



HOMAGE TO JERUSALEM Simon Sebag Montefiore's labour of love about this complex, tragic city Weekend Review

World News

NORTH AFRICA-MIDDLE EAST CRISIS

Man who wrote rules for peaceful revolution



Gene Sharp (83), who has been credited with inspiring non-violent revolution in Asia, the former Soviet bloc and now the Arab world, says "things are not looking good in Libya . . . The Libyans are not acting according to my writings." Photograph: Lara Marlowe



INTERVIEW

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People the world over have taken Gene Sharp's path from dictatorship to democracy

THIS IS the way the world changes. An ageing American academic with an *idee fixe* writes pamphlets in the jungles of Burma, which are gathered into a book in 1993, *From Dictatorship to Democracy: A Conceptual Framework for Liberation*.

"I thought that would be it," says Dr Gene Sharp. "For nearly a decade it was. And then things started to move." An Indonesian student bought the book in Rangoon and took it back to Jakarta, where it was prefaced by a future president and used to fight military dictatorship. Another man, from California, gave it to the Serbs who drove Slobodan Milosevic from office. Sharp's ideas took hold, fuelling "colour revolutions" across the former Soviet bloc.

In the newly liberated Baltic states, he was feted as a hero. Today, his book has been translated into 34 languages, and counting. The Serbs of Otpor! (Resistance!) trained Egyptians in Sharp's nonviolent ways. Peter Ackerman, one of Sharp's former students, also trained Tunisians and Egyptians. The Muslim Brotherhood posted *From Dictatorship to Democracy* on their website.

Ruaridh Arrow, who is directing a film about Sharp, reports seeing Egyptians in Tahrir Square last month reading the book by torchlight in the shadow of tanks. One day, Arrow found a protester clutching Sharp's list of 198 methods of nonviolent action. The Egyptian had never heard of the American academic. Sharp, a retired political scientist, considered by many to be the world's foremost expert on

nonviolent revolution, lives in apparent poverty in a crumbling row house in working-class east Boston. At the age of 83, his voice sometimes trails off. He is pencil thin. His jeans are cinched up with a leather belt.

There is no plaque on the door, nothing to indicate that a man who has been spoken of as a possible Nobel Peace Prize laureate lives here. Over the years, the leaders of Venezuela, Burma and Iran have denounced Sharp. He doesn't want his address published. Does he fear for his life? "No," he says. "I'm not frightened, just cautious."

Funding for the Albert Einstein Institution – named for the genius who prefaced Sharp's first book – has dwindled. He once had 11 staff members. Jamila Raqib, a beautiful Afghan immigrant and university graduate, is his executive director and sole full-time employee. They work on the ground floor of the house Sharp bought in 1968.

With the success of the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings, in part inspired by him, Sharp's fame has spread. A half dozen journalists beat a path to his door every day. He receives them in a room with peeling plaster, sagging bookshelves and piles of newspapers. Sally, the bear-like dog Sharp rescued from an animal shelter, rumbles in the labyrinth of document boxes. Raqib is guardian angel, watching anxiously that Sharp doesn't slip on ice outside, offering to call a taxi when journalists overstay their allotted time.

The uprising in Egypt is a source of pride to Sharp. It's almost a textbook case, and he wrote the textbook. "The Egyptians did what Gandhi said: they cast off fear, chanting, 'peaceful, peaceful, peaceful!'" Sharp says. "They did it amazingly well, for a demonstration of more than one million people".

Sharp's books emphasise the

central importance of planning. The Chinese students he met on Tiananmen Square in 1989 "didn't use their brains," he says. "They should have followed the first vote of the students to leave, declared victory and dispersed. There were demonstrations in 50 Chinese cities. People thought the government was about to fall."

He has visited Tibet and met the Dalai Lama. "The Tibetans haven't developed a plan, a strategy," Sharp says, alluding disparagingly to the Dalai Lama's gentle "middle way". But in Egypt, Sharp says, "It looks like there might have been a master plan." It is better, he adds, if there is not one leader but many.

In two specific ways, the Egyptians seem to have followed Sharp's rulebook. They refused to negotiate with Mubarak and they won over the military. Sharp's admonition never to negotiate with dictators "was not a popular viewpoint" when he wrote it. "It's hard realpolitik," he explains. "If a dictator wants safe passage to an international airport, you can give him that. Dictators will always negotiate to strengthen their own position." The Egyptian opposition identified and neutralised Mubarak's principal "pillar of support," the military, as advocated by Sharp. But, he warns in *Dictatorship to Democracy*, military coups against dictators often go wrong because they

"leave in place the existing maldistribution of power between the population and the elite in control of the government and its military forces". The core idea of Sharp's do-it-yourself kit for nonviolent revolution is that one cannot fight a dictatorship on its terms. "By choosing to compete in the areas of military forces, supplies of ammunition, weapons technology and the like, resistance movements tend to put themselves at a distinct

disadvantage," he writes. Sharp believes nonviolent action can be effective against the most reprehensible regimes, even Saddam Hussein or Muammar Gaddafi, if protesters are willing to sacrifice their lives. "People are always trying to find the limits [of nonviolent protest]," he says. "People believe in violence, almost as a religious principle." Sharp claims no paternity for the uprising in Libya. "I don't know how it started, but I presume they were imitating Egypt," he says. "Things are not looking good in Libya . . . The Libyans are not acting according to my writings."

What should the US do? "Stay out!" Sharp says emphatically. "Don't mess it up! The US can make pronouncements, as long as they do nothing." This frail old man gives his books away on the internet, because he wants to spread his ideas. But he is not a pacifist. The son of an itinerant Protestant pastor, he says he was disappointed with the Quakers in his youth. "I was a pacifist, but I went beyond that," he says.

"Pacifists are identified by what they will not do . . . You don't get rid of violence by telling people what not to do. You don't get rid of war by telling people it's wicked. You only get rid of war if people have something else they can do which works better. Gandhi was not a pacifist; he was a pioneer of war without violence."

Sharp rejects the very word "nonviolence". "It's sloppy," he says. "It means anything you want it to mean, or nothing that you want it to mean. It's important that it be nonviolent *action*, nonviolent *struggle*, nonviolent *resistance* – people power."

Sharp won't let me photograph him in his rooftop orchid garden. "It helps people who have a stereotype; there's this weirdo who does this nonviolent thing and he also grows orchids and you don't have to take him too seriously," he explains. But he's happy to pose beside the torn picture of Gandhi that an Indian student gave him in 1949. He had it at Oxford, where he wrote his doctoral thesis on *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* in the 1960s.

After Egypt, Sharp says, "The assumption that you have to invade a country to free people from a dictator doesn't hold up anymore." Before that, "The billions of dollars spent on Nato did not liberate one person in eastern Europe or the Baltics. They liberated themselves. The secret is to liberate yourself."

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