



BRILL

Tactics and Counter-Tactics in Nonviolent Campaigns: Developing a Framework

Brian Martin | ORCID: 0000-0002-6261-7677

Emeritus Professor, School of Social Sciences, University of Wollongong, NSW
2522, Australia
bmartin@uow.edu.au

Received: 27 May 2025 | Accepted: 5 May 2025|

Published online: 16 April 2026

Abstract

Gene Sharp presented a framework for nonviolent struggles with a set of stages or components, which he called the dynamics of nonviolent action. However, at each stage, the opponent — such as a repressive government — can take measures to undermine or thwart campaigners. Within the stage that Sharp called political jiu-jitsu, the opponent can and often does use a variety of tactics to prevent or stymie the jiu-jitsu outcome, for example by covering up the action and devaluing the target. Powerful opponents can also use tactics to counter nonviolent campaigns in other components of Sharp's dynamics. However, less attention has been given to these tactics, in part because they are typically less visible, though their effects on campaigns can be far-reaching. A preliminary examination of these sorts of opponent tactics and activist counter-tactics, with examples from the stages of “laying the groundwork,” “maintaining nonviolent discipline” and “achieving success,” provides a framework for further investigation. Examining tactics within the different stages of nonviolent campaigns can offer guidance to campaigners.

Keywords

nonviolent action – Gene Sharp – political jiu-jitsu – laying the groundwork – nonviolent discipline – tactics

Introduction

Nonviolent movements have the potential to challenge government repression, war, oppression and genocide. In analysing nonviolent struggle, it is useful to think of strategy, which is basically a plan to achieve a goal, taking into account the resources and skills of both campaigners and their opponents. Within a strategy, tactics or methods are the means or tools.

There are several comprehensive models of nonviolent campaigns from an activist perspective. One is George Lakey's (1973) *Strategy for a Living Revolution*, a five-stage framework. Another is Bill Moyer's (2001) "Movement Action Plan", or MAP, an eight-stage framework. MAP has been widely circulated among activists, whereas Lakey's framework has received less attention. The focus here is on a third model, by Gene Sharp, which he called "The Dynamics of Nonviolent Action." This model captures important patterns from an activist viewpoint, but there is more to be learned by probing each of its stages. The aim here is to present a tentative framework for classifying opponent tactics and activist counter-tactics within these stages.

The next section presents Sharp's dynamics. After this is a section discussing the methods and counter-methods involved in the stage of the dynamics called political jiu-jitsu. The three subsequent sections give examples of opponent tactics and activist counter-tactics in three other stages: laying the groundwork, maintaining nonviolent discipline, and achieving success. The tentative framework here offers a preliminary guide to further research on tactics and counter-tactics in nonviolent campaigns.¹ The framework can also help campaigners anticipate opponent tactics and prepare to counter them.

The Dynamics of Nonviolent Action

Gene Sharp's classic study *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* is widely cited (Sharp 1973). In Part Two, "Methods of Nonviolent Action," Sharp lists 198 methods, classifying them as being within the three general categories of (1) protest and persuasion, (2) noncooperation, and (3) nonviolent intervention, with subcategories within each of these. This list has been reproduced on numerous websites. Sharp's theory of power, presented in Part One of his book, has also attracted attention. The focus here is on Part Three, "The Dynamics of

¹ Sharp (2005, 444–445) describes four levels of strategy: grand strategy, strategy, tactics and methods. Here, "tactics" is used with a slightly different meaning, close to Sharp's methods.

Nonviolent Action” — called here “dynamics” for short — the longest of the three parts (Sharp, 1973, 447–814).²

Sharp’s dynamics is a framework for nonviolent campaigns, which can be waged against repressive governments and against oppressive systems, such as racial segregation in the US, that are supported by governments. Drawing on a wide range of case studies, Sharp inferred a set of components of these campaigns, using what we might today call “grounded theory” (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), though Sharp did not articulate his methodology beyond saying he proceeded “largely by an inductive approach” (Sharp, 1973, 450). The components of the dynamics — which can also be called stages, elements, facets, or features — are given in Table 1.

TABLE 1 Components of Sharp’s Dynamics of Nonviolent Action

– Laying the groundwork for nonviolent action
– Challenge brings repression
– Solidarity and discipline to fight repression
– Political jiu-jitsu
– Three ways success may be achieved
– The redistribution of power.

These are the titles of chapters 9 to 14 of *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*. In subsequent work, Sharp (2005) changed “political jiu-jitsu” to “noncooperation and political jiu-jitsu”, and the following component to “four ways success may be achieved.” For convenience, the first component will be called here “laying the groundwork,” the third “maintaining nonviolent discipline” and the fifth “achieving success.”

In each lengthy chapter dealing with components of his dynamics, Sharp gave examples from various nonviolent campaigns. While Sharp emphasised the importance of each element, he did not examine, in any detail, the causes of failure along the way, in particular failure due to the efforts of opponents. This is most obvious for political jiu-jitsu.

2 *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* was initially published in a single hardback volume. The subsequent paperback edition appeared as three books, each comprising one of the three parts, with pagination unchanged.

Political Jiu-jitsu: Opponent Tactics and Activist Counter-Tactics

Political jiu-jitsu can occur when campaigners mount a challenge that is met by repression, for example when police use force against protesters. When the protesters remain nonviolent in the face of violence — in other words, when they maintain nonviolent discipline — then the repression can be counterproductive: it can stimulate more people to join the movement, from what Sharp called the grievance group; garner support from previously uncommitted third parties; and trigger dissent within the opponent group. In essence, political jiu-jitsu turns being a victim of an unfair or outrageous attack into a recruiting opportunity.

Sharp gave several examples of political jiu-jitsu in nonviolent campaigns, including the Bloody Sunday massacre in Russia in 1905, which undermined the rule of the Tsar, and the Sharpeville massacre in South Africa in 1960, which discredited the South African government’s reputation internationally. What Sharp did not do is analyse massacres or other major injustices in non-violent struggles that did *not* recoil against the perpetrators, in other words the absence of political jiu-jitsu in circumstances where it might otherwise be expected. Martin et al. (2001) examined this in a comparison of political jiu-jitsu in the 1991 Dili massacre, which galvanised the East Timor liberation movement worldwide, and the 1965–1966 Indonesian genocide, a massive human rights abuse that did not trigger greater resistance. This was followed up by Martin (2007) in a systematic examination of methods used by powerful perpetrators to reduce public outrage over their actions, using the case studies of the Sharpeville massacre, the Dili massacre, and the 1930 Salt Satyagraha in India. These methods can be put into five categories (Martin, 2007), listed in Table 2.

TABLE 2 Types of Methods that Reduce Public Outrage from Injustice

– Covering up actions
– Devaluing the target
– Reinterpreting the events, by lying, minimising, blaming and framing
– Using official channels to give an appearance of justice
– Intimidating and rewarding people involved.

Similar methods may be used in other facets of Sharp’s dynamics, namely that powerful players take actions against challengers, but these are seldom visible — either by design or because they are below the media radar — and there-

fore less likely to be studied. An example is the FBI programme COINTELPRO, active in the 1960s and 1970s, to disrupt and undermine US protest movements through surveillance, infiltration, harassment, and sowing discord among groups by sending fake letters, all carried out covertly (Blackstock, 1976; Cunningham, 2003). In the context of Sharp's dynamics, COINTELPRO operated at the stage of laying the groundwork, not political jiu-jitsu: the FBI attempted to thwart campaigners before they mounted a challenge. The methods involved in COINTELPRO included covert operations (the method of cover-up) designed to discredit activists (the method of devaluation) using lies and deception (the method of reinterpretation) all in the context of harassment and possible arrest and imprisonment (the method of intimidation). These are analogous to the methods used by perpetrators to reduce outrage from violence against protesters in the stage of political jiu-jitsu. The COINTELPRO example shows that the methods in Table 2, found in the stage of political jiu-jitsu, may also be applicable at the stage of laying the groundwork.

Given the limited body of systematic evidence for examining tactics within each stage of Sharp's dynamics, Table 2 categories, created initially with reference to political jiu-jitsu, are proposed here as a preliminary framework for classifying opponent tactics in other stages of nonviolent campaigns. Using this preliminary framework is straightforward: for challengers at each stage of Sharp's dynamics listed in Table 1, their opponents — such as repressive regimes — can potentially use any of the types of methods listed in Table 2 against the challengers. Because this framework is tentative, studies of opponent tactics might lead to modifications of the method categories, for example new categories or revised features.

If we think of the clash between a nonviolent movement and its opponent — often a government — in terms of opponent tactics and activist counter-tactics, it can be useful to think of opponent tactics as operating at two levels. At the first, immediate level, the opponent acts to hinder, undermine, discredit and repress the movement, for example through surveillance, covert disruption, laws, propaganda, arrests and beatings. However, when people see these actions as unfair, illegal, abusive or underhanded, more of them may turn against the opponent. In other words, actions taken against the movement have the potential to give it greater credibility and support. Therefore, the opponent may attempt to prevent this sort of response to its actions in various ways, for example disguising its role, denigrating the targets and lying about what happened. These can be thought of as second-level tactics: tactics to minimise the impacts of the first-level tactics that are adverse to the opponent. First and second-level tactics can be used at any point in a movement's campaign. Sharp's dynamics is one way to conceptualise stages or elements in

a nonviolent campaign, so it should be possible to see both types of tactics at every stage.

Political jiu-jitsu is the reaction to an opponent action, for example beating or shooting protesters. The opponent action is a first-level intimidation tactic, intended to frighten, subjugate or eliminate the activists. The methods listed in Table 2 are second-level tactics. However, for other stages in Sharp's dynamics, the relative roles of first and second-level tactics must be assessed based on what happens in campaigns. Comments about the types of opponent tactics will be made at the end of each section about other stages in Sharp's dynamics.

The methods in Table 2 are for reducing public outrage from injustice, namely second-level tactics. The question arises: why should these also be a framework for first-level tactics? One response is that each of the types of methods in Table 2 can serve as a means of attack, or as an aid in attack. Devaluation and intimidation can be direct means of attack, operating at the first level, as well as reducing public outrage. Cover-up serves to assist attack operations, reinterpretation gives them greater legitimacy, and official channels give them authority. Thus, the methods in Table 2 can operate at both first and second levels. Another reason why the classification in Table 2 is relevant to first-level tactics is that cover-up, devaluation, reinterpretation, official channels, and intimidation are representative of crucial domains in struggles, specifically information, credibility, meaning, authority and force.

Campaigners can counter each of the methods in Table 2. These counter-methods are listed in Table 3 (Martin 2007).

TABLE 3 Types of Methods for Increasing Public Outrage over Injustice

– Exposing the opponent's actions
– Validating the target
– Interpreting the actions as an injustice
– Avoiding or discrediting official channels; instead, mobilising support
– Resisting intimidation and rewards.

This process has been well described for political jiu-jitsu. Consider the opponent tactic of cover-up: opponents and their allies can reduce public outrage by hiding or disguising information about a violent assault on nonviolent protesters. Protesters, anticipating attempts at cover-up, can take steps to deter an assault and, if it occurs, to use it to increase public outrage and generate greater support. For example, organisers of a protest that might be attacked by police can arrange for audio and video coverage, preferably by credible inde-

pendent observers. If police know their actions are being recorded, they may be less likely to act, or be more careful when they do. Knowing they are being watched, police might use less visible techniques, for example painful holds on protesters, who in turn might think of ways to document such techniques. The result is a sort of tactics race, all in relation to the tactic of cover-up and the counter-tactic of exposure. The same type of process can occur for each of the other methods in Tables 2 and 3.

In practice, challengers may not plan this far in advance, for example when police attacks are unexpected, and attackers may not plan in advance either. Protesters in Dili in 1991 did not anticipate the massacre, and the Indonesian commanders did not anticipate how much the exposure of the killings would invigorate the East Timorese cause internationally.

When opponents use the methods in Table 2 and activists the ones in Table 3, the outcome is contingent on a struggle over information, beliefs and commitments, and thus is a sort of mini-struggle within the wider nonviolent campaign. This mini-struggle involves both first and second-level tactics. For political jiu-jitsu, the opponent attacks are at the first level: people's bodies are on the line. There is also a second-level struggle over outrage.

Martin (2007) applied the framework outlined in Tables 2 and 3 to issues outside the template of violence-nonviolence, for example censorship, unfair dismissal, and torture, introducing the term "backfire." "Backfire dynamics" refers to the methods and counter-methods used in struggles over injustice, whereas backfire as an outcome refers to actions by perpetrators of injustice being counterproductive. In scenarios involving violence versus nonviolence, backfire as an outcome is the same as political jiu-jitsu.

Methods and counter-methods are revealed most clearly when unjust attacks are counterproductive in a way that generates considerable publicity and hence ample evidence that can be studied by outsiders. On the other hand, when powerful perpetrators conceal their actions, this greatly reduces the possibility of backfire as an outcome and also makes studying these sorts of actions far more difficult. For example, the Dili massacre was witnessed by Western journalists and documented by photographs and a video, whereas earlier massacres in East Timor lacked such eye-witness documentation from independent observers (Martin, 2007, 27). Consequently, scholars have given far more attention to the Dili massacre than to other massacres in East Timor.

Within Sharp's dynamics, opponent actions are most visible at the stage of political jiu-jitsu, making them easier to study. Nevertheless, there are some studies of tactics at other stages. Each of the next three sections addresses a stage of Sharp's dynamics: laying the groundwork, maintaining nonviolent discipline, and achieving success, with examples from relevant studies. Because

the stage “political jiu-jitsu” has been analysed in some detail already, it is not further addressed here. The stages “challenge brings repression” and “the redistribution of power” are not covered due to the limited number of suitable studies. Each opponent-tactics subsection concludes with observations about first and second-level tactics.

Laying the Groundwork

Opponent Tactics

Actions that deter or prevent activists from undertaking the preparatory efforts called by Sharp “laying the groundwork” can be considered in either an expansive or restricted sense. In the expansive sense, repressive actions of any sort can be included; in the restricted sense, the focus is on actions specifically aimed at preventing an organised, substantial, overt nonviolent challenge.

Firstly, consider the expansive sense: even when there are no attempts to lay the basis for a nonviolent resistance campaign, repression techniques might still be thought of as pre-emptively undermining a potential campaign. Relevant here is a longstanding body of research on repression and repressive violence (e.g., Ackroyd et al., 1977; Bunyan, 1976; Goldstein, 1978; Hoefnagels, 1977; Plate and Darvi, 1983) as well as more recent studies (e.g., Boykoff, 2006; Cunningham, 2003; Davenport and Appel, 2022; Earl and Braithwaite, 2022), all of which are potentially relevant to the laying-the-groundwork stage. Because repressive violence — including beatings, arrests, imprisonment, torture, killings, and disappearances — is widely seen as unjust, the backfire framework can be applied independently of its role in Sharp’s dynamics. For example, perpetrators of torture regularly hide their actions, label victims as criminals or terrorists, minimise the effects on victims, set up superficial investigations when torture is exposed, and threaten victims, namely all the methods listed in Table 2 (Brooks, 2017; Martin and Wright, 2003). Repression also includes methods that do not involve physical violence, including ridicule, labelling, defamation, and stigmatisation, which have been called “soft repression” (Ferre, 2004; Jämte and Ellefsen, 2020; Smithey and Kurtz, 2018). These fall into the category of devaluation (Table 2).

Secondly, consider several studies with more focused attention on preventing resistance from emerging. Sullivan (2016) obtained access to files of the Guatemalan National Police for the period 1975–1985, a particularly bloody period, when over 100,000 people, most of them indigenous, were killed by the military and police. It has been called genocide. Sullivan discovered that the police took repressive action against potential opposition groups before they

mounted public actions. They especially targeted groups with revolutionary aims, such as overthrowing the government. In relation to Sharp's dynamics, the police repression falls within the stage of laying the groundwork; in terms of tactics, it fits intimidation.

There is another relevant aspect of Sullivan's analysis. It challenges the usual view that repression is deployed only when movements start taking action, which is also an implicit assumption in the elements of Sharp's dynamics. The usual view derives, in part, from media reports, which seldom describe struggles before they become publicly visible. Sullivan writes, "... biases in newspaper data predispose analysts to the conclusion that governments only employ repression in response to overt collective challenges, while missing repression directed against more covert mobilization activities." (Sullivan, 2016, 1165). The absence of information about repression intended to derail laying the groundwork can be classified as a form of cover-up. Note that this does not need to be intentional. The absence of media coverage of repression when there are no overt challenges is, in part, an unintentional consequence of the news values of Western media, and consequently researchers who draw on Western media.

The term "cover-up" is used here to include both intentional hiding of information and the absence of information caused by other processes; the latter might be called *de facto* cover-up. For example, activists sometimes do not report being abused or harassed due to embarrassment or fear of publicity or reprisals, resulting in an absence of public information.

In this context, it is worth mentioning the work of Virgil Hawkins (2008), who analysed media coverage and public attention to deadly conflicts around the world, finding that the more deadly conflicts — for example, wars in the Congo from the 1990s on — usually received very little attention compared with conflicts salient in the Western media. Since 2022, there has been saturation coverage of wars in Ukraine and Gaza, but little on the more deadly killing in Sudan. This imbalance in coverage also affects the study of nonviolent movements.

One of the best available sources for understanding techniques used by repressive regimes against nonviolent opposition is William Dobson's (2012) book *The Dictator's Learning Curve*. Dobson, a journalist, set out to study the dynamics of authoritarian regimes by interviewing politicians, officials and civil society activists. He noted the great advances made by anti-regime movements using nonviolent action, observing that in recent years progress had stalled. Dictators were becoming more sophisticated by allowing a limited level of dissent but keeping it at the margins. They were less ham-fisted, watched opponents carefully, and listened to public opinion so they could act to prevent a build-up of resentment that might boil over in a people-power uprising.

Dobson gives an account of Putin's Russia in the early 2000s, including his centralisation of power, marginalisation of the Duma, handpicking of regional leaders, and takeover of nearly all media (especially television). According to Dobson, Putin was careful not to go too far. Elections were fraudulent, but this was mainly due to regional leaders stuffing ballots so they wouldn't look too unpopular; Putin won with 70% of the vote, not 99% as in the days of the Soviet Union. Civil society groups were undermined by fire inspections and other forms of administrative harassment. Journalists were at risk of being murdered. Putin also set up a nationwide process to collect complaints, so the government could be alert to emerging problems. The regime set up government-operated non-government organisations (GONGOS) that claimed to be independent but were not. "In truth, their goal is to legitimize government policy, soak up foreign funding from genuine NGOs, and confuse the public about who is in the right, the government or its critics" (Dobson 2012, 28).

In this brief summary of Dobson's account of Putin's Russia, several government tactics to deter and disrupt laying the groundwork can be discerned. The takeover of the media serves as cover-up; threatening journalists is intimidation; and GONGOS are an official channel, with their deceptive features being a method of reinterpretation. Administrative harassment might be considered another form of intimidation, but it might be worth treating as a new category.

Silitski (2005) analysed methods used by Alyaksandr Lukashenka to cement dictatorial powers in Belarus, focusing on what he called "pre-emptive methods", dealing with threats before they arise, mainly looking at elections and political parties. Rather than providing a reasonable façade of electoral fairness, Lukashenka smashed electoral rivals. In doing this, he rejected the softer methods used in Serbia and Ukraine, where anti-government movements were able to mobilise against unfair elections. At the beginning, Lukashenka was popular and would have won fair elections. He used his popularity to shrink opportunities for opponents.

Preemption aims at political parties and players that are still weak. It removes from the political arena even those opposition leaders who are unlikely to pose a serious challenge in the next election. It attacks the independent press even if it reaches only small segments of the population. It destroys civil society organizations even when these are concentrated in a relatively circumscribed urban subculture. Last but not least, it violates the electoral rules even when the incumbent would be likely to win in a fair balloting.

SILITSKY, 2005, 84

The methods used by Lukashenka's regime at the stage of laying the groundwork can be classified into several of the categories in Table 2: cover-up and reinterpretation via control over the media, the official channel of elections to legitimise the regime, and intimidation by regulations against protests, controls over educational institutions, obstruction of campaigning and shutting down NGOs. In summary, Lukashenka's regime's primary method was intimidation, much of which was to bolster elections as an official channel, with media control an accompanying method of cover-up.

Born et al. (2025) analysed why nonviolent movements have not developed in Turkmenistan, concluding that isolation (political neutrality and a single-export economy) is the major factor limiting the emergence of a nonviolent movement. Larger and stable fossil-fuel export revenue props up the security apparatus, fending off potential challengers that might have a grievance about the distribution of the money. Meanwhile, protesters go missing without fanfare, and there is a continuing threat of repression.

... the isolation permeates through the disruption of all forms of organization of possible alternative power bases, by the constant reshuffling of political roles and routine detentions of potentially powerful officials, guaranteeing obedience from all levels of government through repression and fearmongering.

BORN ET AL., 2025, 22

Feldstein (2021), in a study of digital repression, says the main threats to autocrats are insider challenges (especially coups) and popular protests. Since the 1990s, protests have been a greater threat. To pre-empt protests, governments develop intelligence services, maintaining power by "low-intensity coercive tactics—surveillance, opposition harassment, legal persecution, and short-term detentions", and digital repression helps in doing this (Feldstein, 2021, 11).

In summary, studies of repression provide a wealth of information about how regimes attempt to prevent the emergence of nonviolent resistance campaigns. Most of their techniques fit the categories in Table 2.

These examples of opponent actions at the stage of laying the groundwork suggest that they are mostly first-level tactics: they are actions intended to prevent, stymie, or undermine activist efforts to build the capacity to organise significant nonviolent actions, initiating a campaign. In some cases, these opponent actions could trigger outrage, in which case second-level tactics could be used, but the distinction is not always relevant. For example, a repressive government may keep its disruption and repressive operations secret in order to make them more effective by not alerting activists to them. In such a case,

cover-up is both a first-level and potentially a second-level tactic: it is an aspect of the repression while also serving to limit potential outrage.

Activist Counter-Tactics

Glick (1989), in a classic treatment, examined US government covert action and provided guidelines for coping with infiltration, psychological warfare, legal harassment, and extra-legal force. Glick recommended exposing covert action as undemocratic, indeed as state terrorism, and opposing it publicly via research, education, support for victims, direct action, legal action, and coalitions. Many of these methods can be classified as one or more of the methods in Table 3.

Not all methods of resisting repression contribute to laying the groundwork. For example, Born et al. (2025) report that in the space of a decade (2008–2018) in Turkmenistan, a third of the population emigrated in response to repression. Sharp (1973, 211–213) lists protest emigration among his methods of social noncooperation, but the massive emigration from Turkmenistan left behind children and elderly people, few of whom can lead a movement.

There is a growing body of information about resistance in the digital sphere, namely opposing disinformation and surveillance (e.g., Bartkowski, 2018; Bell and Spalding, 2017; EFF, n.d.; OPTF, 2021). Many of the methods of resistance can be classified as exposing the action (i.e., exposing disinformation and surveillance), interpreting it as an injustice, and resisting intimidation.

More generally, there is a well-documented counter to repression: nonviolent action (Chenoweth, 2021; Nepstad, 2015; Schock, 2015; Vinthagen, 2015). Indeed, resisting repression is one of the central rationales for nonviolent action, one to which Sharp subscribed. It may seem circular to cite nonviolent action as a counter to repression that serves to prevent laying the groundwork, the first stage in Sharp's dynamics, given that laying the groundwork is preparation for nonviolent action. The resolution of this apparent circularity is that it is possible to take action that precedes a full-blown campaign, or to think of action as synergistic with laying the groundwork. In other words, actions can be used as means to build capacity for further actions. However, few studies of nonviolent action discuss how actions contribute to preparing for campaigns, at least not explicitly in connection with Sharp's dynamics.

Maintaining Nonviolent Discipline

Opponent Tactics

In Sharp's dynamics, "maintaining nonviolent discipline" is not really a stage but rather a feature of campaigns that makes both political jiu-jitsu and success more likely. When activists use violence, this gives greater legitimacy to the opponent's violence and reduces the possibility of support from third parties.³ Therefore, opponents have an interest in provoking protester violence and undermining commitments to avoid it. There are various ways they can do this.

Agents provocateurs are undercover police or police agents who encourage protesters to use violence, sometimes going so far as to provide weapons or help construct them. At rallies, they may urge other members to use violence against police, and may join in. *Agents provocateurs* attempt to undermine nonviolent discipline, so protesters can be discredited as being violent, legitimising violence against them.

The efforts of *agents provocateurs* include several tactics within the component "maintaining nonviolent discipline": cover-up, because these infiltrators try to hide their identity; devaluation, by discrediting activists as being violent; and reinterpretation, by lying about themselves and their aims. The tactics of official channels and intimidation are not usually involved.

In many cases, challengers choose armed struggle for their own reasons, without encouragement from their opponents, and in such cases it is not appropriate to classify this as a method used by opponents. However, in some cases a government encourages armed resistance to itself — for example by deploying *agents provocateurs* — as a way to weaken commitment to nonviolence. Although there have been many violent radical flanks in nonviolent movements worldwide, in only a few cases is there good evidence that they have been encouraged or supported by the governments they are opposing.

Repressive governments often try to discredit or remove leaders of nonviolent movements, and this can affect nonviolent discipline. Without an esteemed leader, some activists might turn to other leaders or movement groups less committed to nonviolence.

Martin Luther King Jr was the most prominent leader of the US civil rights movement. The FBI undertook surveillance of King's activities and covert operations to discredit him (King Encyclopedia, 2008), aiming to undermine the

3 Violence by authorities against violent protesters can also be counterproductive, when the authorities' violence is seen as disproportionate and hence unjust. Even in warfare, disproportionate violence can be seen as unjust (Gray and Martin, 2008).

entire movement. This technique is straightforward in itself, but how it relates to the elements of Sharp's dynamics is not so simple. The FBI's surveillance was covert, so it can fit into the category of cover-up, but its threats to King, conveyed confidentially, were a form of intimidation. If the FBI had released information about King, this would have fit into the category of devaluation. But the FBI did not go public. King's rivals included Malcolm X (assassinated in 1965), and the Black Panthers, who carried guns and had a militant profile. In the aftermath of King's assassination in 1968, there were riots across the US, suggesting that commitment to nonviolence was far from widespread among what Sharp would call the grievance group, namely Black Americans.

Another example is the Israeli government's expulsion of Mubarak Awad, a Palestinian nonviolence leader, in 1988. Within the long-running Israel-Palestinian conflict, Palestinian resistance has sometimes been primarily nonviolent, as in the first Intifada 1987–1993, and sometimes primarily violent, as in suicide bombings and missile attacks, and in Hamas' attack on 7 October 2023. Some supporters of Palestinian rights have argued that nonviolent methods are a better option, capable of gaining greater support both within the Palestinian population and internationally (e.g., Dajani 1994; King 2007). For example, the first Intifada led to much greater Palestinian participation in resistance than the prior terrorist attacks by the Palestinian Liberation Organisation, and also triggered greater international support. In this context, the Israeli government, by expelling Awad, sought to weaken Palestinian commitment to nonviolence. However, expelling a nonviolence leader does not fit neatly into the framework employed here, and might be the basis for a new category.

Violent resistance can disrupt or undermine a nonviolent struggle. Sharp (1973, 597–608) argued that violence weakens nonviolent movements, giving several historical examples, concluding, "The popular view that violence in a resistance or revolutionary movement by definition adds to the power and chances of success of that movement can no longer be accepted." (608) It is harder to build the foundations of a nonviolent struggle when a war is raging, and a nonviolent challenge can be sidelined, not having the same capacity to attract participants when armed struggle is the dominant form of action: the existence of armed resistance can reduce commitment to nonviolence by offering an alternative option for some activists.

Given that governments can encourage violent resistance by challengers as a way of marginalising a potentially more powerful nonviolent resistance, how can this method be categorised in terms of the five types of opponent tactics? It is not the sort of cover-up by which a regime hides or disguises its own violent activities. Nevertheless, attention to violent resistance can reduce the visibility of nonviolent methods. For example, during the Vietnam War, there

was a nonviolent Buddhist campaign, but it received little publicity compared to military activities. Encouraging violent resistance can implicitly devalue nonviolence as weak and ineffectual. Reinterpretation is involved, especially by framing conflict as inevitably violent. Intimidation is involved, because remaining nonviolent is more difficult in the midst of violence. When there is active armed resistance, this serves as a visible alternative, drawing some participants away from nonviolent options. Despite these connections, perhaps encouraging violent resistance should be considered as a new category of tactics. However it is classified, it is an important tool for regimes threatened by a nonviolent movement.

These examples of opponent actions to disrupt and undermine nonviolent discipline are mostly first-level tactics, intended to encourage activists to be violent, thus legitimising violence against them. Some of these first-level tactics — for example infiltrating movements and fomenting violence — have the capacity to trigger outrage, mainly within the movement, in which case second-level tactics come into play. This dual-level capacity of tactics is obvious in relation to the secrecy involved in infiltration, which serves to undermine movement groups (first level) and prevent awareness that this is happening (second level).

Activist Counter-Tactics

At the stage of maintaining nonviolent discipline, one area where campaigners have shared their insights is in responding to infiltrators and *agents provocateurs*. A key response is to expose them, which is the counter-tactic to cover-up. An excellent example is COINTELPRO, the FBI's programme for disrupting US protest movements in the 1960s. In 1971, a group of antiwar activists broke into the FBI office in Media, Pennsylvania, and carried away a large number of FBI files. After going through the files, they mailed copies of revealing documents about COINTELPRO to journalists at major US newspapers. One of them, Betty Medsger, ran stories about the FBI's activities, which caused a scandal.

Decades later, Medsger discovered the identity of the activists and wrote a book about their experiences, drawing on FBI files available (Medsger 2014). The activists had suspected FBI spying and disruption but had no evidence. They planned their raid on the Media FBI office carefully. Their plan relied on finding a sympathetic journalist willing to take on the FBI. Medsger discovered that the FBI had made concerted efforts to discover the burglars, but did not succeed. It is easy to imagine what would have happened if the burglars had been caught: the FBI would have attacked their credibility, the method of devaluation.

Steve Chase (2021) provides an activist-oriented examination of agent provocateurs, with examples from several countries and campaigns, including a focus on the US civil rights movement, covering FBI infiltration and provocations. He makes a strong case for nonviolent discipline in campaigns and resisting those who call for violence, whether they are agent provocateurs or sincere activists. He notes that infiltrators never argue *against* violence. He recommends that group members should be more willing to counter pro-violence arguments, noting that diversity of tactics should be diversity of *effective* tactics, and that violence harms campaigns: it is not just an individual choice. Countering pro-violence arguments is a counter-method of interpretation in Table 3.

Achieving Success

Opponent Tactics

The component of Sharp's dynamics that he called "three ways success may be achieved" — later revised to four ways (Sharp 2005) — is less well specified than other components. The four ways are conversion, accommodation, non-violent coercion, and disintegration (Sharp 2005, 415–421). Even after a major nonviolent struggle, including political jiu-jitsu, an important obstacle to success is the opponent's actions, which can be classified in the same way as in other components. One important tactic often used by opponents is official channels: setting up or using procedural mechanisms — such as negotiations, conferences, and agreements — that give only a semblance of fairness and honesty, while actually serving the opponent's agenda.

In the aftermath of the 1930 Salt Satyagraha, the transformative event in the campaign for India's independence, led by Gandhi, the British government held a conference in London to seek a settlement with the independence movement. However, according to Weber (1997, 461), "The negotiations yielded no tangible gains to the nationalist cause." This is typical of official channels, which involve delay that allows campaigning momentum to decline, and take the issue out of the domain of campaigning with popular participation and transfer it to the domain of experts and elites operating behind closed doors, excluding the public.

Another example is the first Palestinian intifada, 1987–1993 (Darweish and Rigby, 2015; Rigby, 1991). It was followed by the Oslo Accords between the Israeli government and the Palestinian Liberation Organisation, which promised a path to Palestinian statehood, the so-called two-state solution. However, the promise was not fulfilled (e.g., Baumgart-Ochse 2009; Miller 2023). The accords

moved the Palestinian struggle out of the streets into the rooms of negotiators, from which it never recovered as a nonviolent struggle.

Official channels — negotiations, investigations, court cases, agreements — seem to provide a way to cement gains from a campaign. Sometimes this is the case, but often the appearance belies the reality.

The use of official channels to prevent the success of a nonviolent campaign is a first-level tactic. Second-level tactics are occasionally involved, when official channels are seen as blatantly unfair. An example is the trial of Los Angeles police officers involved in the beating of Rodney King in 1991 (Martin, 2007, 43–64). The jury's non-guilty verdict a year later triggered a massive riot, because people had seen the video of the beating and made their own judgement. The federal government's response was to launch a second trial of the same officers: another official channel to address outrage from the first. However, this example is not from a nonviolent campaign. More studies are needed to examine the roles of first and second-level tactics at the stage of achieving success.

Activist Counter-Tactics

When official channels are used to obstruct the success of nonviolent campaigns, there are two main counter-tactics: avoiding or discrediting official channels, and mobilising support. That there is no single and obvious counter-tactic suggests the difficulty for campaigners: many people believe in official channels — investigations, laws, elections and the like — as the road to social change. When the opponent promises to address grievances, some campaigners may want to accept the promise, and it may be hard to maintain momentum.

Although Sharp devoted considerable attention to this element of his dynamics, there has been little systematic follow-up within the nonviolence literature, at least when compared to the attention given to methods and outcomes. More examination of methods used by opponents following nonviolent confrontations may give insights into how to better sustain movement successes.

Conclusion

Sharp's "dynamics of nonviolent action" provides a way to understand the features of typical nonviolent campaigns, thus offering guidance to activists. However, at every stage articulated by Sharp, opponents can try to obstruct and deter campaigners. Research concerning one particular element in the dynamics, political jiu-jitsu, shows that tactics commonly used by opponents

to prevent or limit the jiu-jitsu outcome can be classified as cover-up, devaluation, reinterpretation, official channels, and intimidation (Table 2). A similar degree of investigation has not been carried out in relation to other stages in Sharp's dynamics, in part because so many of these tactics are not in the public eye.

The aim here has been to suggest a preliminary framework for analysing tactics in other elements of Sharp's dynamics. Available studies provide considerable evidence that opponents of nonviolent campaigners use the same types of tactics at the stages of laying the groundwork and maintaining nonviolent discipline as they do at the stage of political jiu-jitsu. However, there is an important difference between opponent tactics at these different stages. The trigger for political jiu-jitsu is typically a repressive action that could cause public outrage, and perpetrators use a variety of tactics to reduce this outrage. The repressive action can be called a first-level action, namely intimidation, in contrast with methods to reduce outrage, which can be called second-level. When opponents try to hinder campaigns at the stages of laying the groundwork and maintaining nonviolent discipline, their actions are typically first-level, sometimes also operating at the second level of reducing potential outrage.

At the stage of maintaining nonviolent discipline, one particular opponent method, encouraging violent resistance, is important but is hard to classify in the preliminary categories based on the ones commonly found in the stage of political jiu-jitsu. It is plausible that different types of opponent methods might be used in different stages of campaigns, because, for each stage in the struggle, their capacities and opportunities are different. This points to the need for further investigation into the diversity of opponent tactics at different stages in nonviolent campaigns.

There is less evidence concerning tactics at the stage of achieving success, except for the role of official channels. Even less evidence is available for two other stages — challenge brings repression and the redistribution of power — but it is plausible that some of the same tactics would be used as found in the stage of political jiu-jitsu. Further studies are needed to explore opponent tactics and activist counter-tactics throughout all facets of nonviolent campaigns.

The practical goal of this sort of analysis is to offer ideas to help nonviolent campaigners be more effective. At the stage of political jiu-jitsu, it is useful to campaigners to anticipate the methods that police might use against nonviolent protesters to reduce outrage — such as hiding abuse and claiming protesters are violent — and devise ways to counter them. The same applies at other stages, for example laying the groundwork, which is less often a focus in studies of nonviolent movements, often because there is less information for outsiders to study. The most common methods used against nonviolent campaigns, and

the most effective ones, may well differ according to the stage of the campaign. This applies to Sharp's dynamics, and might also be studied in the frameworks proposed by George Lakey and Bill Moyer. The important thing is to examine not just activist methods and strategies, but also opponent tactics. And given that opponents, over time, learn how to counter movement tactics, it becomes imperative for activists to continually study opponent tactics and experiment with ways to counter them.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Paula Arvela, Anu Bissoonauth-Bedford, Marina Granato, Suzanne Gray, Julia LeMonde, Thomas Weber and especially Molly Wallace and two anonymous reviewers for many useful comments.

References

- Ackroyd, Carol, Karen Margolis, Jonathan Rosenhead, and Tim Shallice. 1977. *The Technology of Political Control*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Bartkowski, Maciej. 2018. *An Activist's Guide to Fighting Foreign Disinformation Warfare*. Washington, DC: International Center on Nonviolent Conflict.
- Baumgart-Ochse, Claudia. 2009. Democratization in Israel, Politicized Religion and the Failure of the Oslo Peace Process. *Democratization* 16(6): 1115–1142.
- Bell, Jessica, and Dan Spalding. n.d. *Security Culture for Activists*. Oakland, CA: The Ruckus Society.
- Blackstock, Nelson. 1976. *Cointelpro: The FBI's Secret War on Political Freedom*. New York: Vintage.
- Born, Willemijn, Maartje Weerdesteijn and Joris van Wijk. 2025. The Path of Least Resistance: Repression of Nonviolent Resistance through Isolation in Turkmenistan. *Central Asian Affairs* 12(1): 1–28.
- Boykoff, Jules. 2006. *The Suppression of Dissent: How the State and Mass Media Squelch US American Social Movements*. New York: Routledge.
- Brooks, Aloysia. 2017. *The Annihilation of Memory and Silent Suffering: Inhibiting Outrage at the Unjustice of Torture in the War on Terror in Australia*. PhD thesis, University of Wollongong.
- Bunyan, Tony. 1976. *The History and Practice of the Political Police in Britain*. London: Julian Friedmann.
- Chase, Steve. 2021. *How Agent Provocateurs Harm Our Movements*. Washington, DC: ICNC Press.

- Chenoweth, Erica. 2021. *Civil Resistance: What Everyone Needs to Know*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Cunningham, David. 2003. FBI Counterintelligence and the New Left. *Social Forces* 82(1): 209–240.
- Dajani, Souad R. 1994. *Eyes Without Country: Searching for a Palestinian Strategy of Liberation*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Darweish, Marwan and Andrew Rigby. 2015. *Popular Protest in Palestine: The Uncertain Future of Unarmed Resistance*. London: Pluto Press.
- Davenport, Christian and Benjamin J. Appel. 2022. *The Death and Life of State Repression: Understanding Onset, Escalation, Termination, and Recurrence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dobson, William J. 2012. *The Dictator's Learning Curve: Inside the Global Battle for Democracy*. New York: Doubleday.
- Earl, Jennifer, and Jessica Maves Braithwaite. 2022. Layers of Political Repression: Integrating Research on Social Movement Repression. *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 18: 227–248.
- EFF (Electronic Frontier Foundation). n.d. *Surveillance Self-Defense*. San Francisco, CA: Electronic Frontier Foundation.
- Feldstein, Steven. 2021. *The Rise of Digital Repression: How Technology Is Reshaping Power, Politics, and Resistance*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ferree, Myra Marx. 2004. Soft Repression: Ridicule, Stigma, and Silencing in Gender-Based Movements. *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change* 25: 85–101.
- Glaser, Barney G. and Anselm L. Strauss. 1967. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Chicago: Aldine-Atherton.
- Glick, Brian. 1989. *The War at Home: Covert Action Against U.S. Activists and What We Can Do about It*. Boston: South End Press.
- Goldstein, Robert Justin. 1978. *Political Repression in Modern America from 1870 to the Present*. Cambridge, MA: Schenkman.
- Gray, Truda, and Brian Martin. 2008. The American War in Indochina: Injustice and Outrage. *Revista de Paz y Conflictos*, 1: 6–28.
- Hawkins, Virgil. 2008. *Stealth Conflicts: How the World's Worst Violence Is Ignored*. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate.
- Hoefnagels, Marjo (ed.). 1977. *Repression and Repressive Violence*. Amsterdam: Swets and Zeitlinger.
- Jämte, Jan, and Rune Ellefsen. 2020. The Consequences of Soft Repression. *Mobilization: An International Journal* 25(3): 383–404.
- King, Mary Elizabeth. 2007. *A Quiet Revolution: The First Palestinian Intifada and Non-violent Resistance*. New York: Nation Books.

- King Encyclopedia. 2008. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). In *The Martin Luther King, Jr. Encyclopedia*, edited by Clayborne Carson. Bloomsbury Academic. <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/federal-bureau-investigation-fbi>
- Lakey, George. 1973. *Strategy for a Living Revolution*. New York: Grossman.
- Martin, Brian. 2007. *Justice Ignited: The Dynamics of Backfire*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Martin, Brian, Wendy Varney and Adrian Vickers. 2001. Political Jiu-jitsu against Indonesian Repression: Studying Lower-profile Nonviolent Resistance. *Pacifica Review* 13(2): 143–156.
- Martin, Brian, and Steve Wright. 2003. Countershock: Mobilizing Resistance to Electroshock Weapons. *Medicine, Conflict and Survival* 19(3): 205–222.
- Medsger, Betty. 2014. *The Burglary: The Discovery of J. Edgar Hoover's Secret FBI*. New York: Vintage.
- Miller, Aaron David. 2023. Why the Oslo Peace Process Failed. *Foreign Policy* September 13, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/09/13/oslo-accords-1993-anniversary-israel-palestine-peace-process-lessons/>
- Moyer, Bill, with JoAnn McAllister, Mary Lou Finley, and Steven Soifer. 2001. *Doing Democracy: The MAP Model for Organizing Social Movements*. Gabriola Island, BC, Canada: New Society.
- Nepstad, Sharon. 2015. *Nonviolent Struggle: Theories, Strategies, and Dynamics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- OPTF. 2021. *Ground Safe: Assessing the Digital Security Needs and Practices of Human Rights Defenders in Africa, MENA, South Asia, and Southeast Asia*. Sydney: OPTF.
- Plate, Thomas, and Andrea Darvi. 1983. *Secret Police: The Inside Story of a Network of Terror*. London: Sphere.
- Rigby, Andrew. 1991. *Living the Intifada*. London: Zed Books.
- Schock, Kurt. 2015. *Civil Resistance Today*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Sharp, Gene. 1973. *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*. Boston: Porter Sargent.
- Sharp, Gene, with Joshua Paulson, Christopher A. Miller and Hardy Merriman. 2005. *Waging Nonviolent Struggle: 20th Century Practice and 21st Potential*. Boston: Porter Sargent.
- Silitski, Vitali. 2005. Preempting Democracy: The Case of Belarus. *Journal of Democracy* 16(4): 83–97.
- Smithey, Lee A., and Lester R. Kurtz. “Smart Repression,” in Lester R. Kurtz and Lee A. Smithey (eds.), *The Paradox of Repression and Nonviolent Movements* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2018), pp. 185–214.
- Sullivan, Christopher M. 2016. Undermining Resistance: Mobilization, Repression, and the Enforcement of Political Order. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 60(7): 1163–1190.
- Vinshagen, Stellan. 2015. *A Theory of Nonviolent Action: How Civil Resistance Works*. London: Zed Books.

Weber, Thomas. 1997. *On the Salt March: The Historiography of Gandhi's March to Dandi*. New Delhi: HarperCollins.