

Interview with Dr. Brian Martin

By: Ali (lanternblog.com)

Due to an email contact I had with Dr. Brian Martin, associate professor in Science, Technology and Society at the University of Wollongong, he kindly accepted my invitation for an interview. I've sent him the questions through email, as he preferred a written interview. With the time and efforts he put into it, the result is both informative and very interesting. The interview has two major parts; first part is more the theoretical aspect of non-violence, while the second part is about the application of such techniques focusing on Iran.

A short introduction about Dr. Brian Martin:



He has got his PhD degree in Theoretical Physics in 1976, he has been associate professor, and senior lecturer, in Science, Technology & Society at the University of Wollongong. He has written 10 books and over 150 major papers and chapters on different social issues, some of his books on nonviolent movements include: Technology for Nonviolent Struggle, Nonviolence versus Capitalism, Social defense – Social Change (you can download the PDF version of these books in our nonviolence library <http://nonviolence.lanternblog.com/> or from his webpage <http://www.uow.edu.au/arts/sts/bmartin/pubs/>).

He has given some more information about himself and the way he started research in the field of nonviolence in answer to my second question.

Ali: In the beginning I'd like to thank you, Brian for accepting to do this interview and share your opinions with us.

Question: Let me start from the basics and as the first questions ask you as a thinker and writer in nonviolent movements to give us your definition of nonviolence?

Dr. Martin: Nonviolent action includes methods such as petitions, rallies, boycotts, strikes, sit-ins, fasts and setting up alternative political structures. It's often more informative to give examples of nonviolent action than present a formal definition. These and other such methods avoid physical violence against others, though nonviolent activists themselves may be assaulted or arrested. Nonviolent action is action that goes beyond conventional politics, so it doesn't include lobbying or voting.

Nonviolence can also be something broader, including personal behaviour that avoids oppression and efforts to promote ways of living together that are based on freedom, justice, equality and ecological sustainability.

Question: I know that you are originally a physicist, as I'm in the field of natural science myself; as the next question I'd like to ask you how you got into research and studies in the field of nonviolence? Can you please explain your starting ambitions for research and studies in this field?

Dr. Martin: In about 1977 I first read about nonviolence. The idea meshed with my beliefs about how society ought to operate, namely people taking action on their own behalf in a way that is compatible with the goal: nonviolence is the method and nonviolence is the goal. At that time I was involved in the environmental movement, especially the campaign against nuclear power. One of the key issues concerning nuclear power was the link to proliferation of nuclear weapons, so that got me thinking about peace issues. In 1979 I helped set up a peace group in Canberra (Australia's national capital), as there wasn't one at the time. We soon started promoting social defence, which is nonviolent community resistance to aggression as an alternative to military defence, and I started writing about these issues.

I don't think being a physicist was an important factor in my interest in nonviolence. But with physics training I felt more confident arguing issues about nuclear accidents, nuclear weapons and so forth.

It was only many years later that I thought about the connections between science, technology and nonviolence. Nearly all the writings about nonviolence focus on social and psychological factors — such as unity, commitment and strategy — because they are most important. But science and technology are important too. There's definitely a need for more scientists and engineers to be involved in researching and promoting nonviolence.

Question: As you know there are two general groups of nonviolent activists; those who choose nonviolence as a way of life and those who believe in it as a way of dissolving conflicts. May I ask you how do you see nonviolence?

Dr. Martin: I think both these orientations to nonviolence are important, and they overlap too. Where there is a supportive culture or tradition, such as religious belief, then nonviolence as a way of life makes sense. But in many places this is seen as peculiar and it makes more sense to promote nonviolence as a pragmatic alternative to violence. In Western social movements, nonviolent action is mostly used pragmatically, but some activists have personal commitments to nonviolence. As nonviolence becomes more recognised, I expect that more people will move from a pragmatic to a principled orientation.

Nonviolence has several advantages over violence: it causes less suffering, it wins over more people (bystanders and sometimes even opponents), and it is less likely to lead to a new system of oppression. There might be some times when violence is

more effective, at least in the short term, but once violence is used, it opens the door to even more violence and this soon undermines the effectiveness of nonviolence. So for maximum effectiveness, it's probably better for more people to have a principled commitment to nonviolence.

Personally, I always say that I don't know whether nonviolence is always superior to violence, because nonviolence hasn't yet been tried enough. Militaries have spent billions of dollars and trained millions of soldiers. The amount of money and effort put into nonviolence is only a tiny fraction of this. Nonviolence deserves full-scale funding and testing over a period of decades. Until this happens, it is premature to say it doesn't work.

Question: There is a belief in some nonviolent activists that the time of violent changes/revolutions has come to an end and it's a start of a new era where changes (changes for good) will be happening by nonviolent movements. Do you agree with such point of view?

Dr. Martin: There is definitely a greater awareness about nonviolence among social activists in many countries. There is more information available and people are sharing their experiences about what works and what doesn't. So it is quite possible that nonviolence will become even more widely used by movements.

But, unfortunately, it is likely that some activists will continue to use violence. The mass media report on violence daily but seldom give any idea of how common or effective nonviolent action can be. Indeed, nonviolent actions are often reported as if they are violent. Governments often actually prefer their opponents to use violence, because then they have greater justification for using violence *against* these opponents. So some governments try to provoke violence by movements, either indirectly through harsh policies or directly by using disguised police agents who join protest movements and advocate violence.

This means that nonviolent activists need to become more sophisticated in developing new methods and countering government tactics.

Question: Gene Sharp has introduced a "structural approach to human rights" [1], (at the moment I'm finishing the translation of this article to Persian to be published in lanternblog). He explains that achieving a long term and lasting recognition of human right issues around the world we should basically work on bringing down dictatorships worldwide, i.e. denying human rights violators the power to perpetrate their atrocities. What is your opinion about this framework? If you agree with this point of view why the industrialized and rich countries instead of the huge amount of money they spend daily on their military actions, don't work more on helping develop new free societies with nonviolent acts? (I prefer free society to the expression of democracy!)

Dr. Martin: Many government leaders say that they oppose repression and aggression but in their policies do the opposite. The most prominent example is the US government. It gives diplomatic recognition to countries where serious human rights violations occur. It produces massive amounts of weapons and sells them to repressive governments. It develops and manufactures technology that can be used for torture and sells it to countries where torture is known to occur. Many other governments do the same.

Furthermore, the US government violates civil liberties itself. Government agencies spy on US citizens and harass dissidents. Torture is used, in foreign prisons like Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib, and in US prisons too.

In most countries, the armed forces are not needed to protect against foreign enemies. Their most important function is protecting the government from challenge. Militaries, and militarised police forces, are far more likely to be used against citizens than against foreign threats.

Governments cannot be relied upon to promote human rights. That's why it is vital for social movements to maintain their efforts.

Question: From your point of view capitalism is not an ideal social system [2] as well as dictatorships, but concerning nonviolent struggle you consider bringing down a dictator the “easy case”. Considering the fact that in capitalist society human rights violations are by far less than totalitarian societies, as a result in the former it is less probable to use violence against nonviolent protestors. Can you please explain why using nonviolent methods against dictators is “the easy case”?

Dr. Martin: In a dictatorship, the human rights abuses are more obvious, and more people know the source of the problems, and they know the solution: get rid of the dictatorship! The problem is easier to recognise and the solution is more obvious.

Economic systems, including capitalism, can cause poverty, alienation and inequality, with damaging secondary effects including higher death rates for the poor. This is especially serious in poor countries being squeezed by neoliberal economic policies and corrupt governments. Large numbers of people may suffer or die, but this is not as dramatic or obvious as imprisonment of dissenters or massacre of protesters.

The challenge for those who support nonviolence is to develop ways to turn poverty and exploitation into big issues just like dictatorship and repression.

Questions: Dictatorships and military governments are the biggest violators of human rights but from my personal point of view a dictatorship can also result in destroying the heritage and natural resources of a country as it happened in Afghanistan under

the Taliban and was and still is happening in Iran (for example drastic decrease in natural forests, destroying the national heritage and...). What do you think about this point of view?

Dr. Martin: Militarism is definitely linked to destruction of the environment, both in dictatorships and in systems of representative government. Production of weapons, maintaining armed forces and the running of military exercises use large amounts of resources and leave a polluting aftermath. Wars themselves are incredibly damaging to the environment. The military exerts a strong influence on scientific research agendas, often steering towards developments that are bad for the environment, such as the military-inspired nuclear research pointing the way towards civilian nuclear power.

There's a strong connection between peace and environmental movements. Often their concerns overlap, such as in opposition to nuclear technology or wars over resources such as oil. The two movements share experiences in activism, including nonviolent action. There's a fair bit of mutual support in terms of campaigns, though on the other hand sometimes their agendas compete with each other. The environmental movement has had greater success in building organisations and campaigns that last over years or decades, whereas the peace movement tends to surge and fade in response to external events. So peace activists should learn from the environmental movement how to sustain their efforts and organisations over the long term.

Ali: Let me now shift the discussion from a theoretical point of view towards the potential practical applications of such methods in the future and focus on my country, Iran.

Question: According to your book, "Social defense Social change" [3] you consider the 1978 revolution in Iran a "change mainly carried out by nonviolent means". What do you think went wrong that the final result was "disastrous"?

Dr. Martin:

The Iranian revolution was carried out by nonviolent means, but there were few people with a vision of a nonviolent society and how to achieve it. As soon as the Shah was overthrown, most people in the struggle assumed that their role was over. They needed to keep active to prevent the rise of a new repressive government.

This points to an area where nonviolence strategies need to be improved. Nonviolent activists are much better at opposing injustice than they are in promoting a new system.

Another problem was *other* governments. Leaders of nearly all major governments assume that government control, including using force, is natural. So in the case of

Iran, foreign governments provided no assistance to promote citizen power that could challenge or replace rulers.

Ali: Before moving on to the next question, I'd like to give you a short description of the situation of the recent years from my personal point of view as I don't know how much you know about the politics of the recent years, briefly:

After the Iran-Iraq war - a conflict that has sapped the energy and attention of all - a period of oppression started and lasted for 8 years. People who were tired of oppression decided to vote for a reformist in the presidential election, (many voted for the reformist to say no to the fundamentalists), although nobody believed that he may win. I was doing my bachelor at the time, I remember how the university became alive, and everyone was excited for a change. The result of the election was shocking; Khatami came to power with support of more than 20 million votes. The first years of his presidency were excellent, new freedoms were being achieved, like more freedom of press. This was the period where many newspapers started working. Hardliners which saw their power in danger started the pressure by closing down newspapers, terrorizing and killing the intellectuals. Student protests against closing down a reformist newspaper were suppressed ruthlessly and unfortunately Khatami who won a second term later on and the reformists who won the majority of parliament didn't use their legal power. As a result, slowly many people lost their hope for change and went to the sideline, many of them boycotting the elections which just made the situation worse, fundamentalists won back the parliament, city council, and finally the presidency.

In a way the whole procedure which Gene Sharp has described in "From Dictatorship to Democracy", all the stages have been tried: coups, elections and foreign saviors which we know none of them will really work.

Question: Now I ask you the question I've been asked lots of times when I talk about nonviolence and its power: "How can you expect a population of sidelined and disappointed people to usurp an oppressive government by means of nonviolence?"

Dr. Martin: Let me respond in stages. First, we know from historical experience that popular nonviolent action can be successful against repressive governments. Famous examples include the toppling of the Marcos dictatorship in the Philippines in 1986, the collapse of Eastern European communist regimes in 1989, the forced resignation of Indonesian President Suharto in 1998 and the ending of Milosevic's rule in Serbia in 2000, all as a result of nonviolent action. In addition, dozens of dictatorships in Africa and Latin America have been toppled by popular nonviolent insurrection.

Second, nonviolent action usually works better than violent resistance. Armed struggle is often defeated - there is not a single example of a successful popular armed overthrow of the government of an industrialised country (though there are cases of military coups in industrialised countries, such as Greece). Even when armed struggle is successful, the human costs are often enormous: the war for Algerian independence from France caused a million Algerian casualties out of a population of only 10 million. Two million Vietnamese were killed in their liberation struggle.

In a nonviolent struggle, many people may die, but never yet have deaths occurred at the level of armed struggles.

Third, no method can provide a guarantee of success. Neither violence nor nonviolence is a sure path. All that anyone can do is pick the method that has a better chance of success. Success here includes external changes, such as a change in rulers, policies or systems of government, and grassroots changes, such as greater confidence and knowledge, stronger alliances, greater commitment to equality and justice, and practical arrangements that build in these commitments.

This leads - at last - to your question. What should be done when the situation seems difficult or even hopeless, in which there seems to be little support for action against oppression? This is a question of tactics and strategy.

It is important to understand that many struggles take a long time. Remember that the Indian struggle for independence from Britain lasted many decades. The *process* of the struggle may be just as important as the immediate result. After India gained independence, there was horrific violence between Hindu and Muslim communities that led to the creation of Pakistan. It might have been better if the independence struggle had taken even longer, but had forged stronger Hindu-Muslim links.

Many struggles start very small but, when the situation is right, quickly gain support. In East Germany in 1989, rallies against the government started small but grew rapidly, over the space of few months, until the rulers decided to quit. The Iranian Revolution also had this feature of rapid expansion.

When the situation is difficult and few people are willing to take action, it is time for careful long-term planning. What actions will best lay the groundwork for future expansion of activity? If you read about Gandhi's campaigns, you can get a feeling for how difficult it was to choose and carry out actions that attracted support.

The choice is the familiar one: what should be done? Each individual has to find a personal answer. There is always something worth doing. Sometimes it is small and apparently insignificant. But there is no point in dramatic actions that fail. If the situation is bleak, then it's worth thinking about what can lay the groundwork for the future, when the situation is more promising.

Finally, I think it's wise not to trust in governments as the solutions to social problems. There are a great number of examples of governments that have broken promises and have betrayed social movements. Election campaigning can be a trap if it drains away energy that could go into grassroots action. Furthermore, after the election, activists may reduce their energy, either through false expectations of the new government or through discouragement, depending on who is elected.

Question: Currently freedom of press in Iran is one of the worst in the world, many political websites are being filtered (even a small weblog like ours), there is no independent TV or radio station (at least not inside the country). Iran has the greatest number of imprisoned journalists in the Middle East [4,5], the government has control over all sources of power most importantly Oil, and uses all its power to suppress any movements, as they've ruthlessly done it before. Considering these facts, do you think it is possible to awaken the public to their strong power? If yes, how should the activists plan such a large campaign?

Dr. Martin: The fact that the government has to use heavy-handed censorship shows its weakness: the government is actually afraid of what the people will do with a bit of independent information.

It can be useful to analyse information flows. How can information get to a person? Possibilities include face-to-face conversation, telephone calls, leaflets, emails and newspapers. Then look at the blockages, namely the ways that the government (and other groups) prevent information getting to people, distort the information, or give false information. Then examine ways to get around the blockages. This could be encrypted email, personal reports from people who have travelled to other countries, newsreaders giving subtle messages, and a host of other techniques. Then examine each of these techniques for their advantages and disadvantages. For example, which technique is best for building support?

The next stage is to carry out a very small initiative and see how well it works. Does it overcome information blockages? Are more people willing to be involved? Does it help people understand what can be done? Then the whole cycle can begin again: analysis, planning, campaigning, evaluation.

If there are lots of small independent individuals and groups taking initiatives, learning what works and sharing their insights, this is a powerful foundation for building to larger campaigns.

Question: While I was finishing preparing this interview, a nonviolent movement organized by the bus drivers unions in Tehran for more rights and also to the protest against the illegal imprisonment of the leader of their union was cowardly suppressed. The clerical-led authorities of the Islamic Republic crushed "ruthlessly" a general strike planned by the Union of the Single Bus Company of Tehran and Suburbs (SBCTS) on Saturday 28th, arresting 700 of drivers, workers and personnel and their families. Tear gas and other methods were used against their families, and many of the wives and even children were even beaten as well. According to sources and eyewitnesses, on orders from the Government of the islamo-populist President Mahmoud Ahmadi Nezhad, thousands of security forces in plainclothes, police and militias backed by the Revolutionary Guard's anti-riot units attacked drivers, workers and personnel of the Bus Company of Tehran, arrested over one thousands, including wives, children and families, beat up the strikers, wounding at least 50 of them,

reported in a “very serious state”. At the same time the governmental media has been completely quiet about such a vast violation of human rights. Tehran’s Mayor, General Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf – a former commander of the Revolutionary Guards Air Force and Police Chief --, has condemned the strike, saying “the SBCTS’ Union is “illegal” because it is not officially registered.”; although the union is one of the oldest workers union in the country. I should say that the rights the drivers were originally asking were completely related to their condition of work and payments [6,7]. It obviously seems that the leaders have decided to oppose any movements of the public, even if it asking for the changes within the frameworks of the present leadership. What should be the policy against such ruthless violators of human rights? I should add that the imprisoned drivers as another nonviolent move have decided to go on a group hunger strike this evening.

Dr. Martin: When the government makes an attack like this, it has the potential to be counterproductive, because people see that it is grossly unfair. I have been researching the tactics used by perpetrators of injustice (<http://www.uow.edu.au/arts/sts/bmartin/pubs/backfire.html>). There are five standard methods that perpetrators use to inhibit outrage from their actions. One, they cover up the action, so people won't know what has been done. Two, they denigrate the targets. Three, they give an explanation to justify what happened. Four, they set up an official process to give the appearance of justice. Five, they use intimidation and bribery against the targets and observers.

In what you've told me about the SBCTS example, there is cover-up by the government media, an official explanation for the action (the lie that the SBCTS is illegal), and intimidation through arrests and beatings.

The actions by the government are predictable, so activists need to be prepared. If you know that the government will try to cover up its abuses, then you need to be prepared to expose them, using tape recorders, cameras, witness statements, and ways of communicating and publishing the information. If you know that the government will try to discredit protesters, then you need to dress and behave in a respectable fashion, and if possible have respected people join the protest. For each of the methods that the government is likely to use, activists should make plans to oppose or get around them.

If activists are prepared, then they shouldn't be afraid of government attacks. Instead, government attacks become an opportunity to create greater awareness and support. The goal is to make the attacks backfire.

Ali: Brian, at the end I'd like to thank you for the time you spent with us, I'll publish this interview in Persian and English in our group weblog where hopefully with the contribution of other readers we can carry on the discussion. At the end I'd be happy if you have any comments or points to add to the discussion.

Dr. Martin: Thank you for your initiative in addressing these important issues, and best wishes to you and all others struggling against repression in Iran.

References and Further readings:

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- [10] For other resources you can see Nonviolence Library: <http://nonviolence.lanternblog.com/>