
POWER, PROTEST, AND POLITICAL CHANGE

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CHAPTER 3: SUSTAINABILITY



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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

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 off-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

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 that 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 possibil-

ities 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 Sustainability, the other chapters available for download include:

1. **The Big Trap: When (and When Not) to Negotiate;**
2. **Coalitions and Allies; 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.



SUSTAINABILITY

A ONE-PAGER

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

Why is sustainability important? It is a long-held truth of protests that for them to be effective, they need to have sustained, mass mobilization. And in the world of negotiation, sustaining a movement means sustaining the leverage and power that organizers need to push their political leaders to say yes to a deal.

For that reason, for movements relying heavily or solely on protest, it's crucial that organizers keep up their momentum not only to get into the negotiation room, but throughout the negotiation itself.

How do you keep your people on the streets? We identified five factors that can help protesters stay on the streets, avoid repression, and grow the protest's numbers:

1. **A commitment to cultivating diverse participation** across all sectors of society. Bringing a diverse cross-section of society into the action increases the tactics you can deploy, decreases the state's ability to repress you, generates a sense of legitimacy, and increases the entry points into the movement, among others.
2. **Building community and love within the protest movement.** Art, music, and other forms of expression and joy not only keep your people on the street. They can make your protest a party that people never want to leave (literally).
3. **A holistic approach to sustainability.** People going out into the street every day means they're probably not working. If the movement wants to keep them there, they must literally sustain their bodies, and their wallets, in addition to their joy.
4. **Commitment to the cause.** Protesting is hard, and it can be dangerous, and it takes grit. Organizers must make a persuasive case to their people for why they should withstand weeks, or months, of potential economic, emotional, and physical harm.
5. **The use of tactics designed to evade dispersal and repression.** In other words, what tactics step so outside the realm of the police force's normal playbook for dispersal, such that they no longer know what to do?

Will this ensure my movement's success? No. Sometimes, the issue simply isn't "ripe," or the political leadership is so "closed" that even the largest and longest sustained movements couldn't move them. However, these factors can increase the odds that your movement is able to sustain a direct action like a protest as long as possible.

SUSTAINABILITY

“If we really want to get this revolution popping, we need more of us—we need more people, more bodies, and more minds.” –Jamie Marsicano, co-founder of Charlotte Uprising

One of the biggest challenges organizers in the US and around the world named in the course of our research was how to sustain their protests: how to get people to the streets, and then how to keep them there. Many of the organizers involved in the summer 2020 Black Lives Matter protests recalled feeling their awe at the initial turnout of the protests fade into dismay and disap-

pointment as those protests fizzled, leaving them with far less power to demand policy changes from their political leaders at the city and state level.

As their diminishing ability to push for change later in the summer demonstrates, in the world of negotiation, a movement’s power can be conceived of as their *leverage*



at the negotiation table—and if that power is derived primarily from direct actions like street protests, then that leverage waxes and wanes with the size and impact of the direct action. A protest of ten thousand strong in Houston may send councilmen and women in City Hall reeling and fearing for their election prospects next year, but if that protest fizzles out a week later, those officials may think: well maybe I'm actually safe, and maybe I can get away with not working with these folks.

This is why sustainability is absolutely critical for organizers seeking to negotiate with their political leadership. **Sustaining a protest means sustaining the leverage and power that organizers need to push their political leaders to say yes to a deal.**

As nonviolent resistance expert Veronique Dudouet puts it, movements must reach a point of power and leverage such that “the balance of forces is shifting against [the political leadership], and find it politically wiser to negotiate, because it is cheaper and easier than holding firm.”¹ This is what this chapter is about: **how to sustain direct actions long enough to make the cost of not negotiating—and moreover, not reaching a deal—too high on the political leadership an organizer is trying to move.**

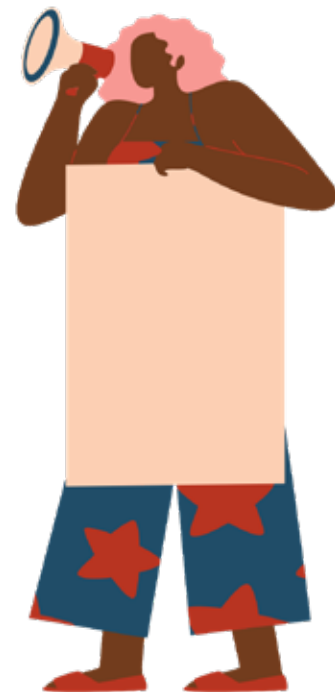
As an opening caveat, this chapter will largely focus on direct actions, and specifically protest. Our attention to protest is not meant to imply that they are the most important form of nonviolent struggle, or that they should be the only actions used. In fact, a growing body of research warns that too much focus on direct actions like street protests distracts from other, potentially more effective tactics like economic noncooperation.² Additionally, we urge organizers to think of ways they can deploy the direct actions we will discuss alongside those we do not, and we have included

links to lists of hundreds of tactics—both classic and refurbished for the era of social media—on this report's webpage.

However, we think it's important to focus on protests for two reasons:

1. They are increasingly the dominant form of nonviolent resistance in the 21st century;³ and
2. Many of the most seminal ideas on protest sustainability were written and developed in the 1960s and 1970s, well before the rise of the internet.⁴ The Digital Age of the 21st century has brought with it new opportunities and challenges to sustaining a presence in the streets. We see this chapter as both a supplement and a way to offer new ideas on how to meet those challenges.

This chapter is divided into two sections. It first provides a brief outline of the theory behind sustainability and negotiation. It then describes the main factors involved in sustaining a protest, and thus sustaining the leverage organizers need to get to—and then stay at—the negotiation table.



PART I: THE THEORY OF SUSTAINABILITY AND NEGOTIATION

Before diving into the specifics of sustaining a protest, we think it's useful to start off with a brief theoretical outline of how exactly organizers can think about the relationship between their protest and its implications for negotiation.

As we noted above, in the context of negotiation, **power-building can be conceived of as leverage-building—it is building up your hand at the negotiation table so that you can successfully assert your interests and get the deal you want.** And experts on civil resistance note that a movement's biggest source of leverage is its ability to impose political costs on the leaders it wants to extract concessions from—stopping the protests is the thing that political leaders want in exchange for policy change, and it is further protest that is hanging over their heads as a consequence to saying no to a deal.⁵

As scholars at the US Institute of Peace (USIP) put it:

The path to negotiation is paved with leverage gained through civil resistance. What can be called the fundamental bargain in civil resistance cases comes about because actions taken by civil resisters impose costs on and erode the legitimacy of opponents,

who in turn may be persuaded to talk and make changes to a policy or institution in return to relief from the pressure of direct action.⁶

EXPERT NOTE: BATNAS

Roger Fisher and William Ury in *Getting To Yes* termed the consequences a party will experience as a result of not reaching a deal as a “BATNA,” or the Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement. In other words, each side possesses the ability to walk away, and the best outcome they can reach by walking away is their BATNA. The party with the better no-deal situation thus has the better BATNA. In negotiation theory, the party with the better BATNA will be able to reach more of their interests at the negotiation table, because the other side is more eager to reach a deal and avoid their BATNA than the other side. Thus, power-building can also be understood as BATNA-building—a movement is building its BATNA by sustaining or increasing the power it started with, while also decreasing the other side's BATNA by increasing the consequences of saying no to a deal.

Or, as Veronique Dudouet at the Berghof Foundation articulated, “nonviolent struggle is a necessary component [to negotiation], by helping marginalized communities to achieve sufficient leverage for an effective negotiation process.”⁷

However, **the great twist in a negotiation between a movement and its political leaders is that a movement's leverage at the table is at a near-constant risk of waning.** Movement power is by its nature fluid, and it is an undeniable reality that people will leave the streets. They will get tired, or frustrated, or even hopeful,

and they will stop protesting. And as that direct action fizzles and disappears, so will the movement's ability to effectively assert its interests at the table. Thus, its ability to impose consequences should the other side say no can diminish as time goes on, while the other side's power remains largely static. After all, a political leader's source of power is their mandate and position, rather than the number of bodies they can summon to the street. **For that reason, movements don't only need power: they also need momentum.**⁸

PRINCIPLE

This is where sustainability comes in. In situations in which protest is the dominant form of pressure placed on the political leaders to negotiate, sustaining a protest will keep up the momentum that negotiators need to get in the room, and then have sufficient leverage to make sure their interests are met at the table.

Of course, whether a protest can be sustained or not is not all up to the strategic genius of the organizer. There are some background ingredients that help turn people out into the streets: among others, a widely felt injustice that spans gender, age, race, religion, and other divides; a precipitating event that crystallizes the true agony of that injustice and activates outrage; and a broad recognition of personal stake in the outcome of whether or not that injustice is rectified.

These are the “ripeness” ingredients, those exogenous conditions that can't necessarily be created—however, they can be taken advantage of.⁹ For example, it just so happened that someone was able to catch on video and share George Floyd's murder, during a historic economic recession, and in the middle of a pan-

demic where people had more flexibility than ever to join a protest during the work week. But the Movement for Black Lives and other grassroots organizations had been working in their communities and building their institutional power to get people on the streets for years—and the movement itself had years of protest organizing experience that gave them the expertise to capitalize on the moment. The conditions were “ripe,” but that preparation for such a moment was what allowed the protests to swell to the biggest turnout in the history of the country.

We have seen this over and over again in our work: **protests that look like they sprung up from the ground were actually growing from roots that had been spreading for months or years.** For instance, Sudan's most recent revolution officially started in December 2018, but the resistance committees that helped lead the mass protests to overthrow President Omar al-Bashir were secretly founded back in 2013.¹⁰

Another key “ripeness” issue that is largely out of the control of the organizers—but is nevertheless crucial to factor into any strategy—is the shape and structure of the political leadership that the organizer is trying to move. One expert at USIP noted that in more open political structures in which the elite feel at least somewhat accountable to their represented communities, it may take less time and effort to get in the room to negotiate. However, in less open political structures, “those systems aren't set up to take into account the preferences of those outside the elite. So the elite may have to be more or less dragged to the table by the threat of a movement being able to impose heavier costs in the future if they don't negotiate.”¹¹

And there are situations in which the political leadership is so uncaring, and so cruel, that organizers simply cannot sustain a movement

large enough or long enough to make its elite care. Activists in Syria, for example, noted in their reflections that they knew even before the internal armed conflict broke out that President Bashar al-Assad’s regime would do everything it could to squash them—there was never any chance to negotiate with a government that bombed its citizens so heavily it once ran out of mortar shells. Experts have termed leadership structures like Assad’s regime “**extremely ruthless opponents**,”¹² and they have questioned the ability for civil resistance movements to succeed against them. As a result, less open political structures may not allow protesters to successfully sustain their movement, even if other “ripeness” factors may be present.

CONNECTION POINT

Many US activists we interviewed in the course of our research expressed the same sentiments. As one activist we spoke to put it: “The government has to invite you to the table. So it depends on who is in the government. The government can ignore you and not invite you to the table and just wait until the protests are over and continue.”

PART II: SUSTAINING THE PROTEST

So how do you sustain a protest? What is within an organizer’s control when trying to get people onto the streets, and then keep them there? In our research, we identified five key ways that protests can increase their sustainability, both by internally encouraging people to stay out on the streets and responding to external attempts to undermine or extinguish the protests. Below we outline what those factors can look like, with case studies from the US and around the world of protests that have either successfully or unsuccessfully deployed them.

PRINCIPLE: FIVE FACTORS FOR SUSTAINING A PROTEST

1. DIVERSE PARTICIPATION
2. THE USE OF COMMUNITY AND LOVE
3. A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO SUSTAINABILITY
4. COMMITMENT TO THE CAUSE
5. THE USE OF TACTICS DESIGNED TO EVADE DISPERSAL AND REPRESSION

Factor I: Diverse Participation. Harvard Kennedy School Professor Erica Chenoweth and USIP Director for the Program on Nonviolent Action Dr. Maria J. Stephan introduced in their book, “Why Civil Resistance Works” a now-famous statistic: that “no government has withstood a challenge of 3.5% of their population mobilized against it during a peak event.”¹³ While recent movements have demonstrated that large numbers are not always sufficient to bring about political change—one of Hong Kong’s marches alone included about 27% of the population by organizers’ estimates¹⁴—their finding represents an important rule of organizing: that successful protests require the massive and diverse participation of citizens.¹⁵

EXPERT NOTE: THE 3.5% STATISTIC

Some have called into question the validity of Chenoweth and Stephan’s 3.5% statistic after the George Floyd protests yielded such broad participation—with estimates rising to around 8% of the American population joining a protest at some point—yet very little national changes to the US criminal justice system.¹⁶ Chenoweth and Stephan have emphasized in their writing that 3.5% is merely a correlation, and that it should not be conflated with having a causal effect. In short, 3.5% is not a magic number for success, and a variety of other factors determine movement success.¹⁷ That note of caution echoes our own—that while mass, diverse participation is certainly an important factor, it is not the only one by far that organizers must think about when trying to sustain their protests.

Diverse, mass mobilization does not matter for sustainability because of its sheer numerical force. To name just a few benefits, diverse participation sustains a protest by increasing the tactics a movement is able to deploy, by decreasing the ability of the state to use its po-

lice power to disperse the protest, by generating a sense of legitimacy that can in turn shore up the protesters’ commitment to the cause, and by creating multiple entry points for those closest to the regime to join the movement, further weakening the regime’s BATNA. As Professor Chenoweth puts it, “a mass uprising is more likely to succeed when it includes a larger proportion and a more diverse cross-section of a nation’s population.” **Diverse participation “provides numerous openings through which they can bring about defections, pulling the regime’s pillars of support out from under it at decisive moments.”**¹⁸

Creating Diverse Participation. One way to create such a broad coalition is to think about the minimum overlapping interests needed to join that coalition, and then to clearly establish that overlap as a baseline to entry. In other words: what must a potential participant absolutely believe in, and what principles must they be willing to comply with, in order to join the protest? And which are not required for entry?

The Sunrise Movement has leveraged this strategy quite effectively. A relatively new protest movement advocating for bold policies to combat the climate crisis, Sunrise has emphasized that since one of its movement’s main goals it to use protest and mass turnout to elect supporters of the Green New Deal into office, rather than to negotiate for that deal with existing officials, they want to make it as easy as possible for people to act under its name. For that reason, Sunrise allows anyone to begin a chapter as long as they have three people and agree to a set of twelve principles. Sunrise chapters have thus been able to rise up across the country relatively rapidly while maintaining a leanly staffed central team.¹⁹

“We may not agree on everything, but the things we do agree on we’re going to stand firm on those things. There are people in the movement who believe Black lives matter, but who don’t believe in access to abortion. Now we’re not going to argue about that in this Black Lives Matter march, we’re here to say their names. . . . part of organizing is finding what you do share, those shared values and working from there.”

—Kristie Puckett-Williams, ACLU Organizer

Organizing Diverse Participation. When mobilizing such a broad and diverse population, it’s important for organizers not to lose sight that just because a protest may be large or decentralized does not mean that it should also be disorganized. We have seen across the literature and in our own research that **the most successful protests are broad and decentralized, but organized.**

As experts on nonviolent resistance at USIP put it:

“While street protests and demonstrations tend to attract the most media attention, most of the critical work to build movements happens quietly, behind the scenes, in the form of building coalitions, developing strategies, and resolving internal conflicts.”²⁰

And in her work, Professor Chenoweth has found that “movements that engage in care-

ful planning, organization, training, and 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.”²¹

In short, a sustained protest is also an organized one. People do not just come to the streets on their own. They are encouraged to do so by their families, their colleagues, their churches and their friends. People show up when those they are affiliated with show up, and especially when those organizations then coordinate with each other on logistics, strategy, and goals. And when they are tired, or frustrated, or sick of coming out each day, it’s those organizational and personal affiliations that keep them turning out. Sudan’s 2019 revolution proves an instructive example of just how important an underlying organizing infrastructure is to the sustainability of a movement:

CASE STUDY: DECENTRALIZED, BUT ORGANIZED IN SUDAN

In Sudan, the 2019 revolution was able to topple the country’s longtime dictator, President Omar al-Bashir, in part because the protests were highly decentralized, engaged much of the Sudanese population domestically and abroad, and yet were still organized. Local neighborhood “resistance committees” had quietly built power and support since 2013, and when the nationwide calls to protest began, they were able to mobilize quickly across the country. Resistance com-

mittee after committee began organizing protests one after another, all over the country at once. After awhile, the regime’s security forces simply could not keep up with the frequency, geographic diversity, and ferocity of the protests.²²

As the movement grew, those resistance committees entered into a coalition with the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA), a coalition of professional trade unions and respected academics, under the Forces for Freedom and Change. Together, the Sudanese revolution was born and led by a broad coalition of women, civil society groups, neighborhood committees, professional trade unions, students, and Sudan’s enormous diaspora community.²³

But at its core, what stitched Sudan’s protests into the unbreakable web it became—withstanding brutal crackdowns, including live fire—were the hundreds of resistance committees, these informal groups bonded together in friendship and family. Those organizational affiliations, the bedrock of the protests, provided each protester the logistical support and the willpower they needed to stay on the streets. They went out to the streets each day because their best friend was out, or their schoolteacher was out, or even their grandmother was out.²⁴

Organizers looking to do the same should evaluate for themselves: how are the people who are turning out to my protest—or who I want to turn out—bonded together? Do they have schools or mosques or neighborhood associations that I can organize together to push them to the streets?

For more on creating coalitions and designing decentralized organizational structures, see Chapter 2, “Coalitions and Allies.”

Using Diverse Participation. Working to build diverse participation not only can help mobilize people in large numbers to the streets; it can also protect them once they’re out there. We have seen across historical examples and contemporary cases that those most marginalized by society are also the easiest for the regime to brutalize and terrorize off the streets without political cost—and in turn, it becomes much harder for the regime to successfully crack down on a movement when those with traditionally more power join in. We call these people “**strategic allies**,” because of their out-

sized role in simultaneously growing the power of a movement and sapping the power of the prevailing political leadership.²⁵

During the Civil Rights movement in the US, for example, police forces mercilessly deployed water cannons, bully clubs, and tear gas against protests that were majority-black, but then backed off those tactics noticeably once white protesters began to join the demonstrations.



As such, the protests were able to stay on the streets longer and with less bloodshed than they otherwise would have. Sixty years later, we saw this same tactic play out across the US once again, with white protesters forming the perimeter of marches and sit-ins in order to insulate people of color from attacks by the police during the protests this summer.²⁶ And in a similar vein, during Egypt's 2011 revolution Muslim protesters volunteered to surround their fellow Coptic Christians as they prayed, so that security forces could not launch an attack during the service.²⁷ For a more thorough discussion of strategic allies, see Chapter 2, "Coalitions and Allies" of this report.

Factor II: Use of Community and Love. When we asked activists in contexts as varied as Sudan and Belarus, to Venezuela and Tunisia, about how they were able to stay in the streets day after day, we often received a similar answer: that they felt deeply in community with their fellow protesters. There was some transcendental "X factor" to the protest that gave the movement a spirit and a life, that injected it with joy. **The organizers had created a communion on the streets that not only made the protests bearable, but beautiful.**²⁸ There is certainly no one-stop shop for creating community within a protest, but throughout the course of our research we compiled examples from around the world of times when it has happened, either intentionally or organically.

EXAMPLE 1: ART AND COMMUNITY IN SUDAN

After the military finally turned on President al-Bashir in April 2019, it initially refused to negotiate with the protesters to form a transitional government. In response, the protesters launched a prolonged sit-in outside the military's headquarters until the military finally agreed to negotiate. Despite cramped quarters and long lines for food, many activists who took part in the protest remember it fondly as an expression of unbridled joy and unity. Here are what they remember as contributing to that sense of community:

1. **Artist corners** sprouted up along the periphery of the sit-in, where open-air galleries showcased work from around the country. The galleries also became a way to educate the protesters on the full pain and tragedy that had occurred throughout the country during Bashir's reign. Sudanese activists recalled hearing about the genocide in Darfur for the first time through exhibitions that showcased the atrocities.²⁹
2. **Street art** also became a way to grapple with the immense toll that the revolution had taken on the protesters. Graffiti artists and painters often painted the faces of Sudanese who had died throughout the course of the protests on walls and the sides of buildings. Their families described seeing these memorials as a profoundly cathartic experience.³⁰
3. **Speakers and young leaders were given designated speaking areas,**

where they could stand up and share ideas, express their passions, and teach others about their stories. One young leader now serving as a minister in the transitional government recalled finding her voice and a renewed sense of empowerment at her area.

4. **Music** was also an important—and constant—feature of the sit-in. Each night would feature music circles or even concerts put on by reggae artists, pop stars, a violin orchestra, and even a soldier with a saxophone. One protester in particular kept up a Sufi-inspired drumbeat for almost the entirety of the protest; a Sudan Advisor at Freedom House described his drumbeat as creating “some sort of spiritual connection, particularly among the people. The protesters became like a family, it bridged a gap, created connections beyond just the protest.”³¹

Art’s presence during the sit-in also served two organizing roles in particular. One, dates and times of protests would often be painted into murals to give protesters important logistical information. And two, it helped crystallize for the movement what exactly its collective vision was. As one nonviolent resistance expert at USIP put it: “Art can provide a unifying center for the many different specific goals and agendas . . . Few people may read a movement’s hundred-page manifesto, but everyone can recognize the colors, songs, and images that movements draw upon to tell their supporters who they are and what they want.”³²

EXAMPLE 2: POETRY AND POST-MARCH DINNERS IN BELARUS

During the ongoing protests in Belarus to oust longtime dictator President Alexander Lukashenko, the protesters have similarly been surprised by the community they built during the movement. While the heart of Sudan’s community lied in the sit-in, in Belarus it has been built from apartment to apartment. Belarusians recalled meeting their neighbors for the first time on the streets of the protests, even though they may have lived alongside them for years. From building to building, small communities began to pop up within the context of the protests. Many Belarusians have started hosting post-march dinners in their apartment bloc courtyards with each other, holding poetry readings or holiday decoration parties, along with concerts and musical nights. The use of poetry in particular has struck a poignant chord for many Belarusians, who are famous for expressing themselves through the medium. They were able to take a beloved national pride and retrofit it as a means of protest and community-building. From apartment to apartment, they are keeping each other and the movement alive.³³

One of the most powerful uses of love and community in protests, as shown above, was best articulated by Howard Thurman, a theologian and mentor to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. According to Thurman, the most powerful application of community and love in a movement was its ability to allow a movement to imagine for itself a new reality beyond the world they are currently struggling to change. As Wake Forest Professor Corey D. B. Walker put Thurman's philosophy, engaging with the "discourse of love within the register of the sacred" allows the "opportunity to creatively think love and by extension open the terrain of thought to new possibilities of thinking the world and human experience."³⁴

While the examples above can help set the tone for what is possible, for organizers wishing to create that same sense of community and love, we suggest looking inward first. Think about:

1. Who are you in community with?
2. What do you do together that brings you joy and vitality? Is it poetry or music, humor or the visual arts, prayer or sports? And
3. How can those moments of joy and community be injected into the protest to create that communal love?

Like we said, sometimes that community simply happens organically—there may just be some magic moment where someone strikes a chord that resonates, and others pick up that song. But at the same time, organizers can help set the tone, create the space, amplify the message, and help facilitate those expressions of love and joy. As another of Saul Alinsky's rules on power tactics goes: "A good tactic is one that your people enjoy. If your people are not having a ball doing it, there is something very wrong with it."³⁵

"If a human being dreams a great dream, dares to love somebody; if a human being dares to be Martin King, or Mahatma Gandhi, or Mother Theresa, or Malcom X; if a human being dares to be bigger than the condition into which she or he was born—it means so can you. And so you can try to stretch, stretch, stretch yourself so you can internalize, "Homo sum, humani nil a me alienum puto." I am a human being, nothing human can be alien to me.

—Dr. Maya Angelou

Factor III: A Holistic Approach to Sustainability Most of this section so far has talked about how to mobilize people to protest, and then what to do with them when they're on the streets. However, there's another component to keeping a protest movement alive: the actual mechanics of keeping potentially millions of people physically able to remain on the street.

By protesting, citizens have decided to step outside of their normal relationship with the government and their society; they have ruptured the social contract, and as such the services and benefits normally given to those citizens by the state are now denied. To put it in more concrete terms, a woman who chose to join the

sit-in in Sudan has, as a consequence, decided to no longer go to her job, to make money to buy food or shelter, to have access to health insurance, medical care, or even bathrooms. There is an entire universe of *things* that she will need in order to participate, and it's the job of an organizer to provide them so that she can remain active in the sit-in. That organizer, in a way, must set up a viable alternative society within the protest itself. As Professor Chenoweth put it, "movements have gained civic strength when they have developed alternative

institutions to build self-sufficiency and address community problems that governments have neglected or ignored."³⁶ And Gandhi coined this tactic the "constructive program," considering it as important to a movement's success as noncooperation.³⁷ While these are certainly not the only ones, below is a checklist of the ways organizers have provided an alternative to the services that a protester would normally receive but now needs in order to remain actively demonstrating.

A CHECKLIST OF ALTERNATIVE SERVICES

- Defense from the State.** Protesters will predictably come into contact with the state in one form or fashion during a protest, and they will often need support—both financially and professionally—to deal with its fallout. In Charlotte, a jail support group was started after the 2016 police shooting of Keith Lamont Scott, a Black man. It not only provides bail money to protesters arrested in the course of the demonstrations that ensued, but also case assistance by public defenders and free housing while appearing in court.³⁸
- Physical nourishment.** In Sudan, protesters mobilized to freely provide water, regular meals, medical assistance, and sleeping provisions to the entirety of the sit-in outside of the military headquarters. In one kitchen alone, which took over a university building, the protesters made 250 pounds of beef, 220 pounds each of lentils and fava beans, along with 16,000 loaves of bread a day. And in some cases, the medical tents were better stocked with drugs and doctors on call than in Sudan's actual hospitals, thanks to donations from the vast Sudanese diaspora.³⁹
- Safety.** The Sudanese protesters also made sure that the protests stayed overwhelmingly nonviolent. The organizers established checkpoints in the perimeter of the sit-in, where volunteer patrols would frisk anyone who entered and confiscate weapons.⁴⁰
- Financial support.** In Belarus, companies and individuals have banded together to help with the protest's financial fallout. Tech companies in Minsk have started offering salaries to police officers who quit their jobs in protest. Protesters have directed each other to visit restaurants whose owners have been beaten or threatened by the police as a result of donating meals. One flower shop owner was tortured for handing out free

flowers to women during a protest—the next day, there was a line around the block of patrons waiting to buy flowers in solidarity. And in Sudan, the sit-in was largely financed by professionals in the community with extra savings and by Sudan’s diaspora, who donated enormous sums from abroad.⁴¹

- ✓ **Mental health.** Activists we spoke to have suffered a variety of mental and emotional consequences as a result of repression by the state, from insomnia and depression, to post-traumatic stress disorder and anxiety. One cultural activist in Belarus put her country’s mental health state bluntly: “we are all on pills.” While this report will stay away from prescribing advice or treatments, it is important to acknowledge that mental health is a factor that organizers must be aware of and should think about providing resources for. Some movements have explicitly provided access to mental health professionals. Others have simply created support groups or just encouraged each other to talk and name what they have been feeling.⁴²
- ✓ **Family support.** In Belarus, neighbors have begun taking turns looking after each other’s children in order to allow their parents to go protest. They have also made plans to take care of and/or hide each other’s children should their parents be arrested or the juvenile police come to take the children away in retaliation for protesting.⁴³

Factor IV: Commitment to the Cause. As has been gestured to above, sustained protests are enormously costly on those out in the streets. It can take their liberty, their livelihoods, and their lives. Activists around the world have been tortured, imprisoned, placed on house arrest, threatened, beaten, brutalized, and murdered for attempting to freely expressing their beliefs.⁴⁴ A Syrian activist we spoke to suffered two rounds of torture before eventually fleeing the country as a refugee. Another interviewee in Belarus had to hide with her young son in the back of a McDonald’s to evade a search party of police for hours—they were eventually smuggled out through the basement, and she remains so terrified that she no longer leaves the house.

Protesters in the US have similarly felt the economic and physical brunt of protesting. No

matter if you live under a freely elected government or brutal regime, **sustaining a protest takes enormous commitment—if protesters do not feel an intense loyalty and devotion to the cause, they will likely not see continuing it in their interests.** In our research, we heard over and over again in places like Belarus and Sudan that part of what kept people in the streets was the profound belief that living in a world without regime change would be far worse than torture or detention. One activist in Syria noted that he and his friends felt that death was preferable to life under President al-Assad.

One element that researchers and experts have found crucial to generating commitment is perceptions of the movement’s legitimacy. As two experts in nonviolent resistance noted:

“A movement perceived as legitimate encourages greater mobilization because the population is attracted to its values and goals; fear of the consequences of disobedience begins to transform into enthusiastic commitment when people see their fellow citizens participate and share in a movement’s risks, dangers, and rewards.”⁴⁵

They note that perceptions of legitimacy can create a “virtuous cycle of mobilization,” by which the more the movement gains legitimacy, the greater its numbers grow, thus increasing its legitimacy, and so on.

Like building community in a protest movement, it’s impossible to write a recipe prescribing exactly how to generate legitimacy, and thus commitment—however, it is certainly something that can be evaluated, and that organizers can take as a warning sign that the health of their protest movement may be in trouble should they find those elements lacking. As one expert at USIP emphasized, organizers must constantly question for themselves: “how serious are the participants, and how willing to continue to push for their goals are they, even when it’s costly to do so? Have movement members continued to engage in action even when there has been repression? Even when there is personal, significant levels of cost, do they continue to engage?”⁴⁶ If the answer to these questions is no, organizers may have to plan for the day when their protest wanes sooner than they may like.

Factor V: The Use of Tactics Designed to Evade Dispersal and Repression. Another crucial element that can make or break a movement’s ability to stay on the streets is the actual tactical choices that its organizers make. Activists around the world told us stories about how **they were the most successful at remaining on the streets when they were able to deploy tactics that disrupted the state’s traditional**

methods of dispersal or repression. Or, as Saul Alinsky put it in his third rule of power tactics: “wherever possible, go outside the experience of the enemy. Here you want to cause confusion, fear, and retreat.”⁴⁷ Those innovative and creative tactical choices have allowed activists to evade detention, mitigate violence, confound state forces, and thus remain in public and on camera in force.

Moreover, carefully choosing such tactics has never been more important. Just as activists around the world have innovated ways to build power, so have their governments become savvier about stymying those efforts. Repressive regimes around the world have learned the hard lesson that outright violence, torture, and purges can often lead to more backlash than it’s worth, and that subtler forms of repression may be more effective in the end.⁴⁸



Organizers must look out for the steps that their governments are taking to impede their movement’s efforts, and to generate tactics to combat them. While there are countless examples of protest tactics that can achieve that goal—and links to them are included on this

report’s webpage—we have chosen to include some below that highlight the most interesting features of successful protest tactics in the 21st century.

Physical Decentralization. Perhaps the most widely discussed, and replicated, recent innovation in protest tactics comes from Hong Kong. Pro-democracy Hong Kong protesters have become famous for a type of decentralized protest they describe as “moving like water,” by which the protest itself moves fluidly throughout a city or neighborhood. Directed in real-time by organizers using platforms like Telegram, where one channel alone can gather up to millions of followers, protesters will seemingly pop up, demonstrate, and dissolve at random throughout the city. Their ability to move spontaneously, dissolve on command, and pop up at locations dropped only minutes before over social media has allowed them to evade the police and stay on the streets for hours on end.⁴⁹

Going Online. When the government’s tactics finally became too brutal for Hong Kongers on the street, they did what has only become possible in recent history: they went online. And quite innovatively, one of the places they went to was a “protest island” on the video game

Animal Crossing.⁵⁰ While online and alternative protest spaces like the protest island may not be as viscerally overwhelming, they can still hold a strong command over the public’s attention—think thousands of black squares “blacking out” Instagram feeds in the US over the summer symbolizing solidarity with the Movement for Black Lives. Hong Kong’s protest island, for its part, finally became so irksome to the Chinese regime that the game is now officially banned in China.⁵¹

Sudanese artists similarly used digital media as a means of protest during the 2019 revolution. One notable campaign was called “Blue for Sudan,” which would turn users’ profiles blue to show solidarity with the killing of activist Hashim Mattar during the June 3 massacre.⁵² And in Thailand, Facebook has become a central coordination hub for the ongoing protest movement. In fact, a Facebook group of 1 million Thai followers dedicated to discussing the monarchy and calling for political change enraged the Thai government so much that it demanded the company take it down.⁵³

As one important caveat, we have found in our own research and in the literature a wariness on leaning too heavily on social media as an organizing tool. As Dr. Maria J. Stephan put it in

CONNECTION POINT: MOVING LIKE WATER IN BELARUS, TOO

Belarus’s ongoing protests against President Lukashenko has notably taken up Hong Kong’s innovation. Via Telegram, a media group called Nexta—which is run almost solely by a 22-year-old Belarusian blogger out of Poland—has facilitated much of the protest’s movements as it is happening. Nexta will drop a location and time perhaps just a half-day before the protest is set to begin, and as the protest progresses Nexta will update the marchers with the locations of the police, where best to turn in the city, and where to find safe houses and lawyers should the protest be dispersed. It also sets community guidelines for the protests, emphasizing nonviolence or sometimes telling the protesters to wear all white or carry flowers and balloons.⁵⁹

her article, “Five Myths about Protest Movements:”

[W]hile Facebook, Twitter and Instagram have made protesting easier and mobilization faster, social media has not necessarily helped activists build durable organizations or foster long-term planning. These structures were critical to helping the Polish Solidarity movement endure martial law in the early 1980s, and more recently, grassroots organizing helped the Sudanese popular movement survive violent crackdowns by government forces and paramilitary groups. Movements that lack such attributes are vulnerable.⁵⁴

Movements that rely too heavily on digital tools are also vulnerable to crackdown by more repressive regimes, who have proven willing and capable to shut down social media sites, or even the Internet altogether.

In all, protesting online through social media is important, but it’s not a shortcut. There is no replacement for doing the organizing legwork needed to build a durable, structure on the streets.

Artistic Expressions. In addition to building community, using art as protest can be an effective way to tactically help the protest sustain itself on the streets. Belarusians have used mass poetry readings, concerts, and public art reveals as ways to protest, while also confounding the police. The police forces have notably been more reluctant to break up such expressions because they aren’t sure whether what is happening in front of them is a rock concert or a demonstration against the government—or, usually, both.

In one infamous instance of protest art from Serbia’s Otpor movement in the 2000s against the country’s dictator Slobodan Milosevic,

protest leaders set up a barrel with Milosevic’s face painted on it and encouraged passers-by to hit it. A crowd of angered Serbs formed to hit the barrel, eventually attracting the eye of the police. Hitting a barrel was not technically illegal, but the police felt that they needed to do something to stop it—*so they arrested the barrel*. Photos of the arrest were so outlandish and absurd that the story rocketed around the world, humiliating the police and bringing new vigor to the protests.⁵⁵

Gender-Specific Tactics. Of the many reasons why it’s important for women leaders to be at the helm of protest movements—including the fact that women have organized more nonviolent campaigns for peace in the past decade than any other group⁵⁶—it also allows for a greater diversity of tactics. In Belarus, the ongoing protests against President Alexander Lukashenko have featured dedicated protests for grandmothers and pensioners every Monday,⁵⁷ along with protests dominated by women wearing white and carrying flowers and balloons.⁵⁸ Both have been notably met with very little resistance by police forces. And back in the US, the protests this summer were speckled with “Moms against police violence” marches. Especially in patriarchal societies, women have been able to subvert the narrative placed on them as precious and fragile things to be protected for the sake of their movement’s sustainability. To put it in blunt terms: no police officer wants to beat an old woman if he can avoid it.

PRINCIPLE: A BRIEF NOTE ON TACTIC DIVERSIFICATION

As we noted earlier, even though this chapter focuses predominantly on protests and other forms of direct action, there is reason to be wary of leaning too heavily on such tactics. In the wake of this era of mass mobilization enabled by social media and other digital technologies, experts have begun cautioning against an overreliance on marches, demonstrations, and other forms of direct action. To Professor Chenoweth:

In the digital age, such actions can draw participants in large numbers even without any structured organizing coalition to carry out advanced planning and coordination communication. But mass demonstrations are not always the most effective way of applying pressure to elites, particularly when they are not sustained over time. Other techniques of noncooperation, such as general strikes and stay-at-homes, can be much more disruptive to economic life and thus elicit more immediate concessions. It is often quiet, behind-the-scenes planning and organizing that enable movements to mobilize in force over the long term, and to coordinate and sequence tactics in a way that builds participation, leverage, and power.⁶⁰

As her note of warning suggests, it has become clear just how crucial it is to deploy a diverse array of tactics, sometimes at the same time. As Alán de León, an organizer with MoveTexas in Houston, put it:

Everyone is looking for opportunities to do something, and it's the organizer's job to create those opportunities. Maybe one person is willing to sign a petition, someone else is willing to show up at the mayor's house. You have to create those opportunities. . . . opportunities that fit people and their interests and how they want to get involved. And as you're doing that, you're building community power and strength that's needed to get strength and [the] respect of community officials.⁶¹

Per Alán's insight, when thinking about sustainability, organizers must create a variety of opportunities for mobilization. Protesters may no longer be willing or able to show up on the streets day after day, but they might be willing to cook meals or donate to bail support programs.

Experts at USIP identified this very dynamic as one of the key reasons the 2019 Sudanese revolution succeeded: "The protesters diversified tactics and alternated between methods that concentrated people in large numbers (sit-ins, marches, demonstrations) and marches that were spread out and dispersed (strikes, boycotts, stay-aways). Dispersed tactics made it more diffi-

cult for the Bashir regime to repress the movement.”⁶²

Central to the organizers’ strategy was a *willingness to reimagine what was possible for their protesters to do*. For instance, when the military finally agreed to negotiate with the protesters to transition to civilian rule, the protesters began acting as de facto investigators to determine which soldiers they found to be adequate negotiators—if they found that one soldier in particular had a particularly egregious track record or was not actually committed to the revolution, they would pressure their leaders to refuse to negotiate until that soldier had been blacklisted.⁶³

CONCLUSION

Mobilizing a protest is a complex, difficult, and treacherous exercise—sustaining one is an even steeper climb. However, there are some general principles and tools organizers can use to (1) keep their protests alive for as long as possible, and then (2) leverage the power of that protest to build a long-term, sustainable organizing apparatus that will give them the heft they need in the negotiating room to successfully assert their interests. Doing so requires careful planning, an understanding of both the movement and the political leadership’s relative capabilities and interests, and an eye for opportunity.



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