

THE SPIRIT OF 1989, FROM TIANANMEN TO PRAGUE

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Europe, European Union (EU) and India

The recent commemoration of the 30th anniversary of the violent suppression of China's Tiananmen Square protests is a good occasion to look back on the year 1989 and the non-violent movements for democracy which changed our world. It is a fact that the non-violent movements in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989 ended the confrontation between East and West and strengthened the possibility of a "new international order" based on the extension of democracy around the globe. As a result of the victory of non-violent campaigns in Poland (with the Solidarity movement) and in Czechoslovakia (with the Velvet Revolution), the technique of non-violent transformation of authoritarian and semi-totalitarian regimes into liberal democracies turned into a global cross-cultural phenomenon.

In other words, the self-empowerment strategies of non-violent civic actors of 1989 had a great impact on those around the globe who believed in a genuine process of democratisation. Let us not forget that the past 30 years have witnessed an unprecedented flowering of non-violent experiences. In many areas of the world, such as Latin America, North Africa and West Asia, where armed struggle was once seen as the only path to freedom, non-violent campaigns are now considered institutionalised methods of struggle for democratic invention and democratic governance.

One of the important tasks that was set by the non-violent movements of 1989 was the provision of "good governance". For these movements and their leaders like Czechoslovakia's Václav Havel, the real test of democracy was not only in the peaceful process of transition, but also in the non-violent consolidation of democratic institutions. For the advocates of non-violence in 1989, democracy was not just "an institutional arrangement for organising the political society" but a new attitude and approach towards the problem of power. For example, from the point of view of a 1989 leader such as Havel, the concept of power should go hand in hand with responsibility. As he pointed out, "Politics is an area of human endeavour that places greater stress on moral sensitivity, on the ability to reflect critically on oneself, on genuine responsibility, on taste and tact, on the capacity to empathise with others, on a sense of moderation, on humility."

In a Gandhian manner, the spirit of 1989 affirmed that the challenges and difficulties of democratic governance needed to be confronted through self-rule, self-control and the soul force. Undoubtedly, for all the non-violent actors of 1989, the twin practices of self-discipline and empathetic service seemed necessary in order to control an unjust and inappropriate power.

This is actually what was suggested by the student-led democracy movement in China. For the Chinese students, the process of democratisation was a way to change the Communist power over society into a power from within it. As another leader of the 1989 movements, Adam Michnik, declares, "The real struggle for us is for the citizen to cease to be the property of the state."

Truly, civic actors and freedom animators such as Adam Michnik and Václav Havel did not learn to love democracy and non-violence blindfolded and with their heads lowered. They believed that democracy can be practised only when we can look at it clearly and critically. Accordingly, it was in their minds that the Berlin Wall began to crumble. As the spirit of 1989 dawned in Beijing, the Polish people, and the Czechs, Slovaks, Romanians, Hungarians, Lithuanians, Estonians, Ukrainians and Russians came to understand that the empowerment of civil society and the collective ability to rule democratically were the essential constituents of non-violent transition to

democracy.

Ironically, on the same day (June 4, 1989) that the Polish Communists were defeated for the first time in elections in a Communist state, the Chinese pro-democracy movement was crushed by the tanks in Tiananmen Square. Paradoxically, both Communist China and post-Communist Poland turned to market economy and a wild rush for wealth. But the lesson of 1989 remained intact and more relevant than ever.

As a matter of fact, it took shape once again in the spirit of young Egyptians and Tunisians who shook Arab history through the tactics of non-violent resistance. Certainly, the spirit of 1989 was non-violence in the making. And today, we can find the same spirit of 1989, what we can call a Gandhian moment of history, in Algeria, Sudan, Iran, Indonesia, the U.S. and many other countries around the globe. It shows that the dream of 1989 which accompanied the Chinese students of Tiananmen, the workers of Poland and the civic actors of Prague is not over. It shows that where non-violence is practised, democracy is honoured. Moreover, the spirit of 1989, which took shape in the year of all freedoms, is a reminder that democracy is a system based on trust in human action and the fact that the impossible could become possible.

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