

CERTIFICATE COURSE IN NONVIOLENCE STUDIES - REFLECTION PART 3 WEEK 4

THE FIRST INTIFADA

Maria Angelica de Melo Rente

The first Intifada intended to end the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip and to regain Palestinian sovereignty. It started as a response to the increasing Israeli control over Palestinian communities, including overtaxing goods that crossed the borders and controlling access to water and electricity, as well as lower wages and precarious life conditions for Palestinian people.

The very young population (in 1988, 59 percent of the Palestinians living in Gaza Strip were under 19 years old), after living all their lives under Israeli occupation, wanted to resist it. The first Intifada demonstration was fired by a car crash at a military checkpoint, in which four Palestinians lost their lives, killed by an Israeli truck driver. It was said that it was not an accident, but a retaliation to the death of an Israeli citizen. The demonstration was severely repressed by Israeli soldiers and young Palestinians reacted by throwing rocks at them.

The fact that the violent methods prescribed by the Palestinian Liberation Organization were not very effective against the Israeli occupation and the abuses Palestinians were subjected to motivated the creation of the United National Command for the Escalation of the Uprising in the Occupied Territories (UNC), whose main goal at first was to propose nonviolent strategies for resistance. That's why I consider that Intifada can be categorized mainly as a strategic nonviolence movement. I do not consider it a movement based on principled nonviolence because, as Ackerman and DuVall point out in *A Force More Powerful*, Palestinian culture, based on tradition, tended to favor some use of violence. They also point out that "limited violence also distracted the public from the real work of non-cooperating with the Civil Administration and building alternative Palestinian institutions" (p. 409). So, it seems to me that the power of nonviolence was somehow undermined by the option to agree to some use of violence.

Actually, we can see some inconsistencies and ambiguities in the movement, what makes it controversial to consider Intifada a "pure" nonviolent movement. For example, there was an effort from the part of the leadership to stick to nonviolence and some very powerful nonviolent direct actions. On the other hand, limited forms of violence against Israeli soldiers, like rock and Molotov cocktails throwing, were encouraged by some UNC leaders, Palestinian businesses were set on fire for not observing strike hours and 190 people considered collaborators were murdered by protesters.

Eventually, there was an increase in the use of violence both from military forces and the resistance. Nowadays, Popular Committees are still active in the region and they are accused by Israeli authorities of being terrorist organizations.

Elements of obstructive program present: boycotts, general strikes, demonstrations, marches, withdrawal, selective non-cooperation, civil disobedience.

Elements of constructive program present: alternative social and economic institutions, dual sovereignty and parallel government, alternative communication systems.

One of the most successful tactics used was the distribution of leaflets organized by UNC, instructing the civil Palestinian population on nonviolent action. A large production and distribution network was set up to print

and hand out the leaflets, in what is considered “one of the most ambitious mass education efforts in nonviolent action in the twentieth century” (Ackerman and DuVall, op. Cit. p.409). Also, the fact that leadership was decentralized permitted the movement to move on even when some of the leaders were imprisoned.

The most important lesson we can learn from this movement is that the use of violence, even when it is “limited”, tends to undermine the efficacy of nonviolent tactics in the long run. It seems to me that it is necessary to find a very challenging balance between principled and strategic nonviolence for a movement to be as successful as it can be, and this is achieved only by relentless persistence in our purpose to practice satyagraha at all moments.