



Safeguarding Your Group

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APEC protest, Sydney 2007
Photo: Damian Baker (www.jp3.com)

You want to exercise free speech — but now it seems much riskier. This article gives ideas for preparing for and resisting various forms of political repression. It 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 non-violent 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 and 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, and you and your group will need to work out your own detailed plans.

Make plans

Your group should have specific plans to deal with the most likely threats, and general plans to deal with unlikely ones.

You should assess the most likely threats, for example theft of materials, arrest of members, destruction of files, circulation of damaging stories and subversion by a hostile member. Do you have plans to address these threats? If not, develop plans and practise executing them.

If you are threatened, arrested or incapacitated, you may

want to make sure 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.

Be known

If your group has strong links with other groups and individuals, you are in a much stronger position to resist and survive attacks. Strong networks may help deter attacks in the first place.

The most useful networks depend a lot on the nature of your group and what threats you're considering. The basic principle for assessing networks is to imagine an ideal network and compare it to your actual network.

List categories of groups or individuals that would help your group resist and survive attacks, for example, lawyers, journalists, politicians and other environmental groups. They can be local, national, international and virtual. Develop a plan to strengthen your networks by creating new contacts and strengthening links with existing contacts. Also, you can aim to develop the skills and experience of people in your group who are part of other networks.

You are safer the more you are known through diverse networks, including family, friends, co-workers and groups such as churches and clubs.

Support networks

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.

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 as well as internationally if appropriate.

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.

Dealing with surveillance

If agents want to find out what you're saying, writing or doing, they have extensive technology. They can track you electronically through phone conversations, financial transactions, use of tollways and closed-circuit television cameras. They can tap your phone and even detect what you are saying through vibrations on a windowpane. 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.

Although this sounds serious it's very unlikely. Despite large budgets, intelligence agencies simply do not have the resources to carry out high-intensity surveillance of numerous people. Unless you have a very high profile or considered a serious threat, it's unlikely you're under surveillance..

Surveillance can be damaging but being apprehensive is worse. 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.

Nevertheless, it can be worthwhile taking some commonsense steps.

A basic rule is to only write things 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.

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

Skills

The greater your members' skills, the better able your group will be to resist and survive attacks. Furthermore, it is important to remember that a group possesses collective wisdom and skill, greater than the sum of individual wisdom and skill.

You can do an inventory of the key areas of skill for your group, such as information technology, management, writing, public speaking, networking, organising, problem analysis, strategic planning, and emergency response, and include whether or not you can depend on a key individual. Then set priorities for helping current members acquire skills, recruiting new members with relevant skills and practising using skills.

Organisational dynamics

A well-functioning group is better able to withstand attacks. Are your members committed to each other and to the group's purpose? Can they make decisions efficiently?

Key areas of organisational dynamics include trust, decision-making, equality, resilience and emotions. In relation to trust, for example, can members rely on each other to get things done? When does distrust undermine the group's effectiveness?

Improving your dynamics is seldom easy – a rethinking of processes and assumptions may be required. Having an outside facilitator may help.

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

Prof. Brian Martin is an academic at Wollongong University, well-known to civil liberties groups for his work on whistle-blowing and resisting repression. This text is adapted from a checklist developed by Schweik Action Wollongong <www.uow.edu.au/arts/sts/bmartin/others/SAW.html> and an article by Brian. <bmartin@uow.edu.au>.

Building Resilience to Repression

- **ASIO, the Police and You** is an online handbook of special relevance to the Muslim community published by The Australian Muslim Civil Rights Advocacy Network. <www.amcran.org>
- **Be Informed: ASIO and Anti-Terrorism Laws.** The University of Technology Sydney Community Law Centre has produced this detailed information kit. <www.law.uts.edu.au/clc/publications/index.html>
- **Protection Manual for Human Rights Defenders**, published by Front Line – The International Foundation for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, with detailed security advice and information. <www.protectionline.org/article.php?id_article=186>
- **Public Eye** covers the history and theory of political repression. <www.publiceye.org/liberty>
- **Organising in the face of increased repression** by US activist Starhawk. <www.starhawk.org/activism/activism-writings/organizing.html>
- **Activist Rights** a comprehensive guide to organising activist legal support around Australia published by Fitzroy Legal Service. <www.activistrights.org.au>
- **Resisting repression: resources for defending Australian freedoms**, compiled by Brian Martin. <www.uow.edu.au/arts/sts/bmartin/dissent/documents/rr>
- **NGO in a Box – Security Edition Project** – an excellent collection of software tools and manuals for better privacy and security on your computers and on the Internet. <<http://security.ngoinabox.org>>

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