



CHAPTER VI

Make Oppression Backfire

Remember that movie in which George Clooney plays a businessman who spends most of his time in airports and on airplanes? I may not look as cool as Clooney walking through security with my dirty sneakers in my hand, but traveling more than a hundred thousand miles each year means that I basically spend my life on the road. In fact, my wife, Masha, often says that I only pretend to live in Belgrade, and that my true home is the Lufthansa lounge at the Frankfurt airport. It's been that way for years. By now I can tell you which major world airport has the best slice of pizza, which

offers the most comfortable chairs for a quick nap, and which boasts the least disgusting bathrooms. Actually, I can tell you more than that: airports are perfect microcosms of their societies, and if you study an airport closely enough, you'll be able to learn a lot about the culture that built it. Americans, for example, are absolutely obsessed with security, which is why there are so many ridiculous screening hoops to jump through before you're allowed in the terminal. They're also strongly family oriented and sensitive to the needs of the disabled, which is why airports in the States have a lot of low water fountains, diaper changing stations for the little ones, and ramps for people in wheelchairs. In Europe, tobacco is a big thing, which is why they got around the requirement to ban smoking at the airport by building enclosed glass booths next to every other gate so that passengers can rush off the planes and light up. In Italy they demonstrate their legendary sense for organization by efficiently losing your luggage as soon as your plane reaches the terminal.

In much of Southeast Asia, they're more spiritual: at airports, attendants practically bend over backward to treat monks with deep respect. Fly to Thailand, say, and there'll be a little sign alerting you that Buddhist monks have priority along with the elderly and disabled. Monks even have their own departure lounges, partitioned off from the rest of us more worldly travelers. Stand in line in Cambodia, and some beatific-looking young man wearing an orange robe might zoom past you as everyone else nods reverentially. It's equal parts charming and annoying, and it tells you just how ele-

vated monks are in primarily Buddhist societies. Burma is no exception—the half a million holy men in saffron are the nation’s favorite sons, offered everything from worshipful looks to financial aid. They’re also considered above the fray of ordinary political events, which in Burma is an enviable place to be. The country has been groaning under a military dictatorship since 1962, and the Burmese have repeatedly tried, with little success, to shake off the generals’ yoke.

When an election was held in 1990, the pro-democracy figure Aung San Suu Kyi won big. Naturally, the regime annulled the results and cracked down hard on democracy. They put everyone back into a political refrigerator, and nothing much happened for nearly two decades, until a host of harsh economic measures sent people to the streets in 2007. One of those people was Ashin Kovida.

If you met Kovida at a party without knowing that his first name was an honorific by which the Burmese call their monks, you’d still get the sense that he’s a holy man. He is small, and he speaks so softly you have to lean in to understand what he’s saying. But in 2007, with government subsidies removed and oil prices soaring, this gentle man decided he’d had enough. The military junta had to go. And just like many other hobbits, he felt it was his responsibility to lead the charge.

Luckily, inspiration came Kovida’s way. A copy of *Bringing Down the Dictator*, that DVD about Otpor!’s success in bringing down Milošević, was somehow smuggled into the country, translated into Burmese, and sent to the remote Bud-

dhist monastery where Kovida was living at the time. Watching this documentary, Kovida felt inspired: the men and women he saw on the screen were nowhere near as pious and pure as he was—we are, after all, rowdy Serbs—but they were just as young and just as driven and, most important, they had succeeded in doing something in their homeland that Kovida desperately wanted to do in his. He, too, wanted to bring down the dictators. So to get his revolution started, he took the extreme step of selling his Buddhist robes, and with the money he received he printed out pamphlets that invited Burmese of all walks of life to join him in a march.

The march took place on September 19, 2007. About four hundred of Kovida's fellow monks joined him. Even though there's only a little bit more freedom to protest in Burma than there is in North Korea, people reasoned that the army wouldn't dare get violent with this bunch. After all, these weren't your run-of-the-mill political troublemakers. These were monks, the highest moral authority in the nation. Even the ruling generals, they figured, had their limits.

They were wrong.

No sooner had Kovida and his supporters shown up than the army opened fire. Dozens were killed. Massive arrests followed, with thousands of monks sent away for sentences of sixty years or more, often at hard labor. It was the harshest measure the regime had taken in decades. But it also went a step too far: in acting against the monks, the generals learned the bitter lesson tyrants always learn when it's too late, which is that sooner or later oppression always backfires. Enraged

by this act of violence perpetrated against the monks, the Burmese began what many started to call the Saffron Revolution. Now, on the heels of that upheaval, Burma is taking steps toward democracy, and the formerly imprisoned dissident leader Aung San Suu Kyi is now the most prominent member of Burma's parliament, while Kovidha, the monk who started it all, is still campaigning for democratic reform in his homeland.

In a way, the revolutionaries were fortunate that the regime cracked down so hard on the monks. Because of the government's brutality and stupidity, average Burmese who never would have thought of taking a stand against the generals were so swept up in emotion that they couldn't just sit there and do nothing. The clueless generals had brought about their own downfall. It's a common mistake, and that's why making oppression backfire is a skill every activist can and must master. Sometimes it alone can spell the difference between failure and success.

Making oppression backfire is a skill, sort of like jujitsu, that's all about playing your opponents' strongest card against them. Before you can do that, though, you need to understand exactly how oppression works. It's important to realize that oppression isn't some demonic force that bubbles up from some deep, festering well of evil in the blackened hearts of your opponents. Rather, it is almost always a calculated decision. In the hands of authorities everywhere—from dictators to elementary school principals—oppression achieves two immediate results: it punishes disobedience, and it prevents fu-

ture problems by sending a message to potential troublemakers. Like so much we've been talking about, all oppression relies on fear in order to be effective: fear of punishment, fear of getting detention, fear of being sent to a gulag, fear of embarrassment, fear of whatever.

But the ultimate point of all this fear is not merely to make you afraid. A dictator isn't interested in running a haunted house. Instead, he wants to make you obey. And when it comes down to it, whether or not you obey is always your choice. Let's say that you wake up in some nightmare scenario out of a mafia movie, where some wacko tries to force you to dig a ditch. They put a gun to your head and threaten to kill you if you don't start shoveling. Now, they certainly have the power to scare you, and it's certainly not easy to argue with someone who has a pistol pointed right at your temple. But can anybody really make you do something? Nope. Only you can decide whether or not to dig that ditch. You are totally free to say no. The punishment will certainly be severe, but it's still your choice to decline. And, if you absolutely refuse to pick up that shovel and they shoot you dead, you still haven't dug them a ditch. So the point of oppression and fear isn't to force you to do something against your will—which is impossible—but rather to make you obey. That's where they get you.

This insight, I must say, came from the master of nonviolent action, Dr. Gene Sharp. Sharp realized that dictators succeed because people choose to obey, and while people might choose to obey for many reasons, for the most part they obey

out of fear. So if we want people to stop complying with the regime, they have to stop being scared. And one of the scariest things in any society, whether it's a dictatorship or a democracy, is the great unknown. That's why kids are afraid of the dark, and that's the reason that your average citizen sweats bullets when he walks into the oncologist's office for the first time.

But as we learned in Serbia, the best way to overcome the fear of the unknown is with knowledge. From the earliest days of Otpor!, one of the most effective tools the police had against us was the threat of arrest. Notice I didn't say *arrest*, but just the *threat* of it. The threat was much more effective than the thing itself, because before we actually started getting arrested by Milošević's police, we didn't know what jails were like, and because people are normally much more afraid of the unknown, we imagined Milošević's prisons to be the worst kind of hell, a Serbian version of the Sarlacc Pit in *Star Wars* and only slightly less terrifying. But then when things started getting heated, a lot of us actually were arrested, and when we got back we told the others all about it. We left out none of the details. We wrote down and shared with our fellow revolutionaries every bit of what had happened in the jails. We wanted those about to be arrested themselves—we knew there were bound to be many, many more of us picked up by the dictator's goons—to understand every step of what was going to happen to them.

First, you'd be handcuffed. And one handcuff would be locked much tighter than the other, so one of your wrists

would feel like it was going to explode. Then we alerted our male friends that they were likely to find themselves in a small cell with thugs and drunk drivers who would be puking all over the cell, and our female friends that they were likely to spend a few hours in close quarters with prostitutes. Everything would smell like vomit and piss. Your belt would be taken and your pants would fall down, embarrassing you even further. Since they also took your shoelaces and now your sneakers hardly fit, you'd be walking around with awkward, clumsy steps. Then everyone would be taken for fingerprints and sent off to interrogation rooms, where, just like in bad television shows, there's a good cop and a bad cop. The first offers you coffee and a smoke; the second yells and bangs on the table. Both ask you exactly the same questions: Who is Otpor!'s leader? How is Otpor! organized? Where does Otpor! get its money? "Otpor! is a leaderless movement," we told people to say, and "Otpor! is organized in every neighborhood," and "Otpor! is financed by the Serbian diaspora and ordinary people who want us to live in freedom." When the table-banging began, all you had to do was remember those three lines. The whole thing was a lot like being in a high school play, and it always followed the same predictable pattern.

We called our preparations for being arrested "Plan B," and it worked wonders. Soon, instead of speaking of prison in hushed tones, our friends and acquaintances spoke of it dismissively, even humorously. They knew what to look for-

ward to. Being in prison was still scary, sure, but it was much less scary than the dark things we used to imagine before we gained experience and started educating one another. And we covered for each other too. If the police actually got one of us, we all had legal documents signed and ready, giving a few lawyers sympathetic to our cause power of attorney. Finally, we had elaborate phone lists in place, so that if any of us got arrested there was always someone notifying parents and friends and loved ones. And, of course, there were piles of pre-made press releases sitting on top of desks and tables ready to be sent out to the media seconds after shit went down, with only the names of the activists and the address of the jail left blank and waiting to be filled in.

Plan B worked wonders because it blunted the dictator's means of oppression and helped us turn the tide of fear. Obviously we knew that even with Plan B we couldn't control what Milošević was going to do to us, and everybody understood that at some point there were going to be casualties. It was a given that some of our people would lose their jobs, some of them would be sentenced to long prison terms, and some might even be tortured or killed. But the way we dealt with this was by giving each case the human attention it deserved. We in Otpor! always reminded ourselves that each member of our group was an individual, with a family and responsibilities. We were sworn, like American soldiers, to "leave no man behind," and trained ourselves to endure the worst. Soon people were willing to take incredible risks be-

cause they knew that as soon as Milošević's guys slapped the handcuffs on them, there would be an entire movement working behind the scenes to set them free.

With Plan B, the fear of the unknown melted away. Getting arrested soon meant that you joined an exclusive club and that you wouldn't be facing the full weight of the security forces all by yourself. Not only that, but once we stopped being scared and started getting organized, the police realized that the harder they cracked down on us, the worse it got for them. Their oppression was backfiring.

Think of the situation from their point of view. You're in Serbia. You're a police officer. You've joined the force to protect and serve and arrest the bad guys. But now you're being told to interrogate ten young students from this organization called Otpor!. Most of their get-togethers are filled with laughter and joking around, and although you'd be punished for admitting it, some of their pranks are actually sort of funny. Maybe these kids even remind you of yourself when you were younger. But this is work, so you have to leave your feelings in your locker with the rest of your personal belongings. You begin by asking the kids a list of questions you've been handed, and the arrestees give you the same absolutely useless answers that you've heard hundreds of times before. From outside the windows of the police station you hear about fifty people in front of the station singing pop songs and chanting the names of the kids you're interrogating, and you can see that the crowd gathered in front of the precinct house is handing out flowers and cookies to every single po-

liceman who walks by. Parents and lawyers of the arrested kids are also crowding the corridors of your building and tying up the phone lines with their calls, making it difficult for your colleagues to concentrate on real criminal investigations. Every three seconds, it seems, a polite retired grandparent—maybe your neighbor from the apartment across the hall—asks in a soft voice, “Why are you beating our wonderful children?” At this point it would be hard to say who’s under siege from all these arrests, Otpor! or the police.

Now imagine the scene when the people who are arrested are finally let go. Upon stepping out into the street, these kids are greeted by throngs of adoring fans shouting at the top of their lungs, hooting, whistling, and applauding. We called it the rock star reception tactic, and it worked beautifully. Before too long, being arrested made you sexy even if you were a pale and pimply nerd. The clever members of Milošević’s inner circle were able to grasp what was going on. In May 2000, we heard serious rumors that the head of Serbia’s secret police had submitted a report to the government stating that oppression was only making things worse for the regime, and that each arrested Otpor! member caused twenty more people to join the movement. But the dictator wouldn’t listen. Milošević and his wife—the one with the flower in her hair—demanded more arrests. And that was exactly what Otpor! wanted.

Since getting arrested was now the coolest thing you could do for your social life, Otpor! decided to capitalize on this marketing bonanza. We printed up three different colored

T-shirts with the Otpor! fist on them, each color representing how many times its wearer had been arrested. Within weeks, the black T-shirts—with a fist in a white circle—became the hottest fashion item in Belgrade, cooler than anything either Abercrombie or Prada could design (this was the 90's after all). That's because the black T-shirt was given to people who'd been arrested more than ten times.

All this was a tremendous boost for Otpor!, but it still got us only halfway to where we needed to be. We understood fear and the nature of oppression, we'd learned everything that we could about the mechanics of oppression, and we'd succeeded in making oppression seem like nothing more than a minor and acceptable risk, just part of the job. Now we had to develop strategies to overcome oppression. This was much harder to pull off, and nowhere, perhaps, was it done more beautifully than in Subotica.

Subotica is a midsized town in the north of Serbia, not far from our border with Hungary. Even though more than a hundred thousand people live there, the town is still very much true to its name, which literally means "little Saturday." There's much industry in Subotica, and people there work hard, but they also go to church much more than the rest of us, and spend most of their leisure time in a variety of ornate and well-preserved public buildings, such as theaters, schools, and libraries. If I weren't the sort of maniac who needed the constant hum of news and bars and people and rock concerts and action, I'd love to live somewhere like that.

And so it was in Subotica, at the height of Milošević's power, that a certain police officer ruled supreme. Let's call him Ivan.

If you've ever seen *Robocop*, you have a pretty good idea of what Ivan looked like. If you haven't, imagine a six-foot-five gentleman whose skin closely resembles well-oiled steel, whose low voice is so frightening it makes pets whimper and run away, and whose disposition is sadistic on good days and outwardly psychopathic on bad ones. When members of Otpor! got together to trade stories of who had it worst, the guys from Subotica would always win by telling how Ivan had crushed someone's wrist with his boot heel just for fun, or about how he'd smacked a young woman so hard she literally spun around in place like a cartoon character before falling to the ground in shock and pain. And as Otpor!'s demonstration against Milošević's dictatorship grew more and more heated, our friends in Subotica had a very serious question on their hands: how do you solve a problem like Ivan?

At first glance, their prospects were grim. With Ivan, knowledge did very little to dissipate the terror—he really was that awful. And he had every measure of power at his disposal. He was not only a giant, a strongman, and a brute, but he had a badge that, in a smallish town like Subotica, allowed him to do pretty much whatever he wanted. This wasn't Belgrade, where at least we could rely on independent media to make heroes out of us. This was the sticks. And since Subotica had a mixed population of Hungarians and

Croats, Ivan, a fire-breathing Serb, would go at his targets with nationalistic fervor. The man was a holy terror. Naturally, because Ivan instilled tremendous fear in nearly everyone in town, he was dearly beloved by his bosses. Guys like him were crucial to keeping the masses in check. Had they tried the same tactic of throwing parties outside the prison to support Ivan's victims, Subotica's nonviolent activists most likely would have found themselves on the wrong side of the madman's fist. There was no getting around the man. And that's when someone mentioned the beauty salon.

It was a grimy little place in a grimy little neighborhood, the sort of poorly lit, unappealing establishment only locals frequented, and even then they went there more to gossip with their friends and neighbors than for the hairdresser's very limited understanding of hair styling. One morning, however, anyone walking by the place could see, plastered to a rarely washed window, a small homemade sign. It had a picture of Ivan on it, looking like his usual menacing self, below which was a short but blunt statement: "This man is a bully." Soon posters with Ivan's ugly mug were everywhere in sleepy little Subotica. "Call this man," the posters went on to say, "and ask him *why he is beating our kids*," followed by his phone number at the precinct house.

Now, Ivan was much worse than a bully, and there were plenty of names that we could have called him. But the activists who had put up the signs didn't want to challenge Ivan's authority, call into question his unlawful and violent conduct, or make any comment whatsoever about his attitude toward

Otpor!. People could agree with Otpor! or not; that wasn't the issue. Our activists were interested in much more basic stuff. That salon where the poster first went up, they knew, was where Mrs. Ivan—who we can imagine as being only slightly smaller and less menacing than her husband—had her hair cut and blow-dried. When she walked in and saw the sign, her pleasurable routine would be interrupted by anger and shame. And when she returned home later that day, she was bound to ask her husband what was going on.

Now, Ivan could beat us all he wanted. But he was powerless against the clucking tongues of his neighbors, the friends of his wife. These weren't punkish rebels like us—they were his people. He really wanted them to like him. Before the signs popped up, each person maligned by Ivan was likely to keep his grudge private, thinking that it was only his or her personal opinion and that the rest of Subotica considered the officer to be a pillar of the community. But the poster campaign gave a public airing to what everyone in town felt deep in their hearts yet were too afraid to say out loud: that Ivan was a bully. And in the context of communal life, a bully who beats up other people's children is an outcast.

It only got worse for Ivan. The next morning, arriving at school, Ivan's children were greeted by their father's face nailed to every tree. That day, the kids were called names and mocked by their friends. Soon the other parents didn't want their children playing with Ivan's little darlings. Life at Ivan's house was getting tense. Rumors swirled that his drinking buddies were avoiding him at the local bar. Ivan was finally

paying for his brutality, and the price, he was learning, was much higher than he had expected. He was living in total social isolation. I wish I could tell you that all this public shaming started a campaign that got Ivan fired, or even that he was made to see the error of his ways and joined us at Otpor!. But I don't really know. Most likely Ivan remained a police officer until he retired years later with a full pension. Yet it hardly matters, because in the months that followed the brilliant campaign against Ivan, our friends in Subotica reported that this goon just wasn't the same man. He still showed up to arrest protestors, but now he did so with a disinterested air, just going through the motions. There was no more wrist-twisting or shin-crushing. I'm sure that in his mind, *he* was the one being oppressed.

The shaming posters, admittedly, were nothing more than a tactic, a way to neutralize a powerful foe. We've seen the same methods of social ostracism used recently during the Occupy protests in the United States, when police officers like Anthony Bologna of the NYPD and John Pike of the police force at the University of California, Davis—both of whom pepper-sprayed protestors who had been posing no threat to the police or anyone else—were singled out and publicly shamed for their actions. But because we all live in the age of social media, making oppression backfire can be used not just as a response to an unlucky encounter, the way you might do with Ivan in Subotica or Tony in New York, but as a core strategy as well, as a means to capture your message and force your opponent into a debate he otherwise never would have

had. To illustrate this point, consider the story of my favorite modern monarch, Russia's Vladimir Putin the First.

We all remember when King Putin was confronted by a band of musical provocateurs, about a dozen young women who wore ski masks and called themselves by the endlessly entertaining name Pussy Riot. Their songs were just as understated as their band's name, with their biggest hit to date being "Putin Zassal," or "Kill the Sexist." Like the Sex Pistols who came before them, they staged rowdy and theatrical public concerts. And like the Sex Pistols, Pussy Riot was in it for a bit of press. They stormed into an Orthodox cathedral in the heart of Moscow and put on an impromptu performance of their song "Punk Prayer—Mother of God, Chase Putin Away," an event that shocked nearly all of the pious Russians who saw the video of the event online. But unlike the Pistols—who always did their best to rile up the British crown but were perpetually hampered by that stiff upper lip—Pussy Riot was blessed with the perfect foil in the vindictive Putin and the egomaniacal bureaucrats who lived to win the boss's favor. Rather than shrug the whole thing off, the Russian leadership orchestrated a massive and forceful legal prosecution, with an indictment that ran to 2,800 pages and a sentence that involved years of incarceration in a penal colony.

In February 2012, before the crackdown on Pussy Riot, very few people outside of Russia's activist circle had heard of them. But in an instant, their arrest made news all over the world. The more Putin's people pushed, the more famous Pussy Riot became. The members of the band who were still

at large recorded another song, taunting Putin to make the prison sentence against their friends even longer. Even Madonna gave the girls of Pussy Riot a shout-out in her Moscow concert. There was no mistaking who was in command of the situation: by goading Putin's regime into using its power in such a vindictive way, Pussy Riot succeeded in showing the rest of the world not only that Putin was a despot but also that he was not a particularly effective one, as he was evidently failing in the most basic task of shutting down a rowdy rock band made up of young women in their twenties who were perhaps overly fond of salty language. He was like a chef who couldn't cook an egg. To a man like Putin, fond of having his picture taken with his shirt off while diving for ancient vases or wrestling tigers, there was no worse insult than to be needled by a bunch of kids named Pussy Riot.

The trick for activists looking to make oppression backfire lies in identifying situations in which people are using their authority beyond reasonable limits. There was an incident not so long ago in the lovely state of Kansas, where a group of ordinary high school students took a class trip to Topeka to speak with Governor Sam Brownback. Now, when I was a student in a Communist country during the 1980s, I didn't exactly enjoy the freedom of speech that Americans are so lucky to have, and there were no cell phones for me to play with during school outings. But you can bet that if I had been in a situation like the one Emma Sullivan found herself in that day, I probably would have done exactly what she did. That's because Emma, a high school senior with no special affection

for the governor's politics, snuck out her phone during the assembly, logged into Twitter, and sent the message "Just made mean comments at gov brownback and told him he sucked, in person #heblowsalot" to all of her sixty-five followers.

As a matter of fact, she didn't say anything of the sort during the meeting—but, as anyone who has ever been on the Internet can tell you, facts don't really matter once you're online. And when the staff at the governor's office saw Emma's comment pop up on his Twitter feed, her statement was deemed offensive enough, whether she'd spoken it aloud or only typed the words. A decision was made: she needed to be punished. Brownback's team brought Emma's tweet to the attention of her school's administration, which was equally disturbed by this display of teenage impertinence. After a tense, hour-long meeting, Emma's principal handed down her punishment: a demand that Emma write the governor an apology.

Up until that point, the only people who knew what Emma had done were a few officials on Brownback's staff, a couple of people at her school, and whichever of her followers had actually read her message. We can probably agree that what Emma did was bad—at the very least, kids shouldn't be using their cell phones during a school event. But as my friend the political expert Will Dobson likes to point out, ordinary people don't take to the barricades because things are bad. In order for your average citizen to really get engaged with an issue, he needs to think that it's unfair or wrong. A snow-

storm that shuts down an entire city is bad—but nobody would organize a protest against the weather. If it's discovered, however, that the streets in certain neighborhoods remain unplowed long after others have been cleared, simply because their residents voted against the mayor, that would strike people as unfair. And forcing a teenage girl to apologize in writing for expressing her feelings about a sitting governor—with all the power and might that such a position entails—seemed wrong.

It didn't take long for Emma's story to be all over the national news. Within days she was appearing on CNN and the other major news outlets. In all the press coverage she received, nobody seemed to care that Emma had said the governor sucked. Her bad deed wasn't the issue. Rather, what people really took offense at was how heavy-handed the adults' behavior was in this situation. Their exercise of authority had backfired. And that's because what they were doing was wrong. After all, how could the governor and a high school administration punish a young kid for exercising her constitutionally protected right to express herself? With pressure mounting on Brownback and the principal, the governor eventually apologized for the way his staff had handled the situation, the school dropped the issue, and the newly vindicated Emma gained almost seven thousand Twitter followers in the course of a week.

Whether your fight is with a school board or a brutal dictator, making oppression backfire relies on simple mental arithmetic, the kind that even a guy like me, who barely passed

high school calculus and needs his wife to figure out the tip at a restaurant, can easily do. When you think of power, remember that exercising it comes at a cost, and that your job as an activist is to make that cost rise ever upward until your opponent is no longer able to afford the charges. Nobody is omnipotent, and even the most powerful rulers on the planet still rely on the same scarce and finite resources we all need. After all, in order to do anything, the strongmen of the world still need to come up with manpower, time, and money. In that regard, they're just like everybody else.

In a very basic and ugly example, the type of oppression that Bashar al-Assad's regime relies on in Syria—the destruction of entire cities—requires not just a maniacal bloodlust but also lots of money. After all, somebody has to pay for all the tanks, planes, bullets, and soldiers' salaries so that Assad's armies can kill their own people. And this cost of oppression to Assad is compounded by the fact that each time Assad bombs a city with chemical munitions, he's destroying businesses and neighborhoods that will no longer be able to contribute to Syria's economy. Forget even the moral cost of murdering his own citizens—Assad is also wiping out his tax base. It's a grim arithmetic, and it's not very fun to calculate how many more taxpaying civilians the despot can kill before there's no one left to supply the government with income. As all dictators eventually learn, there's a price to be paid for oppression.

Oppression of the dictator variety will no doubt end up creating martyrs, and movements would be well advised to

use their fallen or imprisoned comrades as rallying points. In 2005, for example, after cops in the Maldives caused an outrage by torturing and murdering a teenager, an activist by the name of Jennifer Latheef joined in a large protest against the police. The boys in blue, naturally, were none too pleased and arrested Latheef and a few others. For her participation in the rallies, Latheef was charged, preposterously, with terrorism. But if the Maldivian authorities thought their tough stance against protestors would intimidate members of the pro-democracy movement in the island nation, they were wrong.

That's because the Maldivian activists decided to put a very high price on oppression. They wanted to hit the dictatorship right where it was most vulnerable: in the wallet. With a keen understanding that the regime was dependent on tourist dollars, Jennifer Latheef's comrades reached out to the travel industry and told the world her story. As a result, the Lonely Planet travel guidebooks included a few sentences about this brave young woman's imprisonment in all copies of their Maldives editions. Not only that, but the publishers made a note of all the resorts in the Maldives that were owned or operated by people with close ties to the dictatorship and "named and shamed" those properties in its pages. Thus Western tourists—who provided most of the milk on which the Maldivian regime suckled—were able to send a message to the authorities that the police's heavy-handed attempts at silencing dissent would cost the national treasury a substantial amount of money. And it worked. In 2006, Latheef was offered a presidential pardon, which, as a matter of principle,

she refused. For the regime, the whole affair proved to be a huge embarrassment, and the level of oppression used against the protests was seen as a colossal mistake.

We can also consider the case of Khaled Said in Egypt. Just an ordinary young man from Alexandria, Said was killed in 2010 by the police for no apparent reason in the vestibule of a residential building. A few hours later, when his shocked family was called to the morgue to collect his body, they couldn't believe what they saw. Although their beloved Khaled was lying lifeless before their eyes, the family could barely recognize their son and brother's body on the table. That's because the police had beaten him so badly that his swollen corpse was little more than a collection of black-and-blue bruises and raised red welts. Horrified, Khaled's brother snuck a photograph of the body with his cell phone, which the family later decided to upload to the Internet in order to draw attention to the case. Among those who saw and were shocked by the picture of Khaled Said was Wael Ghonim, a Google marketing executive who used the photo to start a Facebook page called "We Are All Khaled Said." Hundreds of thousands of Egyptians "liked"—what an awful use of the phrase—Ghonim's page, and the outrage stirred up by Khaled's death was one of the sparks that Mohammed Adel and the April 6 organization used to launch the Egyptian Revolution.

Because the police decided to murder him for no reason, Khaled Said went from being an anonymous kid in Alexandria to a national icon and a trigger for regional upheaval.

Much like the suicide of Mohammed Bouazizi, the Tunisian fruit vendor who was humiliated by the police and set himself on fire to protest the misery and oppression that he endured every day at the hands of the government, the murder of Khaled Said proved once again that occasionally bills do get sent to dictators for their crimes.

And trust me, there's always a way to make the bad guys pay. When the Islamic Republic of Iran banned all mention of Neda Agha-Soltan, the young woman murdered by the regime's security services during a 2009 rally for democracy in Tehran, plenty of activists were searching for ways to keep the name of their martyred comrade alive. But things didn't look good for the pro-democracy crowd. The government declared Neda's funeral off-limits to the public, and pro-regime militiamen were prowling the streets of Tehran looking to make trouble for anyone who stepped out of line. Confronted with all this, a few Iranian activists asked for my advice. After discussing the problem for a while, we realized that while the authorities could easily keep people from speaking Neda's name, it would be almost impossible for them to stop people from singing about her.

And that's because "Neda," like "Susie" or "Mary" in English, is a common enough name, and there are heaps of cheesy Farsi-language pop and folk songs about "the beauty of my darling Neda's eyes" or "how much I love it when the charming Neda smiles." All the Iranians needed to do was to cut some ringtones using these popular songs and send them around. Then whenever somebody received a phone call on a

bus or a text message in a café, everybody in the immediate vicinity would hear Neda's name and know that plenty of others out there were also thinking about her. What could the ayatollahs do? Sure, they could ban a few dozen iconic pop songs, but the further down this rabbit hole of diminishing returns the regime went, the more ridiculous they would appear to the general public.

In order to make oppression backfire, it pays to know which of the pillars of power you can use to bolster your case. In Burma, the heavy-handed reaction to Ashin Kovidā's march cost the regime the support of the crucial religious pillar. Kovidā wisely bet that the monks would eventually overcome any other opposing faction, and even though many were killed and many more arrested, the junta proved powerless against the monks because the men of the cloth won the sympathy of an intensely pious population by enduring their oppression with grace and fortitude. In Serbia, we took a very similar bet on provincial doctors: with the corrupt socialized national health system, people, particularly in small towns, depended on their local family doctors for every health-related issue imaginable. For that reason, in those regions Serbs revered their doctors, and on a practical level the regime simply couldn't touch them. All you had to do to make oppression backfire in those places was convert a handful of doctors to your cause and watch as the police struggled to follow orders on one hand and respect their beloved physicians on the other.

Believing that change can happen to you, dreaming big and starting small, having a vision of tomorrow, practicing laughtivism, and making oppression backfire: these are the foundations of every successful nonviolent movement. But like every building, the foundations aren't enough. Unless a solid structure is erected slowly and deliberately, the whole thing is likely to collapse. And the first thing you need for a house to stand united is for everyone to work in unity.

