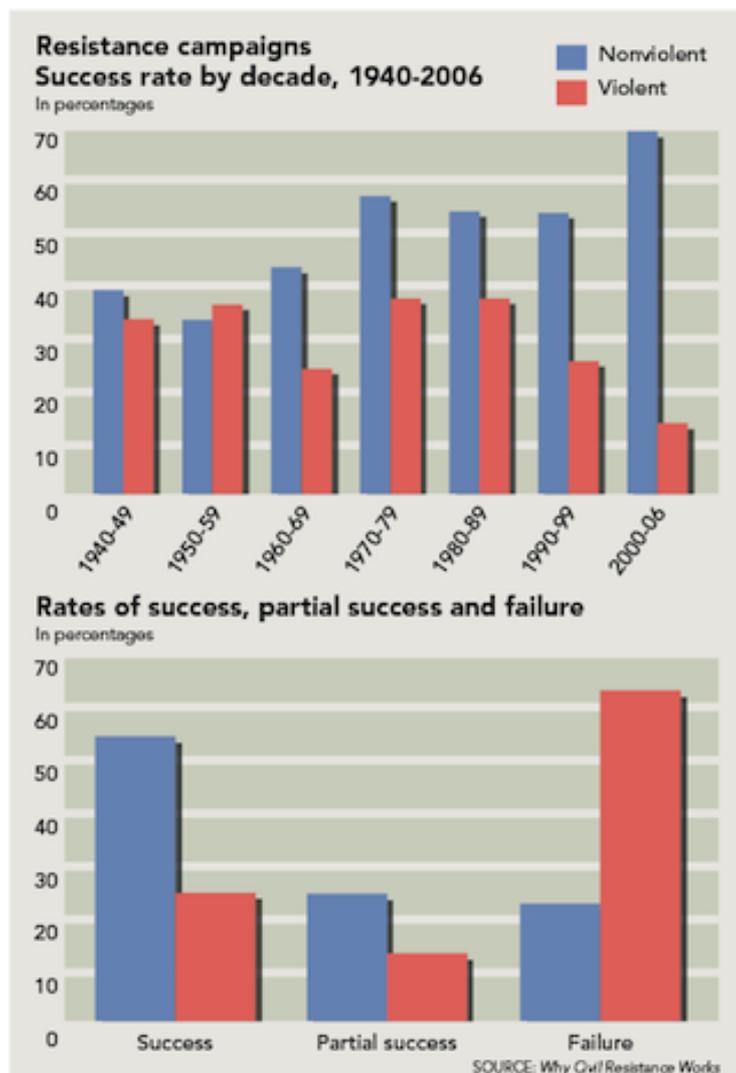
One important tactic of nonviolent resistance is civil disobedience. To be effective, an act of civil disobedience must be exercised by a large number of individuals.

Nonviolent resistance covers a wider population of a country.

On a mass scale, civil disobedience has a high chance to work because any violent reactions and measures from the government could backfire.

In a talk held in 2012, Chenoweth emphasised the importance of getting 3.5% of the population to protest in order to bring down a government. Malaysia has a population of around 30 million.

Many may think that a nonviolent approach would probably work if the target is soft and weak. However, research shows that the level of government repression does not make much difference to the outcome.



Rather, what Chenoweth and Stephan suggested is: the keys to success are the methods and strategies adopted by the resistance groups.

That falls rightly with the research by Peter Ackerman and Jack DuVall, who say: “People power is not imported, it’s homegrown... With unity, planning and nonviolent discipline all harnessed to the determination of people to be free, oppression can be defeated.” – April 28, 2014.

*\* This is the personal opinion of the writer or publication and does not necessarily represent the views of The Malaysian Insider.*

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