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# POWER, PROTEST, AND POLITICAL CHANGE

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## CHAPTER 2: COALITIONS AND ALLIES



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# GLOSSARY OF TERMS

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**Allyship** – When one person or group enters into a supportive relationship with another person or group to achieve a discrete goal or purpose.

**Activist** – A person who campaigns, via civil resistance or other means, for political change.

**BATNA** – Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement, or the best course of action should a party decide to no longer negotiate.

**Civil Resistance** – The act of openly disobeying an unjust, immoral or unconstitutional law as a matter of conscience, and accepting the consequences, including submitting to imprisonment if necessary, to protest an injustice. Also commonly referred to as civil disobedience, nonviolent action, nonviolent conflict, nonviolent struggle, and other variations.

**Coalition** – A collection of distinct people, parties, organizations, or other entities engaging in joint strategic action under one group or organization.

**Decentralization** – A type of movement structure where there is no single person in charge, nor one center of power for the movement. Instead, there are various parties involved in the sustenance and maintenance of the power-building process.

**Direct Action** – The tactics of civil resistance to injustice. More than 250 forms of nonviolent direct action have been identified, including marches, boycotts, picketing, sit-ins, and prayer vigils, to name a few.

**Interests** – In negotiation theory, interests refer to the “basic needs, wants, and motivations” underlying a party’s position or point of view on an issue.

**Movement** – An organized effort to promote or attain political change.

**Negotiation** – The process of discussing, compromising, and bargaining with other parties in good faith to persuade them to reach an agreement or resolution to the dispute. Although negotiation is often assumed to be an adversarial process, you can also (and normally do) negotiate with allies and supporters.

**Organizer** – A person who engages and empowers others with the purpose of increasing the influence of groups historically underrepresented in the policies and decision making that affect their lives.

**Pillars of support** – The organizations, entities, institutions, and actors that provide

the political leadership with the knowledge, skills, and/or resources to maintain and wield power. They include civil servants, religious groups, media organizations, businesses, and security forces, among others.

**Political Leadership** – The governing body with the power to produce, implement, and amend laws and policies in a jurisdiction. Also commonly referred to as the authorities, power structure, “haves,” and in authoritarian contexts, the “regime.”

**Power** – The ability, whether physical, mental or moral, to affect change.

**Protest** – In our report, we will refer to “protest” as the direct actions that involve demonstrations of disapproval, exemplified by people present in both on- and of-line public spaces.

*Our definitions were informed by The King Center’s Glossary of Nonviolence, Encyclopedia Britannica, the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, and Saul Alinsky’s seminal work, Rules for Radicals.*



# INTRODUCTION

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The mass protests that erupted across the United States this summer inspired the idea for this project. After the murder of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and too many other Black Americans, protests across the country swelled by the millions into what we now know to be the largest direct action in the history of this country. Yet despite that unprecedented demonstration of support and power, many activists in the US felt that only piecemeal reforms and lip service were given in response to their demands. Sharing their frustration with the slow pace of progress, we asked ourselves: If you want to make change as an organizer, how do you build power to get into the negotiating room, and then how do you wield that power effectively once you've sat down at the table with your political leadership? How do you overcome a vast power asymmetry between you as one individual and your entire state or national government?

To answer those questions, we looked to both home and abroad. We interviewed organizers across the US, from national movements like Black Lives Matter, the Sunrise Movement, and March for our Lives, to local jail support groups in Charlotte, North Carolina and community services movements in Houston, Texas. We interviewed civil resistance experts at the US Institute of Peace and Freedom House, ambassadors of opposition governments living in exile, high-ranking officials in transitional governments, and activists across six countries, including Yemen, Belarus, Tunisia, Syria, Sudan, and Venezuela. And we poured through theoretical works on negotiation, power, and community organizing, as well as modern case studies. Each struggle we heard and read about

had its own unique contexts and histories, but at the end of our research we were surprised by how fundamentally similar these stories were at their core. The same challenges those in the US described to us were and are currently being felt around the world, from movement to movement and country to country.

And just as we heard the same problems articulated to us over and over again, we also heard a need from many of our interviewees to have more access to solutions. Some of our interviewees likened their organizing to “building the plane as we’re flying it.” Others said that they were only able to exchange ideas and advice during small weekend retreats or over Twitter. Almost all of them, no matter if they had four years of organizing experience or forty, wanted more ideas from fellow activists from around the world.

That is what this report is fundamentally about: **to consolidate the wisdom from activists all over the world on how to overcome the common challenges they face when building power and negotiating with their political leadership, and to put forward our own findings informed by our shared background in dispute resolution, negotiation, and community organizing.**

Of course, the problems and solutions we name are certainly not the only ones available—but they are some of the most common. And they are also some of the newest challenges. We have seen in our research that much of the most beloved literature on building power and negotiating as a movement was written in the mid-20th century, well before the possibilities and perils of social media, before women’s



leadership in public life emerged as a mainstream idea, and before globalization imposed far-reaching consequences on where power was even located. We live in a new world, with new challenges, and as such we need new ideas for how to overcome them.

To be clear, what this project is not is an Organizing 101 handbook, or an Introduction to Negotiation course. While we will be referencing negotiation and organizing principles throughout, that ground has been well-trodden, and we have provided links to skills trainings, articles, books, and guides on our resources page. In this area we wish to serve merely as aggregators of the best knowledge on organizing and negotiation. What we have reserved for this report is an examination of the greatest challenges organizers face when attempting to prepare themselves for and engage in negotiations with their political leadership to achieve political change, and what to do about it.

Moreover, throughout this report we'll be focusing primarily on a specific subset of nonviolent struggle: direct action, and more specifically street protests, such as marches, demonstrations, sit-ins, and the like. By scoping our findings in this way we do not mean to imply that such direct actions are the most effective ones, or even that direct action is the most effective form of nonviolent struggle. However, we have seen that **protest is increasingly the predominant form of nonviolent struggle in the 21st century**. As of this report's writing, we are living in a world and context that is currently exploding with them. Just this year we have seen high-profile mass protests erupt around the globe, from the US, Lebanon, Mexico, Israel, India, Brazil, and Nigeria, to even long-politically dormant locales like Russia, Belarus, Thailand, and elsewhere. People on every continent are waking up, and they are using protest to announce: We are here,

and we are not going anywhere until you give us what we want.

While this chapter specifically focuses on Coalitions and Allies, the other chapters available for download include:

1. **The Big Trap: When (and When Not) to Negotiate;**
2. **Sustainability; and**
3. **Communicating the Message.**

Since we know that every organizer may face only one or several of the challenges addressed above, these chapters were designed to be read separately. As such, if you read the report in full you may feel that some of the information is repeated—and indeed some of it is. However, we think they all contain valuable lessons for anyone seeking to build power and engage in negotiation, and our sincere hope is that anyone can find value in any of them.

One-pagers distilling the need-to-know content of each chapter are also available on the report page and in each one-pager's dedicated chapter



# COALITIONS AND ALLIES

## A ONE-PAGER

Reports can get long. Here's a one-page breakdown of what you need to know:

*Why should movements choose a decentralized structure?* Movements with decentralized structures are well-suited for building power during the early stages of a movement, because they can enable mass mobilization to the streets. No one is waiting around for a leader to say, "go here, and do this." People are able to join how they want, when they want, and in the ways they want to help sustain and maintain the movement's power. However, a decentralized structure can become a liability if movements wish to negotiate, exactly because of its leaderlessness and loose bonds.

*So what should movements that want to negotiate do?* when a movement has reached this point in its strategy, we think it becomes paramount that organizers work to consolidate their coalitions before stepping into the negotiation room.

*Why are coalitions important?* In short, greater numbers on the street means greater power at the negotiation table; protests and other direct actions like it can be a visceral and effective way to demonstrate a movement's popular legitimacy, its sheer people power, and the potential for that movement to levy consequences on a political leader should that leader walk from the negotiation table. And when it comes to getting people to the street, building coalitions with other organizations is essential.

*How should a movement think about allyship?* Forming alliances both with people that you like (and sometimes with people that you don't) can be the difference that tips the scale in your favor. And they're important because just as one individual alone does not make a movement, often one community can't either. In short, movements need allies. Here's how we suggest thinking about which ones you'll need:

1. **Natural allies.** The people who understand your cause and are sympathetic to it. They're the easiest to build support in, mobilize out onto the streets, and engage in other tactical actions. Basically, they're your buddies.
2. **Strategic allies.** These individuals and groups, by contrast, are closest to the political leadership, those who help prop it up the most. They may not naturally overlap with all of your interests, but it's absolutely essential that you peel them off, because it saps the power of the political leadership and gets you new power that you might not otherwise have.



# COALITIONS AND ALLIES

*“Freedom, peace, justice, and revolution are the choice of the people!”  
– protester chant during the 2019 Sudanese Revolution*



As the classic organizer’s saying goes: “The only antidote to organized money is organized people.” That fundamental rule of organizing has held true throughout the decades. People are the building block of a movement’s ability to get the power necessary to move their political leadership to action. The fact is, one person

alone cannot change the power structure within a government, but when united with others, they can move political mountains, reimagine systems of government, even topple regimes. Organizers cannot on their own pass new laws, ordinances, or policies, but with the support of people around them, they can move leaders to

make those changes for their community. The natural first question facing organizers wishing to build people power of course is: how exactly do you actually structure them such that they are able to push for that change in the most effective way possible?

In our assessment of movements advocating for political change in the US and around the world, we have found that, **by and large, decentralized structures are well-suited for building power through rapid and mass mobilization to the streets.** At the same time, decentralization has its limits. And nowhere is that tension felt more strongly than in considerations of coalition-building and allyship. We have found that as decentralized movements form coalitions, build their power together, and then reach a point where they are in a position to negotiate with the political leadership, there can arise real disputes around the strategy of how to achieve their shared goals. Within those coalitions, there may be stakeholders who want to stay on the streets and take a harder stance against the political leadership. Others may be more willing to negotiate as the situation may demand. These types of disagreements can lead to fragmentation that undermines—or even extinguishes—the power and momentum of a movement.

This chapter will dive deep into that fundamental tension arising from a decentralized movement structure and address: what decentralization can give to a movement, when and how it stops being as useful, and what to do about it. It will first discuss the benefits of a decentralized, but organized movement structure and explore a few solutions to the tension between decentralization and the demands of negotiation. It will then evaluate the opportunities and challenges of coalition-building and end with a discussion of building allies.

As you read, we suggest keeping these questions at the top of mind:

1. How should people be organized to achieve your movement's goals?
2. Which groups of people do you need on your side to make the change you want to see?
3. Do you need representation? And if so, who represents you? Where do they represent you, and how?

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## PART I: DECENTRALIZATION AND POWER-BUILDING

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Alán de León, an organizer from Houston, Texas and his colleagues at Move Texas, were hoping to push the mayor of Houston to pass a cite-and-release ordinance that would give police officers the option of giving someone who commits a low-level crime a citation instead of jailtime. Thankfully, there was energy and momentum around the idea: tens of thousands of people were marching in the streets of Houston to protest the murder of George Floyd, and alongside them were non-profit organizations, community groups, and even city councilmembers who had long wanted to see change in the city. The different people, interests, and organizations were great for the movement, but with so many involved and no one group or leader in charge, Alán and his colleagues had to figure how to (1) structure themselves, (2) figure out a common negotiation strategy, (3) identify who would actually represent them, and then (4) do the actual work together to proceed toward their collective goal.

As Alán’s story demonstrates, having buy-in from a wide-reaching and diverse part of the population is a necessary, but *insufficient* first step to getting in the negotiation room, and then getting a deal that meets a movement’s interests. **It is essential for organizers to also figure out how to actually structure their people power in order to reach their movement’s goals.** This section will explore the benefits of decentralization, as well as its limitations, especially in the context of coalition-building, structuring a movement, and then trying to negotiate with the political leadership. We will come back to Alán’s story periodically throughout this chapter as we provide some suggestions about how best to structure the people in a movement into the best position possible to get the changes it is looking for.

As a final note, one reason why we’re focused on decentralization in particular is because we have observed in the literature and our own research that modern protest movements—both in the US and around the world—are overwhelmingly and increasingly decentralized and leaderless, with social media and the democratization of digital tools making mass mobilization easier than ever before. While having more tools to facilitate even greater turnout on the streets brings with it new and exciting avenues of power, there are also drawbacks that organizers must be aware of and prepare for. Below are some of those benefits and the costs to a decentralized movement structure.

**Power-building and the Benefits of Decentralization.** As Dr. Maria J. Stephan, Director of the US Institute of Peace’s (USIP) Program on Nonviolent Action explained, “Today’s movements increasingly rely on leaderless resistance — or, perhaps more accurately, a diffuse structure with many leaders organizing in smaller pockets.”<sup>1</sup> In our research, we observed that movements have found a decentralized structure advantageous for three different reasons:

1. It is much harder for the political leadership to repress the movement through divide-and-conquer tactics, because **the success of the movement does not hinge on the presence of one person.**
2. Joining the cause is easier, which leads to **more individual agency and quicker mass mobilization**—especially in an era where almost everyone has access to Facebook or Twitter right in their pocket.
3. A decentralized movement helps to generate a sense of **popular legitimacy.**

Below we have briefly expanded on each of these reasons, using examples and case studies from how movements in the US and around the world have leveraged these benefits to their advantage.

**Reason 1: The Difficulty of Defeating a Leaderless Movement.** From Hong Kong and Chile, to Algeria and Sudan, leaderless movements in the past year have proven why it can be so difficult for the political leadership of a government or regime to repress them—by their nature, the political leadership cannot defeat that movement by imprisoning, killing, or coopting a few individuals.<sup>2</sup> For example, in the ongoing protests against President Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus, despite the fact that the regime has tried to attack and silence opposition leaders, the movement has continued to effectively coordinate logistics on where, when, and how it will protest. The movement hasn’t died, no matter how many people the regime murders or detains, because no one person is the leader of that movement.

Moreover, protests have become more adept at coordinating their actual movements on the streets to avoid dispersal and repression. With apps like Telegram, popular Belarusian blog-



gers and movement leaders—some living in exile in neighboring countries—can tell protesters in real-time where specific police forces are headed, literally directing them down streets as they march. From a tactical perspective, it is more difficult to disperse and end such protests, not only because a leader does not exist, but also *the person leading the protest may not even be in the protest itself.*

### CASE STUDY: THAILAND

In Thailand, the protests speaking out against the monarchy in the latter half of 2020 have been “youth-based, centered around Bangkok’s elite universities, and are largely leaderless. Yet, they have grown steadily bigger and more focused since they began earlier this year and have become difficult for the Thai government to suppress. While the Thai government has arrested many individuals it identified as leaders, this has not been enough to end the protests.”<sup>3</sup>

In sum, in making it difficult to identify one sole key leader of a movement, the protests can sustain themselves long enough to compel the political leadership to the negotiation table.

**Reason 2: Ease of Joining the Cause.** Another benefit to decentralization is that it lowers the bar to entry into the movement—people looking to join just simply can. That decentralization lent itself heavily to the Sunrise Movement’s rise, which has been lauded for its ability

to rapidly mobilize startlingly large numbers of supporters. Part of the reason Sunrise grew to be so large rests on the fact that they made it as easy as possible to join the cause, create your own Sunrise hub, and connect with chapters and branches nationwide. To join Sunrise, supporters only need three or more individuals and to agree to twelve core principles, which include talking to their communities, remaining nonviolent, and uniting with other movements for change.<sup>4</sup> Once a Sunrise hub is created, it receives guidance and support from the larger movement organization, along with its fellow chapters. This low bar to entry has helped the movement make a name for itself as a powerful mass mobilizer.

However, as the example above demonstrates, organizers need to actively create those opportunities. Without these easy access points to the movement, would-be supporters may not be as inclined to participate. And to be clear, these access points can involve more than simply joining a protest. Movements are not just sustained by protesters on the streets. People can get involved by raising money to bail out protesters in jail, by cooking food for protesters, providing medical care, babysitting kids for parents and family members wishing to protest, or simply sharing posts on social media. However, again, that all depends on the imagination of the organizer to think of and then implement those entry points.

One enormously powerful tool organizers now have at their disposal to lower the bar to entry is technology, and in particular social media. Organizers have created groups on social media to coordinate protests, communicate key movement information, and mobilize supporters. In the US, organizers have used technology to share petitions, coordinate phone- or text-banking, and to mobilize the public around one cause or symbol that shares the movement’s values. This energy can also

translate into support for protests offline as well. Organizers can use digital tools to direct supporters to specific actions held nearby, and to coordinate logistics on when to show up, where, and how. Organizers looking to mass mobilize should think of the ways they can open their own entry points as much as possible, both on- or offline.

**Reason 3: Generating Consensus.** Leaderlessness and mass mobilization can also help generate a sense of popular legitimacy that organizers can leverage at the negotiation table. When, for example, the Movement for Black Lives can point to the fact that the 2020 summer protests were the largest in American history, they can convincingly say to the political leaders they're trying to move that they rep-

resent the interests of the people. In essence, the mass mobilization that a decentralized structure helps to create can also help send the resounding message to the political leadership that a consensus of the population is on the side of the movement. As one pro-democracy activist participating in the ongoing Belarusian protests put this phenomenon, **“the idea [of mass mobilization] is to create a critical mass of people filling out the streets and to demonstrate the new majority.”**<sup>6</sup>

*The Limitations of Decentralization* Just as Alán experienced in Houston, decentralization can help organizers rapidly mobilize their movement to the streets, but it has its own drawbacks. Namely, that decentralization can become a liability once it comes time to nego-

## CASE STUDY: BUILDING CONSENSUS AND LEGITIMACY IN SUDAN

Sudan's 2019 revolution is a great example of where a decentralized structure helped demonstrate consensus. During the revolution, the Sudanese people had two goals: (1) remove longstanding dictator, President Omar al-Bashir, from power and (2) transition to a democratic government. Sudan is a diverse country, made up of a spectrum of ethnicities, languages, and histories—and moreover, President al-Bashir had spent much of his 30-year reign exploiting those fault lines to pit Sudanese against each other, so that they could not unify against him. As was to be expected, when the revolution began in December 2018, the different organizations that had developed in the wake of those fault lines—with their own interests, philosophies, and constituencies—wanted to have a voice and representation in determining the future of their country.<sup>7</sup>

However, rather than fall into old grievances, these disparate organizations set aside their differences for the sake of their overall goal—ousting President Bashir. Hundreds of informally organized neighborhood committees, a collection of “ghost” trade unions subverting the regime's official professional associations, civil society groups, opposition political parties, university professors, and student groups all joined hands under one banner, the Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC), to demand with a single voice that Bashir finally leave power. That ability to mass mobilize vast swaths under one, decentralized hub signaled to the regime that there was an unbreakable unity among the Sudanese people, and that they wanted change.<sup>5</sup>

tiate with the political leadership, just because there are so many agendas, interests, individuals, and organizations whose voices need to be taken into account. In Alán's case, while the energy and interest from large portions of the Houston community helped mass mobilize people to the streets, focusing the passion of so many organizations and movements into one negotiation strategy presented enormous challenges. As Alán and his coalition faced down a meeting with the mayor (who had sole power to bring a cite-and-release bill to the floor), they had to figure out exactly what their shared goals were, who would represent them in the room, how they would actually negotiate, and what they would do if they got a "no."

The Sudanese movement mentioned above also faced a similar dilemma. The FFC represented an enormous swath of Sudanese society, and as a consequence there were internal fissures the organizers had to resolve: the various blocs and representative groups within the FFC had a spectrum of opinions on matters such as leadership of the FFC, principles, decision-making processes, and what counted as a satisfactory outcome. While often contentious, these internal negotiations were neces-



sary to ensure that the different moving parts of the movement were on the same page. In consolidating their voice in this way, they were able to avoid the challenges that arise when too many different groups try to negotiate with one political leader.<sup>8</sup>

### CONNECTION POINT: EGYPT'S FAILED PROCESS

Unfortunately, other movements have not been able to resolve their internal differences as effectively as the FFC. In the aftermath of Egypt's Arab Spring revolution, which ousted longtime dictator President Hosni Mubarak the protesters could not agree on "who could represent the movement and what the aims were" during the negotiations to transition the government to democratic governance.<sup>9</sup> That "deep crisis of representation" led to a fracture in the proposed visions for the country, dismantled the collective strength of the protesters, and ended up creating a vacuum through which more organized political entities like the Muslim Brotherhood were able to slip through.<sup>10</sup>

So what can organizers do if their movement has a decentralized structure, but would like to negotiate? For one, when a movement has reached this point of its life cycle, we think it becomes paramount that organizers work to consolidate their coalitions before stepping into the negotiation room. Doing so can bring with it several benefits: It can

1. Demonstrate **unity and strength**;
2. Help mitigate the risk that the other side



will try to **divide and conquer** the movement;

3. Build the movement's **legitimacy**; and
4. Underscore that the movement has the **support of the people**.

To be clear, consolidation of a decentralized movement in preparation for a negotiation doesn't simply require bringing together coalitions under one slogan, strategy, or interest. It also means *creating a leadership structure*. The tactical move of consolidating different groups into a coalition within a movement to create a coordinated group can be the difference between reaching your objectives or not.

However, consolidating a movement into a tighter leadership structure is easier said than

done—doing so can raise difficult questions of who exactly leads the movement, which organization or individual gets the final say, and what power should be reserved (or taken away) for the rest of the movement's supporters. In order to resolve these and other internal tensions, we have found in the literature and our own research the following factors to be key:

1. **Representation.** It is paramount that all the different groups within a coalition that want to be are (or at least feel) represented and have a voice when it is time to start negotiating. By way of a few examples, movements can consider using a quota system to ensure representation of certain key groups, mandate consensus before any major decision is made, or even set up an executive committee for the coalitions. In taking representation into consideration

## CASE STUDY: TESTING THE LIMITS IN BELARUS

As of November 2020, Belarus seemed to be experiencing a similar challenge around transitioning from a decentralized movement structure to a more consolidated arrangement. Since August, Belarusians have taken to the streets in the largest protests in the country's history, demanding that President Alexander Lukashenko step down after blatantly rigging an election in his favor this past August. It was predicted by informal polls that, against his opponent Svetlana Tikhanovskaya—the wife of a presidential candidate President Lukashenko jailed in the run up to the election—he would only take home about 3% of the votes. After fleeing the country for fear of her life, Tikhanovskaya and a cadre of other opposition figures established the Coordination Council, with the express goal of creating a central hub from which to direct the protests and negotiate with Lukashenko.<sup>11</sup>

However, with most of its leaders jailed, in exile, or dead, the Coordination Council has struggled to be the voice of the movement, and it is widely accepted that Svetlana Tikhanovskaya—who has spent most of her life as a housewife and schoolteacher, and stands as more of a symbol than political leader—is not the best candidate for the top job. While the Coordination Council still operates within the country, and Tikhanovskaya is attempting to lead from exile in Lithuania, the crackdown has severely weakened their ability to coordinate. According to Franak Viacorka, fellow at the Atlantic Council, Lukashenko's strategy was to “do everything to split the opposition and not let all forces and parties unite around Tikhanovskaya. The biggest fear of Lukashenko is Russia and the West opening talks with his opposition. So he is doing his best to paralyze it.” As of this writing, it remains to be seen whether the Coordination Council can consolidate its power and voice.<sup>12</sup>

early, you can avoid the trap Egypt fell into during its own negotiation progress, where a representation vacuum ultimately derailed their ability to form consensus.

**2. Preparation.** One way to work against the tensions that come from coalition-building is through careful preparation. Organizers should: (1) identify the coalition's goals for the negotiation and make sure that everyone on the team, including various coalition members, is on board; (2) dig deep into the technical issues of how those goals can be translated into real policy, thinking deliberately about what options the negotiators are willing and able to propose to the other side; and then (3) jointly devise a strategy ahead of time on who will speak, with what tone, and on which issues. For more on preparation for negotiation, see Chapter 1, "The Big Trap: When (and When Not) to Negotiate."

**3. Continuation.** It is also helpful for the coalition to consider contingency planning in the event that the negotiations do not result in the outcome the coalition desired, and that civil resistance must continue. Organizers should think: if I get a "no," what next? What are my next five steps if I walk out of the room? Do I go back to the streets? Try to find another person to negotiate with? Try to expand my base of supporters? And how can I do that now, so that I'm not scrambling to figure out my strategy when I'm on the backfoot? This specific type of preparation helps those in the coalition be ready for all eventualities and retain momentum, even if things do not fall in their favor. Otherwise, with momentum lost, and no clear plan of action, a political leader looking to break a movement's momentum will have an open field to take advantage of its indecision and lack of clarity.

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## PART II: BUILDING AND OPERATING COALITIONS

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We've noted above that key to a decentralized movement is a grassroots infrastructure often connected by loosely formed coalitions, which we are using here to describe a collection of distinct people, parties, organizations, or other entities engaging in joint strategic action under one group or organization. The importance of those coalitions to the success of a movement's mobilization efforts cannot be understated. **Coalitions not only strengthen the position of the movement for all the reasons stated earlier in the chapter, but they also weaken the power of the political leadership the movement are hoping to negotiate with.** Due to their importance to the underlying structure of a movement, the formation and operation of coalitions deserves a deeper dive.

Building coalitions creates the opportunities and conditions necessary to then build movements, which can get the attention of the political leadership and a subsequent invitation to negotiate. As Harvard Kennedy School Professor Erica Chenoweth has written, "Movements that engage in . . . coalition-building prior to mass mobilization are more likely to draw a large and diverse following than movements that take to the streets before hashing out a political program and strategy." As she has found, "movements that grow in size and diversity are more likely to succeed."<sup>13</sup> Relatedly, coalitions are important to the success of a movement, because one small or independent group is often not strong enough to push for change on its own, especially if it has no line of communication to those with traditional sources of power.

In the literature and our own research, we have found that there is a spectrum regarding the different ways that coalitions may form, and thus different types of coalitional structures. This spectrum can range from a strict coalitional structure with established principles and hierarchies, to a much looser alignment of related groups, what we will call a coalition based on “**opportunistic linkages.**”

On the stricter end, a more rigid structure can be useful when one, united voice is most needed to advance a movement’s goals. For example, in Sudan the various groups leading the 2019 revolution were initially satisfied with a looser coalitional structure. However, when the revolution grew to such a size that the groups began to clash with one another over logistics, representation, and demands, they decided to come together to form the Forces for Freedom and Change. Twenty-two different organizations and groups signed on to the charter that formed the Forces for Freedom and Change. The charter itself laid out three main objectives: (1) ending President al-Bashir’s presidency, (2) forming a transitional government, and (3) protecting peaceful protesters and their freedom of speech and expression, in addition to ensuring justice for crimes against the Sudanese people.<sup>14</sup> While separately, the groups might have continued to successfully mobilize and withstand inter-group clashes, together they were able to organize, speak, and eventually negotiate as one.

Other coalitions may come together due to opportunistic linkages on a particular issue. While these coalitions have weaker organizational bonds, they can still be effective. We would often see this happen in the context of organizers in a city coming together to push a mayor to take certain policy steps on an issue. Different associations, organizations, and groups would coalesce around a specific policy goal, signaling to the mayor that it was a serious issue, although those individual groups would eventually return to their own strategies and agendas once that opportunity to collaborate has ended.

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## PART III: ALLYSHIP: HOW TO BUILD IT AND WHO TO BUILD IT WITH.

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Forming alliances both with people that you like (and sometimes with people that you may not) can be the difference that tips the scales in your favor. And they’re important because just as one individual alone does not make a movement, often one community can’t either. As criminal justice reform leader Glenn E. Martin once said, “those closest to the problem are closest to the solution, but furthest from the resources and power.”<sup>15</sup> Martin was naming a fundamental paradox in community



## FOOD FOR THOUGHT: GUIDING QUESTIONS

All of this raises the question of which groups and individuals should be at the negotiation table, and which should perhaps take a backseat to the negotiation. This will vary from situation to situation, but as coalitions attempt to consolidate in preparation for negotiation, these questions can help guide organizers as they go about thinking how to build their coalitional structure:

1. Which group(s) are most affected by the issues being discussed?
  - (a) Does everyone who is equally affected also need an equal spot at the table?
  - (b) Should disproportionately affected communities or individuals be given a louder voice?
2. Have any other group(s) built power in such a way that not including them would make the negotiations appear to be (or actually be) illegitimate?
  - (a) Are there fears of important stakeholders rejecting the process if a certain organization, group, or individual is not included?
  - (b) How can organizers reach into their networks to make sure everyone who should be at the table is included?
4. How will the coalition make strategic decisions in the room?
  - (a) Are there groups/individuals who should have authorization to say yes on certain issues over others? Does the coalition need to agree based on consensus? Does one individual or group have ultimate say?
  - (b) What type of agreement would those in the coalition, but not in the room, be alright with accepting?
  - (c) Who will guide the actual conversation, set priorities on the issues, and offer options and proposals to the other side?
5. Which group(s) might help move a negotiation forward in ways not apparent at first?
  - (a) Are there individual strengths of each group that could be leveraged in the room?
  - (b) What other individuals or groups wield power on this issue that may not be already invited? How can their influence be leveraged to your advantage?

organizing: that those most affected by a policy an organizer is trying to change, the marginalized community he or she is organizing in, are often those with the least power to change it. This is where allies come in—these are the people and organizations and institutions that are closer to the sources of power an organizer needs to make the change the movement is advocating for. In the literature and our own research, we have identified two types of allies: (1) natural allies, and (2) strategic allies.

**Natural allies** are the parties that are ideologically aligned with and predisposed to agree on certain goals with a movement. One example from the US is the Sunrise Movement, which uses a strategy termed the People’s Alignment Theory. Sunrise intentionally provides allyship to groups combatting white supremacy, class issues, racial injustice, and others, without demanding a say in their strategy or negotiation decisions. They made the strategic decision that in order to reach the goals that they have set, they would have to work as allies with other movements and groups in the hopes that those movements and groups would then work as allies with Sunrise. They realized that by joining forces with other organizations that also fight for social justice causes, they would be able to maximize not only their people power, but also that of movements whose values they share.

**Strategic allies**, by contrast, are the individuals, organizations, and institutions with traditionally more power in society, who may not automatically share the same grievances, injustices, or pains as the movement’s main supporters. **The enormous benefit these allies bring to a movement is that they not only grow the power of the movement, but they can directly hit and weaken the prevailing political leadership, because they attack the pillars of support upon which the political leadership relies on** for legitimacy, for its political power, and even for its economic viability. As Veronique Dudouet

at the Berghof Foundation noted, nonviolent action by “those whose active or passive collaboration [...] is needed for the oppressor to oppress” can be a great source of power for protesters and activists.<sup>16</sup> Thinkers and practitioners in community organizing call the strategy of cultivating strategic allies hitting at the political leadership’s “**pillars of support**,” because by doing so the movement is sapping the entities and individuals upon which the political leadership relies upon to maintain and wield power.

### CASE STUDY: SUNRISE AND ALLYSHIP

The Sunrise Movement’s People’s Alignment Theory follows a growing dynamic in inter-movement relationships: that of an increasing emphasis on intersectionality. In the literature and our research, we have seen how movements are centering their strategies more and more on intersectionality. Movements are more aware than ever that their individual struggles are actually deeply connected to the issues other movements in their community are tackling. Organizations that are pushing for environmental justice are thinking more about the outsized impacts of climate change on communities of color. Movements centered on racial inequities are increasingly emphasizing the need for economic, as well as racial empowerment in disenfranchised communities. More and more, organizers working in diverse communities understand the need to build alliances that cut across religious, cultural, and socioeconomic lines. And the literature backs them up. Scholars in intersectionality studies emphasize that “intersectional prisms can inform connections across privilege as well as subordination to better facilitate meaningful collaboration and political action.”<sup>17</sup>

## CASE STUDY: STRATEGIC ALLIES IN BELARUS

The Belarusian protesters have excelled at attacking President Lukashenko's pillars of support by cultivating strategic allies, most notably the country's army of factory workers.<sup>18</sup> Throughout his reign, Lukashenko has relied heavily on the political and economic support of the country's factory and industrial worker class. However, when Lukashenko initially cracked down on the protests in the fall of 2020, much of those factory workers—already enraged at the economic downturn of the country and by the administration's failure to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic—abandoned both Lukashenko and their posts. Mass strikes broke out across the country, with factory workers refusing to go back to work until Lukashenko releases the hundreds of political prisoners in detention and steps down.<sup>19</sup> One plant that went on strike, Belaruskali, accounts for a fifth of the world's potash fertilizer and is the country's top cash earner.<sup>20</sup> These factory protests are not only an economic hit to the regime—constituting over half of the country's total economic output—but also a deeply symbolic one. They stand for the reality that Lukashenko has truly been abandoned by the entirety of Belarus.<sup>21</sup> They also remain a symbol of the resolve of the Belarusian people—as state-run factory workers, these men and women are putting their livelihoods on the line in a very real way.

Lukashenko's response to their protests have demonstrated just how devastating their defection really is. The only times he has shown a willingness to concede or negotiate has been with industrial and factory leaders, who he sees as crucial to maintaining power. When the workers' strikes began in mid-August, he floated the idea of a referendum and pledged to release detained protesters.<sup>22</sup> He staged a televised meeting with construction industry officials, but it did not appear to be a serious negotiation. And he told factory workers on August 17 that an election could be organized after the adoption of a new constitution (but then reversed that position just hours later).<sup>23</sup>

At first glance, the factory workers would have been the most unlikely allies of the protesters on the streets of the capital—historically, those in the rural working industrial class have hated and derided those in Minsk, whom they believe to be part of an aloof and distant elite. However, the nature of the situation was such that factory workers felt compelled to participate by their side.



Strategic allies can also help a movement literally sustain itself on the street. During the 2019 Sudanese Revolution, the military personnel who felt increasingly more loyalty to the protesters than to President al-Bashir became a core strategic ally. The Sudanese protesters achieved these defections by intentionally cultivating members of the military to their side. As just one example, one of the main chants that the Sudanese protesters shouted at the military was: “can your salary afford the price of bread?” By appealing to a shared interest—the crippling economic pain the entire country had been suffering, with the exception of al-Bashir’s inner circle—the protesters were able to bring aboard a strategic ally that helped limit violence towards them. At one point, during a crackdown ordered by the regime, some members of the military literally turned their guns on their fellow soldiers in order to protect the protesters. Similarly, during the Black Lives Matter protests this summer, white protesters would often stand on the perimeter of a march, attempting to offer more protection to Black protesters in the face of police brutality. For more on sustaining a protest, please see Chapter 3, “Sustainability.”

Organizers hoping to bring strategic allies over to their side must ask: (1) who in my community or country has the most power to influence the political leadership I’m trying to move; and (2) what overlapping interests can I appeal to that will help mobilize them to my side?

*Morality, Allyship, and Negotiation.* Underlying all of these questions of allyship are complicated ethical implications for organizers building relationships with potential allies they find questionable at best, or extremely problematic at worst. Where a person draws the lines of their moral principles is of course a deeply personal exercise, but this section will lay out a few scenarios that activists we interviewed have considered when deciding wheth-

er or not to engage with a particular political leader or potential strategic ally.

We spoke with one Syrian activist who had a strong relationship with a prominent conservative US Senator who supported the US’s intervention in Syria, but who in the activist’s opinion had questionable views on other subjects, such as the US’s war in Iraq. However, the activist was willing to cabin the limits of his collaboration with the Senator to Syria-related matters, while also not glorify him on every other position he took. He realized that without this senator, he may not be able to make progress on his cause against the al-Assad regime. Moreover, before fleeing Syria as a refugee this activist had also been willing to engage with local security forces to coordinate on specific matters—including sometimes the same forces that had detained and tortured him—because of how dire the needs of his community were. For the activist, nearly any opportunity for engagement with different actors who could help his fellow Syrians and advance the goals of their cause should be capitalized on, no matter who the individuals were. In the activist’s view, Syria had no hope of success unless the movement took advantage of every opportunity it could.<sup>24</sup>

However, other organizers and movements, depending on their contexts, have drawn harder lines. For example, an organizer who co-founded a jail support group in Charlotte told us that they were not willing to speak with city officials until the city had fulfilled certain preconditions. They wanted the city to see things from their point of view by literally coming down to Jail Support’s headquarters and working a shift alongside the organizer and their fellow members. The organizer wanted the city officials to know and feel exactly what it was like to go through the criminal justice system. This organizer believed that if the city officials saw the devastating impact of the system from

their perspective, those leaders would legislate differently. Much of that reluctance came from past bad experiences with the city. After the city once arrested fifty Jail Support volunteers, mostly from marginalized communities, the organizer felt that they could not have a real conversation with the city until those officials could prove they empathized with Jail Support.<sup>25</sup>

On the other hand, one organizer from the Movement for Black Lives who helps organize protests against police brutality across the country bluntly stated: “we don’t negotiate with terrorists,” and was unwavering in that declaration.<sup>26</sup> This organizer felt unwilling to engage in any conversation where they felt they must defend their humanity and desire to be an equal member of society. The thought of opening any dialogue toward a resolution or partnership with a group that perpetrates violence against their community simply did not occur.

We cannot and will not suggest what an organizer’s comfort level should be around when to engage with certain parties he or she may fundamentally disagree with. Every organizer must make that decision for themselves. But we will tell you that part of the consideration should be to take into account the different ways a movement can be successful, and which people the movement may not be able to be successful without.

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## CONCLUSION

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Bringing structure to the people and groups in a movement is key to building the power necessary to achieve that movement’s goals. While a decentralized movement structure allows the movement to mobilize more people, creating leverage at the negotiation table, it also has its drawbacks when the time to negotiate actually

comes. Before sitting down at the table, organizers must consider how they can consolidate the various interests within a united coalition and think about other allies they may need in order to reach their movement’s goals.



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