Nonviolent Struggle in Repressive Times:
Counter-Strategies for Persistent Resistance

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Nonviolent resistance entails a powerful set of tactics and strategies that have enabled people to achieve a wide array of victories – from human rights to racial justice to the end of authoritarian regimes and the onset of democracy. Yet, like all forms of fighting, nonviolent action entails risks – sometimes serious ones. We do know that nonviolent movements generally elicit less lethal repression than armed movements. In one study, 23% of nonviolent movements experienced a mass killing as compared to over 68% of armed movements (Chenoweth 2017). Nonetheless, nonviolent resisters still face a wide array of sanctions. Repression, in fact, is ubiquitous: in Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan's (2011) groundbreaking study, they found that of the 100+ nonviolent maximalist campaigns that took place in the 20th century, nearly 90% of them faced some degree of repression. In short, resistance will almost always provoke sanctioning measures.

We tend to assume that social movement repression is unequivocally negative. Certainly, state-sponsored repression can end a movement, as it did in China's Tiananmen Square democracy movement in 1989. It does so by raising the costs of participation, which causes some people to drop out and deters others from joining (Tilly 1978). We also know that sometimes repression can stop a movement by removing its key leaders – as in the case of the American Indian Movement (where most leaders were either incarcerated or killed) as well as in Nigeria's Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People when its leader, Ken Saro-Wiwa, was executed on trumped up charges (Nepstad and Bob 2006). Yet state repression sometimes backfires – that is, instead of thwarting a movement, it strengthens it (Hess and Martin 2006; Martin 2007). As people see repression inflicted on unarmed resisters, it can provoke moral outrage, which generates greater support. Some even feel compelled to join a movement since the repression exposes a state's brutality, accentuating how desperately change is needed and how it is not possible to work within the existing political system.

If state repression is inevitable, how can nonviolent resisters minimize its impact or even transform it to their advantage? What insights do research studies in this field offer us? In this presentation, I have three objectives. First, I will describe common methods of repression that governments and citizens use to stop movements. Second, I will discuss ways that activists can mute the impact of this repression in order to protect protesters and sustain the movement. Third, I will discuss how citizens can transform an act of repression to create the backfire dynamic, also known as political juijitsu (Sharp 1973) or the paradox of repression (Kurtz and Smithey 2018).

COMMON METHODS OF STATE REPRESSION

Researchers have documented the methods that governments use to undermine a movement's power or to demobilize it completely (Marx 1979). One of the most commonly used techniques is *creating an unfavorable image* of movement leaders and participants. This is done to discredit or delegitimize the movement, thereby undercutting its appeal to the broader public. For example, during the 1956 Montgomery bus boycott, which launched the U.S. civil rights movement, white segregationists spread rumors that Martin Luther King, Jr. and his co-leaders were pocketing donations and using the campaign to enrich themselves (King 1958). Years later, the U.S. government's Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) promoted rumors that King was having a sexual affair with another civil rights leader, Bayard Rustin, who was gay. In the 1960s, before the LGBTQI movement had challenged the stigma of homosexuality, this was explicitly done to damage King's moral credibility (D'Emilio 2003).

A second method of repression is *information gathering* about movement activists and plans. This happens through various mechanisms including wiretapping phones, accessing texts and emails, and sending informants to infiltrate and pose as movement activists. In recent years, information is increasingly collected through surveillance technologies. For example, during the recent Hong Kong protests, the state used facial recognition software to identify those attending demonstrations.

A third method of repression is the use of *provocateurs* to instigate violence during protests. This serves a dual purpose: it tarnishes the movement's image and it justifies a state crackdown. If resisters are destroying property, starting fires, or physically fighting with opponents, then the state can proclaim that punitive action was necessary to reinforce law and order. This has occurred in a wide range of cases. In Syria in 2011, at the height of the Arab Spring uprisings, the Assad regime purportedly left stashes of weapons in the most rebellious towns to entice opposition activists to take up arms (Chase 2021: 8). If the opposition began to fight the state with violence, the Syrian armed forces could justify taking military action against them. This gave the Syrian regime a strategic advantage since it had far more troops and significantly greater weaponry. Some protesters took the bait, leading to a civil war.

Provocateurs are not always agents of the state. Sometimes they are part of counter-movements. For instance, during the 2020 protests in Minneapolis – following the death of George Floyd at the hands of a police officer – there was a provocateur that became known as "umbrella man." Umbrella man was responsible for smashing windows at numerous businesses, starting fires, and inciting riots.

When he was finally arrested, it was discovered that he was part of a white supremacy group that was instigating violence in hopes of starting a race war.

A fourth method of repression is the use of infiltrators to *generate internal conflict*. Government infiltrators can create or exacerbate tensions within a movement over tactics and goals. They can pit personalities against one another and spread rumors. The result is that movements end up focusing so much on their internal conflicts that they are not able to successfully launch campaigns or sustain action over time. This occurred in the anti-Vietnam War movement, where infiltrators stoked divisions between activists who advocated for nonviolence and those who wanted to use more militant and violent methods. At one point, there was so much suspicion about who was an informant that it destroyed trust within the movement and damaged morale, making it difficult for the movement to persist.

A fifth technique is to *spread misinformation*. We are all aware that Russia has conducted a misinformation campaign on social media to sow dissent and partisan divisions among U.S. citizens, particularly during the 2016 presidential election. There are also groups throughout Europe and North America that have spread misinformation about Covid vaccines. Yet misinformation campaigns have also been used by governments to interfere with movement activities. Sociologist Gary Marx (1979: 105-106) described how, in the 1970s, the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation disrupted plans for large demonstrations in Chicago and Washington DC. March organizers used housing forms to match out-of-town protesters with local residents who were willing to offer them a place to stay. The FBI personnel submitted dozens of housing forms to the march organizers, filling in fictitious names and addresses. When the demonstrators arrived in town, they spent hours looking for addresses only to discover that they didn't exist and thus they had no housing. Sometimes FBI agents sometimes got highly creative with these misinformation campaigns. For instance, they had made plans (that were never actually executed) to interfere with a national convention of the Black Panther Party by sending false information to organizers that the donated food had been poisoned and the first signs of poisoning included stomach cramps. The FBI planned to inject fruit with a powerful laxative, prompting convention participants to leave in search of medical care, thereby ending the gathering.

The flip side of spreading misinformation is the *obstruction of accurate information* that the movement is trying to disseminate (Gohdes 2015). This constitutes a sixth method of repression. In Egypt in 2011, when civil resisters used Facebook and Twitter to announce upcoming actions, the state shut down the Internet. Today in Russia, President Putin's administration has blocked the use of social media in order to inhibit videos, photos, and information about the invasion of Ukraine.

A seventh method is to *remove leaders* in hopes that the movement would flounder without someone to guide it. This can occur through arrest (often on fabricated charges) and incarceration. Martin Luther King, Jr. was arrested during the Montgomery bus boycott on false charges of speeding and possessing an expired driver's license (King 1958). Sometimes, removing a leader entails assassination. During El Salvador's civil war, the military regime ordered the execution of Archbishop Oscar Romero, who spoke out forcefully against the state's human rights abuses and who called for land reform and civil liberties for the poor (Peterson 1996; Whelan 2020). More recently, we see this tactic being used against Russian political opposition leader, Alexey Navalny, who was poisoned. After he recovered in Germany and returned to Russia, he was imprisoned as a way to remove him from the public eye and to silence the person who was challenging government abuses.

METHODS OF CITIZEN REPRESSION

It isn't only the state that uses repression to stop movements. Individuals and citizen groups do as well. Myra Marx Ferree (2005) uses the term "soft repression" to depict how people can ridicule, stigmatize, silence, and spread rumors about activists to pressure them to desist. In the feminist movement, women who reported sexual harassment were often depicted as liars. Many of those who described their experiences of sexual harassment through the social media-based #MeToo movement have been mocked by trolls. Soft repression was also prevalent in 2016, when African-American football player Colin Kaepernick began to kneel instead of stand during the pre-game playing of the U.S. national anthem as part of the Black Lives Matter movement. Thousands ridiculed and shamed him in letters to the editor, in social media posts, and by carrying placards denouncing him during games. Rumors also spread rampantly, questioning if he was authentically Black (since he was raised by white parents). Yet many across the country followed his example, including high school athletes, who faced boos and jeers from spectators and classmates (Nepstad and Kinney 2018).

Not all citizen-based repression is soft, however. Often it can be brutal and vicious. The prime example of this is the vigilante violence that the Ku Klux Klan exercised against African-American civil rights activists (Cunningham 2013). We currently are seeing an increase in vigilante civilian groups at the U.S.-Mexico border who apprehend and sometimes assault migrants who have entered the country (Elcioglu 2015) or pour out jugs of water that have been left, thereby increasing the likelihood that migrants will die in the desert.

WHAT CAN BE DONE? COUNTERING REPRESSION

Fortunately, researchers have not merely documented the forms of repression that movement participants face; they have also documented strategies that mute the impact of such acts, thereby enabling civil resisters to persist. As protesters develop strategies to counter repression, they should keep in mind that the forms of repression are shaped by regime type, with democracies typically using "softer" methods while authoritarian regimes use harsher approaches. In other words, democratic states are more likely to engage in information

collection, damaging leaders' reputations, and planting provocateurs; authoritarian and hybrid regimes are more likely to engage in human rights abuses, mass arrests or killings, and declarations of martial law (Chenoweth, Perkoski, and Change 2017; Davenport and Armstrong 2004). Regardless of the form of repression, we do know that resisters can develop a "tool kit" of techniques to persist in the face of social control (Finkel 2015).

One of the earliest recommendations for minimizing the effects of repression was suggested by Robert Burrowes (1996). Burrowes proposed that when a state crackdown was imminent, civil resisters should *shift between tactics of concentration* (such as mass demonstrations, marches, or occupations of a square) *to tactics of dispersion* (such as boycotts or symbolic moments of silence). Tactics of concentration are useful to build solidarity and morale among protesters, to capture media coverage, and to visibly represent the extent of public support for the movement's goals. However, they also provide a ready target for crackdowns since resisters are geographically concentrated in one location. When repression is likely, resisters can cease demonstrations and shift to tactics where it is difficult to identify participants. A boycott, for example, is not readily repressed since it is virtually impossible to determine who is participating and it is hard to justify an attack on someone for simply exercising their consumer preferences. A related strategy is to hold "lightning actions" whereby people engage in a protest for a very brief time – typically a matter of several minutes – and then disperse. This means that security forces to do not have sufficient time to make arrests. By the time they arrive at the scene, activists have already disbanded and blended back into normal pedestrian traffic.

A second counter-strategy is to have strong but decentralized/horizontal movement organization and leadership. Researchers have documented that state repression is less effective against well-organized movements (Sutton, Butcher, Svensson 2014). Yet centrally organized movements are easier to repress since the leadership is easily identifiable and thus easily targeted. Indeed, influential movement leaders are often the target of assassination attempts – such as Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Archbishop Oscar Romero – since movement opponents believe that killing such leaders would demoralize activists and undermine the movement's capacity for strategic planning and campaign implementation (Bob and Nepstad 2007). The best strategy is to have horizontal, dispersed leadership so resistance can continue if one segment of a movement is immobilized. For example, the Otpor movement that ousted Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic had activist chapters throughout the nation. It started as a student movement, concentrated at Serbia's four universities. Yet students would regularly return to their hometowns, located throughout the country, and recruit non-students to join. This led to the emergence of Otpor Mothers, who wanted to support their children's political engagement. In addition, Otpor took action so that the authorities could not identify leaders. As one researcher noted, "While a team of Otpor activists in Belgrade made key strategic decisions, it was hidden from the public eye. Instead, Otpor rotated its spokespeople each fortnight without compromising the consistency of its political message. This tactic baffled authorities, who were accustomed to co-opting, dividing, or discrediting a handful of opposition political leaders" (Nikolayenko 2012: 150). Later, when state authorities began arresting student organizers in the capital city of Belgrade, they thought

the movement would end. The decentralized nature of the movement enabled activists in other regions to continue their struggle.

A third component of the resisters' toolkit is *preparing for arrest, interrogation, and imprisonment*. Again, we can learn from the example of Otpor. Knowing that they would be arrested, activists prepared one another to counter fear of the unknown. Therefore, when the initial arrests were made and activists were eventually released, those individuals came back and shared every detail they could. They explained the process – from being handcuffed, finger printed, to having their belts and shoe laces removed and being interrogated. They explained the questions they were asked and provided answers that activists should use. One Otpor leader explained:

> [The interrogators] ask you the exact same questions: Who is Otpor's leader? How is Otpor organized? Where does Otpor get its money? "Otpor is a leaderless movement," we told people to say, and "Otpor is organized in every neighborhood," and "Otpor is financed by the Serbian diaspora and ordinary people who want us to live in freedom." When the table banging began, all you have to do is remember those three lines. The whole thing was a lot like being in a high school play…" (Popovic 2015: 132).

In addition, when an activist was arrested, Otpor's network rapidly mobilized. Movement supporters gathered outside the jail, chanting the names of those being detained, handing out cookies and flowers to the jail staff, while the mothers and grandmothers politely asked police why they were beating their children. In small towns, parents would call the spouse of the local police chief, asking for the student's release, or they would post pictures in local businesses of jail guards who were particularly brutal (Popovic 2015). Such initiatives communicated to the state that its actions were being monitored by and exposed to the broader public.

A fourth counter-strategy is to *deal with infiltrators or provocateurs* who instigate street fighting, riots, and property destruction. Addressing provocateurs can be sensitive. Too much suspicion creates distrust, undermining movement unity. Yet ignoring the problem allows the provocateurs to carry out their mission. The solution here is to maintain nonviolent discipline, which is essential during repressive events. As Sutton, Butcher, and Svensson found (2014) in their study, one-sided attacks by the state backfired 43% of the time when the movement was well-organized and refrained from any counter violence. So how is this achieved? Steve Chase (2021) recommends that all movement campaigns incorporate the use of trained peacekeepers, who identify individuals engaged in escalating behavior and use various techniques to de-escalate the situation. This can include physically surrounding the provocateurs so that they cannot launch an attack. Chase also suggests explicitly debunking rhetoric about the value of riots and property destruction (often promoted, for example, by antifa or black bloc groups). He further recommends establishing a clear code of conduct before any action. As Sterling (2020) has written:

> In the end, there may well be some people whom you never figure out are infiltrators until long after everything is over. The best solution to the problem of the unknown

infiltrator is not to distrust everyone, but rather to avoid this potentially disastrous tension altogether by adopting and enforcing a clear code of conduct for all participants. If you isolate people who refuse to maintain your agreed upon security protocols or who break your code of conduct, then you will have effectively defeated the enemy in your camp (quoted in Chase 2021).

Fifth, activists can help avoid repression by *building relationships with security forces*, which may undermine their willingness to carry out orders to crack down. This is one reason why lethal repression did not happen earlier in China's Tiananmen Square protests. Activists made intentional efforts to reach out to police, calling for their support. Initially, it worked well as police joined in protests on occasion and did not offer much resistance when students pushed through barricades during their marches. In fact, when the Chinese Communist Party became aware that it would be difficult to stage a crackdown since so the loyalty of so many security force officers had been compromised, they intentionally brought in new troops from Mongolia. The Mongolian soldiers had not been exposed to any information about the democracy movement. Moreover, since they did not speak the same dialect, protesters were unable to appeal to them (Nepstad 2011). The Mongolian troops were the ones who ultimately carried out the violent attack that ended the movement.

A sixth counter-strategy is to *obstruct surveillance technology through disguise*. In the recent Hong Kong protests, the state deemed any protest as an act of illegal assembly. Face recognition software was used to identify those who participated in protests so they could be arrested and prosecuted. Activists came up with creative ways to remain anonymous and avoid identification. To ensure that their faces were not visible, they began carrying umbrellas, wearing masks, or balaclavas (Ullrich and Knopf 2018). It was so effective that Hong Kong authorities subsequently passed a mask ban.

Finally, resisters can amplify incidents of repression to *generate a backfire effect*. Backfire is "a public reaction of outrage to an event that is publicized and perceived as unjust" (Hess and Martin 2006: 249). This outrage can prompt international condemnation of a repressive state and shift public opinion in favor of protesters. In other words, skilled resisters can use repressive "transformative events" to expose the regime's brutality, to bring international pressure to bear on the regime, and to win public support. Thus, repressive actions, which were intended to demobilize a movement, can have the paradoxical effect of strengthening opposition.

Yet a repressive event does not automatically generate public outrage. In order for the backfire dynamic to occur, three conditions are necessary: 1) witnesses must perceive the repression as unfair, excessive, and disproportional (not a legitimate use of force); 2) information about the repression has to be communicated to audiences that have enough influence and power so that their outrage can have an impact; and 3) civil resisters must effectively counter the state's propaganda. Regarding the first points, civil resisters must ensure that information about the crackdown is disseminated widely – particularly to international journalists and influential groups. This has become easier as most people have smart phones,

enabling them to take photos and videos and spread them to others via social media, email, and text messages. If the state has placed restrictions on social media, as it often does in authoritarian contexts, then activists must overcome these barriers. One example of this is that international supporters are offering VPNs (virtual private networks) to Russian opposition activists so that they can access alternative information about the war in Ukraine and Russia's violations of the Geneva Convention.

Even if information and video footage of a repressive event is successfully disseminated, the government responsible for such atrocities will attempt to censor this information, cover it up, or spin it as a legitimate use of force. Government authorities will undertake a propaganda effort to justify their actions. Fortunately, there are numerous ways that civil resisters can counter this and promote public condemnation. Hess and Martin (2006) offer us an overview – summarized in Table 1 below – of common regime maneuvers as well as activists' methods of promoting backfire.

Table 1: State Techniques Used to Inhibit Backfire and Activist Responses

State Techniques Used to Inhibit Public Outrage	Examples	Activist Methods of Promoting Public Outrage
Information cover-up	Censorship, confiscation of information	Communicate videos and evidence to media through journalism, social media
Devaluing the target	Depicting victims as liars, criminals, thugs, etc.	Humanization through personal stories
Reinterpretation	Spinning the facts	Presenting credible witnesses, revealing interests of repressive elites
Official channels of investigation	Formal inquiries, official statements	Independent parallel inquiries; exposing biases
Intimidation and bribery of witnesses	Threats, arrests, attacks	Continued action, initiatives by third parties

These dynamics are clear in the Black Lives Matter movement's effort to address police brutality against African-Americans. Often, few details about black citizens' deaths are released to the public; sometimes officials merely issue a statement that the person died in police custody, thereby covering up critical pieces of information. Additionally, police representatives often spin the situation, stating that the apprehended individual had resisted or threatened the police officers' lives, thereby justifying the use of lethal force. This occurred in 2016, when 25-year-old Freddie Gray was arrested in Baltimore. The police stated that Gray was arrested for possession of an illegal switchblade. They also blamed the victim, claiming that Gray ran away unprovoked when he saw the police. Black Lives Matter activists effectively countered this

information, providing evidence that the knife Gray carried was legal and noting that there is no law against running; therefore, there was no legitimate reason to arrest Gray. In addition, Baltimore police claimed that Gray was apprehended peacefully. Countering this cover-up, the Black Lives Matter movement released a video, taken by bystanders, that showed Mr. Gray was forcibly placed in a hold, that six police officers used excessive force, and that Mr. Gray was screaming and begging for medical intervention. They also presented witness accounts that the arresting officers had failed to safely secure Mr. Gray in the transport van, placing him in a position that led to a lethal spinal injury (Kerrison, Cobina, and Bender 2018). The medical examiner's report indicated that 80 percent of Mr. Gray's spine had been severed at his neck. This information – disseminated by activists – elicited public outrage since it clearly showed that the repressive force was excessive and unfair since Freddie Gray had not committed any crime. This unleashed the backfire dynamic, prompting widespread protests and calls for major reforms in policing. Similarly, when George Floyd was killed by a Minneapolis police officer in 2020, information was released that devalued Floyd. The police noted that Floyd had had previously spent time in prison for armed robbery and drug possession. They tried to depict Floyd as a dangerous criminal who had to be handled forcefully. Their propaganda effort did not work. The police officers' disregard for Floyd's humanity galvanized public outrage because the video of his arrest revealed that Floyd was not posing a threat to the officers; on the contrary, he clearly stated that he could not breath and cried out for his mother. The public could see with their own eyes that police officers' actions were completely disproportionate to Floyd's alleged crime of using a counterfeit $20 to purchase goods at a store.

CONCLUSION

Nonviolent activists can expect to experience repression whenever their movement poses a real challenge to authorities. Over time, protesters have developed savvy strategies, built coalitions of supporters, learned to work effectively with the media, and have engaged in creative tactical innovation. Yet governments and counter-movement activists have also had a steep learning curve and they have become more skilled at inhibiting and obstructing social movements. Agents of repression have developed new surveillance technologies and continue to implement tried-and-true methods that have been used for centuries – such as misinformation campaigns, planting provocateurs, arrests and incarceration, and direct violence. Therefore, it is essential that nonviolent resisters view their mission not as a one-sided struggle but rather as a chess game. They need to strategically plan and carry out offensive action. They also need to anticipate their opponents' moves, developing a toolkit to pre-empt punishments, minimize or avoid sanctions, and generate the backfire dynamic. By reviewing the research on this topic, we can see that there are effective methods that enable resisters to sustain nonviolent action during periods of repression.

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