



# PILLARS OF SUPPORT

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# PILLARS OF SUPPORT

By themselves, rulers cannot collect taxes, enforce repressive laws and regulations, keep trains running on time, prepare national budgets, direct traffic, manage ports, print money, repair roads, train the police and army, issue postage stamps or even milk a cow. People provide these services to the ruler through a variety of organizations and institutions. If people stop providing these skills and services, the ruler cannot rule. Once we understand that this is the nature of political power in society, we must understand how power is exercised. The people are the main holders of power in society, but they are much more effective at exercising that power when they work together in the form of organizations or institutions, such as the police, civil servants, labor groups, business groups, etc. Some of these organizations may support your opponent, and others may support your movement.

We call these supporting organizations pillars of support because they support the power structure in society. At the beginning of a nonviolent struggle, it is likely that many of these organizations provide support to your opponent. If these organizations and institutions begin to withdraw their support from your opponent (and some may even start actively supporting your movement), your opponent will no longer be able to maintain control.

**TIP**

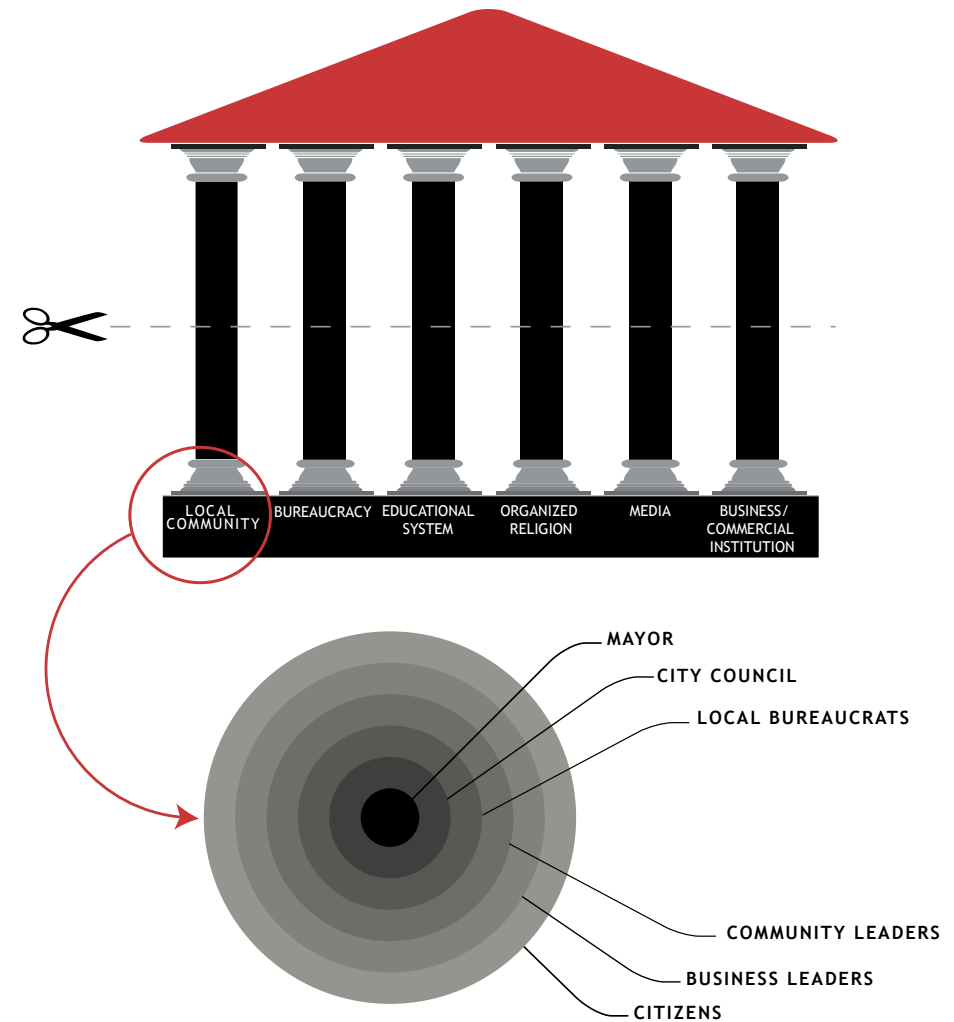
If people withdraw their support, the ruler cannot rule!

**SPO1: Define pillars of support.**

For our purposes, we define pillars of support in this way:

*"Pillars of support are institutions and sections of the society that supply the existing regime with sources of power required for maintenance and expansion of its power capacity."*

Dr. Gene Sharp in Waging Nonviolent Struggle



Within every society, various pillars of support can be identified. They may include: the police, military, ruling institutions such as the judiciary and electoral commission, civil servants, the educational system, organized religious institutions, state-controlled media, the business community, and other organizations.

**IMPORTANT:**

Understand the difference between pillars of support and social functions.

Note that we did not list social functions such as the “economy” or “religion” as pillars of support. Pillars of support are the institutions that create and carry out social functions. If you want to influence society, identify and focus your efforts on the institutions and organizations (pillars of support) that support the existing power structure and social functions.

**SPO 2:**

**Understand the importance of pulling out from, rather than pushing into, different pillars of support.**

It is critical for a nonviolent movement to find ways to influence the behavior of the people within various pillars of support, by:

- eroding their loyalty to your opponent(s)
- persuading them to deny their skills and knowledge, material resources, and time to your opponent(s)

**TIP**

Target your nonviolent actions effectively: “Pull out from” rather than “push into” each individual pillar.

When a nonviolent movement is successful at influencing a particular pillar, members of that pillar will find ways to withdraw their support from your opponent and his/her supporters; by openly or subtly disobeying orders, by ignoring orders altogether, or by carrying orders out slowly, inefficiently and/or incompletely. Members of some pillars may also begin to openly or subtly support your movement as well.

In order to influence the behavior of various pillars, it is important to understand the difference between pulling the members of that pillar towards your movement versus pushing them away from your movement.

For example, looking at the diagram on the previous page, if you want to erode the loyalty of the soldiers of the army, successful movements in the past have gen-



erally done so by talking with them on the streets, reminding them that they are also fathers, sons, husbands, and citizens, appealing to their sense of patriotism, and assuring them that a society run by the opposition will be better for them and their families than the current government is. This kind of behavior pulls the soldier’s loyalties away from the center of the pillar and towards the opposition. In contrast, movements that have threatened soldiers in the streets, and thrown stones or committed other violent acts against them, push them closer towards the center of the pillar. This is why some oppressive governments sometimes try to provoke violent acts by the opposition, because they know that this will push their soldiers closer to them and make the soldiers more likely to obey orders.

**SPO 3:**

**Define the ways power is exercised through each pillar and estimate the level of each pillar’s importance in your society.**

In this section, we will review the general attributes of several common pillars of support.

## 1. POLICE



**THE POLICE** are almost always an important source of power in society. They maintain law and order, they carry out the government's laws, and they insure that the system remains stable.

**Within the police one can identify all of the different sources of power:**

### SOURCES OF POWER

#### AUTHORITY

**Authority** – the police have the authority to enforce the law.

#### HUMAN RESOURCES

**Human resources** – there are many thousands of policemen.

#### SKILLS & KNOWLEDGE

**Skills and knowledge** – police provide the state with various skills and knowledge such as: investigation techniques, computer and technological knowledge, surveillance techniques, knowledge of how to break up demonstrations, etc.

#### MATERIAL RESOURCES

**Material resources** – police have weapons, computers, cars, buildings, radios, and through large budgets they can sometimes even afford helicopters, airplanes and boats.

#### INTANGIBLE FACTORS

**Intangible factors** – people are socialized to obey the police out of habit. Even when the police or the army are not present, people will obey symbols of their authority.

#### SANCTIONS

**Sanctions** – if you do not obey the police, you can be punished. If you resist their orders, for example by running away when they want you to stop, the punishment can be even worse.

## 2. MILITARY



While the military shares some of the same characteristics with the police, and provides similar sources of power, it is important for nonviolent movements to understand what the differences are between the military and the police in their particular society. It is not uncommon for one of these groups to be favored by an authoritarian while the other group is not trusted as much. The distrusted group often has lower loyalty to the government, which means that its support can more easily shift to your movement. Sometimes there are also rivalries between the military and the police.

### 3. BUREAUCRACY (CIVIL SERVANTS)



#### TIP

If the bureaucracy withdraws its support from the ruler, everything stops!

Civil servants compose the huge administrative entity called the state bureaucracy. Slow, inefficient and corrupt bureaucracies are the trademark of 90% of non-democratic countries.

In addition to carrying out the decisions made by the ruler, which gives them authority, the bureaucracy is also large in numbers (human resources), and has a huge repertoire of skills and knowledge.

They can also impose sanctions, because they can stop any part of most processes in the society (for example: getting a license to build a house may require at least ten different permits issued by various departments of the state's bureaucracy).

They are also paid by the state. Their large budget (material resources) often comes from taxpayer's money — from the people.

### 4. EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM



#### TIP

Students do not stand alone; they stand together with their families!

Teachers and students can become the catalyst for political change and can enlist support of other pillars of support in many societies. Teachers help shape minds of young children, and they help older students to think critically. They provide students with ideas and also serve as role models.

Every government depends heavily on teachers, because through teachers the young generations frequently adopt the rules and values that their governments want them to. Another reason is that teachers tend to keep students quiet, busy, and in line! Students have been at the forefront of nonviolent movements throughout the world's history. Students are usually too small in number to make major societal changes just by themselves, but they can have an important role in awakening and mobilizing people, pointing to problems, and communicating a movement's Vision of Tomorrow. They also can make older people feel ashamed for not acting.

Furthermore, when students are part of a nonviolent movement, often their families also get involved. And what's more, students often have fewer immediate responsibilities than older people, so they usually have more available time and are more willing to take risks and make sacrifices. Finally, they have a large stake in the future so they more often than others feel the need for change.



**ORGANIZED RELIGION:**  
*Though usually recognized as a "conservative pillar," organized religion sometimes plays a very dynamic role during processes of political change.*

Organized religion is generally conservative and supportive of the existing power structure in society because they often have more operational influence and freedom than other institutions or groups.

However, one can find numerous examples in the past of individuals and local organizations within this pillar of support that have offered a helping hand to nonviolent movements struggling for change.

In organized religion, the six sources of power can be found. Religious groups have authority because they represent the religion. They have enormous human resources — not only the clergy and clerics, but also believers who may be ready to act and support clerical decisions. Religious groups possess skills and knowledge to perform religious rituals and manage the clerical system. They frequently have significant material resources — including buildings, real estate, schools and investments. If religious groups are disobeyed, they can invoke sanctions, for example excommunication, castigation, or fatwa. Finally, they embody intangible factors because people are socialized to meet religious obligations and obey religious rules.



*Media has become an increasingly important pillar of support in recent decades.*

Effective nonviolent movements must have the means to communicate their messages to a wider audience. This is why authoritarians in many countries attempt to limit or deny movements access to this pillar of the support. They also frequently invest substantial resources in state-run media. As a consequence, nonviolent movements sometimes have to create innovative and independent media outlets and communication systems for themselves. They also sometimes choose to launch campaigns that focus on expanding media freedom and fighting censorship.



**7. BUSINESS COMMUNITY**

*The business community follows the money and its material interests!*

By providing people with goods and services that the government does not supply, and by playing an important role even in most centralized societies, business communities are frequently recognized as a very important pillar of support. Their main interest is profit, so they are quite pragmatic and often view support to a nonviolent movement or a government as an investment. Your challenge is to convince this community that supporting your Vision of Tomorrow is a wiser investment than supporting your opponent.

This pillar of support is closely related to other important pillars, such as labor unions and professional associations.

**EXERCISE:**

Analyze the ten most important pillars of support in your society, and rank them by their importance to your opponent

RANK	PILLAR	RANK CLARIFICATION	WAYS THE SOURCES OF POWER ARE EMPLOYED
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**SUMMARY**

Rulers cannot execute their decisions without organizations and institutions supporting their will. These organizations and institutions are called “pillars of support” because they support the existing power structure in society. Through these pillars, people provide their time, energy, resources, skills and knowledge to the ruler. However, if people choose to stop providing these services, the ruler cannot rule.

As a nonviolent movement plans actions, it is important to remember that members of different pillars of support should be pulled away from their pillar and towards the movement. They should not be pushed further towards the center of their pillar. When enough individuals from various pillars shift their attitudes and behavior and are pulled away from their pillar, it can weaken the ruler and force him/her to make concessions to the nonviolent movement or to relinquish power altogether.

**EXERCISE:**

Based on previous remarks, individually formulate a Vision of Tomorrow for your society, and present it to the group.