Bulgaria and Romania: empirical studies on the effectiveness of nonviolent action

In their book and essay "Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict" Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan create an important statistic about the effectiveness of violent and nonviolent movements. They reach the conclusion that nonviolent political action is, on average, more successful in achieving its goals than violent opposition. However, they do not account for the contextual dissimilarities in the case studies that they have depicted – Burma, the Philippines, East Timor, Palestine, and Iran. The fact that there are successful violent movements in history raises an important question that concerns our society – isn't the average success of nonviolence purely a consequence of context? The best way to find an answer to such a question is to compare two or more movements with the same or very similar contexts, which have different results purely because of the type of opposition applied to their situation. I believe that we can find an example of these kinds of movements in the violent Romanian revolution and nonviolent Bulgarian transition from communism to democracy at the end of the last century, which have not been selected by the two scholars in their work. In Bulgaria, peaceful protests led to the nonviolent transition from a communist regime to a democratic system. On the other hand, the violent overthrow of the Ceaușescu regime in Romania allowed a group of second-tier communist party operatives to take power and stifle the democratization of the country until losing power in 1996, after which democratic reform began. Ultimately, Romania experienced a difficult transition, filled with violent protests and counter protests, which was completed after a nonviolent civil movement was created. On the other hand, the transition in

Bulgaria was almost entirely nonviolent, leading to peaceful and fast changes. These two similar cases demonstrate that nonviolent resistance is more effective than violent action.

The success of a movement should be defined as the democratization and consolidation of a country's institutions due to violent or nonviolent protest. Linz and Stepan, two scholars of the democratic transitions, give a useful definition of when democratization is completed: "A democratic transition is complete when sufficient agreement has been reached about political procedures to produce an elected government, when a government comes to power that is the direct result of a free and popular vote, when this government de facto has the authority to generate new policies, and when the executive, legislative, and judicial power generated by the new democracy does not have to share power with other bodies de jure"[1]. While this definition may be useful, it may cause us to satisfy ourselves with the holding of the first free elections under a democratic constitution in 1991-1992. However, this would leave out all the protests and violence that characterized Romanian transition until 1996. Thus, it might be useful to amend this definition to the present context. Democratization in our case should be complete when the descendants of the former communist parties of both countries were voted out of power in a democratic way and when these parties handed control of the country over peacefully. A democracy is consolidated when these changes occur over multiple election cycles. The term "socialism" and "socialists" are not used in regards to the economic system, but as a collective definition of the members of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP). The same group before 1989 in both countries are referred to as "communists", as they were members of the Bulgarian and Romanian communist parties.

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[1] Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation* (Baltimore MD and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1996), p.3.

This essay will compare the genesis, development, and results of the two movements in light of the process of democratization of the former Communist Bloc countries in Eastern Europe. While the comparison can be made between Romania and Poland, Hungary, or the Czech Republic, the contextual similarities between it and Bulgaria are much stronger. Indeed, these two case studies possess a higher level of similarity than the case studies, used by Chenoweth and Stephan. Unlike Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland, where opposition to communism was vocal and persistent, both countries were loyal to the communist ideal. Both countries had flawed experiments with democracy in the interwar period, cycling between a strong monarchy, military coups, political infighting, and communist/fascist uprisings. Romania and Bulgaria both joined the Eastern bloc in 1944. Both Nicolae Ceaușescu and Todor Zhivkov, the communist dictators of Romania and Bulgaria respectively, were opposed to the perestroika program of Gorbachev and enjoyed a strong cult of personality. The two neighboring countries were facing strong economic hardships due to the flaws of the socialist economy. Both leaders promoted ethnic conflict against other groups in society – the Hungarians and Turks respectively. The main contextual difference is in the fact that Nicolae Ceaușescu left Romania with a 0$ foreign debt [2], while the Zhivkov regime had created a 10.6 billion $ foreign debt by 1989.[3] On the other hand, Ceaușescu was much more repressive than Zhivkov, who was known to tolerate criticism. Despite this, we can establish a very similar context in both countries.

The reasons for this discrepancy in the choice of violent and nonviolent action is due to a number of factors. Firstly, the different ways that the former communist leaders were removed

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[2] Cornel Ban, "Sovereign Debt, Austerity, and Regime Change: The Case of Nicolae Ceausescu's Romania", *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures,* Volume 26, Number 4 (November 2012): p.763

[3] Aleksandar Nikolov, Mitko Delev, Aleksandar Ivanchev, and Vesselin Yanchev, *History and Civilization for 11th grade* (Sofia: Prosveta, 2002), p. 423 [Author's translation]

became a key factor in the way the movements developed. Indeed, in Romania the murder of Ceauşescu created a cycle of violence that led to more violence erupting, while in Bulgaria the peaceful seizure of power led to a peaceful transition. Secondly, the development of the civil movements was different. While in Bulgaria a fear of civil war and revanchism was experienced by people on both sides, preventing them from employing violence, in Romania the initial violence of the revolution created an illusion that violence is the only way to bring about change. Violence escalated further, especially during the Mineriads, which made people realize that a nonviolent campaign would be more effective against a deeply repressive regime. On the other hand, political violence was outlawed during the round table agreements in Bulgaria, putting to paper an already established popular principle. Lastly, ethnic tensions were handled differently in both countries. While in Bulgaria the rights of the Turkish minority were affirmed in both the roundtable accords and the constitution, in Romania Hungarians were accused of separatism and they were repressed. Ultimately, the nonviolent campaign used all three of these factors to remove violence and bring international pressure on the regime, allowing for further democratization.

On November 9, 1989, the Berlin wall fell. This initiated the winds of change in Eastern Europe. The next day a coup started within the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP), which ended with the ousting of Todor Zhivkov on November 17 by his party colleagues, led by Petar Mladenov. Mladenov called for reforms within communism. A number of opposition groups consolidated in forming the Union of Democratic Forces (SDS), which became the leader of the nationwide protests for the fall of communism. The most important day came on December 14, when a big rally of peaceful protesters gathered before the parliament. Shut down by the protesters while attempting to address the masses in the square, Mladenov was recorded as saying: "It would be best if the tanks came!". However, violence was evaded and talks were initiated between the

SDS and BCP, establishing a roundtable, which negotiated the transition from communism to democracy between January and June 1990. Free elections were held for a Grand National Assembly, which were won by the renamed Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP). After the resignation of Petar Mladenov, the leader of the SDS, Zhelyu Zhelev, was elected president. On July 9, 1991, a democratic constitution was adopted, with the election of October 13 being won by the SDS. Its government did not stay in office for long due to problems with its coalition partner, the Turkish Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) and the president. It was followed by a technocratic government led by the DPS and the BSP in 1994. All these changes occurred within the democratic context. After the failure of the BSP government due to unfeasible economic policies, the new elections gave power back to the SDS in 1997. In 1992, Bulgaria joined the Council of Europe.

Meanwhile, in Romania protests in defense of a pastor in the city of Timişoara grew into a national revolution against Nicolae Ceauşescu. After the rebellion spread to Bucharest, Ceauşescu was evacuated via helicopter from his palace. However, a group of second-tier communist party members headed the protests, establishing the National Salvation Front (FSN), led by Ion Iliescu. Ceauşescu was arrested and on December 25, 1989, was court-martialed and shot alongside his wife Elena. The FSN proceeded to win the elections in May 1990 easily, with Iliescu becoming president. A new constitution was crafted, but the anti-democratic tendencies of the government became apparent as time passed. Iliescu fell out with reformist prime-minister Petru Roman, who broke off from the party in 1992. Instead, Iliescu and his Democratic National Salvation Front (FDSN), which later was renamed to the Party of Social Democracy in Romania (PDSR), coalesced with the ultranationalist Greater Romania Party (PRM), Romanian National Unity Party (PUNR), and the Socialist Party of Labor (PSM). Iliescu's rule from 1990 to 1996 was marred by scandals, ethnic conflicts, violent protests and violent repressions of said protests, and international

isolation. By 1996, the opposition had consolidated enough and the democratic Romanian Democratic Convention (CDR) won the elections for president and parliament and initiated sweeping democratic reforms. Even though Iliescu was re-elected in 2000, he ruled over a democratic Romania and also changed his approach to governing. Since then, Romanian democracy has been consolidated. Both countries joined NATO in 2004 and the EU in 2007.

The method of change has had a profound impact on the way political powers in both countries would act throughout the 90s. On the one hand, the violent outbreak of the Romanian revolution, even though spontaneous, condemned the country to a vicious cycle of violence. As a system, democracy is built on the consensus between political factions and agents that the political process should be peaceful and that popular opinion should not be suppressed. Indeed, one of the decisions of the roundtable in Bulgaria prohibited actors in the political process to use violence or any moral or physical pressure to achieve their goals. The SDS and BCP (BSP) showed mutual respect and will to compromise in order to build a functional democratic state, to the disappointment of the more radical elements in the Bulgarian movement. While no other country was as politically polarized as Bulgaria between "reds" (communists) and "blues" (democrats), no other movement was as committed to nonviolence as the protest movement in Bulgaria. The reason for this development was the protesters themselves, who refused any form of escalation into violence, as well as their representatives in the political sphere. It all started with the actions of the BCP, which, "[i]n order to preempt the radicalization of the protests… proposed to the UDF [SDS] the holding of roundtable talks."[4] This was followed by a similar commitment on the part of the SDS and its activists: The results of this mutual commitment to nonviolence by the parties and their supporters

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[4] Vesselin Dimitrov, Klaus H. Goetz, and Hellmut Wollmann *Governing after communism* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, c2006), p.160.

can be summed up in the words of political scientist Emil Giatzidis: "The Bulgarians, finally, have consistently rejected extreme political movements and parties and have shown no anti-democratic tendencies in their electoral behavior… Bulgaria has succeeded in becoming a democratic country."[5] The political and social discourse was relocated into parliament.

When the first free elections of 1990 elected the BCP as the strongest power in parliament, many were fearful that the reformed communists would hijack power and draft an undemocratic constitution. However, Mladenov's talk of "democratic socialism", which initially characterized the goals of transition, was not politically acute or implementable. Moreover, the footage of his outburst discredited not only the then-president of the republic but also his supporters within the BCP. The protests of November and December 1989, as well as the peaceful movement "The City of Truth" that created a city of tents in front of the building of the National Assembly and the Council for Civil Disobedience, continuously showed that Bulgarians wanted change and this forced both the SDS and BSP to respect and adhere to popular sentiments. "This was not a revolution that presupposes vehemence and some form of violent resistance – it was a popular festivity – a carnival, to be precise – in which the social hierarchy, until recently regarded as irreplaceable, was upended. "[6] The truth is that by the implementation of the Constitution and the elections of 1992 the BSP, while internally divided among old nomenklatura members and reformers, and its leadership understood that the reinstitution of communism was not a viable ideology anymore. That is why in a speech before the UN General Assembly in October 1990, president and founder of the SDS Zhelyu Zhelev declared that: "Bulgaria is no longer communist,

[5] Emil Giatzidis, *An introduction to post-Communist Bulgaria* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p.72.

[6] Georgi Dimitrov, Petia Kabakchieva, Jeko Kiossev, *Russia and Bulgaria – farewell democracy* (Sofia, Bulgaria: LIK Publishing House), p.47

it is not a totalitarian state."[7] The elections of 1992 gave the parliamentary majority to the SDS, which started the implementation of democratic reforms. The government received popular support in the form of pro-government rallies. While it would fall to a vote of no-confidence, parliament would continue to function under a technocratic government, which preserved many of the implemented laws. In 1994, people voted the BSP back into power. The government of prime minister Zhan Videnov was unable to handle the economic crisis and due to the disproportionately massive export of grain, the country fell into hyperinflation. Once again, the people took to the streets to protest nonviolently against a government that had failed to stabilize the economy and implement economic reform. In January 1997 the government tried to violently suppress protests, but this caused further demonstrations, where the Bulgarians, even though brought to poverty by the government, organized "a ubiquitous peaceful movement of the nation against the communists-socialists. It was very powerful and covered vast territories. It was a peaceful and civilized protest movement…"[8] In this way, the prime minister was forced to resign and the following elections were won by the SDS. So, the transition from communism to democracy was characterized by a strong popular movement, which was extremely committed to nonviolent resistance. This protest movement was able to secure a form of expression for dissident opinions, which translated into changes of parties during electoral cycles. In the span of 7 years, there were 3 BCP (BSP), 2 SDS, 1 technocratic, and 2 caretaker governments. This variability allowed democracy to be established successfully, despite the initial unwillingness of the BCP. "Bulgaria never witnessed an uncontrolled explosion of violence."[9] This is not to say that there were no violent episodes.

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[7] Speech of Dr. Zhelyu Zhelev, president of the People's Republic of Bulgaria, in front of the session of the United Nations General Assembly, October 3, 1990, http://www.faktite.bg/person/president/3757

[8] Dr. Krum Savov in a conversation with the author, Plovdiv, Bulgaria, August 24, 1998, in Nasya Kralevska-Owens, *Communism versus democracy* (Sofia, Bulgaria: American Research Center in Sofia, 2010), p.423.

[9] Vesselin Dimitrov, *Bulgaria – the uneven transition* (London; New York: Routledge, 2001), p.40.

However, the burning of the BCP headquarters on August 26, 1990, is still controversial, as witnesses claim to this day that the fire was not started by them, but was used by the government to disperse the City of Truth on August 27. The attack on the parliament building in January 1997 thankfully did not result in casualties and was condemned both by the protest leaders, the public, the SDS, and the newly elected president Petar Stoyanov. This violence did not have long-term effects and was remedied. A successful characteristic of the transitions is its nation-wide, not nationalistic, character. Bulgarian Turks were subjected to the so-called "Revival process" in the 70s and the 80s by the communist regime, where they were forced to change their names and were subjected to xenophobic propaganda. One of the first moves of the roundtable agreements and the BCP was to condemn the "Revival" process, allow for the restitution of the Turks' names and estates, and remove any possibility for ethnic conflict. Indeed, the creation of the DPS and its role as a third political power secured the rights of Turks in Bulgaria.

Meanwhile, in Romania, things turned out differently. The initial revolts in Timişoara were not originally aimed against communism but were founded in defense of a Hungarian pastor being deported by Romanian officials. Then the police started attacking the demonstrators, who retaliated. In Bucharest, the dictator Nicolae Ceauşescu called a rally, expecting the people to support him. However, "la population de Bucarest a transformé ce rassemblement en révolte."[10] The revolt forced Ceauşescu to flee via helicopter. He was later captured by the army, which joined the protesters. The subsequent violent murder of Nicolae and Elena Ceauşescu started a vicious cycle of violence that undermined the establishment of a democratic society. This was admitted by Ion Iliescu during an interview with Vladimir Tismaneanu: "I am convinced that a normal

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[10] Cristian Bocancea, *La Roumanie du communisme au post-communisme* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998), p.84.

political trial would have been a positive factor in the process of transition towards democracy."[11] In essence, the murder of the dictator, as hated as he was by the general populace, was not the correct way to act. On the one hand, it legitimized violence as a tool within political life. On the other hand, it allowed the second-tier communists to use the revolution as a means to seize power. "In the case of Romania, the violence of the break… had an adverse effect upon the subsequent process of change. It undermined the legitimacy of the new regime since the Romanian extrication from the old regime was not brought about by what transitologists call a negotiated pact."[12] The National Salvation Front was founded initially as a provisional government. It took control over the daily running of the state and scheduled elections for April (later postponed until May) 1990, a mere 4 months after they seized power. This allowed Iliescu and his collaborators to use the state structures to build a powerful party organization, which the burgeoning opposition was unable to counter. Indeed, when it became clear that the FSN would transform into a party, many feared that this would create a union between state and party, thereby merely substituting one single-party regime with another, which was averted in Bulgaria due to the creation of the SDS. Protests began, which culminated in an attack on the party headquarters on January 28th. Ion Iliescu describes the violence of the protesters: "The protesters found a way past the soldiers on guard and threw Molotov cocktails on the ground floor of the building; there was a fire on the ground floor and it looked like violent clashes were about to start."[13] While the police ultimately repulsed the activists, this showed a worrying trend in Romanian political life, one of continued instability and violence.

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[11] Iliescu, Ion. *Communism, post-communism, and democracy*, interviewed by Vladimir Tismaneanu (Boulder, Colorado: East European Monographs, 2006), p.204

[12] Lavinia Stan, *Romania in transition* (Brookfield, Vermont: Dartmouth Publ., 1997), p.7.

[13] Iliescu, *Communism, post-communism, and democracy,* p.217

This violence would continue during and after the first free elections, which were decisively won by the FSN. However, their victory became the reason for procrastination of reform. Indeed, Iliescu as president soon began to comment that a communist democracy is possible, just like Petar Mladenov had thought of "democratic socialism" in Bulgaria. This worried many people, but the moment that the internal and foreign praise for the Romanian transition died down was the marathon protest of June 1990 against the government. These protesters rioted against the government, which called in miners from the Jiu Valley to Bucharest to defend Iliescu and his rule. The miners were a strong group within Romanian society, which throughout the transition pursued their own interest, which was to preserve the status quo. In the initial stages, they supported Iliescu's government, but after the latter was forced to commit to reforms, the Mineriads turned against the government. During the whole transition, the miners acted as a destabilizing factor in Romanian politics. They proceeded to attack and chase the protesters into the university building. This was followed by the beating, looting, and sacking. Cristian Bocancea was correct in his view that "[a]u plan international, la Roumanie a perdu alors la sympathie qu'elle avait gagnée en décembre 1989, car elle donna un mauvais exemple de gestion de la démocratie."[14] The international financial aid and support that the government expected on part of NATO, the EU, and the IMF was soon understood to be impossible to attain due to the political instability. After both the populace and party members understood that the ideals of the revolution were not going to be achieved, a split formed within the FSN. On the one hand, the ex-communists who desired good relations with the USSR, preservation of the socialist economy, and opposition to NATO and the EU, were led by president Ion Iliescu. The reformist wing of the FSN under prime minister Petre Roman soon split from Iliescu in the 1992 elections. This removed the parliamentary

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[14] Bocancea, *La Roumanie du communisme*, p.120

majority of the FDSN, which forced Iliescu to initiate coalition talks. Iliescu's renamed Party of Social Democracy for Romania (PDSR) allied with the most radical elements in the Romanian parliament – the ultranationalist Party of Romanian National Unity and Greater Romania Party, as well as with the successor to the Romanian Communist Party – the Socialist Labor Party. This alliance with ultranationalists created fears about the preservation of Romanian democracy. Indeed, "the governmental arc… had the effect of further polarizing the country and allowing extremely nationalistic and xenophobic parties to play a formal role in the government."[15]

The ultranationalist propaganda was mainly aimed against the ethnic Hungarians in Transylvania, which deepened ethnic tensions. Although the Hungarians were actually the ones who started the Romanian revolution in Timişoara and despite the initial assurances for equal participation in the country's democratic life that Iliescu gave them, the FSN soon started anti-Hungarian propaganda, accusing the Hungarian minority in Transylvania of wanting to secede. This appeal to nationalism and conservatism was used by Ceauşescu very effectively to repress the Hungarian minority. Indeed, from 19-21 March 1990 in the city of Tigru Mureş, which was predominantly Hungarian, peaceful commemorations of the 1848 Hungarian revolution sparked a nationalist backlash from the government, which dispersed the demonstrators. On March 20 a rally was held against the violence committed by the government, but soon violence erupted on both sides. "It could be argued that Romania suffered a serious reversal of its path toward democracy."[16] The government had full control over the state media and used it to denounce the Hungarian protests as instigated by external conspiratory groups, not by people that wanted a stop to the violations of the Hungarians' civil rights. There existed a real danger of the nation spiraling back

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[15] Stan, *Romania in transition*, p.16
[16] Stan, *Romania in transition*, p.11

into a dictatorship due to all these cycles of violence and suppression of dissension. It appears as a paradox, but "[t]he Eastern European country with the most abrupt break from the old order achieved the most useless transformation"[17]. However, a number of changes, both internal and external, saved Romanian democracy and brought about the democratization of the country.

The first of these was the Timişoara proclamation, which was written down by participants in the original movement on March 11, 1990, as a reaction to the Mineriad, which violently suppressed the protests in Bucharest. It became a de facto constitution for the civil movement that had to combat Iliescu. Its 7th point proved crucial to the opposition to Iliescu: "Timişoara started the Revolution against the entire communist regime and its whole nomenclature and by no means was it intended as an opportunity for a group of anti-Ceauşescu dissidents within the RCP to rise to political power."[18] This document exposed the way that the Romanian revolution was used to legitimize the group around Iliescu and how that was not the goal of the popular movement. This document changed the priorities and methods of the civil movement. It became clear that violence could not bring down an elected regime and that the movement had to turn to nonviolent methods. However, a second factor was the disintegration of the USSR in 1991 and the subsequent international pressure by the western institutions on Iliescu. Indeed, the former pro-Soviet was forced to pursue a pro-western policy. This led to conflicts between Iliescu and his nationalist allies and to their eventual political divorce. Understanding the pressure that the UN, NATO, EU, and IMF can have on Iliescu, a group of dissidents such as George Soros started forming NGOs to champion causes, which were easily used to put international pressure on the Iliescu regime, such

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[17] Vladimir Tismaneanu and Marius Stan, *Romania confronts its communist past* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p.52.

[18] George Şerban, *Timisoara proclamation,* quoted in Ruxandra Cesereanu, "Romania after Communism: Queries, Challenges, and Mythifications", *Caietele Echinox,* vol. 28 (2015): 180

as minority rights and free media. Indeed, this movement was successful in forcing the government to relinquish its control of media. The subsequent media campaign against Iliescu and his support for Serbian president Slobodan Milošević, who was internationally condemned for his violations of human rights, eroded the president's popularity. Tom Gallagher is thus correct in his view that "in Romania, they [the NGOs] may have been crucial in sustaining democratic values in the first half of the 1990s." Moreover, in 1996 Hungary and Romania were pressured to sign a bilateral agreement to stabilize relations, revoke territorial claims, and respect their borders under international pressure. Thus, the NGOs and European organizations played a key role in preserving and stabilizing democracy in the country. In 1996, Iliescu lost the presidential election to the democrat Emil Constantinescu. The Romanian Democratic Convention, a coalition of democratic parties, then began a number of reforms that consolidated Romanian democracy. While Iliescu would again win the elections in 2000, he would rule a new Romania, whose path to democracy and membership in the EU and NATO was already determined. His second rule respected all of the democratic institutions, reforms were begun in the judiciary, the relationship between the Hungarian minority and the Romanian majority were healed, and democracy has since stabilized in Romania. Thereby, the turn to nonviolent action in Romania was able to rectify the violence in the country's initial anticommunist movement had caused.

After a survey of the movements against the communist regimes in Romania and Bulgaria, two countries with a similar contextual past, we can see two different patterns of democratization. On the one hand, the political coup in Bulgaria was peaceful, which lead to a nonviolent transition to democracy, spurred on and encouraged by popular nonviolent protests, which put pressure on institutions to bring about reform. In the meantime, the Romanian revolution was exploited by a small clique of second-tier party functionaries to seize power and jeopardize the development of

democracy. Protests against Ion Iliescu were violent and that led to their suppression by the government. It was only after the movement turned to nonviolent methods of protest and through international pressure that the democratic institutions were salvaged. It is interesting that these case studies are absent in Chenoweth and Stephan's book, because they are much more similar than any two of the cases the scholars studied. By comparing Bulgaria and Romania, we can argue against a potential counterargument that context is the only reason for the success of certain nonviolent movements. Thus, we can confirm and reinforce Chenoweth and Stephan's conclusion that nonviolent action is more effective than violence as a means to bring about change.

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