



"If people power provides no panacea, it does in many instances open up alternatives to war and armed struggle." - April Carter "People Power and Protest since 1945"

The recent Australian Federal Elections threw into sharp relief a dramatic instance of the play of people power operative within a democratic system. It was an organized and effective assertion of community action against the prevailing duopolistic stranglehold by the two mainstream parties.

This illustration came from the Northern Victorian electorate called Indi. In the vast Australian landscape where political power is being monopolized by two main parties forming government in a game of musical chairs, here in Indi we saw how an independent grass roots movement spontaneously formed during the election

who got out, got engaged, did community work, letter dropped, knocked on doors."

The concept of people power is no doubt one laden with ambiguity. If one were to put it in simple terms it stands basically for political pressure exercised through the public demonstration of public opinion. In a democracy like Australia it fills in deficiency gaps; in an authoritarian system it may signal the emergence of a challenge to the oppressors. Depending on the individual responses of the governments concerned peoplepower can remain essentially non-violent or it can transform into armed rebellion as we now



PEOPLE POWER AS A POSITIVE POLITICAL FORCE

campaign worked to bring down the influential Liberal Party front bencher, Sophia Mirabella, who held the seat for 12 years while simultaneously disregarding any challenge by the Labour Party. The independent movement became known as "The Voice of Indi," as if to suggest that neither of the mainstream parties represented the aspirations of the electorate. Its candidate, Cathy McGovern, triumphed in a campaign that was on the wire right to the end. Peoplepower registered a victory to the surprised dismay of the main players who had taken the electorate for granted and stopped listening to it.

This particular electoral drama sent shock waves through the two-party dominated political system. For too long the political players under this two-party system had demarcated the country into a list of 'safe seats' and 'marginal seats.' A goodly part of the whole electorate had safe seats for either Labour or Liberal. The seat I live in is claimed to be 'Labor-safe' and I've never seen the MP who just complacently walks under his party umbrella.

MS McGowan told ABC Radio Statewide Drive Victoria that she holds her victory with enormous pride.

"A very tightly fought victory, right down to the wire, we've run a grassroots campaign and people have really responded and you walk up the street and people tooting their horns and congratulations and well done and it's amazing to think about what 33 000 votes looks like but you hear it, it's wonderful."

MS McGowan says Sophie Mirabella congratulated her on the victory in a short and professional conversation.

Ms McGowan says the enormous community involvement helped her across the line. "It really was a community response, they thought they were being taken for granted and they've reacted in an amazing way, but I'll probably never understand really the amount of work that everybody has done...you keep hearing the hundreds of stories of people right across the community

see happening in Syria or as we saw happened during the Arab Spring. Violence is not seen as an essential component of such forms of protest as by definition such movements alight from among the mass of civilians who are essentially unarmed.

In this sense the idea of peoplepower is as old as history. In modern times, Gandhi led a successful non-violent people power movement that eventually led to the mighty British Empire quitting India. The famous salt march was a highpoint in the Gandhian drama. In The Philippines, Ferdinand Marcos was ousted by peoples' power. Other instances from contemporary times can be cited: resistance to dictatorial or authoritarian rule, as in Iran in 1978-9, the 'velvet revolutions' in Eastern Europe in 1989 and

currently the Arab uprisings, and resistance to attempts to thwart the democratic protest through a coup d'état or stolen elections - as in the "color" revolutions in Serbia (2000), Georgia (2003) and the Ukraine (2005). Most recently the world witnessed the Spring Revolution in the Middle East. These are all instances of people power in action.

Handled intelligently peoplepower can be channeled into healthy courses in a democracy. This is what occurred at the Australian Federal Elections. It can be a meaningful complement to democratic governance. Handled foolishly and arrogantly it can be unfortunately destructive. This is what occurred during the Arab Spring.

Sri Lanka had its own recent moment of people power at Weliveriya in the Gampaha District when villagers in their hundreds got together to register their protest over what was perceived as a contamination of their ground water supplies by a factory owned by a government bigwig. This action had been a culmination of several attempts made through the normal democratic channels via local MP's and ruling politicians.

The latter would not lift a finger because the factory owner was too powerful. In desperation the community developed a grassroots protest. At Weliveriya the people were totally unarmed. Government lied when it tried to assert that the protestors were armed. In a strange act of executive folly or foolish bravado the army was brought in to crush this demonstration when it would have been sufficient to leave it as a police matter.

When the army turned on the protestors the latter were compelled to vent their anger by picking the only weapons that nature provides them with namely stones and rocks. We have yet to see the government looking into the complaints.

In the big global picture Weliveriya is a tiny speck. In comparison to Indi in Aus-

tralia, however, it approximates better. The important thing is that the two different cases may be regarded as offering opposite lessons. Indi may be treated as a model of a well-organized movement full of vitality absorbed healthily into the broader democratic governance. Weliveriya failed against all these criteria. Both cases, however, represented illustrations of the free expression of freedom from established political infrastructure.

The potent force of people power derives from one fundamental truth in politics namely that all governance systems have to rest on popular acquiescence. In an immediate and urgent sense this is true of functioning democracies; in the eventual sense it is true of even authoritarian systems.



Making Sense
Shyamon Jayasinghe

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