

A Short History of “*From Dictatorship to Democracy*”

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The following is excerpted from a letter written by Gene Sharp in response to a student on the origin and spread of his book, “From Dictatorship to Democracy.” The book may be downloaded in a variety of languages at <http://aeinstein.org/organizations98ce.html>

"From Dictatorship to Democracy" was written at the request of Tin Maung Win (now deceased), a prominent exile Burmese democrat who was then editor of "Khit Pyaing" (The New Era Journal).

It was originally published in installments in "Khit Pyaing" in Burmese and English in Bangkok, Thailand in 1993 and afterwards as a booklet in both languages (1994) and in Burmese again (1996 and 1997). The original booklet editions from Bangkok were issued with the assistance of the Committee for the Restoration of Democracy in Burma.

It was circulated both surreptitiously inside Burma and among exiles and sympathizers elsewhere.

The preparation of this text was based on over forty years of research and writing on nonviolent struggle, dictatorships, totalitarian systems, resistance movements, political theory, and other topics. Also, I had the assistance of Bruce Jenkins in the preparation of this analysis.

This still took four months full time. It was intended only for use by Burmese democrats and various ethnic groups in Burma that wanted independence from the Burman-dominated central government in Rangoon. (Burmans are the dominant ethnic group in Burma.)

I could not write an analysis that had a focus only on Burma, as I did not know Burma well. Therefore, I had to write it as a generic analysis. This decision to make the analysis generic was at the time solely based on my limited knowledge of Burma.

I did not then envisage that the generic focus would make the analysis potentially relevant in any country with an authoritarian or dictatorial government. However, that appears to have been the perception by people in who in recent years have sought to translate and distribute it in their languages for their countries.

The Albert Einstein Institution (then in Cambridge, and later in Boston, Massachusetts, USA) solicited funds from the Open Society Institute that made possible the translation and publication of "From Dictatorship to Democracy" into four of the ethnic languages of Burma: Mon, Karen, Jing Paw, and Chin. The English text and the translations into Burmese and the four ethnic languages of Burma have recently been made available on the Albert Einstein Institution web site (aeinstein.org).

The SLORC military dictatorship in Rangoon wasted no time in denouncing this publication. Heavy attacks were made in 1995 and 1996, and reportedly continued in later years in newspapers, radio, and television. The Albert Einstein Institution prepared documentary accounts of these attacks during those years. As late as 2005 persons were imprisoned for seven years sentences merely for having possession of the banned publication.

Although no efforts were made to promote the publication for use in other countries, the publication began to spread on its own. A copy of the English language edition was seen on display in the window of a bookstore in Bangkok by a student from Indonesia, was purchased, and taken back home. There, it was translated into Indonesian, and published in 1997 by a major Indonesian publisher with an introduction by Abdurrahman Wahid, then head of Nadhlatul Ulama, the largest Muslim organization in the world with thirty -five million members, and later President of Indonesia.

During this time, at my office at the Albert Einstein Institution we only had a handful of reprints from the Bangkok English language booklet. For a few years we had to photocopy it when we had enquiries for which it was relevant. Later, someone from California took one of those photocopies to Belgrade during Milosovic's time and gave it to the organization Civic Initiatives. They translated it into Serbian and published it. When we visited Serbia after the collapse of the Milosevic regime we were told that the booklet had been quite influential in the opposition movement.

Independently of this, Robert Helvey, a retired US Army colonel, gave a major workshop in Budapest, Hungary, for about twenty Serbian young people on the nature and potential of nonviolent struggle. These were the people who became the basis of the Otpor organization that led the nonviolent struggle that brought down Milosevic. Helvey had encountered my work on nonviolent struggle a few years earlier while he was a Fellow at Harvard University's Center for International Affairs.

Several leading members of the Otpor movement developed their own capacities to spread awareness of the potential of nonviolent struggle to remove existing oppressive governments. They served as consultants to groups in several countries, including Ukraine, Georgia, Belarus, and probably others and encouraged translations of this analysis into new languages.

One of these was Ukrainian. The Albert Einstein Institution was asked for financial assistance to print that translation. Although the Institution had no money for staff to promote the dissemination of "From Dictatorship to Democracy" and no money to pay for translations and printing, we were able to be helpful. We managed to send US\$6,000 which made possible the printing of 15,000 copies.

In recent years our assistance in translations has been primarily due to Jamila Raqib's guidance and to the use of lessons learned from earlier years on how to conduct translations on this subject for the field. When possible, we insist that the guidelines for translations we have developed be followed in order to ensure accuracy in languages in which there was earlier no established accurate terminology.

In addition to this publication, the use of nonviolent struggle elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe has also been very important in recent decades. These cases include ones in Czechoslovakia, Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, and East Germany. Of course, struggles in other parts of the world have also been important, including the Philippines, the United States South, and India.

We usually do not know how awareness of this publication has spread from country to country. It's availability on our web site in recent years has been important, but clearly that is not the only factor. Tracing these connections would be a major research project.

"From Dictatorship to Democracy" is a heavy analysis and is not easy reading. Yet it has been deemed to be important enough for twenty-seven translations although they required major work and expense.

Translations of this publication in print or on a web site include the following languages: Khmer (Cambodia), Farsi (Iran), Mandarin (China), Russian, Vietnamese, Amharic (Ethiopia), Spanish, Belarusian, Dhivehi (Maldives), Nepali, Tibetan, Tigrinia (Eritrea), Uzbek, Kyrgyz, Arabic, Indonesian, and Azeri (Azerbaijan). Several others are in preparation.

This fact, and the great diversity of the societies and languages into which translations have occurred, or are in process, make it difficult to avoid the provisional conclusion that the persons who initially encounter this document have seen it to be relevant to their society because of the perceived accuracy of its analysis.