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Digital Resistance for Clean Politicians: Brazil

A military coup in 1964 inflicted over two decades of impunity and human rights abuses on the people of Brazil. In 1980, Catholic clergy informed by liberation theology began catalyzing civic dissent and a unified opposition to the regime.¹ Amid economic deterioration and repression, public calls to end the dictatorship grew, culminating in the broad-based 1983 Diretas Já (direct elections now) movement demanding direct presidential elections.² As millions of citizens took part in nonviolent mobilizations across the country, fissures grew within the junta.³ Although the regime blocked a bill amending the constitution to allow direct elections of the president and vice president, Tancredo Neves, a civilian candidate, ran for the office of president. Defectors in the Electoral College sided with him and the political opposition, thereby ending military rule.⁴ Neves died before taking office. His vice president, Jose Sarney, a defector from ARENA, the military's political party, was sworn in as president.⁵ For many Brazilians, full democracy only came in 1989, when the citizens directly elected Fernando Collor de Mello. His victory was soon followed by infamy. Following mass demonstrations, in 1992 he was impeached for corruption, foreshadowing the political venality that eventually spurred the bottom-up Ficha Limpa (clean slate or clean record) social movement, the focus of this chapter.⁶

Context

Fast-forward two decades. Brazil is an emerging economic powerhouse, ranked the eighth-largest in the world.⁷ But it is still beset with disparity

and corruption. Brazil is also rated the seventeenth-most unequal country in the world.⁸ A 2010 study by the Federation of Industries of the State of São Paulo (FIESP) reported that corruption costs Brazil approximately US\$39 billion (BRL 69 billion) a year, and per capita income would be 15.5 percent higher without this malfeasance.⁹ Political corruption is endemic, and cynicism abounds—so much so that there is a common expression in Brazil, “*Rouba, mas faz*” (He steals, but he gets things done).¹⁰ According to the watchdog website *Congresso em Foco*, in 2010, 29 percent of legislators in the Chamber of Deputies of Congress (147 out of 513) and 26 percent of senators (21 out of 81) either faced criminal charges in the Supreme Court or were under investigation. As well, many cases lapsed before they would be heard.¹¹ Some members—how many is not known—have been convicted in lower courts. The majority of wrongdoing involves stealing public money or violating campaign finance laws.¹² Poverty and graft interact in the political process, as politicians convicted of crimes continue getting elected through vote buying.¹³ Finally, while a law on the books stipulated that those convicted would face impeachment and be prohibited from running again for three years, the few who were exposed in scandals avoided punishment by preemptively resigning, enabling them to stand again in the next elections.¹⁴

In 2010, twenty-five years after the generals were pushed away, the *Ficha Limpa* movement wielded people power once again—this time to root out graft, abuse, and unaccountability in the electoral system, and to restore legitimacy to Brazil’s hard-won democracy.

The Beginning

Previous attempts to pass political reform bills failed in the Brazilian Congress. But in April 2008, forty-four civil society organizations (CSOs) joined together in a nonpartisan coalition called the Movement Against Electoral Corruption (MCCE). It included the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil (CNBB); grassroots organizations linked to the Catholic Church; unions, the Brazilian Bar Association (OAB), and other professional groups—for example, nursing, accounting, and biology organizations; and the Brazilian Justice and Peace Commission (CBJP). Their objective was simple yet sweeping: to prevent individuals with criminal backgrounds from running for elected office at all levels of government.¹⁵ Marcus Faver, a judge who in the past had tried to hinder candidates with criminal records from seeking public office, proposed using a little-known legal instrument in the 1988 Constitution—

the Popular Initiative (Article 61, Paragraph 2), which allows citizens to submit bills to Congress.¹⁶ Strict conditions for eligibility apply: the collection of handwritten, documented signatures from a minimum of 1 percent of the electorate from no fewer than five different states, in which the number of signatures from each state total at least 0.3 percent of the constituents.¹⁷ Only then can the legislation be submitted to the Congress, where it is reviewed by relevant committees and must pass in both the Chamber of Deputies and Senate. Finally, should these hurdles be cleared, the law is presented to the president, who can either accept it or veto it. The MCCE's vision was twofold: to clean up Brazilian politics and to change cultural attitudes about corruption and vote buying, by directly involving the population in the solution.¹⁸ The movement was launched with the slogan, "A vote has no price, it has consequences" (*Voto nao tem preco, tem consequencias*).¹⁹

The original legislation was drafted by a group of lawyers in Rio de Janeiro. Members of the Brazilian Bar Association certified its constitutionality. Candidates would be rendered ineligible to take office if they have been convicted of the following crimes by more than one judge: misuse of public funds, drug trafficking, rape, murder, or racism. Furthermore, the penalty for politicians accused of such wrongdoing was toughened; they would be barred from public office for eight years. Finally, the legislation was designed to prevent politicians from using constitutional loopholes such as preemptive resignation to avoid prosecution and run again.²⁰ The name *Ficha Limpa* (clean slate or clean record) was the inspiration of Marlon Reis, a judge who was one of the movement's leaders.²¹

At the outset, few were optimistic that the MCCE could collect so many signatures. The movement, through the vast networks of its CSO members and the Catholic Church, including legions of volunteers, systematically built mobilizing capacity and engaged citizens through trainings, grassroots meetings, dissemination of information about *Ficha Limpa*, debates, public lectures in churches and schools and at NGOs, and street actions.²² The support of the Catholic Church proved to be vital. Its social authority was a counterweight to the institutional authority of the Congress, and its reach extended throughout the country, particularly in rural and more remote areas. Information and communication technologies (ICT) were also used extensively to communicate, debate, and exchange information.²³ As importantly, the MCCE cultivated allies within the Congress—politicians supportive of *Ficha Limpa* who would later prove to be instrumental eyes and ears for a digital resistance campaign.²⁴

In less than one and a half years, the MCCE surpassed the required 1.3 million signatures. On September 29, 2009, the Ficha Limpa bill, together with 1,604,794 handwritten signatures, was submitted to the Congress.²⁵ The movement made history, and the first victory was won.

Avaaz, Digital Resistance, and a Flying Cow

The MCCE's leaders understood that without massive civic mobilization, it was unlikely that Ficha Limpa would ever be passed. Opposition to it was fierce; once enacted, the bill would disqualify close to one-third of the entire Congress from serving. Legislators could also try to weaken it and use myriad stalling techniques to indirectly quash it, such as keeping the bill under review in committees for years. One politician commented, "It is easier for a cow to fly than this initiative to get approved in Brazil" (*É mais fácil uma vaca voar do que esse projeto ser aprovado no Brasil*).²⁶

The MCCE had already been in contact with Avaaz, a worldwide digital movement with the goal of bringing "people-powered politics to decision-making everywhere."²⁷ Now, at this critical juncture, the groups decided to join forces.²⁸ According to Graziela Tanaka—at the time an Avaaz campaigner based in Brazil—Ficha Limpa was an ideal anticorruption initiative. "It had a clear goal, clear input, it was easy to cut to the issue, and was something bold that people would want to join."

Strategies

Facing an uphill battle with the Congress, Avaaz identified three strategies for its overall campaign. In order to create political will for the legislation to be passed, it had to turn Ficha Limpa into an issue that no one could dare oppose. Their approach was to use sustained, overwhelming public pressure on the one hand and positive media attention on the other, which in turn would also generate pressure. Second, building support—genuine or pragmatic—from within the Congress during the legislative process was also essential, in order to overcome efforts to thwart and delay the bill's passage. "When thinking of campaign strategy, you need to think of how there's a two-way benefit for people in power," said Tanaka.

The upcoming October 2010 general elections became the vehicle for this interchange. Once the campaign began to reach a critical mass and go viral, backing for the bill grew as politicians grasped the political advantages of coming out in favor of it even before a vote. Finally,

Avaaz sought to reinforce the movement's discourse and legitimacy that the MCCE had cultivated: the struggle was led and owned by regular citizens, who—initially through the documented, handwritten signatures, and now through mass digital and nondigital actions—were demanding that their elected representatives uphold Brazilian democracy by carrying out the people's will.

Recruitment

Avaaz campaigner Tanaka credits the MCCE with having done the hard part—building a national civic alliance, activating people on the ground, developing relationships with honest politicians and other powerholders, and cultivating the media. When Avaaz joined the struggle, citizens had already reached the point of wanting to participate. Avaaz's strategy was to tap and multiply this people power by adapting to the Brazilian context its online model of recruitment and mobilization. This consisted of sending out regular alerts with specific calls for action, and asking recipients to spread the alerts throughout their social networks—via Twitter, Facebook, Orkut (another social networking site), and “old-fashioned email”—to the extent that sharing becomes exponential and seemingly takes on a life of its own. That is, it goes viral. “It's the power of people spreading and owning the campaign,” Tanaka explained.

At the outset of the campaign Avaaz had 130,000 members in Brazil. By April 2010 this number had grown to 650,000 and then climbed to 700,000, most of whom were multipliers, circulating Avaaz alerts to their social networks. While not all were equally active, Avaaz has found that the longer a person stays on the alert list, the more active that person becomes. Tanaka reports that they had no challenges maintaining member interest in *Ficha Limpa* and, more generally, in corruption. “People were disillusioned with the political system and because the same politicians always had power.” It was seen as another form of *coronelismo*, a term referring to big landowners associated with rural elite dominance and vote buying. “People wanted to see corrupt politicians out of elections,” she added.

“Sign to End Corruption”

Avaaz sought to build people power momentum to push the *Ficha Limpa* bill through the entire legislative process, all the way to a final vote in the Chamber of Deputies and Senate, ratification by the president, and a Supreme Court vote over the constitutionality and validity of the law.²⁹

The pace of the online campaign picked up in February 2010, when the bill began winding its way through congressional committees. Building upon the MCCE's signature drive to submit the bill, Avaaz launched an online petition with the goal of obtaining 2 million signers, although Tanaka acknowledged that the total seemed "far off" at the outset.

The petition went viral, which Avaaz used to garner media coverage. Media interest was so great that Ficha Limpa was landing on the front pages of the biggest newspapers on a weekly basis, reported Tanaka. This, in turn, piqued public interest in the movement, the bill itself, and the legislative process—driving more and more citizens to Avaaz, which then reaped further media attention. The interplay between the campaign and the media resulted in an ever-increasing, mutually reinforcing cycle of attention and pressure. By May 3, 2010, the petition reached the 2-million mark.³⁰

Minicampaigns

From approximately February through April 2010 Tanaka coordinated one to two such rapid-response campaigns almost every week. The MCCE tracked the movement of Ficha Limpa through committees in real time, thanks to congressional allies it had cultivated over the previous two years. These legislators would inform the MCCE—day by day, sometimes even hour by hour—about what was going on, what was being said, who was opposed, who was undecided, who was supportive, and so on. In turn, the MCCE conveyed this information immediately to Avaaz, which was able to send out action alerts quickly with status updates to hundreds of thousands of members to take action, including

- E-mailing messages to specific legislators straight from Avaaz's website.
- Directly phoning the offices of targeted politicians involved in the Ficha Limpa committee, which broke new people power ground in Brazil, as literally thousands of citizens flooded offices with calls. People were asked to register their call through a live chat tool, which Avaaz used to tally numbers.
- Signing the e-petition, and tweeting and posting the alerts to Facebook and Orkut.

Through the emails and phone calls, citizens conveyed collective demands to individual lawmakers at critical junctures in the legislative process. Avaaz's time-sensitive asks were directed at committee mem-

bers who did not publicly disclose their opposition but behind the scenes were using watering-down and delaying tactics. “We showed them that we had a presence online and a real presence,” said Tanaka.

Additional Tactics

In conjunction with Avaaz’s campaign, the MCCE created a video on increasing social action that was used to create political awareness in civil society.³¹ Another tactic was the prominent use of online information feeds to generate excitement among citizens as well as media interest and coverage. This included tweets and e-petition names appearing on the Avaaz website in real time. Finally, on May 4, 2010—the day the Chamber of Deputies was scheduled to vote on Ficha Limpa—Avaaz organized a rally at the National Congress. Rich with symbolism and visuals that garnered extensive national media coverage, Avaaz submitted a complete list of the names of the 2 million citizens who signed the e-petition in favor of the bill. Supporters, including some politicians, engaged in street theatre, humorously cleaning the site by washing the steps with pails of water and brooms.

Communications and Media

The MCCE’s core message, reinforced by Avaaz, was that Ficha Limpa was a Popular Initiative bill—demanded, initiated, and driven forward by the Brazilian people. What claimed media attention during the online campaign was the movement’s legitimacy and numbers, and the novelty of digital resistance. After the legislation was successfully submitted to Congress, Tanaka reported that they did not receive much attention from journalists at first. “It was only when we got close to a million e-signatures and the mass calls to congressmen started that we became interesting to them.” Positive media coverage surged as Ficha Limpa became one of the top-trending Twitter topics. According to Tanaka, journalists and congressional representatives later voted Ficha Limpa the most important political issue of 2010.

Backfire

By March, Congress started to block messages that citizens were sending from the Avaaz website tool. Avaaz shifted gears straightaway. It used alternative email addresses, switched servers, and rallied people to send messages from their own accounts. In any case, the blocks went into effect after the first thousands of emails reached the designated inbox, so many emails still made it through. The congressional move backfired, perceived as an affront to citizens. Rather than stymieing them, it

spurred higher levels of commitment and action. Moreover, the MCCE publicized the developments to the media, gaining valuable coverage.

Campaign Attributes

Organization and Coordination

Avaaz defies definitions. It is charting a new form of citizen engagement, civil resistance, and people power that transcends national borders and the virtual-physical divide. Although Avaaz is not a conventional international nongovernmental organization (INGO) or CSO with fixed headquarters, it has a hierarchical structure for decisionmaking. Nor is it a regular social movement where the leadership and strategists operate out of a physical space and interactions both among core activists and with citizens occur largely in the real world. Its stated mission is to “organize citizens of all nations to close the gap between the world we have and the world most people everywhere want.”³² Avaaz’s overriding objective is to empower “millions of people from all walks of life to take action on pressing global, regional and national issues, from corruption and poverty to conflict and climate change.”³³

Consisting of a small core team working virtually from points around the world, meeting occasionally in person at strategy and planning sessions, Avaaz is now completely member-funded. Tanaka, the digital group’s only campaigner in Brazil, interacted remotely with the core leadership. For Ficha Limpa, she regularly coordinated with one of the leaders of the movement, Judge Marlon Reis. At the time, it was a unique partnership for Avaaz, and Tanaka believes it was effective, due in part to the good collaborative process established with the MCCE.

Tactical Planning and Sequencing

Digital resistance lets a movement see in real time how people react to online calls for action by their “click rate,” and how they in turn spread appeals to others. Such monitoring allows the campaign to measure public interest; quickly assess and hone strategies, tactics, and messaging; and create new actions and media outreach efforts; for example, Avaaz created an online Twitter button and focused strongly on Twitter after noticing that the petition started to go viral through it. This approach had never been undertaken before. Avaaz also coordinated public pressure with media outreach coordinated by the MCCE. “So the Members of Congress got hit by the media and our pressure,” explained Tanaka.

Breaking Down Barriers

The Avaaz action-alerts empowered citizens to become engaged in the legislative process, all the way down to the committee level, and communicate with lawmakers by providing contact information as well as tips about what to say and how to interact with congressional staff. These exchanges started to break down the entrenched boundaries between the ruling elites and regular people. “In a way,” reflected Tanaka, “the campaign was strengthening the democratic process because Members of Congress weren’t used to getting calls from voters, and voters were not used to following the legislative process, and calling and making demands of Members.”

Unity

The MCCE and Avaaz both strategically cultivated unity of goals and people—in their messaging and tactics. The Popular Initiative bill was by nature grassroots and dependent on citizens’ sharing Ficha Limpa’s objectives and translating support into tangible actions, first and foremost, through handwritten signatures with voter identification. Tanaka recounted that Avaaz’s action alerts always contained a movement-building message that “reinforced that people were a part of something bigger, that the campaign’s strength depended on how far people spread the messages, and that it depended on us to keep the pressure and show Congressmen we were watching them,” she added. The live chat tool also built unity; Tanaka explained that people could share messages of encouragement as well as excitement for the campaign, showing that this movement was a truly collective power.

Outcomes

Ficha Limpa Passage

The law was ratified by a majority in the Chamber of Deputies on May 4 and unanimously in the Senate on May 19. It was subsequently approved by then-president Luis Ignacio da Silva on June 4, 2010. One of the MCCE leaders, Daniel Seidel, executive director of the Brazilian Commission for Justice and Peace, proclaimed, “I say, the cow flew!”³⁴

Soon after this people power triumph, corrupt interests launched efforts to undermine the new law, resulting in a confusing application for the 2010 elections and ongoing legal battles all the way to the Supreme Court by candidates who won their seats but were ruled ineligible to take office by lower electoral courts. Avaaz launched a digital resis-

tance, powered by citizens, during the Ficha Limpa vote in the Supreme Court.

On March 23, 2011, the Supreme Court issued a decision that Ficha Limpa could not be applied to the 2010 elections. Consequently, those candidates who won but were barred from taking office would now be eligible to claim their seats.³⁵ On February 16, 2012, the Supreme Court ruled that Ficha Limpa was constitutional and would be enforced in the October municipal elections that year.³⁶

Cleaning Up the Corrupt

In September 2012, regional election courts banned 317 mayoral candidates from running in the municipal elections.³⁷ Some politicians are reported to have stepped down due to public pressure, even before the bill was ratified. Joselito Canto, who was under investigation for suspected involvement in at least thirty transgressions involving embezzlement of public funds, resigned from office. He tweeted, “Today I announce the end of my political career. Ficha Limpa, mix-ups in the ALEP [Legislative Assembly of Paraná]. Enough! I stopped.”³⁸ In addition, a local campaign in the state of Rio de Janeiro heralded the unanimous passing of a Ficha Limpa law in the State Legislative Assembly.³⁹

The MCCE is still making strides. It launched an electoral reform campaign and wants to initiate new grassroots efforts targeting graft in the health and law enforcement systems, thereby addressing forms of corruption that are not only widespread but particularly harmful to citizens in their everyday lives. The MCCE is also deliberating on how to initiate a broader societal debate about reforming the country’s political system.⁴⁰

Bottom-Up Democracy

The Ficha Limpa movement has changed the way Brazilians view themselves, their democracy, and their capacity to make their collective voice heard. “What’s happening now is part of this new democratic process,” reflected Tanaka. “People are excited that they can exercise their civic duty, that they can be engaged with their democracy.” This shift in public consciousness—from cynicism and apathy to outrage and empowerment—is reflected in a variety of ways:

Both Avaaz and the MCCE detect a fresh level of *political engagement* in the society. According to Tanaka, “People are paying more attention to their democratic system. They know who is their congressman, who are the candidates, and they want to make sure that those who commit crimes are remembered at election time.” In a survey conducted

a week after the October 2010 presidential elections, 73 percent out of a 1,300-person sample stated they took Ficha Limpa into consideration when choosing a candidate.⁴¹ Seventy percent of candidates accused of Ficha Limpa violations lost their elections.⁴² As well, websites and blogs are focusing on electoral democracy, including the MCCE's own site and the Movimento Voto Consciente, which focuses on the Legislative Assembly of São Paulo.⁴³

Digital engagement has increased. Between 2009 and 2011 Brazil's Facebook use grew by a factor of 38 (3,832 percent).⁴⁴ During the first quarter of 2011, the country ranked third in the world for Twitter reach at 23.7 percent of the population.⁴⁵ As of November 1, 2011, of the 10 million people who made up Avaaz globally, Brazil had the largest community, with over 1.2 million members. The next biggest was France, with almost 1.1 million members, while the United States had under 789,000 members.⁴⁶ Since the Ficha Limpa movement, digital activism is now expanding to remote areas, allowing people to become part of political and social activism even when they cannot physically connect to groups. According to Tanaka, during 2011, more protests were organized through social media, including Facebook, than ever before.

The Ficha Limpa movement changed Brazil's culture of *citizen advocacy* from a traditional reliance on civil society specialists to mass popular pressure. In addition to organized civic action to fight corruption, regular people are taking their own initiative. "People now want things to do," observed Tanaka. They use Facebook and Twitter for political purposes—to post their reactions to political events and developments, to find out about campaigns and actions, and to link up over shared concerns. For instance, Mapa Colaborativo da Corrupcao do Brasil is an online, interactive, open-access corruption map created by Rachel Diniz, a journalist and filmmaker. The map is designed to be built by citizens, who can post corruption cases that have been documented in the press in their localities or nationally. Diniz also connected to the Ficha Limpa community by sharing information and links on its Facebook wall, which elicited comments.⁴⁷

Rather than peter out, people power pressure has continued, over both local corruption and political machinations to overturn Ficha Limpa. The mobilizations are uniting citizens from different walks of life and civic organizations, and are identifying linkages between corruption, poverty, violence, and democracy. At the end of May 2010 in Natal, students organized two rallies through Twitter over alleged mayoral corruption and mismanagement. Their actions morphed into an occupation and protest camp inside the city council on June 7. According

to a news report, the group presented a series of demands, and after negotiations, twenty-one councilors signed an agreement and the occupation was dismantled. That same month, protests were launched in thirteen cities in Paraná over corruption, including embezzlement of public money in the state Legislative Assembly. A participant said, “What really works is the involvement of society. If [society] doesn’t make a demand, politicians will keep on doing what they want.”⁴⁸ Finally, a digital civic campaign in the state of Rio pressured the state legislature to pass its own *Ficha Limpa* bill.⁴⁹ The unanimous vote was held in November 2011.

When *Ficha Limpa* was being challenged by appeals submitted to the Supreme Court, and scandals rocked President Dilma Rousseff’s cabinet, thousands of people took part in nonviolent actions during autumn 2011, organized through social media rather than by political parties or unions. On September 7, Brazil’s Independence Day, protests were held in the capital, Brasília, and twenty other cities. They were supported by the country’s College of Lawyers, the Brazilian Press Association, and the National Bishops Conference, which jointly issued a statement: “Corruption in our country is a pandemic which threatens the credibility of institutions and the entire democratic system.”⁵⁰

Several days later, on September 19, Rio for Peace, a local CSO, surprised residents with a visual dramatization on the famous Copacabana beach; 594 brooms, representing the members of the Congress, were planted in the sand. “The purpose of our initiative is to make people aware of the extent of rampant corruption and to demand greater transparency in the management of public funds, since the deviation of funds is responsible for the death of thousands of Brazilians,” said Antonio Carlos Costa, a social activist, theologian, and the group’s founder.⁵¹ Since June 2013, Brazil is regularly making international headlines as mass mobilizations over government spending priorities, public service cuts, and corruption are pressuring powerholders.⁵² Avaaz launched another grassroots digital campaign to pass legislation, sitting in the Congress since 2006, to end the dubious practice of “secret voting.” Digital resistance involving the largest online petition in Brazilian history (1.6 million names) and a nude protest pressured lawmakers in the Chamber of Deputies, who unanimously voted in its favor in early September 2013.⁵³ The legislation then headed to the Senate. While it was up for vote, Avaaz reported, “Right now, senators’ telephones are ringing off the hook as Avaaz members across Brazil use our online calling tool to directly tell them to stop this corruption—experts say a win is likely in days!”⁵⁴ A partial victory finally came on November 26,

2013, when the Senate approved a weakened version of the House legislation. Avaaz vowed to continue the struggle.⁵⁵

Changing Powerholder Culture

Tanaka and MCCE activists assert that the culture of impunity among powerholders is changing in Brazil. “Today we have a national discussion about our politics thanks to this law, and the voter is analyzing the quality of candidates based on new parameters to see if the candidate has the requirements to represent him or not,” said Luciano Santos, a lawyer with the MCCE.⁵⁶ “The language of Ficha Limpa is being incorporated into the political discourse, and candidates are now trying to show voters that they aren’t corrupt,” reported Tanaka. Political elites of differing ideologies are contending they must alter their ways. Around the center, Alvaro Dias (Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira, Paraná) predicts changes will be a “natural consequence” of Ficha Limpa. On the right, Antonio Carlos Jr. (Democratas, Bahia state), said that parties will become more careful about candidate selection and will need to reeducate members and draft ethical codes.⁵⁷ Some political parties, such as the leftist Partido Socialismo e Liberdade, have even taken the step of implementing the “clean record” criteria into their ranks. As with the case of the Citizens Alliance for the General Elections (CAGE) 2000 in South Korea, in the long run, this dynamic may prove to be as significant as the actual legislation—by stimulating the internalization of public standards of integrity and accountability among institutions, the political system, and powerholders in society.

Transnational Inspiration

Other countries and the international community are looking at Ficha Limpa as a model for new anticorruption legislation. According to Brazilian officials, some civic actors in Bolivia are observing its implementation as they want to strengthen a similar but weaker law in their country.⁵⁸ Avaaz adapted the “Clean Record” concept to the 2011 general elections in Spain. Partnering with the Indignados movement, Avaaz launched an online and offline campaign demanding that political parties drop from their lists for the local and regional elections candidates indicted or convicted of serious crimes and offenses, and to select individuals “with a well-known track record of responsible public service.”⁵⁹ “Theatrical stunts” were combined with an online petition that was short of the 125,000-person target (108,524 signatures).⁶⁰ They triggered a public debate, but their immediate demands went unheeded, perhaps a reflection of its short-lived and much, much smaller scale of mobilization than the strategic, well-organized, and planned Ficha Limpa movement.

Case Analysis

Institutionalizing Accountability

Political corruption is a common target of bottom-up civic initiatives, from CAGE 2000, the Dosta! youth movement in Bosnia-Herzegovina (see Chapter 10), and the DHP (Dejemos de Hacernos Pendejos) movement in Mexico (see Chapter 10). Ficha Limpa brings a new strategy to the struggle. Rather than pressure political parties to drop corrupt candidates or inform voters about them during elections, both of which require recurrent civic campaigns, a legal mechanism was created to institutionalize exclusion from the political process—hence, to gain accountability for malfeasance. One could argue that Ficha Limpa cannot prevent all corruptors from seeking public office. Some have not been caught and tried by more than one judge, or they can get associates to run in their place, as did Joaquim Roriz, whose wife, Weslian Roriz, stepped in when he was blocked in the 2010 race.⁶¹ However, it fundamentally disrupts the corrupt status quo, creates incentives for integrity, supports—and, one could argue, even rewards—honest politicians, and tackles impunity without having to directly target each and every corruptor.

Tipping Points

At the moment when enough citizens say “this is enough,” digital resistance can provide an alternative recruitment method that quickly channels people’s anger toward mitigating the injustice and oppression via tangible objectives and demands, and it can tap into their desire to act through multiple online and real-world nonviolent tactics. Avaaz tries to identify “tipping point moments” in struggles, when powerholders are faced with a monumental choice and “a massive public outcry can suddenly make all the difference.”⁶² It sees these instances as briefly open windows of both crisis and strategic opportunity, as “crucial decisions go one way or another depending on leaders’ perceptions of the political consequences of each option.”⁶³

For Avaaz, tipping points go hand in hand with a “good ask,” a demand that Tanaka characterized as “ambitious and inspiring enough for people to take action.” A good ask has the dual strategic function of encapsulating tangible requests for powerholders while appealing to or resonating with citizens. Online rapid-response alerts issued at key junctures conveyed a sense of urgency that enhanced unity, ownership in the struggle, and excitement to be involved. For instance, a message sent prior to the vote on Ficha Limpa declared, “Dear Brazilian Parlia-

mentarians, We urge you to support the Clean Record Law Proposal (PLP 518/2009). We expect you to vote for clean elections, in which political candidates who have been convicted of serious crimes such as murder and mismanagement of public funds are ineligible for office. Our votes in October will depend on your actions in this critical moment for Brazilian politics.”⁶⁴

From Minicampaigns to Going Viral

Through information and communication technologies (ICT), the process of civil resistance can be broken down into rapid-response minicampaigns, sometimes on a daily basis. These smaller campaigns can quickly create a sense of momentum among citizens, provide positive reinforcement for taking action, and produce modest, incremental victories.

The Ficha Limpa movement—on the ground and online—demonstrated how thousands of individual actions, even of a modest nature, can be combined into a powerful collective force. In this respect, Avaaz’s online members can be considered the equivalent of on-the-ground movement activists, taking action and engaging fellow citizens in a variety of nonviolent tactics that generate people power. Just as the MCCE gained numbers and strength through the networks of the forty-four civic organizations in the coalition, Avaaz’s ever-growing number of Brazilian members tapped into their own social networks to involve others. The difference was in magnitude. “The effectiveness of online campaigning is that you can reach a scale where you are not interacting with individuals but with hundreds of thousands of people who don’t expect personal interaction but are ready to act upon receiving alerts,” explained Tanaka.

Avaaz’s online campaign was the largest in Brazil’s history, with an unparalleled scale of mobilization, including the petition with 2 million signatures, 500,000 online actions, and tens of thousands of phone calls to legislators.⁶⁵ Together with the MCCE’s efforts, the Ficha Limpa movement took on an air of people power omnipresence. “Congressmen couldn’t run away from it,” said Tanaka. “They were constantly hearing about Ficha Limpa from the media, email messages, and phone calls from citizens in the thousands.” It was the country’s third-top-trending topic in 2010. An MCCE poll conducted prior to the 2010 general elections found that 85 percent of respondents supported the legislation—indicating a profound shift away from public cynicism and complacency with the corrupt status quo to the demand for clean, accountable governance. Avaaz also received anecdotal feedback from politicians. Tanaka recounted that upon meeting legislators, they would make such

comments as, “Oh, so you’re the group behind all those emails!” Together with the MCCE’s efforts, this “created the political will for the legislation to be passed,” she said.

Partnerships

Avaaz strategically assessed both its own and the MCCE’s strengths and limitations. Each brought what the other generally lacked: Avaaz had a track record of rapid response and scaling-up mobilization, while the MCCE excelled in winning allies from within the corrupt system, intelligence gathering, grassroots organizing and action, and media outreach and communications. Avaaz didn’t want to duplicate the MCCE’s efforts and decided not to get involved until it could add value to the struggle. That point came when the Ficha Limpa bill was introduced to Congress. Digital resistance could generate swift, even instantaneous pressure, when timing was absolutely critical and it wasn’t possible to mobilize people quickly on the ground.

Digital resistance blurs the boundaries between internal and external actors. Although Avaaz is a transnational network with global campaigns, it also launches national campaigns within countries. In Brazil, Avaaz’s campaigner Tanaka set the civic initiative in motion and coordinated with the MCCE. She developed campaign strategy and planning along with input from Avaaz’s global team.

Beyond the Online-Offline Dichotomy

Avaaz’s Ficha Limpa campaign demonstrates that the debates about digital versus real-world activism and social change are flawed. First, they tend to conflate the medium (digital realm) with tools (ICT such as Twitter, Facebook, SMS, emails, blogs, and website links) and the non-violent tactics derived from ICT tools (for example, viral messaging and e-petitions). This leads to confusion about what is actually being debated; the terms “Internet,” “social media,” and “social media tools” are often used interchangeably. But disputing the value and impact (or lack thereof) of the digital sphere is different from debating the value and impact (or lack thereof) of social media tools, which are a subset of ICT tools in general.⁶⁶

Second, the debate tends to be framed through absolute questions: for example, “Do social media make protests possible?” or “Have the new tools of social media reinvented social activism?” or “Do social media lead to democracy?” Such queries are based on a faulty assumption—that there are direct, linear relationships between the realm of struggle (digital) and tools (ICTs such as social media) on the one hand,

and outcomes (democracy, freedom, accountability, justice) on the other hand. In the field of civil resistance, the overwhelming conclusion among scholars and activists is that there is no formula or consistent matching up of objectives, strategies, tactics, and outcomes. Sociologist Lee Smithey notes that civil resistance takes place on a cultural, social, political, and economic landscape.⁶⁷

A more fruitful line of inquiry involves the examination of power relations, strategies, tactical choices, and people power dynamics in the digital sphere. For example, the above questions can be reframed as follows: How does the digital sphere expand the struggle arena? How do digital tactics (derived from ICT/social media tools) wield people power? In what ways are ICT/social media tools changing social activism and civil resistance? How does digital resistance shift power equations that can lead to political, economic, and social change?

Third, the boundaries between the online and offline worlds are blurring. As the Ficha Limpa movement demonstrated, on-the-ground and online civil resistance shared the same grievances, objectives, and demands, while creating synergies. Moreover, tactics can no longer be neatly categorized as digital versus real-world; they can actually combine both realms. A case in point is when thousands of citizens received an alert via ICTs asking them to phone a lawmaker's office to voice a concerted demand regarding Ficha Limpa (a daunting and unfamiliar action for regular Brazilians). Many overcame their reticence; the response was a flood of calls. Was this purely social media or real-world mobilization? And when these people subsequently used ICT tools to tell others in Avaaz and their social networks about their action, they in turn spurred more citizens to follow suit. How was this different in intent and desired outcomes to providing an on-the-ground movement with a list of personal contacts to approach or inform about their activities in order to engage them in the struggle?

Lessons Learned

Digital Resistance

Digital resistance is a form of civil resistance, and it can wield people power. The decision to struggle through this medium or on-the-ground or some combination of both depends on the objectives, strategies, and capacities of the civic campaign or social movement, and the realities of the particular struggle arena. Tanaka reported that during the vote, even some legislators who were not supportive of the bill acceded that they

could not ignore the will of 3.6 million Brazilians who demanded the passing of Ficha Limpa. The reactions of these powerholders and the media are telling. They did not make a distinction between the 1.6 million handwritten signatures and 2 million online petitioners. Nor did they discount the authenticity of civic mobilization through the digital realm and the mass actions executed through ICTs/social media.

Another lesson is that online activism can shift power relations and translate into real-world actions. The Avaaz campaign broke new ground, as evidenced from the thousands of citizens who boldly called the offices of congressional representatives and Supreme Court members. This action was revolutionary in a society where political powerholders hold formidable social authority and interactions with citizens are infrequent, circumscribed, and hierarchical.

Finally, digital resistance is complementary to on-the-ground civil resistance but not necessarily a substitute for it. Grassroots organizing builds a strong, united base of groups as well as citizens, which, in the case of Ficha Limpa, was essential to collect over 1.6 million handwritten signatures. Only through on-the-ground interactions and relationships can allies be cultivated from within corrupt systems, and negotiations be conducted. Then again, digital resistance enables immediate communication; quick, even instantaneous responses; rapid mobilization without the time, organization, and resources needed for on-the-ground efforts; and opportunities to experiment with tactics and tweak actions and messages in real time with minimal resources.

Intangibles

ICTs/social media can foster a genuine sense of ownership and collective identity, two key intangible qualities of bottom-up civic initiatives. The blogosphere was reported to have “embraced” the Popular Initiative bill. Some bloggers created their own online banners. Others issued calls to action. One wrote, “It’s time to fight the ‘good fight.’ Time to forget the ideological differences and to shine in a new era of national politics.” Another tweeted, “Let’s put pressure on the deputies reaching two million signatures to show that if they don’t vote for ‘Ficha Limpa,’ we won’t vote for them.”⁶⁸ When the bill was passed, a Brazilian member of Avaaz wrote, “I have never been as proud of the Brazilian people as I am today! Congratulations to all that have signed. Today I feel like an actual citizen with political power.”⁶⁹

Digital resistance also provides an added dimension of movement ownership and social identity through an ongoing narrative that can be powerful either on its own or in combination with on-the-ground civil

resistance. Tanaka explained that online civic initiatives are particularly effective in creating a narrative that people can closely follow, day by day, as the campaign or movement develops. In Avaaz's case, on a weekly basis while the Ficha Limpa bill was in committee, citizens "were given action opportunities that by the approval of the law, they could feel that they were a key part in it, truly own the campaign movement, and know that their actions were fundamental at every step of the way." The narrative is a powerful way of involving people in the whole campaign—from committees, to the vote, to presidential approval, to Supreme Court validation, she concluded.

As well, whether digital resistance gone viral or mass on-the-ground resistance, the scale of citizen participation enhances the credibility of the movement and legitimacy of its demands. "To tackle something big [corruption]," said Tanaka, "we needed to make it [Ficha Limpa] bigger than us. It needs to be publicly owned. This is the protection."

Wielding People Power

The Ficha Limpa case illuminates four lessons about people power. First, successful digital resistance involves the same people power dynamics as on-the-ground civil resistance: disrupting the unjust, unaccountable status quo; shifting loyalties among powerholders and within institutions; and winning people toward the movement or campaign, irrespective of their motives.

Digital resistance also offers economies of scale. While this alone is not a determinant of success, it can provide a strategic advantage under some circumstances and at critical points in a struggle. "Instead of going to meetings and planning rallies, in two hours we can send an email to 200,000 which can spread," noted Tanaka. Third, digital actions expand the repertoire of nonviolent tactics but are not inherently superior or more effective than on-the-ground actions, and vice versa. Lastly, whether civil resistance takes place in the digital or real-world realms, the elements of success are the same: shared grievances; unity of goals and people; collective ownership of the campaign or movement; skills, strategies, and planning; tactical creativity, diversity, and strategic sequencing; effective communications and messaging; and a strict commitment to nonviolent methods.

Notes

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