

Defending the use of nonviolence

Written by Chien Hsi-chie
Wednesday, 28 August 2013 08:35

Earlier this month, a group of young people staged a demonstration, throwing paint at the Executive Yuan building, writing slogans and staging an occupation of the Ministry of the Interior building.

Many people disapproved of their behavior, saying that it was an insult to a state institution and that the protesters had defaced public buildings and obstructed the normal operation of public services for people going about their everyday affairs. These people have described the demonstration as an unwarranted act of violence against the public, rejecting the idea that it could be regarded as a nonviolent protest.

In 1849, the US writer, poet and abolitionist Henry David Thoreau was imprisoned for refusing to pay taxes in protest against the Mexican War and the persecution of Native Americans at the hands of the government. He believed that doing what is right is better than obeying bad laws.

Power is invested in the government through the consent of the citizenry, and nonviolent protest indicates the withdrawal of this consent. Protests can take different forms: noncooperation, disobedience by defying the government's laws and directives, or demonstrations showing the power of the citizenry seeking to bring about change.

Nonviolent protest comes about because of a need for reform once people recognize the injustice of suppression by the governmental system or the law.

Nonviolent protest rejects all forms of violence, both physical and verbal or written. The target of the protest is injustice — whether it is manifest in specific events or people, or inherent in the system, and not directed against specific people — so that it does not descend into personal attacks or enmity, which would not further the cause of reform of the system.

Taiwanese confuse nonviolent protest with compliance, surrender or nonresistance — the strategy of the meek — and incorrectly believe that nonviolent protest is little more than peaceful demonstrations and meditating. On the contrary, proactive nonviolent protest involves nonparticipation of civil life through nonpayment of taxes, industrial action, cessation of trading, nonattendance of classes, refusing to vote and refusing to perform compulsory military service.

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Without proper context, these actions might seem rather absurd, but actually they can be extremely effective and can be enough to force the authorities to concede and reform an unjust system. Since these types of protest do not necessarily create conflict, they can contribute to the gentle creation of a just and harmonious society.

Indian independence leader Mahatma Gandhi is one of the first examples people think of when they hear of nonviolent protest. He would most certainly have approved of the way the young Taiwanese protesters went about their demonstration — aimed at calling on Vice President Wu Den-yih (吳登益) to eat his words, having promised the residents of Dapu Borough (大埔) in Miaoli County's Jhunan Township (竹南) three years ago, when still premier, that their houses were safe — by throwing paint at the Executive Yuan building and then sitting down and waiting, indicating their willingness to accept the legal consequences of their actions.

In the middle of last century, during the Danish resistance movement against Nazi occupation and the resistance to Soviet rule in Lithuania, the public would paint images and slogans around the city to express their protests and their ideas. This approach was nondestructive, in that it neither harmed anyone nor caused any permanent damage to public property, and so it can be considered a form of nonviolent protest. Occupying public institutions is a common form of interference for nonviolent protest.

In Hong Kong, protesters are planning a peaceful occupation of the territory's Central District, under the name "Occupy Central," for a day of traffic disruption in the hopes of forcing the authorities to agree to implementing genuine universal suffrage. Objectors to the plan say that it will inconvenience people, disrupt the financial markets and harm the economy. Nonviolent protest, then, will mean different things, depending on the civil society of the place in which it is done. Violence is defined differently in Hong Kong and Taiwan. In the former, jostling with the police is considered violence. Protesters have to keep pushing the limits of what is acceptable to the public in terms of protest behavior, and this will also be part of furthering civic education.

My suggestion to our friends in Hong Kong would be to make the preparations for their nonviolent movement as open and transparent as possible, to be sincere and to give prior notification so that the public will be more likely to trust them and participate. This would include openly explaining to the public the reason behind the action and the nature of any inconvenience that may result, and even announcing emergency measures that will be put in place, such as the provision of access for ambulances, to lessen any concerns or resistance that the public might have. These recommendations also apply to the protests in Taiwan.

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In addition to having a thorough understanding of how to hold protests, the leaders of the nonviolent protest movement should do as Gandhi and US civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr did, and regard nonviolence as a point of faith and a personal value. This will be of great advantage to the further development of Taiwan's civil society.

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Translated by Paul Cooper

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