

Civil Resistance: A First Look



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Civil Resistance

What is it? Civil resistance is a way for ordinary people to fight for their rights, freedom and justice without using violence. People engaged in civil resistance use diverse tactics, such as strikes, boycotts, mass demonstrations and other actions, to cause wide-ranging social, political and economic change. Around the world, civil resistance has been called by different names—nonviolent struggle, direct action, people power, political defiance, and civic mobilization—but regardless of which term is used, the fundamental dynamics of civil resistance remain essentially the same.

Civil resistance movements are powerful because they summon mass participation in actions to resist oppression by offering a new vision of a freer, fairer society and possibly the loyalties of people who enforce the old system. When people choose to end their cooperation with unjust rulers, that system becomes far more costly to operate. When enough people choose to disobey, the system can become unsustainable, and then it has to change or collapse. Even when the opponents of civil resistance have been well-armed and well-funded, they have often not been able to

“The main thing in the struggle is to get attention. To struggle in a corner where nobody pays attention to you is a useless effort. You’ve got — if you struggle — to attract as much attention as you can to your cause.”

—MKHUSELI JACK, LEADER OF THE CONSUMER BOYCOTT
CAMPAIGN AGAINST APARTHEID IN SOUTH AFRICA

withstand the sustained mass disobedience and civic disruption caused by strategic, widespread acts of nonviolent defiance.

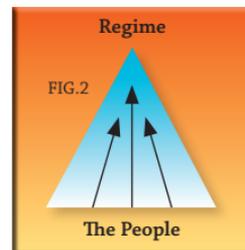
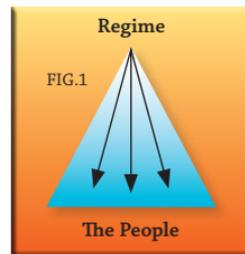
For this reason, many civil resistance movements and campaigns have been successful against diverse adversaries. In every decade of the past century, on six continents, popular movements using nonviolent strategies overthrew oppressive regimes, successfully resisted military occupation, and brought greater justice and freedom to their societies. For example, civil resistance was pivotal in ending apartheid in South Africa; it was used to advance women’s rights, civil rights and labor rights in the United States; it has brought down dictators in the Philippines, Chile, Indonesia, Serbia and other places; it was used to obstruct foreign occupation in Denmark and East Timor; it was instrumental in gaining Indian independence from Britain; it has overturned fraudulent elections in Eastern Europe, ended Syrian occupation in Lebanon, and been used in numerous other lands to establish human rights, justice, and democratic self-rule.

Key Concepts

Civil Resistance vs. Ethical Nonviolence Civil resistance is a form of political contention. Ethical nonviolence is a set of principles that prohibit the use of violence. Participants in some successful civil resistance movements, such as the Indian Independence struggle and the US Civil Rights movement, have preached ethical nonviolence. But there is nothing inherent in the use of civil resistance that requires its practitioners to adhere to nonviolent action for its own sake. In fact, throughout history, it is quite likely that the majority of civil resisters were not motivated by ethical nonviolence. Instead, they were motivated by the fact that civil resistance was the only or most effective means for them to wage their struggle.

Monolithic vs. Pluralistic Views of Power

In many societies, the prevailing view of power is monolithic (FIG. 1), which means that ordinary people are seen as being dependent on the goodwill, decisions, and the support of their government and other institutions. Power is seen as being wielded by the few who stand at the pinnacle of command, who have the most wealth and capacity for violence. The monolith of power is seen as self-perpetuating, durable and not easily changed. However, civil resistance is based on a different premise, described by the pluralistic view of power (FIG. 2), which sees governments and other power-holding systems as being broadly dependent on the people's compliance or acquiescence. In the pluralistic view, power is seen as based on the validation and participation of many parts of society.



It is fluid, always dependent for its strength on a replenishment of its sources by the cooperation of many institutions and people. As such, civil resistance movements develop their strategies based on the view that people who organize a broad coalition of ordinary civilians to disrupt the state's action can neutralize or reverse it.

Acts of Omission and Acts of Commission Civil resisters have used hundreds of different tactics through history. These can be organized into two different categories. Acts of omission are tactics in which people stop doing something that they are normally expected or required to do. Examples of such acts include worker strikes, tax refusal, and consumer boycotts. Acts of commission are tactics in which people start doing something that they do not normally do or are forbidden to do. Examples of such acts include protests, mass demonstrations, sit-ins, and other forms of civil disobedience. The strategic sequencing of such tactics increases the cost to the movement's opponent of maintaining the status quo. It can also inspire ordinary people to join in the resistance, since the range of tactics can be diverse—high risk and low risk, public and private, concentrated or decentralized—which enables people from many segments of society to participate.

Unity, Planning and Nonviolent Discipline Three key principles of successful civil resistance are unity, planning and nonviolent discipline. Unity is developed by mobilizing diverse sections of society, who may initially have different grievances, around a set of achievable goals. Planning is the strategic sequencing of campaigns and tactics based on a careful analysis of conditions and opportunities for action. It also involves anticipating possible setbacks and having contingency plans for them. Nonviolent discipline involves a strategic commitment to use only nonviolent tactics, because violence reduces civilian participation, harms the movement's legitimacy, decreases international support, and lessens the chance of loyalty shifts.

Ten Questions

1 How are powerful rulers defeated by ordinary people using civil resistance?

No ruler is inherently powerful. Rulers are powerful only when they have the direct or indirect support of thousands or millions of people in their society. For a ruler to maintain control, the police, military, judiciary, and bureaucracy must do their jobs. People throughout society must go to work regularly, pay taxes and rent, and purchase items at markets which support businesses owned or licensed by the state. People working in shipping and transportation, as well as in communications and utilities, must continue to move goods and perform services. These are just a few examples of the groups whose support is often critical for the system to function.

Understanding this, civil resistance organizers develop strategies to shake that support and make the status quo difficult to sustain. Mobilizing large numbers of people to dissent and protest can reduce the legitimacy of rulers, especially if repression is used against people exercising their rights. Disrupting the state's control, resistance movements can drive up the cost of maintaining the system—to the point that its defenders begin to question its future. Once their loyalty is undermined, any form of oppression becomes harder to enforce.

2 How does civil resistance begin?

Many successful civil resistance campaigns begin by first building the capacity of ordinary people to take action. Local, low-risk tactics to organize people and build unity can be incredibly important. For example, before Gandhi launched his first major civil resistance campaign in India, he spent months and years visiting and talking with ordinary people, learning about their grievances, hopes, and fears. He developed a sense of what it would take to

win their allegiance and cooperation. He also encouraged people to engage in “constructive work”—community service that built self-reliance among people who had lost confidence in the state but previously felt powerless to act.

Once campaigns build sufficient capacity to engage in more direct forms of civil resistance, they often begin with actions directed at local issues that resonate with a broader public. For example, the organizers of Solidarity in Poland began with a labor strike at one shipyard. When it achieved victory on one issue and established an independent trade union, that victory had an enormous psychological impact on Poles throughout the country and the movement gained strength. Similarly, the U.S. civil rights movement picked up momentum after successful sit-ins and boycotts ended racial segregation in stores and buses in a few cities in the southern United States. With these successes, the movement showed the power of civil resistance, and it quickly acquired national attention and following.

3 How do I organize protests?

A movement’s strategic planners should identify what their goals are, what the strengths, weaknesses and capabilities of their movement and their opponent are, and what assistance third parties and external actors may offer. When a movement has clearly defined its short, mid- and long-term goals and has done a detailed and systematic factual analysis of its situation, it will then be in a far better position to choose which tactics it wants to employ. At that point, if the movement opts for protest demonstrations as a main tactic and wants to learn how to make them successful, there are numerous resources available to detail the technical and tactical dimensions of doing so.



4 If not protests, then what?

Many people think that protests are the primary activity of civil resistance movements. However, protests are only one of many different kinds of tactics that civil resisters may use in their struggle. There are over two hundred identified tactics of nonviolent action from which to choose. Varieties of boycotts (consumer, political, and social); strikes; work slowdowns; refusal to pay rents, taxes, and fees; petitions; civil disobedience; sit-ins; blockades; and the development of parallel institutions are a few examples of other tactics of civil resistance.

The choice and sequencing of tactics depends on the movement's assessment of its situation, as well as what its capabilities and objectives are. If a movement is not very strong, it may want to consider dispersed and low-risk tactics, such as boycotts or the anonymous display of symbols, in order to build the movement's capacity, communicate its message, and/or disrupt the opponent. At a later stage, once the movement is stronger, it may be able to take more concentrated forms of actions, such as rallies, marches, protest demonstrations, or mass civil disobedience.



It is important to remember that just because protests are often the most familiar actions to people considering civil resistance, that does not mean that they are the only or best course of action. Depending on the situation, there are many other tactics that may provide a better result at lower cost to the movement. Creativity and strategic thinking are highly important in deciding which tactics to employ.

5 What if the movement has no charismatic leader?

Many historical movements have waged effective civil resistance without charismatic leaders. The anti-apartheid movement in South Africa made great gains while its leader was in prison and cut off from the movement. More important than personal charm or speaking ability in leaders of civilian-based movements are the knowledge of how to represent and listen to diverse participants in a movement, carefully weighing the costs and risks inherent in alternative courses of action, and sharing decision-making with local leaders.

In addition, over-relying on charismatic leaders carries special risks. Sometimes such leaders can be co-opted by rulers offering to share power, or they can be arrested. Resilient, representative movements are organized so that even if leaders are sidelined, the movements can bring forward new leaders.

6 What if I don't think civil resistance will work in my country?

Civil resistance does not always succeed. But it has worked in many countries around the world where “experts” and others felt it would never make headway. Chile’s Gen. Augusto Pinochet was considered one of the most brutal dictators in the world, and many did not think civil resistance could be pivotal in removing him, but that is what happened. And few would have suspected that the Serbian dictator Slobodan Milosevic, nicknamed the “Butcher of the Balkans”, would be forced out by nonviolent pressure. Yet, when Milosevic ordered his own troops and police to repress hundreds of thousands who were demonstrating and calling for his ouster in 2000, his security forces refused to obey orders in the face of their fellow citizens’ massive mobilization. Milosevic then had no other choice but to step down.

If you’re still unsure about whether civil resistance could work in your situation, then consider possible alternatives, if they are realistic: reforming the political system from within; participating in elections; petitioning the legal system; engaging in negotiations and dialogue with adversaries; appealing to international actors for support; and attempting armed insurrection are all options that have been tried in diverse parts of the world. While it is uncertain that civil resistance will succeed, it is also uncertain that any of the other possible courses of action will succeed.

The decision for an opposition or dissident group, then, is to choose the course of action with the greatest chance of gaining a diverse following, challenging an oppressor’s legitimacy, evading or neutralizing repression, and fostering divisions among those defending the existing system. There are many opposition groups throughout history which have considered these options and chosen to engage in civil resistance, although sometimes it has been used in conjunction with more traditional means of making political change, such as elections, legal challenges, negotiations, and reforming the system from within.

7 What if my adversary uses violence?

You should expect that at some point your adversary will use violence. Historically, this has almost always been the case. Yet an opponent's use of violence does not mean that a civil resistance movement has failed. Civil resistance movements deal with violent repression in a variety of ways that can reduce its effectiveness and/or make it backfire against the oppressor.

First, to avoid or mute violent repression, civil resistance movements may start using tactics that are difficult to quell through violence. For example, consumer boycotts, in which people choose not to buy certain targeted products, are very difficult to suppress, because they are decentralized and it is difficult or impossible for a regime to ascertain who is participating in the boycott and who is not. If protest demonstrations or other public and concentrated tactics are being repressed, non-political resistance or decentralized and non-physical tactics such as refusal to pay fees or taxes or even a general strike may be better options for a movement.

Second, civil resistance movements may use innovative tactics to make their opponent's repression backfire. Exposing repression to the world, and publicizing repression with pictures and stories inside the country, can make the repression more costly—in terms of international reputation and investment—than it is to the movement. Not all repression backfires, but when a movement complicates, delays, or exposes the odious nature of certain acts of repression, the result can be massive loss of public and international support.

Thirdly, there are cases of civil resistance, such as the Philippines in 1986, Chile in 1988, Serbia in 2000, and Ukraine in 2004, where members of the security forces have defected to the opposition, which reduced or effectively eliminated the regime's capacity to do repression. These security force defections were brought about by deliberate, long-term efforts by the resistance movements that were designed to shift the loyalties of the security forces away from the regime.

*“That’s why this repression was counter-productive.
Because it was like the third Newton law of action and reaction.
When you raise the level of repression, the resistance goes up as well.”*

—IVAN MAROVIC

8 What if my adversary cannot be persuaded?

It is not necessary to persuade the hard core of those responsible for oppression, in order to win. However, it may be necessary to persuade some of your adversary’s supporters.

Remember, civil resistance is powerful because it changes the beliefs and behavior of thousands or tens of thousands of individuals whose actions directly or indirectly support the oppression. When your opponent’s sources of power are weakened, then whether or not he is persuaded makes little difference. His power has been reduced to the point that he realizes he can no longer control the outcome, and he is therefore forced to negotiate the transition to a new order.

For example, the 1985 boycott of white-run businesses by the anti-apartheid movement in the South African city of Port Elizabeth caused such losses that they began to pressure the government to change its policies. These businesses may not have been persuaded to agree with the movement’s objectives, but they realized that it made more sense for them to accept some of the movement’s demands than to continue to support the government’s repression.

“It was in fact mass organization which brought about the change in South Africa...which put pressure on the state...ultimately to change... to [bring] about the stalemate, the impasse where the state could no longer respond.” —DR. JANET CHERRY

9 This will take too long. What if we cannot wait?

Civil resistance does not always take a long time to make an impact. While the Solidarity movement did not achieve power until almost ten years after it was organized, it took the opposition in the Philippines just a few years of organizing to oust their dictator, Ferdinand Marcos. What determines success in civil resistance is not the passage of time but, instead, whether a movement is unified and strategic in its action.

10 How can we win?

You have a better chance of winning if your movement or campaign develops popular unity, careful planning, and nonviolent discipline.

Unity is critical because resistance movements are powerful when they represent the will and commitment of a majority. It is important to remember that participating in a movement is voluntary. People join and take risks because they believe in the movement. However, if it lacks unity, if the cause is unclear or doubted, many will choose not to participate. In general, successful civil resistance movements have brought together men and women; children, middle-aged people, and elders; people from diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds; students, laborers, intellectuals, members of the business community and others.

Planning is essential because civil resistance is a contest between a protagonist such as a campaign, movement, or civic group, and its adversary. In such a contest, organization and strategy are required to mold and direct the force marshaled by

a movement. In civil resistance, leaders make many strategic and tactical decisions, such as assessing how to build their resources, how best to use those resources, how to exploit vulnerabilities of their adversaries, and how to defend against countermeasures. Good decisions are rarely made spontaneously. To do good planning, two kinds of knowledge are required. First, strategists need detailed knowledge of the political, economic and social conditions they face, and they need to understand the interests and aspirations of different groups in the society. Second, movement strategists need to know how civil resistance works, which can be learned from personal experience, from resources such as books, films and the internet, and from communicating with others who have experience in civil resistance and political organizing.

Nonviolent discipline is critical because violence by a movement undermines the effectiveness of resistance, usually triggering and seeming to justify a repressive crackdown. Furthermore, when a resistance movement engages in violence, it often loses the participation of people in the society who won't take the obvious risks of violence. Finally, when a movement uses violence against the police and military, it becomes impossible to divide the loyalties of defenders of the system, and any unspoken sympathy for the movement among those defenders will likely disappear. This is the opposite of the dynamic that civil resistance can set in motion, in which the movement's cause—a freer, better society which benefits everyone—and the movement's action, calling on the courage of ordinary people of all backgrounds, become as attractive to many of the defenders of existing power-holders as it is to those who want to end the system.

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