

# Backfire: Workshop notes

Watch film *Bringing Down a Dictator*

Debrief film – focus on feelings

Insights and generalisations

Time	Process	Resources
10 mins	<i>Otpor!</i> 's Plan B: Harvest ideas for dealing with an activist arrest.	
	List	Butchers paper/white board + markers
	Validate. Expand with <i>Otpor!</i> 's Plan B.	
	Handout	Plan B Handout
	Questions/discussion	
20mins (all up)	Transition to BM's Backfire model: Plan B was a successful tactic that one movement developed when faced with repression. What I would like to is share a framework that can support us to develop responses to other acts of injustice and repression by the state. This framework was developed by Brian Martin a long term social change author/activist.	
	Close your eyes: As individuals think of an injustice.	

	Now think of three ways the power-holders tried to inhibit popular outrage over that injustice.	
	Feedback. List	Butchers paper/white board + markers
	Present fwk – What the power-holders try to do to inhibit outrage	Powerpoint slide
	Now for that same injustice think of what activists did to try and promote popular outrage to seek justice for that person, or those people, or that situation.	
	Feedback. List	Butchers paper/white board + markers
	Present fwk – What activists need to do to promote outrage	Powerpoint slide and handout

### **Alternative delivery:**

Present a relevant local scenario that involves an act of injustice. I have used the case of a local nonviolent activist (Jim Dowling) who was beaten and arrested by police at a meeting to discuss civil liberties in Brisbane. Jim was silently standing at the back of a hall and handing out leaflets to people when they left when the police targeted him.

I present the scenario then ask the question: what could be done to expose the injustice and hold those responsible?

This scenario could be presented if the film wasn't watched or even after the debrief of the film *Bringing Down a Dictator*.

**Other options:**

Roleplaying interrogation.

Debrief.

Developing a dialogue list (see handout: Otpor's Plan B).

Roleplaying interrogation again with the dialogue list.

Debrief and discussion.

**Jason MacLeod December 2005**

**From a Workshop with James Whelan and Sam La Rocca of *The Change Agency***

# Igniting Justice: Promoting Backfire

## *What the power-holders/oppressors try to do to inhibit outrage*

1. Cover up the action	The power-holders will almost certainly try to hide as much as possible of their repressive activities, especially their mistakes and failures.
2. Devalue the target	The power-holders will undoubtedly slander, indeed demonise, those who are the target of repression as well as those who attempt to address the injustice.
3. Reinterpret what happened	The power-holders and their allies will try and re-cast the initial injustice and/or their repression in ways that appeal to popular community values, identities, and fears.
4. Use formal procedures	When pressed the power-holders will often use formal procedures. Not to ensure that justice is done but to dissipate popular outrage.
5. Intimidate or bribe people involved.	The power-holders will often attempt to bribe or intimidate those who expose injustice and seek justice.

## What activists need to do to promote outrage

<b>1. Reveal: Expose the action</b>	Try and expose as much information about the injustice and repression as possible. Important roles can be played by whistleblowers, investigative journalists, courageous editors, and alternative media activists.
<b>2. Redeem: Validate the target</b>	It is better if those who take leading roles against the new powers are principled and respectable and thus harder to discredit. For example, in the case of accusations of terrorism or espousing political violence, advocacy by publicly respected figures and/or by those with an explicit commitment to nonviolence makes it harder to credibly label someone a terrorist.
<b>3. Reframe: Emphasise interpretation of the action as an injustice</b>	The struggle over framing and ideas will be ongoing. Engaging in the public debate is vitally important. As well as logical arguments, symbols and slogans are important. Be mindful of the fact that it is often easier to obtain support for defense of the <i>status quo</i> than for social change. It may be advantageous for some activists to frame themselves as defenders of community values, as (true) “conservatives” rather than (right-wing) “radicals.”
<b>4. Redirect: Mobilise public concern (and avoid formal procedures)</b>	There will a great temptation to engage with the issue using formal channels, such as amendments to laws, electoral politics, constitutional appeals, etc. Solely depending on formal procedures is to play the game on the power-holder’s own turf and does not encourage popular participation in efforts to secure justice. A higher priority should be put on empowering people to resist the powers directly than engaging in formal procedures.
<b>5. Resist: Resist and expose intimidation and bribery</b>	To oppose the power-holders is intimidating. Success requires preparation, training, organisation, persistence — and courage.

# Plan B:

## Using Secondary Protests to Undermine State Repression



*In the autumn of 2000, the Serbian people reclaimed their country from Slobodan Milosevic. Their weapons were not guns and bombs but ridicule, rock music and massive civil disobedience. Led by the student resistance group Otpor!, the broad based nonviolent opposition movement continuously innovated and combined tactics to ensure the safety of movement activists and to break down the fear of the Serbian people to speak out against the government. Plan B was one of the tactics they used.*

### Plan B in a nutshell

Whenever the police arrested activists in demonstrations, *Otpor!* activists would instantaneously launch a secondary operation, mobilising more people to show up at the police stations and protest the arrests. The events at the police stations became media showpieces, calling attention to the injustice of the arrests, and the illegitimacy of the regime.

*Otpor!* provided moral support and encouragement to the arrested activists, turning them into local and national heroes, rather than forgotten victims. *Otpor!* thus turned the regime's policy to its own advantage and continued to build a

### Activating Plan B

**Expect repression.** The arrest of activists in particular, and repression in general, is seldom, if ever, an accidental state strategy. In fact, repression is often a sign that a movement threatens the *status-quo*. The purpose of repression is to deliberately weaken, frighten and disempower resistance. By expecting repression and preparing for it, activists empower themselves and strengthen the movement.

**Advance planning.** Turn the tables on the regime. Organise strategies for dealing with repression and develop contingency plans in advance. Know your opponent and anticipate how they might respond based on ongoing research and analysis.

**Roles.** Plan to have clearly identifiable **legal observers** at all actions to monitor and report on the activities of the security forces. "**The reserve**". These activists do not participate directly in the demonstration but monitor the situation from a close

but safe distance. Their duty is not to get arrested. If there were any arrests they need to immediately pass on information about the arrests to the **communication support people**. These activists would receive information about the arrests and mobilise people to quickly gather at the police station. They would also inform the media; notify sympathetic lawyers on stand by; and contact key public allies, union activists, political parties, and representatives and NGO's. Other key roles include: **police liaison** (liaising with police), **media support** (contacting the media and referring the media to the media spokesperson/people), **media spokesperson** (talking to the media), and **arrest support** (supporting and advocating for those arrested; making sure the cat is feed, car is moved, notifying employers that they can't

come to work, contacting family and friends, and doing anything else that might need to be done etc). These roles and people to fill them would also be organised in advance.

**Activation.** Activists assuming the key roles above immediately activate Plan B.

**Maintain nonviolent discipline.** Once gathered in front of the police station it is very important to maintain discipline and for people to understand why they are there. *Otpor!* used nonviolent, humorous activities to maintain a positive atmosphere, such as listening to music, singing songs and playing volleyball. Passer-by's found this funny. The police found it irritating. But what could they do? They could hardly arrest people for standing on the footpath and listening to music.

**Welcome and celebrate when activists come out of detention.** *Otpor!* activists celebrated the activists as heroes when they were released and held a press conference. The activists coming out of detention were often exhausted, tired, frightened, and angry, but they were also motivated and happy because they were not alone when they were released, but were greeted by a crowd of friends and well-wishers.

**Debrief and support.** It is extremely important to speak to activists a day or two after the arrest about their experiences, their plans and activities and family situation (sometimes the parents were much more frightened than the activists). Be known as a movement that looks after your people.

**Thank people!**

### Preparing for interrogation and dealing with fear

The more people are prepared and have "rehearsed" for an interrogation, the less frightening and damaging the experience is going to be for them. When activists are arrested encourage them to remember as much as what happened during interrogations and to write down this information. By analysing these experiences it is possible to come up with realistic scenarios to role-play and to develop "dialogue lists" which can aid activists in the event of arrests and interrogation.

Plan B was part of a larger effort to help activists control their very real fears of arrest and mistreatment.

1. First *Otpor!* told people fear was normal.
2. *Otpor!* taught people to stick close together at demonstrations and to have "buddies".
3. In actions activists had tasks to keep their minds off fear.
4. Most importantly *Otpor!* took the mystery out of arrests and interrogation by preparing activists for it.
5. Activists knew for sure that lawyers, the media and more protesters would stand in front of the police station until they were released.

## In the event of interrogation: *Otpor!*'s dialogue list

Who is <i>Otpor!</i> 's leader?	Everybody knows that <i>Otpor!</i> has no leader. We don't have a president or any other governing body. Anybody could be the leader on his or her street, in a department, at work.... I don't even know all the people in the office. There is always somebody else, and those who are there regularly I know only by their first names or nicknames.
How did you become a member?	I filled in the application form at their website, <a href="http://www.otpor.com">www.otpor.com</a> . It's no secret. Anybody can go to the website, even you.
Who finances <i>Otpor!</i> ?	Serbs from the Diaspora. Some citizens also come to the office and give small donations.
Where did you get the materials?	I took it from the office. Everybody knows the office is in downtown Belgrade, at 49 Knez Mihajlova St.

For more information read **Plan B** by Zorana Smiljanic at [www.newtactics.org](http://www.newtactics.org).  
Adapted and summarised by Jason MacLeod - 13<sup>th</sup> November 2005