De Gruyter Handbook of Political Control

Edited by
Jennifer Earl and Jessica Maves Braithwaite

DE GRUYTER

Brian Martin

2 When Repression Backfires

Abstract: Although repression is commonly designed to stop or deter resistance, gross violations of human rights sometimes trigger opposition. Perpetrators often understand this intuitively and seek to reduce public outrage from their actions by covering up the action, devaluing the targets, reinterpreting what happened by lying, minimizing, blaming and reframing, using official channels to give the appearance of justice, and intimidating or rewarding people involved. Challengers can try to counter these methods by using counter-methods: exposing the action, validating the targets, interpreting the events as unjust, avoiding official channels, and resisting intimidation and rewards. The struggle involving these methods can be called backfire dynamics; when perpetrator methods fail, the repressive action backfires. This dynamic can be observed in a variety of types of political control, including censorship, disinformation, police beatings, disappearances, massacres, torture, and genocide. Examples include the 1930 salt march in India, the 1960 Sharpeville massacre in South Africa, the 2011 Freedom flotilla to Israel, and the 2020 killing of George Floyd in the United States. Challengers, by understanding backfire dynamics, can prepare for more effective resistance by anticipating efforts to reduce outrage and being ready to counter them.

Keywords: repression, backfire, public outrage, political control, tactics

Introduction

On November 12, 1991, there was a funeral procession through the streets of Dili, the capital of East Timor. The marchers used the occasion to protest against the Indonesian occupation of the country. Indonesian troops surrounded the march. As the procession entered Santa Cruz cemetery, the troops opened fire, killing many of the mourners (Kohen 1999; McMillan 1992). This massacre was intended to subdue resistance to the occupation, but on this occasion the violence backfired, triggering international outrage, laying the basis for East Timor's independence a decade later. What made the Dili massacre different from all the previous killings?

East Timor is located in the Indonesian archipelago, the eastern half of the island of Timor. Whereas most of the islands were colonized by the Dutch, East Timor was colonized by the Portuguese. When Portugal's colonial empire collapsed, East Timorese nationalists declared independence, in 1975. Shortly after, the Indonesian military occupied the country and waged a ruthless war against the East Timorese guerrilla army. In the following decade, perhaps one-third of the East Timorese population died, mostly from starvation. Along the way, there were many massacres.

In the late 1980s, the East Timorese resistance organization, Fretilin, changed its priorities from armed resistance in the countryside to nonviolent protest in urban areas (Fukuda 2000). The protest associated with the 1991 funeral procession was a feature of this new approach.

The Dili massacre was different from previous atrocities in important ways. It was witnessed by Western journalists, who reported on the events to international audiences, outraged by the lethal violence used against peaceful protesters. This sounds straightforward but much more was going on behind the scenes. The struggle over public outrage concerning the Santa Cruz killings illustrates a more general process that can be called backfire dynamics.

In the next section, the features of backfire dynamics are described using the Dili massacre as an illustration. Then the context of nonviolent action theory is provided. After this, some connections between backfire dynamics and layers of political control are outlined. Finally, some implications for resisters are noted.

Backfire Dynamics

The Dili massacre, in the immediate term, was devastating to the East Timorese people due to the killings and subsequent repression. But in the longer term, it was a powerful blow against the Indonesian occupation, initiating a process that led to independence. In this sense, the massacre was counterproductive for the Indonesian military and government: it was contrary to their purposes. In the nonviolence literature, this is called political jiu-jitsu (Sharp 1973), the paradox of repression (Kurtz and Smithey 2018), or backfire as an outcome.

Behind the scenes there was also a struggle over information and understanding. The perpetrators used five types of methods to reduce public outrage (Martin 2007).
– cover-up of the actions
– devaluation of the targets
– reinterpretation of the events by lying, minimizing, blaming, and framing
– official channels to give the appearance of justice
– intimidation of people involved.

These methods serve to reduce the likelihood that people will be upset by the events. The Dili massacre is a revealing example in which all five of these methods were used, although ultimately, they were unsuccessful.

> ***Cover-up*** Indonesian authorities tried to prevent documentation of the events from getting out of East Timor. Filmmaker Max Stahl took footage of the events. When he arrived in Darwin, Australian authorities searched his luggage seeking to confiscate his film. (The Australian government was the only one in the world that had recognized Indonesian sovereignty over East Timor.)

Devaluation Some leading Indonesian officials made derogatory comments about the East Timorese. More generally, many Indonesians felt racially superior to the East Timorese.

Reinterpretation After the killings could no longer be denied, Indonesian authorities reported a death toll of 19, later raised to 50, which was still far too low. They claimed the East Timorese were carrying weapons and had instigated violence. These were the techniques of lying, minimizing, and blaming.

Official channels The Indonesian government and the army each set up inquiries. A few individuals were tried, convicted, and served minimal terms of imprisonment. These processes served to give the appearance that the Indonesian authorities were providing justice.

Intimidation After the massacre, Indonesian troops became more aggressive toward independence supporters, assaulting and imprisoning them.

When a powerful perpetrator does something that might cause public outrage and generate opposition, these methods are often sufficient to discourage any significant response. Often, cover-up alone is enough. Indeed, there had been previous massacres in East Timor, but information about them was limited, and the only witnesses were East Timorese survivors, who did not have the credibility or connections to raise international awareness (Dunn 2003:292–293). The Dili massacre was different because Western journalists were present and were allowed to leave; their eyewitness testimony meant that cover-up failed. Hence, the other methods were deployed but, in this case, they did not succeed. To understand why, we need to look at counter-methods that increase outrage over injustice. They too can be grouped into five categories, each one a counter or alternative to methods that reduce outrage.

– Exposure of the action.
– Validation of the target.
– Interpretation of the events as unjust.
– Avoidance of official channels; instead, mobilization of support.
– Resistance to intimidation.

These five types of counter-tactics are sometimes deployed instinctively or by chance; they can also be used as a guide. In the case of the Dili massacre, each of these counter-tactics played a role.

Exposure: Western journalists, from Australia, Britain, and the US, witnessed the shootings, and took photos and a video. On return to their home countries, they reported on the massacre. Max Stahl's video footage was incorporated into a film by John Pilger, which was used to generate support for the East Timorese cause.

Validation: Outside East Timor and Indonesia, it was easier to portray East Timorese as deserving of life and human rights as much as anyone else. Attitudes of Indonesian racial superiority had little salience internationally.

> ***Interpretation:*** It was easy to portray the shootings as unjust. It was also possible to counter lies by Indonesian authorities. For example, an independent commission estimated that 271 people had been killed.
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> ***Avoiding Official Channels; Mobilizing Public Suppor*t:** The inquiries by Indonesian authorities had little credibility internationally. East Timorese leaders in exile, and supporters of East Timorese independence, used the massacre to raise awareness about Indonesian repression.
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> ***Resistance*** Indonesian repression remained severe within East Timor but could do little to restrain campaigning internationally.

In summary, opponents of the Indonesian military occupation of East Timor used a range of techniques to generate public outrage over the Dili massacre, countering the efforts of Indonesian authorities to reduce outrage. The result was that the massacre, intended to subdue East Timorese resistance, backfired by stimulating a tremendous increase in international support for the East Timorese. This is not to say that the road ahead was suddenly easy. East Timor was never a high-profile international issue, and even in countries where there were support groups, especially Australia, Britain, Portugal, and the US, this was a minority interest. But enough concern was raised so that after Indonesia's ruler Suharto was ousted in 1998 following popular protests, and a popularly elected president took office, in 1999 the Indonesian government held a referendum in East Timor. After nearly 80 % voted for independence, anti-East-Timorese militias, backed by the Indonesian military, launched a brutal attack against the population. This time, however, there was sufficient international attention and concern to push for a UN-backed international intervention to stop the killing. East Timor gained independence in 2002. Arguably, the reaction to the Dili massacre played a key role in making this possible.

The Dynamics of Nonviolent Action

Gene Sharp, the pioneer researcher of nonviolent action, wrote many works, of which *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* is the most well-known and cited. In part 1 of the book, Sharp (1973) presents the consent theory of power: the central idea is that when subjects withdraw consent from rulers, the rulers can no longer get their way. In part 2, Sharp lists 198 methods of nonviolent action, with historical examples of each one. These methods are grouped into three general categories: protest and persuasion, such as petitions and marches; noncooperation, covering many types of strikes and boycotts; and nonviolent intervention, for example sit-ins and alternative economic institutions.

Part 3, "The dynamics of nonviolent action," is the longest but least known. It presents a set of stages or features of nonviolent campaigns, with extensive historical

examples. Sharp's analysis can be thought of as a form of grounded theory, developed from his wide-ranging knowledge of nonviolent campaigns, and is one of the few actor-oriented frameworks for understanding such campaigns. Others are the Movement Action Plan (Moyer et al. 2001) and George Lakey's (1973) "strategy for a living revolution."

The first stage of Sharp's dynamics is "laying the groundwork for nonviolent action." After preparations have been made, next is "challenge brings repression": activists use methods of nonviolent action to challenge powerholders. Sharp was thinking of challenges to repressive regimes, and to war, genocide, and oppression. It is in this context that petitions and leaflets are methods of nonviolent action; in a society with civil liberties, many methods of protest and persuasion would not count as nonviolent action in Sharp's framework.

Following "challenge brings repression" comes "maintaining nonviolent discipline." When activists do not use violence, they increase opportunities for participation in the campaign: most people can join marches, strikes, and boycotts. The prime participants in armed struggle, in contrast, are young fit men. There is another reason for remaining nonviolent even in the face of provocation: it increases the likelihood that any violence used against activists will be counterproductive. Violence against a non-resisting target is widely seen as unjust (Moore 1978:26–30), and can trigger moral outrage among observers. In contrast, violence against a violent opponent is less likely to cause outrage, which is one reason that governments label their opponents "terrorists."

For these reasons, maintaining nonviolence discipline is vital to the next stage in Sharp's dynamics, which he called political jiu-jitsu, a broadening of the earlier concept of moral jiu-jitsu (Gregg 1966 [1935]). When a powerful perpetrator uses violence against non-resisting opponents, this has the possibility of triggering greater support among members of the "grievance group": those in the population with the same grievances as the activists. It enables a huge increase in participation in the campaign. Third parties may also join the campaign, and occasionally members of the attacking group moderate or switch their sympathies.

Sharp (1973: 657–703) gives several examples of political jiu-jitsu. In 1905 in Russia, a protest march against the Czar was met by lethal fire by government troops. This massacre undermined support for the regime and laid the basis for the 1917 revolution. In 1930, Gandhi led a campaign against the British salt monopoly and tax, inspiring the Indian population. After satyagrahis (nonviolent activists) were cruelly beaten as part of this campaign, and reports were made about the events, international support for Indian independence soared (Weber 1997). In the United States during the civil rights movement, when protesters were arrested, beaten, or killed, this often led to greater support for the movement, including intervention by federal authorities.

In nonviolent campaigns, according to Sharp's dynamics framework, political jiu-jitsu sometimes occurs, but it is not a necessary condition for success. The final two

stages in his dynamics are the redistribution of power and three (later four) roads to success. As the examples here show, success in nonviolent campaigns seldom arrives quickly or unambiguously; campaigns for social justice are often complex. For this very reason, Sharp's dynamics framework is useful for revealing regularities. In particular, the idea of political jiu-jitsu refers to a phenomenon that, given the usual way of thinking about repression, is unexpected.

In most popular and scholarly thinking, it has long been assumed that violence will necessarily triumph in any confrontation with unarmed opponents. Gandhi's campaigns provided the most dramatic challenge to this assumption, but success in the Indian independence movement was commonly attributed to the British colonial rulers being relatively kind-hearted, not willing to unleash the sort of ruthless repression exercised by others. Even at the time, this assumption was suspect because in Kenya, another British colony, where the Mau Mau mounted an armed rebellion, the British used torture, killings, and prison camps to break the resistance (Edgerton 1989). This suggested that the British rulers were quite capable of ruthlessness, and that Gandhi's nonviolent methods were an important reason the British were less brutal in India. Thinking in terms of an intuitive understanding of political jiu-jitsu, this can be attributed to awareness that repression could backfire (Dalton 1993:130).

It was only after the publication of research by Chenoweth and Stephan (2011), which compared outcomes from anti-regime, secession and anti-occupation campaigns classified as either violent or primarily nonviolent, that political scientists began taking seriously the possibility that nonviolent struggles could be more effective than armed ones.

The Dynamics of Backfire

Sharp presented political jiu-jitsu as a contingent feature of nonviolent campaigns, depending on challengers maintaining nonviolent discipline when suffering repression, and the inference might be drawn that political jiu-jitsu would regularly occur in such circumstances. Yet a cursory survey of repressive events reveals that repression often serves its intended purposes, to subdue and deter resistance. As noted, in East Timor prior to the Dili massacres, there had been other massacres without any jiu-jitsu effects. Earlier in Indonesia, in 1965–1966, there had been genocidal killing with little resistance, yet this did little to trigger outrage (Martin et al. 2001).

To help explain why political jiu-jitsu occurs in only some campaigns and circumstances, it is useful to examine methods used by perpetrators to reduce outrage, as discussed earlier. These methods are most easily observed and documented in cases of sudden injustice, such as a massacre, and the full range of methods is most likely to be observed in those cases in which cover-up fails and there is a prospect of massive public outrage. Torture, for example, usually takes place in secret, and when

secrecy is maintained, there is less need for methods such as devaluation and official channels. When torture is graphically revealed, as in the case of Abu Ghraib prison in 2004, the full gamut of outrage-reduction methods can be observed (Gray and Martin 2007). For these reasons, it is less easy to notice and document these methods in slow injustices, such as economic inequality and environmental degradation.

Backfire dynamics can be observed in many forms of repression, including police beatings, massacres, torture, war and genocide (Martin 2007, 2009). They also feature in injustices that do not involve physical repression, for example censorship and sexual harassment (Jansen and Martin 2015; McDonald et al. 2010). These dynamics can be observed in a range of layers, even within a single issue. For example, mass surveillance occurs at the whole-population layer; its exposure by whistleblowers and journalists (Martin 2015) occurs at the layer of civil society; anti-surveillance efforts occur at the layer of social movements; corporate and government responses to surveillance occur at the layer of institutional politics.

Important implications arise from backfire dynamics. From the point of view of perpetrators, there are two major considerations. First, repression can be counterproductive, leading to public revulsion and increased opposition. Perpetrators may be aware of this, consciously or intuitively, and on occasion be deterred from taking measures that might backfire. Second, when undertaking repression, perpetrators can adopt measures to reduce the possibility of adverse reactions.

Backfire Dynamics and Political Control

Backfire dynamics are relevant to the wider issue of political control, via the role of repression. Rather than making the usual assumption that repression can be measured on a linear scale, being mild, moderate, or strong, when backfire is taken into account, a better question is "What repression tactics aid political control?" Obviously, political control is jeopardized when repression backfires, so each of the tactics for reducing outrage from injustice needs to be considered in examining the relationship between repression and political control.

A commonly used tactic is cover-up. The Holocaust, the Nazi genocide of Jews and others during World War II, was never announced, and the operations were hidden or disguised in various ways. For example, when Jews were rounded up in occupied countries for transportation to death camps, they were told lies about their journey. Obviously, some participants in the killings knew about their own roles, and that of others, but information was withheld from wider audiences, in Germany and beyond. The genocide targeted subpopulations (Layer 2) but the cover-up affected nearly the entire population.

Another example of cover-up is "disappearances," a widely used repression technique under dictatorships such as in Argentina, 1974–1983. Rather than torturing and

killing dissidents openly, they were taken to secret torture centers and killed out of sight, with no information provided to families or others. Although many people suspected what was happening, the lack of evidence made it more difficult to organize opposition.

During the "war on terror" launched after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, a method of killing favored by the US government has been drone assassinations, often with associated deaths of civilians. Drone operations are carried out in secret and killings are seldom announced. Those who are actual or potential targets are well aware of the danger, but wider audiences are insulated from awareness and vivid evidence.

These examples show how common it is for powerful perpetrators to try to hide their actions from wider audiences. This can be counterintuitive, given that it is often assumed that ruthless rulers have nothing to fear from unarmed opponents, and that exemplary acts of violence serve to keep the population fearful. However, if so, there would be no need to hide actions from wider audiences.

The tactic of devaluation is also commonly used. When a target is perceived as bad and/or dangerous, it is far easier to justify actions against them. The Nazis systematically portrayed Jews as subhuman, as vermin, and simultaneously as dangerous, thus laying the psychological basis for genocide. In the US during the Cold War, Communists were portrayed as scheming and dangerous, with this picture used to justify the imposition of loyalty oaths, dismissal, and imprisonment. The label terrorist serves a similar function, with implications of fanaticism, ruthlessness, and cruelty.

The tactic of reinterpretation involves explaining what happens in a more favorable way. It aims to counter the otherwise obvious interpretation that an injustice has occurred, by lying about what happened, minimizing its significance, blaming others, and framing events in a positive way. That reinterpretation techniques are so commonly observed in a wide range of injustices reflects the fundamental importance of legitimacy to political control and other forms of authority and power. This is apparent by asking the question, "Why not boast about repression, and take full responsibility for all the consequences?" Looking at a wide range of repressive violence, including police beatings, torture, massacres, war, and genocide, it is difficult to find examples in which powerful perpetrators took full responsibility for actions that might be considered unfair. Even in warfare, in which killing opponents is widely considered legitimate, the killing of civilians, intentionally or accidentally, is seldom a source of pride to be announced to the world. The only major exception to this pattern is some cases of non-state terrorism, in which responsibility for atrocities is claimed (Martin 2007:157–168). Note that this involves violence by a weaker party against members of a stronger one. State terrorism, in contrast, follows the usual pattern of reinterpretation.

Of the reinterpretation techniques, lying, minimizing, and blaming have the purpose of limiting awareness of damage caused or diverting responsibility for it. These

techniques are most commonly deployed at the layers of institutional politics (police officers, commanders, governments) and civil society (media). The other reinterpretation technique, framing, is more fundamental to legitimacy: it is a matter of getting people to see things from the perpetrator's point of view and as legitimate. In the case of police use of force, the usual police framing is that force was necessary, used within the line of duty, and was appropriate to the circumstances (Lawrence 2000). In the first trial of the four Los Angeles police officers charged over the 1991 beating of Rodney King, defense attorneys showed the jury the video of the arrest, taking them through each blow with an explanation of how it was justified according to protocols that assigned responsibility to King, the arrestee, for every police action. This can be considered an exercise in getting the jury to see the arrest from the perspective of the police – a police framing.

Of all the reinterpretation techniques, framing is the most easily justified, in that it is not misleading like lying, minimizing, or blaming. Framing plays a role, often a key role, in a wide range of issues. Consider war, in which it is common for crimes and atrocities to be committed by both sides. Framing in war means looking at events from 'our' side, assumed to be just, whereas the enemy is assumed to be evil and dangerous. The My Lai massacre, in which US soldiers killed hundreds of non-resisting Vietnamese civilians in 1968, was exposed a year later, and Lieutenant William Calley was put on trial and convicted. Calley had many supporters in the United States who treated him as a hero rather than a war criminal (Opton 1972). This can partly be explained by framing, seeing the war from the perspective of US troops fighting to defend freedom against Communism.

The tactic of official channels includes inquiries, investigations, trials, and other formal procedures, mostly at the layer of institutional policies. To say that official channels reduce outrage from injustice can sound perverse, because when these processes operate appropriately, they are the means of providing justice. Yet when perpetrators are powerful, official channels can serve to mollify audiences, under the assumption that the problem is being addressed. Usually, official channels are only brought into the picture when an abuse or atrocity has been publicized; people are concerned, so authorities need to appear to be responsive. However, rather than acting against root causes or high-level decision-makers, a common scenario is that official processes target low-level figures and cause such a great delay that public concern dies down.

The role of official channels in relation to repressive violence is also apparent in cases such as the beating of Rodney King, Abu Ghraib prison torture, and the Sharpeville massacre in South Africa in 1960 (Martin 2007). In these and other cases, authorities set up inquiries or instigated court cases. Sometimes perpetrators are identified and penalized, but seldom in proportion to their crimes, and seldom are higher-level officials held responsible.

The tactic of intimidation is straightforward: when there is a serious injustice, victims and witnesses may be deterred from reporting it due to their fear of retribu-

tion: they are scared, sometimes by fears about being attacked, sometimes by threats or actual attacks. For example, victims of torture may fear further torture, or harm to their family members. After the Dili massacre, Western journalist eyewitnesses spoke out, but only after leaving East Timor to places where they were safe from Indonesian reprisals, and where their families were safe.

Intimidation as a tactic to reduce public concern has a close connection with the tactic of cover-up. Those who keep quiet to reduce the danger to themselves are caught in the process of cover-up.

Associated with intimidation is a parallel tactic, rewards. Powerful perpetrators can offer money, jobs, and promotions to individuals who go along with operations. A soldier who participates in a massacre and who is loyal to higher officials has the prospect of continued employment and possibly a promotion.

Tactics for Different Layers of Political Control

Outrage-management methods used by powerful perpetrators are most obvious in cases of sudden events, such as police beating and massacres. Yet the same methods can be observed in a wide range of injustices, including those canvassed in this book categorized as layers of control. Here are some examples for each of the layers other than nonviolent resistance: whole populations, subpopulations, institutional politics, civil society, social movements, and violent resistance.

At the layer of whole populations, one important control technique is disinformation, namely the intentional circulation of false and misleading information, which is pervasive during wartime and against putative enemies. Disinformation inevitably involves attempted cover-up, namely of the source of the false and misleading claims. It pollutes the information environment by contesting truthful claims or submerging them in a welter of distracting material. Disinformation that attributes motives and actions to innocent parties is a form of devaluation, and disinformation always involves deception, a form of reinterpretation.

At the layer of subpopulations, the technique of devaluation is both commonplace and potent. Various forms of prejudice – racial, religious, and political – involve devaluing specific groups. Genocide involves systematic devaluation to overcome resistance to killing. In Gregory Stanton's "Ten stages of genocide," (https://www.genocidewatch.com/tenstages) the fourth stage is dehumanization, an extreme form of devaluation.

At the layer of institutional politics, official channels play a prominent role. Laws, courts, regulatory agencies, administrative rules, formal inquiries, and other official channels provide the appearance of justice, even though on many issues there are systematic biases. For example, people are supposed to be equal before the law, but economic inequality makes actual equality a fiction, with white-collar criminals seldom convicted or imprisoned while large numbers of street criminals, many with

intellectual disabilities or mental illnesses, populate prisons (e.g., Vitale 2018). Another sort of official channel is elections, which give the appearance of citizen participation with little substance (Ginsberg 1982).

At the layer of civil society, NGOs are central players in many nonviolent campaigns that challenge repressive and oppressive systems. For this reason, NGOs are often targeted: they may be put under intense surveillance, subject to dirty tricks aimed at causing internal problems or harming public reputations, or hindered by restrictive legislation and application of rules. A different approach is to co-opt NGOs by offering them money or a formal role in some high-level committee with little power. In these responses to NGOs, government agencies use a variety of techniques to reduce concern about their actions, depending on the actions, for example coverup of surveillance and dirty tricks.

At the layer of social movements, backfire dynamics are central to many campaigns. In some cases, like the 2020 murder of George Floyd (Samuels and Olorunnipa 2022), movements receive a surge of support due to an action that generates enormous anger directed at dominant institutions. In other cases, the responses of powerholders to social movements seem to be carefully calibrated to maintain control. In this, there can be misjudgments. For example, when popular figure Benigno Aquino, the rival of Philippines president, Ferdinand Marcos, returned to the country in 1983, he was murdered on arrival. This blatant act by the Marcos government fired up opposition feelings and laid the basis for the 1986 people-power revolution (Mercado 1986).

When both sides in a struggle use violence, many observers will see this as violence versus violence, even when one side has overwhelming superiority, which means that third-party sympathy for the resisters is less likely. This relates to Sharp's (1973) dynamics of nonviolent action framework, in which maintaining nonviolent discipline – protesters abstaining from violence even when subjected to it – is crucial to the possibility of political jiu-jitsu, which is backfire as an outcome. This is the reason why political authorities regularly accuse opponents of being violent and sometimes deploy agents provocateurs to encourage challenging groups to use violence. Even so, when violence by authorities is seen as excessive or directed at innocent parties, it can backfire. In warfare, some forms of violence potentially can be seen as unfair, such as indiscriminate killing of civilians, as in the My Lai massacre (Gray and Martin 2008). Therefore, it is predictable that police, militaries, and political authorities will use methods to reduce public outrage over their own violence in a struggle against opponents who also use violence.

There are several promising research areas using the outrage-management framework. In Sharp's dynamics of nonviolent action, several of the stages could be examined, looking for the same methods of reducing outrage that are most apparent in the stage of political jiu-jitsu. For example, in the first stage, laying the groundwork, political authorities can act pre-emptively to disrupt and destroy an emerging resistance movement, or even the social bases for one. This can be a potent form of political control, yet it has received little attention by researchers (Sullivan 2016).

Very few studies of social problems look at tactics and strategies. Jasper (2006), in arguing for the importance of studying strategies and tactics, emphasizes dilemmas, complexities, and unknowns. Yet the study of backfire dynamics shows there can be commonalities in methods used by political authorities across a wide range of layers.

Resisting Political Control

Studying the methods commonly used by powerful perpetrators offers guidance to those who want to resist political control, especially repression. Understanding of the methods likely to be deployed to reduce anger and disgust from measures seen as unfair or abusive can inform efforts to counter each of these methods, and some of these efforts can be made in advance, which can deter repression. These efforts are mostly likely to be made at the layers of civil society and social movements.

Given that the counter to cover-up is exposure, campaigners who anticipate the possibility of violence can prepare by arranging to document and verify events. In an age of ubiquitous digital technology, this often can be done through audio and video recording. The murder of George Floyd in 2020 was witnessed by bystanders; what helped turn it into an international event was a video recording. The organization **Witness** aims to enable the use of technology, and the skills to use it, to record human rights abuses.

Documentation, to be effective in challenging or deterring abuses, needs to be credible. The counter to the tactic of devaluation is validation, and this applies both to the targets of repression and to those who speak out on their behalf. The Western journalists who witnessed the Dili massacre gave credibility to claims about the killings; similarly, preparations for documenting human rights abuses need to pay close attention to the credibility of witnesses.

In some cases, the most effective challengers to repression are the those with an appropriate social standing. In the protests that brought down Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos in 1986, nuns sometimes were at the front, the ones with immediate contact with troops. The nuns had moral standing to resist violence both as women and as visible representatives of the Catholic Church, in an overwhelmingly Catholic country. During the so-called "dirty war" in Argentina under the generals, a powerful protest was mounted by the Mothers of the Disappeared. Again, it is significant that women could take the lead, arguably because they were harder to devalue.

Challenging devaluation by mobilizing groups with high status can be effective, but has the disadvantage of relying on and reinforcing conventional social hierarchies and stereotypes, such as that Western journalists are more credible or that women are inherently more moral. In the context of severe repressive violence, this may be acceptable.

The counter to the tactic of reinterpretation is to frame the events as unjust, to expose lying, minimizing, and blaming, and to challenge misleading framing. The very

term "reinterpretation" assumes the intuitive interpretation is obvious, which it can be to many audiences but not to others. Resisters should not assume actions speak for themselves, because attempts are made to explain away the worst atrocities, even torture and genocide.

The outrage-reducing tactic of official channels can be the most difficult to challenge, because of many people's deep belief that having problems addressed by laws, courts, experts, and regulatory agencies is the best option, even the goal. Campaigners sometimes push for legislation, formal investigations, or prosecutions of wrongdoers. Although in a few circumstances these avenues provide a suitable result, the trap is that when perpetrators are powerful, official channels serve to defuse popular energies, limit restitution, and preserve systems of power. One option to counter this trajectory is to discredit official channels. When elections are rigged, for example, campaigners might push for a boycott, to reduce the credibility of the results. More generally, the alternative to trusting and relying on official channels is to mobilize support, to continue campaigning. When there is an inquiry, a common scenario is that it takes a long time and comes up with good-sounding recommendations that the government ignores, implements only to a limited extent, or incorporates in new laws that are not enforced. While campaigners wait for the results of the inquiry, momentum is lost and trust is mistakenly put in officials and processes. The challenge, when official channels are involved, is to turn popular concern into something ongoing.

Resistance to political control is often initiated by social movements and supported by civil society organizations, as in many cases of anti-regime campaigns, but there are variations. In a dictatorship, a petition – a method of nonviolent action – can be a potent form of resistance. In some military regimes, such as South America in the 1970s and 1980s, Left political parties and workers' organizations were crushed, and the hub of resistance was the Catholic Church, located in the layer of institutional politics.

Consider the resistance in West Papua to the oppressive control by the Indonesian government (MacLeod 2015). Nonviolent action has played a major role, while the resistance as a whole can be considered to operate at the layer of subpopulations, with the Indonesian government promoting migration from Java to overwhelm the native West Papuan people. Campaigners can usefully consider the possibilities of support or opposition from any of the layers.

Conclusion

A common assumption is that repressive violence, if sufficiently ruthless, will always triumph over nonviolent resistance. The phenomenon of political jiu-jitsu, well documented by Gene Sharp and others, shows the shortcomings of this assumption. Sometimes, repressive violence is counterproductive for the attackers, triggering greater

opposition from the target group and third parties, and weakening the resolve of some in the attacker group. The massacre of East Timorese civilians by Indonesian troops in 1991, rather than quelling the opposition, instead stimulated international support for East Timor's independence.

Yet the dynamics of violence versus nonviolence are more complicated than this, because political jiu-jitsu does not always occur. Indeed, most violence against peaceful protesters, or against non-resisting civilians, does not rebound against the attackers. To understand this, it is useful to examine the methods commonly used by powerful perpetrators to reduce public disquiet from their actions: cover-up, devaluation, reinterpretation, official channels, and intimidation. When these methods are effective, political jiu-jitsu may not occur.

Methods to reduce public concern about the actions of powerful groups are relevant to a range of levels of political control. For example, devaluation is important for racial oppression and genocide, and official channels play a stabilizing role in institutional politics. When protesters remain nonviolent in the face of attack, political jiu-jitsu is more likely, but backfire can also occur even with violent resistance, when repressive violence is more extreme or targeted at civilians. Much remains to be learned about backfire dynamics in a wide range of circumstances, in relation to political control and beyond.

Understanding methods to reduce public outrage offers insights into more effective resistance, by countering each of these methods. This can be done in response to attacks but also preventively. The East Timorese resistance movement, by shifting from armed struggle in the countryside to protest in urban areas, laid the basis for succeeding against a more powerful opponent, and other movements have made similar assessments (Dudouet 2015). Repression is often effective, but it sometimes backfires, and resisters need to know how to use this possibility to their advantage.

Acknowledgments

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