

# Non-violent resistance in the Middle-East: why it works

By Mini Chandramouli

Over the last 18 months, continued unrest in the Middle East has highlighted the strategies and policies utilised by people across the region to respond to autocratic regimes. As the situation in the Middle East remains unresolved, this has become a key issue in international law discussions. Dr Stephen Zunes, during a recent Castan Centre lecture, scrutinised these regimes and presented his theories on the most effective modes of response to be employed by oppressed peoples.

Stephen Zunes is a Professor of Politics and International Studies at the University of San Francisco, where he chairs the program in Middle Eastern Studies. He is also the chair of the academic advisory committee for the International Centre on Nonviolent Conflict. Prof. Zunes was able to use his knowledge and experience to provide valuable insight to the audience on resistance mechanisms used throughout history.

Prof. Zunes began his talk with his persuasive portrayal of the 'two extremes' dominating the Western media's view of Middle Eastern political struggles. That is, Middle Eastern citizens are characterised either as terrorists or passive participants in American interventions. He stated that both these views were incorrect and that in fact the Middle East had historically been heavily involved in non-violent resistance, citing the examples from Egypt in 1919 to Western Sahara in recent decades.

He went on to explain the basis for his belief in non-violent resistance. He stated that 'dictators are only as strong as people's willingness to obey them. Non-cooperation is essential.' This strong statement was backed up by powerful statistics. According to Prof. Zunes, of 70 nations that have transformed from a dictatorship to a democracy, a very small amount did so through violent uprising. Nonviolent resistance is said to have a 56% rate of success, whereas violent resistance has only a 26% rate of success.

Although the US appears to be playing a key role in the breakdown of Al Qaeda, Prof. Zunes made clear that both the Obama and Bush administrations had not assisted the pro-democracy struggle in the Arab world. The Bush administration provided more support for dictatorships than any other US administration. Obama's approach on the other hand consisted of constantly rejecting the neo-conservative doctrine of his predecessor without actually taking a pro-active role in supporting democracy. Prof. Zunes argued that the Obama administration did not want to be on the 'wrong side of history'. President Bush had an extremely superficial structuralist view of human rights which equated elections with democracy, whereas the Obama administration had a more nuanced understanding that democracy relies on civil society and national institutions.

Although the internet has been revolutionary in improving communication, Prof. Zunes reiterated that too much emphasis should not be placed on social media and its contribution to successful non-violent regime change. As Prof. Zunes pointed out, 'when people are committed to a struggle they will find ways to



*Prof. Zunes argues that non-violent resistance is the most effective way to resist oppressive regimes.*

communicate.' He followed by outlining that it was critical not to deny agency to those who were capable of pursuing democracy, as this was a 'home grown phenomenon', which needed to be respected.

Prof. Zunes continued by assessing the success of non-violent resistance in individual nations. He was hopeful for Egypt in the longer term due to the recent revolution and the rejection of fatalism in the youthful population. He expressed appreciation for the dramatic growth in Egyptian civil society. Yemen, he stated, after going through civil war, recognised the power of non-violent resistance. Libya's recent uprising against Gaddafi was widely misinterpreted as being an example of the failure of non-violent resistance. However, according to Prof. Zunes, it only became violent after the NATO intervention. The model case for Prof. Zunes was Tunisia. Tunisian society, which is modest Islamist, is drafting a new constitution and heading towards a more pluralistic society. Prof. Zunes suggested that this was where much of the Arab world would be moving and saw this as a positive outcome.

Prof. Zunes emphasised that non-violent resistance allows large cross sections of the country to participate in the regime as opposed to just healthy young men who can be part of an armed resistance. He also highlighted that dictatorships were more prepared for armed resistance as opposed to the less organised non-cooperation that constitutes non-violent resistance. By emphasising the benefits of these tactics, Prof. Zunes' opinion had a powerful impact on the audience.

Prof. Zunes is driven by more than just morals. He supports non-violent resistance because it works. The audience left inspired by an evening with one of the world's leading experts on the Middle East, and hopeful that peaceful, democratic change can continue in the region.