

Get ready for repression

Living and resisting in a repressive society

The Australian government is introducing laws to detain people without charge and imprison anyone who speaks out about it. You want to exercise free speech — but now it seems much riskier. This leaflet gives ideas for preparing for and resisting repression.

This material is intended for activists, protesters, whistleblowers, civil libertarians, artists and others who are engaging in conduct that should be protected by rights of free speech, assembly and association. It is built on principles of nonviolent action as pioneered by Gandhi and developed by many others. As such, it is oriented to defending against repression and helping to build a more humane, tolerant world.

The key messages here are:

- prepare for attack
- build strong networks

Most of the suggestions here are worthwhile even if you never come under attack.

Many of the ideas here are fairly general. You need to work out your own detailed plans.

Back up your files

Government agents could at any time raid your house or premises, possibly confiscating your computers and paper files. Therefore it is wise to make copies of anything that is vital to you or others, in particular anything that could not be easily replaced. The aim here is not to hide material but to protect it from complete destruction.

For paper files, make several copies and give or post them to people you trust. Don't tell anyone who you've given them to.

For electronic files, do the same. For single files, emailing them to a whole network is good protection. For larger amounts of material, you could hand-deliver or post CDs. Out-of-the-country back-up is worth considering.

Be sure to label everything well. Sorting through a pile of CDs and hundreds of files is no fun.

It's okay to tell people that you've backed up your files in these ways. The process is open. Only the details of implementation are confidential.

You could tell your recipients that if anything happens to you, they should immediately make further back-ups.

Think about it from a recipient's point of view. Make it as easy as possible for them. An emailed file every day is probably too much.

Maybe once a fortnight. Or a CD every few months.

Make plans for distributing information

If you are threatened, arrested or incapacitated, you may want to make sure that certain information is communicated to others. For example, you might want documents released to family, personal networks or the general public. If so, make plans. You could arrange with a friend to send emails or post material on the web in specified circumstances.

Communicating your arrest and detention

If you are arrested, you may or may not wish to alert others.

Australian terror laws will make it a crime for anyone to tell others that you've been arrested. The intention of the laws is to prevent terrorists coordinating their attacks. But you, in contrast, are engaged only in peaceful activities. Your purpose is therefore to alert others to reassure them of your safety and — if they wish — to protest against your treatment.

If you are arrested, switch on your mobile phone to automatically and silently dial an emergency number. Leave the connection open as long as you can.

In case you can make a call, decide beforehand on a code to communicate whatever message is important. It could be something that you say, such as "Don't worry" which means "Please protest on my behalf." Or it could be something that you don't say.

Memorise several crucial phone numbers in case you have a choice about who to ring.

You might arrange with someone to have a separate phone, used for no other purpose. If it rings, it means you've been arrested.

If you anticipate arrest, you could set up a routine by which you communicate to certain individuals every day, by phone or email. If your supporter does not receive a message, it becomes a signal for them to track you down and, if no one knows where you are, assume that you've been arrested. Only do this if you are a highly reliable person! If you go on trips without telling anyone, you could cause a false alarm.

If you think arrest is imminent, keep a friend with you at all times — someone who will raise the alarm if you are attacked.

Be known

You are safer the more you are known through diverse networks, including family, friends, co-workers and groups such as churches and clubs. Tell key people about your plans and routines, so they will be alert if anything happens to you and prepared to follow through with your plans.

Support for you

Make arrangements in advance for legal support, in case you need it. You can contact lawyers yourself or make sure you know someone who can do it for you when necessary.

You might need money. It's wise to have a financial reserve in case of emergency. You might arrange with friends to set up a "bust fund," with a bank account and standard operating procedures to resist the attack on you or your friends.

Make arrangements for others to protest if you are arrested, assaulted or attacked in other ways. Supporters might organise rallies, produce and distribute leaflets, circulate petitions, send emails and contact the media, both mainstream and alternative. Action could be taken within Australia and/or internationally.

If protesting on your behalf puts people at risk themselves, it might be better for action to be taken by someone with public standing, such as a priest or minister, a member of parliament or local government official. Reprisals against such people are less likely because of their formal positions and visibility.

Speaking out

If you want to tell others about your experiences but doing this opens you to attack, lay the groundwork carefully. Make a detailed record of everything relevant that happened, and make sure others have copies. Then write a short summary, in whatever style suits you, and obtain feedback in making it both accurate and readable.

When you're ready to go public, use whatever channels you have available to reach your target audience. You can use email and the web directly. You can contact media. Someone else may be willing to circulate your message.

Dealing with surveillance

If agents want to find out what you're saying, writing or doing, they have incredible technology. They can track you electronically through phone conversations, financial transactions, use of toll roads and closed-circuit television cameras. They can tap your phone and even detect what you are saying through vibrations on a window pane. They can remotely detect every keystroke on your computer. They

can install bugs through your phone. They can break into your house and car and install bugs. They can assign agents to follow you. They can infiltrate your group.

It sounds pretty bad but it's very unlikely. Despite large budgets, intelligence agencies simply do not have the resources to carry out high-intensity surveillance of lots of people. Unless you're very high profile or considered a serious threat, it's unlikely that you're under surveillance. There are lots of people who *think* they're under surveillance but who aren't.

Surveillance can be damaging but probably worse is being apprehensive. If you censor yourself out of fear, you save the authorities the trouble of doing so!

Often a better approach is to be as open as you can in all your communicating and organising. Forget about surveillance and get on with life. The more open you are, the less anyone can reasonably suspect you of nefarious activities.

Nevertheless, it can be worthwhile taking some commonsense steps.

A basic rule is to only write things — for example in an email — that would not be damaging if publicised — or read out in court. For sensitive comments, use the phone or a personal conversation. These are far less likely to be recorded.

If you want to send confidential information, use a pre-arranged code or encryption.

(Even if you have nothing to hide, you can help others by using encryption occasionally, for part of your hard disc and for some emails. If more people use encryption, then those who need to use it will be less conspicuous.)

If you want to ring someone without a record back to you, use a public phone, or use a mobile phone that can't be traced back to you. If you want to send an unsourced email, use anonymous remailers. Another option is to go to a cybercafe — one not too close to your home or work — set up a new email account, send your messages and pay in cash. The key is to avoid creating any electronic record linked to you.

Secrecy breeds distrust. Therefore, whenever possible, it's better to do things openly, because it builds trust with both supporters and opponents.

Know what to expect

If you come under unfair attack, the government is likely to use these techniques to minimise outrage:

- hide its actions;
- damage your reputation;
- give misleading explanations for the action;

- say that it is acting according to the law;
- threaten or otherwise intimidate you and anyone who wants to help you.

To counter these techniques, and maximise outrage, you can:

- expose the actions;
- behave honestly and sensibly, and have others vouch for you;
- explain exactly what is unfair about what happened;
- mobilise support (rather than using the law or other formal procedures);
- resist and expose intimidation.

Suppose you're arrested even though you've done nothing wrong. The government will probably try to keep this secret. If so, exposing the arrest is a powerful challenge.

You are likely to be labelled a criminal, subversive or terrorist. You need to have your good record and behaviour publicised. If you are opposed to violence, put that on the record. If you have a good record at work, make sure others have copies of relevant documents.

Make your beliefs — for example a commitment to free speech and nonviolence — known. Write down your ideas and give copies to others. If your core beliefs are well known and documented, it's harder to discredit you.

You also should try to behave decently. Even though you've been wronged and put under

terrible stress, it is counterproductive to swear, yell or fight. The more dignified you behave and appear, the more the government's attack on you will backfire.

Keep the focus on the key injustice. It's tempting to tell the full history of your treatment, with every complication. That's understandable, but you will communicate more effectively by keeping your story short and to the point.

It's also tempting to pursue justice through official channels such as grievance procedures or courts. This almost always reduces outrage, because people assume that official channels provide justice, even though a single person opposing the government has little hope of success. Using grievance procedures, courts and other official mechanisms takes the matter out of the public eye, puts it in the hands of legal and other experts, and chews up enormous amounts of time and money — even when you are lucky enough to win down the track. It's far more effective to mobilise support.

Finally, you need to face up to intimidation. Sometimes it's wise to acquiesce and survive to struggle another day. But if you can resist intimidation, then you may be able to make the government's attack backfire.

For more material on dealing with repression, see
<http://www.uow.edu.au/arts/sts/bmartin/dissent/documents/rr/>

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Thanks to many readers for helpful comments.
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Further comments welcome to improve this document.