

What Can Afghanistan and Pakistan Teach Us About Nonviolence?

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I may soon have an opportunity to meet with nonviolent activists in Afghanistan, an area of the world we falsely imagine has earned the name “graveyard of empires” purely through violent resistance. I was educated in the United States and learned in some detail about the lives of several morally repulsive halfwits who happened to have “served” in various U.S. wars, assaults, and genocides. But I was never even taught the name Badshah Khan. Were you?

Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, 1890-1988, was given the honorary title Badshah by the people of what was then the northwest frontier of India, much as his friend and ally further south, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, was given the title Mahatma. Khan was a Pashtun, or Pathan, as are many members of the Taliban today.

The imperial occupier 100 years ago was not the United States, but the British empire, and Khan raised a 100,000-strong unarmed, but uniformed and disciplined, nonviolent army to face down a vicious all-out violent assault in an isolated territory, with communication to the outside world cut off. The nonviolent Pashtun became more feared by the British than the violent. The local people became more independent, self-sustaining, and prosperous. And they understood nonviolence to be the weapon of the strong.

A traditionally violent people found continuity in a shift to nonviolence, because they continued to use the strongest weapon they could find — they had simply found a new one. “That such men,” Gandhi said of the Pashtuns, “who would have killed a human being with no more thought than they would kill a sheep or a hen should at the bidding of one man have laid down their arms and accepted nonviolence as the superior weapon sounds almost like a fairy tale.”

It was real. The people of Pakistan and Afghanistan have since, with a great deal of encouragement from outside their region, reverted in great measure to the use of violence. But that course is not unalterable. Nor is it unusual. If the United States were occupied by outside powers, it might take us longer to develop a nonviolent resistance than it has taken Afghans during the current war. We used nonviolence to end Jim Crow but used violence to end Iraq.

Khan was a devout Muslim who would always remain a devout Muslim, one who thought his religion required nonviolence. Beginning in 1910, Khan opened schools in the mountainous region he grew up in. He opened schools for boys and for girls. He taught agriculture, sanitation, self-sufficiency, and nonviolent resistance to empire. Khan learned of Gandhi in

1915 and joined him in calling for nonviolent opposition to the British in 1919, for which Khan was locked up for 6 months.

In 1920, with Khan's support, the Indian National Congress resolved to nonviolently achieve self-rule. Khan continued building schools and going to jail for it. If you've ever seen a photo of Gandhi and Khan, the latter appears a giant towering over the Mahatma. A British deputy commissioner expressed disbelief in Khan's professed nonviolence, and Khan credited Gandhi. Asked what he would have done if not for Gandhi, Khan placed his gigantic hands around two bars of his jail cell and slowly pulled them apart. "That is what I would have done to you," he said. He was sentenced to 3 more years in prison.

When released in 1924, Khan found his movement grown and inspired by his refusal to cooperate with the British. After a pilgrimage to Mecca, Khan formed a new organization, launched a journal in his language, Pushto, encouraged women to participate, continued touring and teaching in the Frontier, and went to meet Gandhi. By 1930 Khan had created his nonviolent volunteer army, the Khudai Khidmatgars, who swore an oath to serve humanity in the name of God and refrain from violence and revenge. Khan continued to be arrested and imprisoned. A nonviolent general strike faced violence but did not join it. Gene Sharp describes a scene recently re-created in Cairo, Egypt:

"When those in front fell down wounded by the shots, those behind came forward with their breasts bared and exposed themselves to the fire, so much so that some people got as many as 21 bullet wounds in their bodies, and all the people stood their ground without getting into a panic."

This continued for six hours. When an elite military unit called the Garhwal Rifles was ordered to fire on an unarmed crowd, its members refused and were themselves court-martialed and sent to prison.

The Frontier was made a province with an indigenous minister at the head of the government. The British still threatened to arrest Khan, but Gandhi threatened to launch a new nonviolent campaign if they did. Khan told the British what Afghans or Pakistanis might tell the United States and NATO today: If "half the money spent in ruination and the killing of tribesmen" were used to develop cottage industries and schools, the British would not need to fear Pathans.

In 1931 the British arrested Khan and Gandhi and escalated their brutality. In 1934 Khan was released but banned from the Frontier. He went to live with Gandhi, to organize the Muslims in Bengal, and to spread the word in Bombay of what his people had been doing to resist the British in the Northwest. In 1937, elections of legislative councils were held for the first time, and Khan's brother was elected prime minister of the Frontier. His first act was to remove the ban on his brother, who immediately returned and resumed his work. The next year, Gandhi visited twice.

Khan and Gandhi left the Indian National Congress rather than support possible violent participation in World War II, returning to it only when that idea was dropped.

Khan and his army marched into British government offices carrying Congress flags and chanting anti-British slogans. Khan and 50 nonviolent soldiers were beaten by police with sticks, breaking two of his ribs. With Gandhi and Khan both imprisoned again, India turned violent, but the Frontier continued with nonviolent resistance. Supporters asked Khan, in

prison, if they could cut British communications lines without hurting anyone, and he replied that they could if they turned themselves into the police right afterwards.

By 1945 Winston Churchill had retired, a new British government promised freedom for India, and political prisoners were released. But Gandhi and Khan had to go to Bengal to calm an outbreak of Hindu-Muslim violence. A primarily nonviolent, and even amicable, victory over empire came in 1947, with independence from the British. That accomplishment cannot be overstated.

But with independence in 1947 came the division of Pakistan from India, which Gandhi and Khan opposed. Gandhi planned a walk to the Frontier but was murdered by a Hindu who viewed him as pro-Muslim. While the Frontier had elected officials from the ranks of Khan's army, Pakistan was run by the Muslim league. In 1948, Khan was imprisoned for 7 years for being pro-Hindu.

During the first 30 years of Pakistan's existence, Khan spent 15 in prison. When free, he pushed for democracy and an independent Pashtun province. In 1956 he and three other leaders formed a People's Party, which functioned as the major opposition party during the 1960s and 1970s. When Khan died in 1988, a new empire was dying in Afghanistan, the Soviet Union. Despite heavy fighting, both sides in that Afghan war declared a ceasefire for Khan's funeral and burial.

Khan, like Gandhi, taught the elimination of anger and fear, and the dominance of strength, love, and courage. Khan opposed passivity, and advocated fighting with the most powerful weapon available: nonviolence. He achieved much for his people, despite the set-back of religious division and the revival of violence. And, as people learn from those who have gone before, it is entirely possible that most of what Khan achieved has yet to happen. In fact, we are all in a lot of trouble if that does not prove true. Unless ignoring and bombing Libya, for example, are not the only two conceivable options, violence will be the end of us all.

Please read "Nonviolent Soldier of Islam: Badshah Khan, A Man to Match His Mountains" by Eknath Easwaran.

Please visit <http://ourjourneytosmile.com>

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