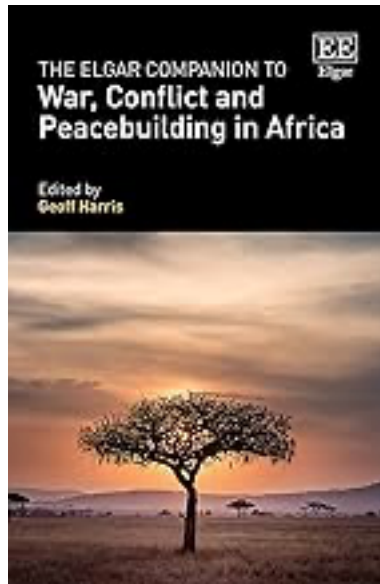


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12. Nonviolent security: an alternative to African militaries

Brian Martin

12.1 INTRODUCTION

African military forces are a terrible burden in economic, political and social terms. Is there an alternative?

Colonialism in Africa created many changes, among them the system of states and militaries (Davidson 1992). As is well known, the continent is divided into a patchwork of countries, each protected by armies. But, after independence from colonial rulers, few of the armies have ever been used to defend against an attack by a foreign power. More commonly, they oppress the people in their own countries, and sometimes subvert elected governments. One of the legacies of colonialism is military coups and civil wars (Francis 2017).

To address these dysfunctions, recommendations include professionalising the army and making it responsive to civilian control (Eriksson 2018; Hounnikpo 2012). Professionalisation means improving training, using a merit system for promotion, and behaving according to principles rather than personal loyalties, the most important principle being support for the elected government and honest electoral rules, rather than loyalty to particular individuals or ethnic groups. When troops, especially commanders, are professional in this sense, they will focus on genuine security threats, including foreign enemies and domestic terrorism, rather than repressing the population and serving partisan political agendas.

Professionalisation sounds worthwhile, but it does not eliminate the driving forces behind war and repression. Indeed, the promised outcomes of professionalisation include more highly skilled troops and the acquisition of more advanced weapons systems. This does not address two fundamental problems. First, a potent military force can appear to threaten other states, leading to arms races. Second, a more professional military force can still engage in repressive actions, stage coups and be used against civilian challenges to the government.

12.2 UNDERSTANDING STATES

Charles Tilly is one of the foremost scholars of the emergence of states, which occurred in Europe in tandem with the rise of capitalism and regular military forces (Tilly 1992). In a provocative chapter titled 'War making and state making as organized crime' Tilly (1985) shows the relevance of the idea of a protection racket.

Organised criminals come to a business owner and say, 'We'll protect your premises from theft and arson, but you need to pay us regularly to maintain our protection.' The racket is that the only threat to the business is from the criminals themselves, who are extorting payment with the implied threat of harm. Tilly writes, 'If protection rackets represent organized crime at its smoothest, then war making and state making – quintessential protection rackets with the advantage of legitimacy – qualify as our largest examples of organized crime' (1985: 169). Tilly alludes to the legitimacy of the state and military. Classic sociologist Max Weber defined the state as an entity with a monopoly over legitimate violence within a territory, and in most countries both the state – the government and related institutions – and the military are seen as needed and deserving of their role and power, in other words having legitimacy. This is in contrast with criminals, who are in defiance of the law. Tilly is saying that the state and military are akin to criminals, because they operate protection rackets. But how this can be judged? Perhaps protection is needed against real threats. Tilly: 'To the extent that the threats against which a given government protects its citizens are imaginary or are consequences of its own activities, the government has organized a protection racket' (1985: 171). If there are no real external threats of aggression, they are imaginary, typically by being hyped through media management. Or perhaps there are some real external threats due to the existence of foreign militaries, but those militaries are only there to defend against a country's own military. In other words, having a military establishment can cause alarm and military build-ups elsewhere, providing a rationale for having a military. In Tilly's terms, a military in this case is protecting its population from threats that are the consequences of its own activities, namely, posing a threat to others, and thus qualifies as a protection racket.

Tilly develops his analogy between war-making and organised crime through an examination of the European experience. In addition, he comments that the states created by decolonisation usually lack the internal forging of mutual constraints between rulers and the ruled that prevails in areas that were never colonised. In such states, military organisation can overwhelm other forms of organisation, and this is what is found throughout much of Africa.

In his book *Ethics, security, and the war machine*, Ned Dobos (2020) provides a provocative argument questioning whether it is worthwhile having a military at all, arguing that this should be considered a pragmatic matter, not dependent on a commitment to pacifism. There are many downsides to having a military, even beyond coups and repression. One of them is turning civilian issues, such as climate change, into military issues. Another is the militarisation of everyday life, for example education, so that people start thinking about using soldiers for a range of duties, such as disaster response, construction and poverty relief.

Dobos acknowledges that militaries have a potential role in defending against an invasion but argues this isn't the most common use of armies. He provides an analogy: torture. Most experts say that torture is seldom the most effective way to extract information. Nevertheless, there might be some rare occasions, like the ticking time bomb scenario, when torture might help obtain information to prevent the bomb from going off. But just because torture might sometimes be useful is not

a justification for setting up a torture-industrial system and training an entire corps in the latest torture techniques. Doing this would be a prescription for using torture more commonly, in non-urgent circumstances, well outside the ticking time bomb sorts of cases where it can be justified. Dobos says that just as it would be unwise to set up a torture system for those rare occasions when torture might be useful, it can be unwise to have military forces just for rare occasions when they might have a valid function.

Imagine that Africa, instead of adopting the colonial models of states and militaries, had followed a different path, building on local traditions of conflict resolution and promoting self-reliance economically. This is hard to imagine but it is also hard to imagine things turning out worse.

But if it is unwise to set up military forces because they are so seldom needed for defence against external aggression, does that mean having no defence whatsoever? Without a military, what is to stop a potential aggressor from walking in and taking over? In fact, there are quite a few small countries without armies. Costa Rica is the poster case, having abolished its army in 1948. Despite most of its neighbours being involved in bloody civil wars – think of El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala – Costa Rica has avoided war and has been prosperous (Booth 2018).

But there is more that can be done to deter and resist aggression – without a military. Citizens can be prepared to resist without violence.

12.3 SOCIAL DEFENCE

For over a century, a few thinkers, researchers and activists have pursued the idea of replacing military defence with an unarmed citizen defence system. This has been called various names, including nonviolent defence, civilian defence, civilian-based defence, social defence and defence by civil resistance. The basic idea is that a society, or community, would defend against aggression without using violence (Boserup and Mack 1974; Burrowes 1996; Johansen and Martin 2019; Roberts 1967; Sharp 1990).

To many people who are familiar with military systems, it seems absurd to imagine that unarmed citizens could somehow resist a determined army. Yet this is exactly what's involved, and there is evidence suggesting that it could work, at least as well as military defence. After all, in wars, one side always loses. Militaries don't always win, so we shouldn't expect nonviolent resisters to always win.

Let's examine what might be involved in defending against a foreign military invasion. To appreciate how this might work, we need to specify the purpose of the invasion. Is it to take over a territory and use it to exploit natural resources? Is it to subdue the population, or a portion of it? Is it part of an ideological expansion, to serve political or religious beliefs?

If there is no armed resistance, then an invading army can easily move throughout the country. But what next? If the people keep doing their jobs and living their lives as before, despite the presence of foreign soldiers, then what? The usual idea is that

invaders take over the government and media and then start running the country for their own purposes. But for this to happen, people have to obey. If they refuse to cooperate, they can make things very difficult for the invaders.

Consider a mining operation using local workers. Invaders might want to take it over, but they need the workers, equipment and administrative apparatus to run the operation. So what might local workers and managers do to resist? They could go on strike, withdrawing their labour, but the invaders might install new managers and hire new workers. However, this wouldn't work if the entire population supported the resistance. Next, the invaders might threaten the workers, or their families, to induce them to return to the job. What next? Another option is to disable or slow down the operation. There are various ways to disable machinery, for example by removing components from motors or putting sand in petrol tanks. Perhaps the mine could be 'accidentally' flooded. Depending on what is being mined, the product could be contaminated. There are various options, and the best people to decide how to proceed are the workers themselves.

In a social defence system, plans would be made in advance. Preparations might include making the operation vulnerable to breakdown, if needed. But there is much more. Decisions need to be made about how to resist, so decision-making procedures need to be planned, and appropriate communication channels and protocols prepared. If some crucial workers are likely to be coerced, plans could be made for them and their families to disappear from the scene, being hidden within supportive networks.

Most businesses process lots of information about production levels, spare parts inventory, sales contracts and the like. An invader might bring in foreign workers and managers, but they would be hampered if computer and paper files were missing or falsified. Many businesses would be brought to a near halt without computers and related support. Again, preparing to resist would involve careful plans and training to make life as difficult as possible for invaders.

What if potential invaders knew about these plans? Any defence system needs to be designed assuming that spies could obtain confidential information. The solution is to make the general plans public, which means the plans need to be effective even if they are known. There is nothing unusual about this. Aside from operational details, most governments do not hide their weapons purchases or deployments because their capabilities serve as a form of deterrence. Similarly, in a social defence system, the existence of preparations would be publicised, so any potential aggressor would be aware of the likelihood of resistance.

Being prepared to thwart an aggressor's ability to take over mining, manufacturing, communication and other aspects of the economy is one part of social defence. Perhaps even more important is undermining the willingness of enemy troops to undertake their duties. Soldiers are trained to use violence against other military forces. They are not systematically trained to use violence against civilians, and many would refuse to do so.

One way to undermine soldier loyalty is simply to talk with them and seek to convince them that they shouldn't be joining an attack on civilians. This process is called fraternisation. In 1968, the Soviet Union launched an invasion of

Czechoslovakia to crush the emergence of a more humanistic version of socialism. Many of the half million soldiers entering Czechoslovakia had been told they were there to stop a capitalist takeover. When told by Czechoslovak resisters that they too were socialists, many of the soldiers became ‘unreliable’: they might refuse orders. Soviet military commanders brought in troops who did not speak Russian and therefore could not so easily be persuaded to disobey (Windsor and Roberts 1969).

Czechoslovaks had learned Russian in school and thus were prepared to talk to Russian soldiers. This example shows the importance of what might be called ‘cultural preparation’. In a country without an army, it is important that citizens be aware of potential threats and know what they can do to prepare for them by acquiring knowledge, practising skills and building networks. Acquiring knowledge includes learning foreign languages, learning about foreign cultures and maintaining awareness of foreign political and military developments. Practising skills includes participating in role-plays of trying to persuade foreign soldiers or politicians, joining simulations for responding in an emergency by shutting down production or refusing cooperation, and testing capacities to see through disinformation and counter it. Building networks includes making connections with citizens from other countries – especially ones from which a threat might emerge – through common interests in sports, music, religion, education and other areas.

These are a few examples of what might be involved for citizens in a social defence system. Just as soldiers need to be well trained to be effective, so too do civilians need training to become effective nonviolent defenders. This training could start in childhood and continue through life. One of the advantages of nonviolent methods is that nearly everyone can participate in some way, for example in rallies, occupations and boycotts. This is unlike armed struggle, which gives prime roles to young fit men.

There is another important factor – technology. Armies are made up of soldiers, of course, but they need weapons. More than individual weapons like rifles, armies need weapons systems, such as the various systems of production, maintenance, supply and operation of aircraft, missiles and tanks, the training to use them effectively and the coordination to deploy them against enemies.

In a social defence system, technologies are just as important, but they are quite different. One consideration is vulnerability to attack. A large energy-related facility – an oil refinery, power station, a giant dam – can be targeted by an enemy or terrorists. Technology policy for social defence should prioritise reducing such vulnerabilities (Martin 2001). Energy efficiency, low energy use and local renewable energy systems offer fewer targets of significance. So does a transport system built around cycling and walking. An agriculture system built around organic farming techniques with little need for artificial fertilisers, pesticides and genetically modified crops will be less vulnerable to attack via interruption of supplies. Technological systems like these for energy, transport and agriculture, and for other sectors, make society less vulnerable in several ways. They reduce the number of prime targets for any foreign aggressor, and similarly the number of targets for terrorists. They make communities more self-reliant and thus better able to survive efforts to subdue resistance by cutting

off vital supplies. They also make communities less attractive for takeover because it is more difficult to extract surplus. For example, imported fuels can be taxed through import duties; energy-efficient buildings cannot be. The upshot is that efforts to promote appropriate technology and build self-reliance are perfectly matched to build resilience against attack.

This sort of analysis can be continued through other sectors of society, including health, water supply, research, communications and decision-making. In nearly every area, promoting self-reliance, independence and local skills make a community better able to defend against aggression and survive attempts to subjugate it.

Why, it might be asked, haven't governments taken up the challenge to support their citizenry to develop the skills useful for nonviolent defence against aggression? One explanation is that these skills can also be used against the governments themselves. In Africa, most people are in far greater danger from their own militaries than from foreign aggressors. Also, nonviolent methods can be used against employers, and most African governments – like most governments worldwide – have close connections with major corporations. If workers are able and willing to shut down production or to take it over and run it without bosses, this serves a double function, defending against foreign aggression and resisting exploitative business owners and managers.

Here's a way of thinking about why governments are highly unlikely to take steps to promote social defence. A government, to maintain its own power, needs to disempower its own citizens, so they do not have the resources and skills to resist the government, and it needs to convince citizens that the government is their protector. It disempowers citizens by limiting their decision-making role and by not training them in skills of resistance, and it tries to convince them that the government is their protector by raising alarms about threats from enemies, whether foreign or domestic.

Whatever the best explanation for why governments are unlikely to promote social defence, what is observable is that few governments have ever made substantial steps towards it. Only a few have instituted inquiries and even fewer have encouraged training for citizen resistance to aggression, and even then only as a supplement to armed resistance. Gene Sharp, the leading theorist of nonviolent action (Sharp 1973), tried for years to convince US military and government leaders to introduce civilian-based defence because it is superior to military defence (Sharp 1990), but had minimal impact.

The lesson from this analysis and experience is to not expect governments to introduce social defence, nor any other steps that might increase the capacity of the citizenry to resist repression. Instead, it is more realistic to expect that governments will be indifferent or hostile to social defence, and therefore sensible to look for support elsewhere. But where?

The most promising avenues are initiatives that build people's capacity to resist aggression and repression, and that provide support to communities to be able to survive. The starting point is existing campaigns and movements whose goals are aligned with what a social defence system might look like. Consider environmental campaigns, specifically on climate change. When they aim at greater energy effi-

ciency and small-scale local energy production, they build a community's capacity to survive in the face of a takeover or terrorist attack targeting large-scale energy facilities. Similarly, campaigns against large dams and massive mining operations reduce a society's vulnerability.

Education is important, especially education that offers understanding of political realities and alternatives, that focuses on people's struggles, and that reveals the power of nonviolent action. Learning about other cultures, and how to engage with them, is highly relevant. Empowerment through learning, in the tradition of Paulo Freire (1972), fits perfectly with moving in the direction of social defence. Also important is learning how to deal with propaganda, disinformation and media agendas.

Communication and decision-making are crucial to social defence. Many activists already know the importance of being able to communicate in ways that avoid surveillance. So are skills in a variety of ways of communicating in case, for example, the government shuts down the Internet, filters messages or tracks social media posts.

Most of all, participation in nonviolent action provides vital experience that is directly relevant to resisting repression. It is the closest thing available to training in civilian resistance, the analogue to military training.

12.4 AFRICAN EXPERIENCE

One of the keys to the capacity of a social defence system is people's experience in resisting aggression and repression. There is plenty of this in Africa. The most well-known campaigns are the decades-long struggle against apartheid in South Africa (Lodge 2009; Zunes 1994; 1999) and the overthrow of the Egyptian ruler Mubarak in 2011, inspired by the uprising that ousted Tunisia's ruler a few weeks earlier. There are many other African nonviolent campaigns against repressive rulers, exploitative companies, corruption, discrimination and environmental damage (Abbs 2020; Ettang 2014; George-Williams 2006; Roberts et al. 2016). Both successful and unsuccessful campaigns were struggles against tyranny that relied primarily on nonviolent methods, and they provided valuable skills and experience to all the participants. The skills included organising campaigns, winning over supporters, standing up in the face of danger, making collective decisions, and communicating with allies, opponents and wider audiences. Not every participant develops every skill, but the campaigns provide a solid basis for repeating and improving future efforts. Perhaps the most important aspect of these campaigns is psychological. They vividly show that nonviolent resistance against governments backed by police and troops is possible and, furthermore, can be successful.

Social defence can be considered as a planned programme designed to prepare for responding to military aggression and repression without arms. The main difference between social defence and the many nonviolent campaigns is the level of planning and preparation.

This can be likened to the difference between fighting fires and building a fire-resistant community. Being able to respond to actual fires is important, but even more important is designing buildings to reduce fire danger, installing fire extinguishers, running fire drills and promoting habits (like not smoking in bed) that reduce the risk of fire. This is the difference between emergency response without and with planning and preparation. With planning and preparation, emergency response is more effective but, more importantly, there is less likelihood of fires in the first place. Similarly, building a social defence system will reduce the likelihood that it will ever be needed.

12.5 PROSPECTS

Military systems are highly entrenched throughout most of the world and seem to be a permanent fixture in all major countries. Despite their dysfunctions, economic and social cost, and their subversion of alternative routes to security, in not a single country is there a plan to scale down the military and replace it with alternative means of security. It is clear from the experience of the past half-century that a rational reconsideration of military systems is not on the agenda. The major changes are in weapons, training and professionalisation, not in an examination of alternatives. Therefore, it would be wishful thinking to imagine that social defence will suddenly become a hot item in social planning. The most that can be reasonably expected is that ideas from social defence, and nonviolent action more generally, will be used by some activists in pursuing their own campaigns.

For example, climate activists can think about which energy alternatives can make communities more self-reliant. Transport planners can think about which modes of travel are less vulnerable to hostile disruption. Farmers can think about vulnerability to interruption of supplies of pesticides, artificial fertilisers and genetically engineered seeds. Educationists can think about what sorts of insights and skills would prepare students for understanding threats and how to resist them while building an equitable society. And so forth.

12.6 CONCLUSION

In Africa, there is plenty of evidence that military forces are seldom needed for defence against invasion and are more likely to be used to repress the people they are supposed to be protecting. In this context, militaries can be thought of as a type of protection racket, a criminal operation demanding payment in return for protection from the ostensible protectors. If a rational evaluation were made, in most cases countries would be better off abolishing their militaries. This is not on the agenda, precisely because African militaries have become indispensable to governments.

Reform proposals to make African militaries more professional and responsive to civilian leaders do not get to the root of the problems. A more radical solution is to

empower citizens to develop the understanding and skills to defend against aggression without arms, and to build infrastructure in communications, agriculture, industry, energy, health and other sectors to support a citizens-based nonviolent defence system. This is also off the agenda for governments, so any moves in this direction need to be taken by citizens themselves. The most promising developments are social movements that use nonviolent action to challenge and overthrow oppressive governments, such as in Tunisia and South Africa. However, as important as these movements have been and continue to be, they have not fundamentally transformed the existence and role of militaries.

Arguably, African militaries serve to protect the system in which massive exploitation continues, both of people by African rulers and of societies by the international economic system built on neoliberalism. All campaigns that move in the direction of local self-reliance help to challenge this exploitation. These campaigns provide the best hope of someday throwing off dependence on military systems.

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