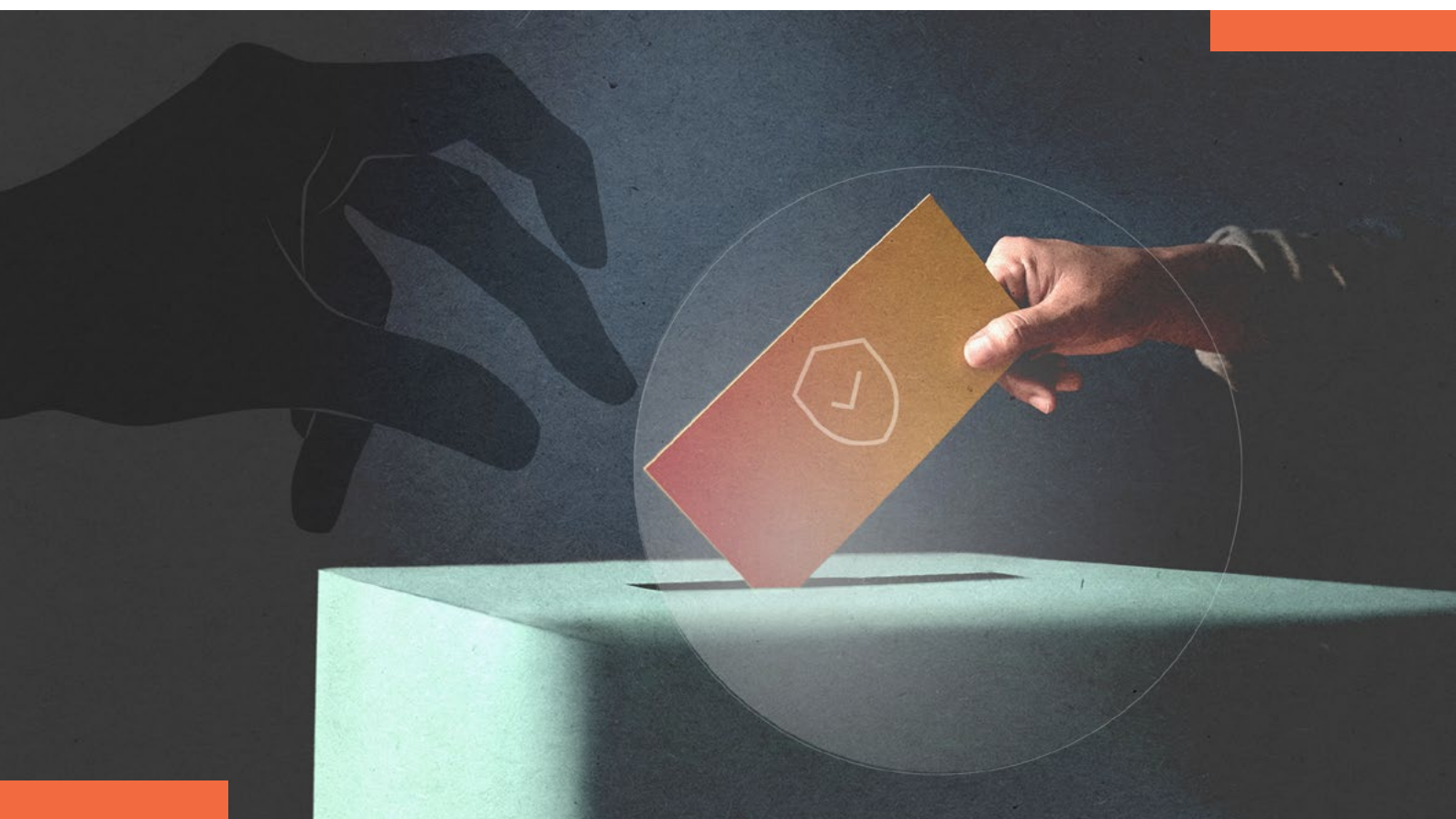




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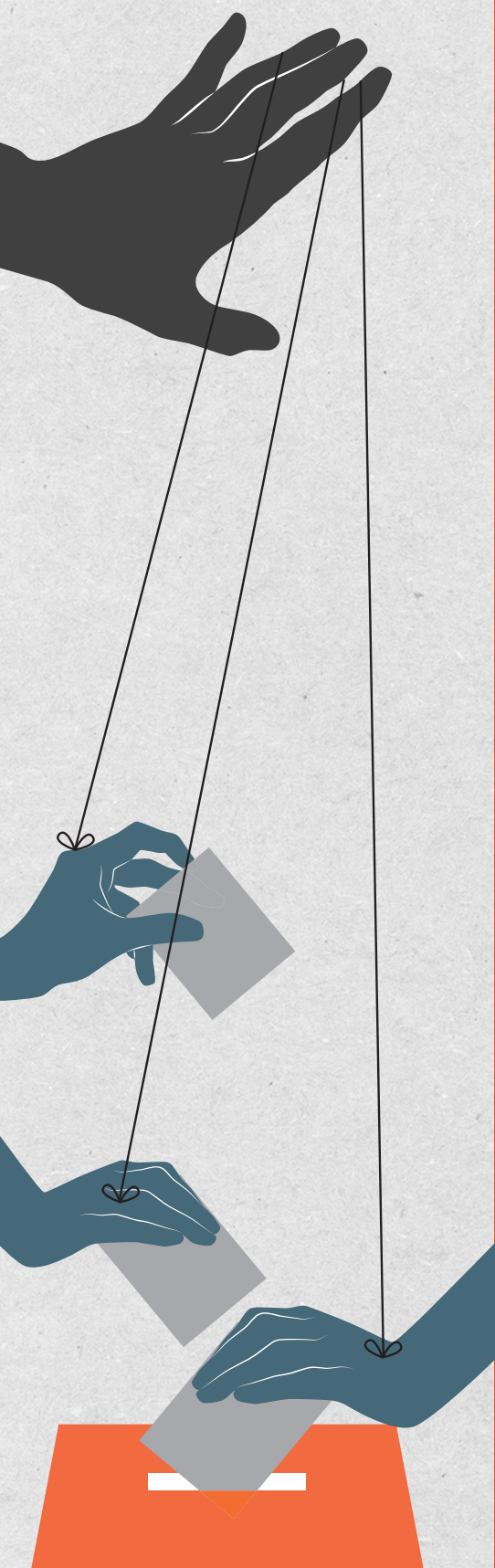
DEFENDING THE VOTE FROM AUTHORITARIANS:

Lessons for Nonviolent Movements



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ABOUT THE REPORT:

This report examines the factors influencing nonviolent movement dynamics under authoritarian regimes where, over the years, electoral integrity has faltered. Utilizing CANVAS' expansive global network, this paper includes data from activists in Venezuela, Georgia, Nicaragua, the Philippines, and Zimbabwe to provide a compelling strategic framework for activists in nonviolent movements seeking free and fair elections. The research is then applied to civil society in Tunisia and how it can overcome growing autocracy and promote democratic values.

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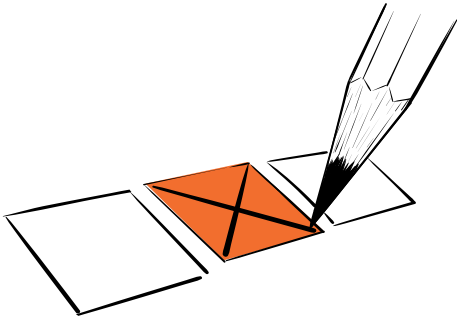
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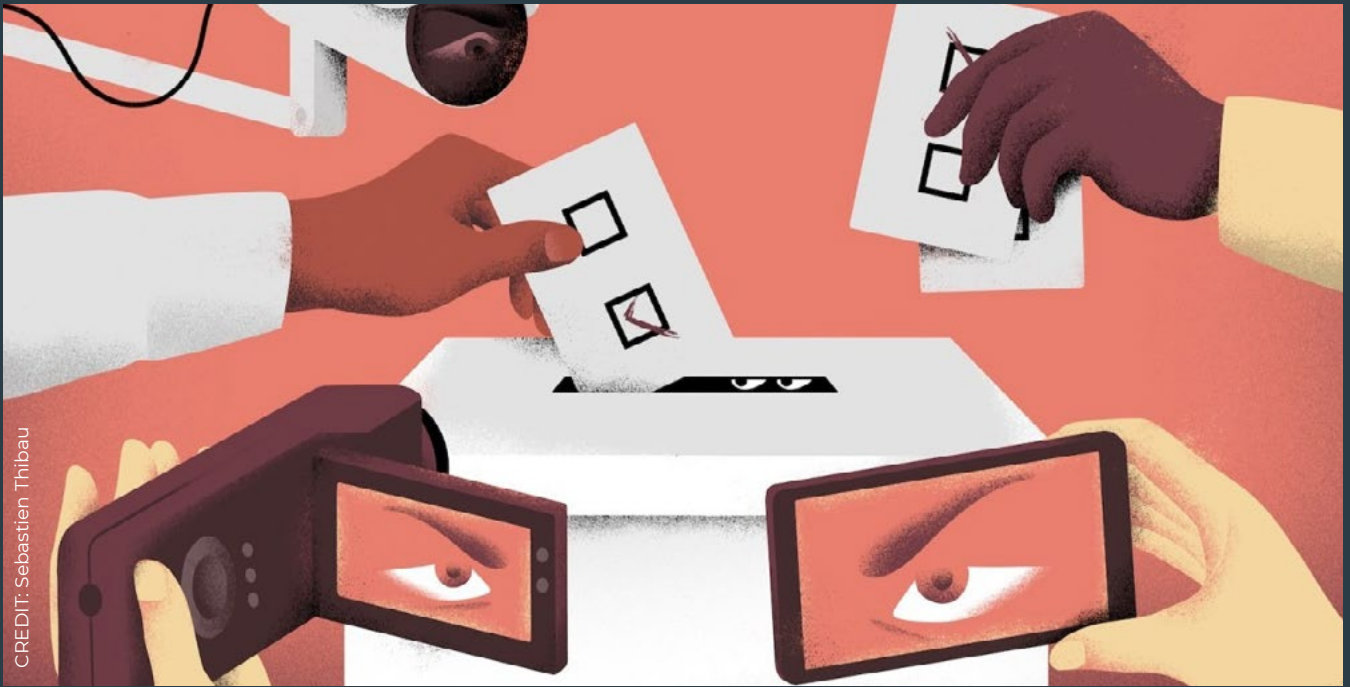
CANVAS PARTNERS, PLAYED A CRITICAL ROLE GETTING OUT THE VOTE, PROMOTING HUMAN RIGHTS, ENSURING FREE AND FAIR ELECTIONS, AND DEMANDING ELECTORAL TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Throughout 2024- which saw roughly half the world's population head to the polls- frontline activists and movements, many of them CANVAS partners, played a critical role getting out the vote, promoting human rights, ensuring free and fair elections, and demanding electoral transparency and accountability.

Recognizing the important role that these partners play, CANVAS launched research into the role of nonviolent movements in elections with a goal to better understand best practices and lessons learned that could be shared across contexts. Indeed, many of these elections highlight key challenges and strategies for nonviolent movements seeking to defend the vote under authoritarian regimes. Despite varied contexts, these elections reveal shared patterns of repression, manipulation, and resistance, offering lessons for movements worldwide.

Working collaboratively across CANVAS's global network, the first phase of this research focuses on recent elections in Venezuela, Zimbabwe, Nicaragua, the Philippines, and Georgia, with additional countries to be added in 2025. The research also applies lessons learned from these contexts to propose strategies for the democratic future of Tunisia, which has become increasingly authoritarian since the heady days of the Arab Spring.



CREDIT: Sébastien Thibaut

Five key lessons that emerge from this comparative research to date are:

1. UNITY IS NONNEGOTIABLE:

In all five cases, fragmented opposition forces weakened nonviolent movements' ability to challenge entrenched regimes. In Zimbabwe, divisions among opposition parties and civil society diluted their impact, while in Georgia, situational alliances failed to evolve into sustainable coalitions. Similarly, in the Philippines, civil society organizations were fragmented along ideological lines. Nonviolent movements must prioritize coalition-building to present a unified front capable of countering authoritarian manipulation.

2. PLANNING IS ESSENTIAL:

Nonviolent movements in authoritarian contexts face a wide range of challenges and must plan proactively to counter evolving threats. Flexibility is equally important, as plans may fail or circumstances can change rapidly. This was particularly evident in Venezuela, where democratic forces achieved a significant and widely publicized election victory in 2024. However, the government refused to acknowledge the results and responded with a brutal crackdown on dissent, forcing the president-elect to flee the country and driving the opposition leader into hiding. Despite having plans in place to prevent electoral theft, these efforts were insufficient. This underscores the need for movements to not only prepare for various contingencies but also to quickly pivot and sustain their efforts until they achieve their goals.





3. ORGANIZING IS EVERYTHING:

Effective nonviolent movements succeed or fail based on their ability to organize against seemingly insurmountable odds. This requires a clear strategy to mobilize diverse groups across the country, each with its own interests and approaches. Without a well-defined plan for who is in charge, agreement on common goals, and coordination between these groups, movements are far less likely to protect elections from authoritarian interference. Disorganization often leads to fragmentation, making it easier for authoritarian regimes to manipulate outcomes and suppress dissent, ultimately resulting in defeat at the ballot box. Clear leadership, shared objectives, and unified action are critical to overcoming these challenges.



4. NUMBERS COUNT:

Authoritarians thrive on voter apathy and will do everything possible to discourage people from voting, from spreading disinformation to creating barriers that suppress participation. High voter turnout is essential not only to win an election but also to send a powerful message that the public rejects authoritarian rule. A decisive turnout also raises the stakes for an authoritarian to commit fraud, as it becomes harder to justify or conceal electoral manipulation. Moreover, large-scale voter participation strengthens the legitimacy of opposition movements and demonstrates broad public support, which can energize international allies and increase pressure on the regime. Numbers are not just a measure of strength but a critical tool for exposing the weaknesses of authoritarian governance.



5. INDEPENDENT MOVEMENTS ARE CRUCIAL:

Independent groups organizing around elections play a crucial role in energizing voters, monitoring elections, and holding those in power accountable. When it comes to movement building, these organizations often have greater credibility with undecided voters and less politically active segments of the population compared to partisan groups. Their independence allows them to appeal to a broader base, increasing public engagement and enhancing the strength of the movement. Indeed, throughout history independent nonviolent movements have played a key role in mobilizing grassroots communities against authoritarian regimes. When it comes to monitoring elections, it is also critical to have independent monitors to ensure transparency and accountability, as the case studies from Nicaragua and Philippines demonstrate.

**BY FOSTERING UNITY, PLANNING, ORGANIZING,
AND PRIORITIZING CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT AND
INDEPENDENCE, NONVIOLENT MOVEMENTS CAN
MORE EFFECTIVELY CHALLENGE ELECTORAL
AUTHORITARIANISM AND DEFEND DEMOCRACY.**





INTRODUCTION

**AUTHORITARIAN LEADERS,
RECOGNIZING THE CHANGING
POLITICAL LANDSCAPE, HAVE
ADOPTED NEW STRATEGIES.**

For the past fifteen years, there has been a marked decline in democracy and freedom around the world, with pro-democracy movements growing weaker and authoritarian regimes gaining strength. This trend is not only alarming but also indicative of broader systemic shifts within global governance.

Authoritarian leaders, recognizing the changing political landscape, have adopted new strategies. Instead of launching large-scale repressive campaigns that could attract international attention and condemnation, they have shifted their focus to targeted interventions that they can spin to their advantage. These interventions often involve going after specific leaders or groups that are perceived as most active in opposing the regime. In practice, this means imprisoning or exiling well-known political opponents, corrupting rivals, blackmailing dissenters, and decapitating political opposition. They then hold elections to claim the ruling mantle. Such tactics help these regimes maintain the appearance of democracy, allowing them to claim legitimacy in the eyes of both domestic populations and international bodies. However, beneath this facade lies the consolidation of totalitarian control over governing institutions, where power is increasingly concentrated in the hands of the ruling elite, often at the expense of fundamental freedoms and democratic processes.

The victims of these targeted interventions are diverse. Political leaders who oppose the regime, active citizens, and both formal NGOs and informal grassroots groups face the brunt of authoritarian tactics. These individuals and organizations are critical to the functioning of democratic societies, as they often serve as checks on power, advocates for human rights, and mobilizers for positive social and political change. However, as the political landscape becomes more hostile to dissent, these actors find themselves under constant pressure, facing surveillance, harassment, or outright repression. This has created an environment where activism and dissent are increasingly risky, leading many to fall silent or seek refuge abroad.

In addition to traditional forms of repression, modern authoritarian regimes have increasingly turned to technology to consolidate their power. Mass surveillance, phishing, online harassment, and disinformation campaigns have become commonplace tools in the authoritarian toolkit. Governments with access to sophisticated technology are able to keep a tight control over active groups and citizens. The use of these technologies makes it increasingly difficult for the general population to remain fully informed or aware of the extent to which their civil liberties are being undermined. The result is a digital landscape that is highly manipulated and controlled, with the state maintaining an unprecedented ability to monitor, influence, and suppress any form of opposition.

The current dynamics of authoritarianism are further complicated by the role of populist politics, which has become a potent

**MORE SUBSTANTIAL
UNITY, BETTER STRATEGIC
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TO ACTIVE NON-VIOLENCE
ARE ESSENTIAL FOR
CHALLENGING THE RISING
TIDE OF AUTHORITARIANISM**

tool for autocrats to consolidate power. Populism, when manipulated by authoritarian leaders, allows them to maintain a veneer of popular support while undermining democratic institutions and processes from within. Fraudulent elections, often characterized by widespread manipulation, voter suppression, and the use of state resources to bolster incumbents, have become a central feature of many electoral autocracies. These tactics create a situation where the appearance of democracy is maintained. Still, the substance of democracy- the ability for free and fair elections, accountability, and the peaceful transfer of power- is fundamentally undermined. Social networks, artificial intelligence (AI), and digital markets have further exacerbated these dynamics, providing authoritarian regimes with new tools for influence and control. The increased polarization of society, amplified by these digital technologies, has made it more difficult for democratic forces to unite and effectively challenge the authoritarian status quo.

While the rise of authoritarianism presents immense challenges, civic groups are not giving up the fight. These groups are adapting and evolving, trying to come up with new strategies to confront the growing threat of authoritarianism.

However, past experiences are no longer sufficient to address the current challenges. More substantial unity, better strategic planning, and a renewed commitment to active non-violence are essential for challenging the rising tide of authoritarianism. Civic groups must find ways to counteract the technological tools used by authoritarian regimes, build resilience in the face of state-led repression, and develop new forms of grassroots organizing that can reach broader segments of society.

In this context, the current study aims to reflect on recent elections within a variety of authoritarian contexts. We seek to understand the evolving challenges faced by democratic movements and explore how these movements can adapt to the complex, rapidly changing political environment. By examining the experiences of different countries and looking at the ways in which authoritarian regimes have evolved; we hope to provide insights into how civil society and nonviolent movements can better navigate this increasingly hostile environment. Specifically, our study will focus on electoral autocracies- regimes that maintain the appearance of democracy through fraudulent elections and the manipulation of political processes- offering a deeper understanding of how these regimes function and how they can be effectively challenged by civic groups.

Our study aims to understand the various factors and actors influencing movement dynamics in authoritarian regimes. By analyzing these factors, we seek to rethink how to create an enabling environment for pro-democracy movements. A key part of our



CREDIT: Matias Delacroix

BY LEARNING FROM PAST EXPERIENCES, STRENGTHENING UNITY WITHIN CIVIL SOCIETY, AND DEVELOPING NEW STRATEGIES TO COMBAT REPRESSION, THERE IS HOPE FOR PRESERVING DEMOCRATIC VALUES AND FREEDOMS.

approach involves examining failed campaigns and identifying the specific factors that contributed to their lack of success. This analysis will provide valuable lessons on the challenges faced by pro-democracy movements and the potential pitfalls to avoid. On the other hand, we will also explore positive dynamics, focusing on what strategies and conditions have been effective in pushing back against authoritarianism. By identifying what works in countering authoritarian regimes, we aim to pinpoint the conditions that favor the success of pro-democracy campaigns.

The insights gained from this analysis will accumulate knowledge that can spark further discussions on how to better prepare for elec-

tions, both in long-term strategic planning and in more immediate, short-term actions. Our study is designed to be useful not only to grassroots groups but also to formal NGOs and donor organizations working to support democratic movements worldwide. We believe that by offering a comprehensive understanding of both successful and failed strategies, our research can help inform better planning and decision-making for those involved in the struggle for democracy.

To achieve this, we focus on five countries that recently held elections- Zimbabwe, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Georgia, and the Philippines- collecting relevant data from each to identify patterns and strategies that have worked or failed in the context of authoritarianism. By examining these diverse electoral environments, we hope to draw broader conclusions that can be applied to other countries facing similar challenges. We also apply some of these lessons learned to a sixth country, Tunisia, to understand how they may apply to a country that is becoming increasingly authoritarian.

Rising authoritarianism poses significant challenges, but authoritarians are not invincible, as history has demonstrated again and again. By learning from past experiences, strengthening unity within civil society, and developing new strategies to combat repression, there is hope for preserving democratic values and freedoms. The struggle is difficult, but it is not over. Through collective action, innovation, and resilience, we can resist the tide of authoritarianism and work towards a more just and democratic future.



METHODOLOGY

This paper draws on the results of many years of research in the fields of authoritarianism, democracy promotion, civil society resilience, grassroots movements, and strategic nonviolent campaigns. We build on existing knowledge and leverage our unique experience working in the field to transform these findings into a user-friendly tool for countering authoritarian systems in diverse contexts.



CREDIT: Aurea Del Rosario

MOVEMENTS THAT MAINTAIN UNITY, DISCIPLINE, AND A CLEAR VISION WHILE ADHERING TO NONVIOLENT PRINCIPLES HAVE THE BEST CHANCE OF CHALLENGING AUTHORITARIAN CONTROL.

Our study focuses on pro-democracy movements within authoritarian states, aiming to understand the complex mechanisms regimes use to suppress activists and the strategies activists employ to resist state repression. Authoritarian states are increasingly holding elections and often have multiple political parties represented within their elected institutions. These regimes may also maintain media outlets and even human rights protection mechanisms, and in some cases, they may amend their laws to align with international standards. However, these outward appearances of democratic governance can be profoundly misleading.

The resilience of civil society and the success of pro-democracy movements in authoritarian regimes depend on several interconnected factors: effective communication, solidarity, strategic planning, the ability to leverage modern technologies, and other tactics and tools to counter repression. Movements that maintain unity, discipline, and a clear vision while adhering to nonviolent principles have the best chance

of challenging authoritarian control. The coordinated efforts of grassroots and formal civil society organizations and support from international actors can provide the momentum necessary to push for democratic change, even in the most oppressive environments.

This research draws on interviews with experienced activists and partners from each country, offering insights into the realities of pro-democracy movements. Interviews were clustered around five key areas: civil society resilience, movement unity, strategic planning experience, nonviolent discipline, and the use of modern technologies to better understand the role of digital platform shaping political dynamics. The research also benefits from CANVAS's nearly twenty years of experience in training and supporting civil society movements. Through its extensive fieldwork, CANVAS has developed a deep understanding of the challenges facing pro-democracy activists and their efforts to combat authoritarianism in various contexts.

Civil Society Resilience

Collaboration between informal grassroots groups and formal NGOs is vital to evaluating civil society's strength in authoritarian contexts. Effective communication, coordination, and mobilization are central to these groups' success, making decision-making processes critical for action effectiveness. A culture of solidarity within civil society is equally crucial. Community support- whether through legal aid from NGOs, financial backing, or advocacy by diaspora groups- sustains movements. However, some NGOs may hesitate to engage in human rights cases, fearing repercussions like losing funding or state access. This reluctance weakens their ability to support those most affected by repression. Capacity-building also strengthens resilience. Training members in social media use, digital presence, and resilience strategies equips movements to address challenges such as arrests, violence, or local organizing. Well-prepared movements are indeed more effective at countering authoritarian tactics. Coordination between donors and local organizations also ensures resources are strategically allocated, aligning efforts to bolster movement resilience.

Government Tactics to Undermine Movements

Authoritarian regimes employ mass surveillance, physical intimidation, arrests, and infiltration of civil society groups to suppress movements. Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation

(SLAPP) are commonly used to silence activists through costly legal battles. Understanding how movements counter these tactics, particularly their ability to maintain pressure post-elections to prevent regime consolidation, is critical.

Unity Within Society

A movement's unity is key to its success. Unified movements share clear goals, strategies, and leadership structures, even if independently each organization is focused on a different issue. Assessing whether consensus exists among members on objectives and methods is vital, as cohesion enhances effectiveness. Inclusivity strengthens movements by appealing to diverse demographics, including gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic groups. Symbols, slogans, and shared cultural or historical values can reinforce solidarity. However, understanding and addressing internal divisions is crucial to maintaining strength.

Strategic and Effective Planning

Planning is critical, even when secrecy is necessary in repressive environments. Movements should articulate strategic objectives and balance short- and long-term goals. Tools like SWOT analyses help identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Planning should also involve forums for discussion during mass actions and strategies for sustaining momentum after elections. Tactical adjustments following key events- and the ability and capacity to quickly and effectively make adjustments- often determine a

movement's success, longevity, and impact.

Nonviolent Discipline

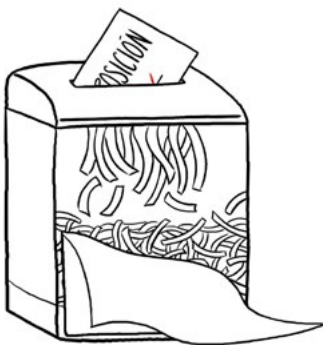
A commitment to nonviolence is foundational for successful movements, as it denies regimes justification for repression. As such, all nonviolent movement members and supporters must be trained to uphold nonviolent discipline, even under duress. Creative tactics, such as humor, symbolic actions, and dilemma strategies, can disrupt authoritarian regimes while maintaining public support. However, any use of violence risks damaging the movement's reputation and alienating supporters.

Technology

Digital tools are vital for spreading messages, organizing protests, and countering authoritarian narratives. Movements must use social media effectively to maintain momentum and challenge disinformation. Authoritarian regimes increasingly use AI, such as deepfakes and propaganda, to manipulate public perception and discredit movements. Media polarization and self-censorship further complicate efforts to amplify alternative voices. Assessing the media landscape is crucial to understanding the challenges movements face in garnering widespread support.



LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE 2024 VENEZUELAN ELECTION FOR NONVIOLENT MOVEMENTS



The 2024 Venezuelan presidential election provides a rich landscape from which nonviolent movements worldwide can extract valuable lessons. The election, marked by allegations of fraud, repression, and a unified opposition that effectively won the election, underscores some of the challenges and strategies crucial to nonviolent democratic efforts.

BACKGROUND



THE OPPOSITION WON THE ELECTION, PROVIDED PROOF THAT IT WON THE ELECTION, BUT THE GOVERNMENT SIMPLY IGNORED IT.

Since Hugo Chavez's rise to power in 1992, Venezuela has seen repeated efforts to weaken institutions and erode civil liberties. Chavez and his handpicked successor, Nicolas Maduro- who came to power following Chavez's death in 2013- used a wide variety of authoritarian tactics to strengthen their grip on power. Both leaders undermined the independence of the judiciary, restricted freedom of speech, persecuted political opponents, and created their own legislative body, rendering the opposition led National Assembly obsolete.

During Maduro's most recent term, Maria Corina Machado emerged as a leader of the opposition, restoring the hope of citizens that change is possible. She managed to unite all the opposition groups to rally behind her and challenge Maduro in the 2024 elections. Seeing her as a viable threat, however, the regime blocked her candidacy. Edmundo Gonzalez then became the opposition candidate, with Machado's support.

The 2024 elections saw both Maduro and Gonzalez claiming victory. There was massive voter turnout, and the pro-democracy movement organized effec-

tively to monitor the electoral process and show it won. The regime, however, used its usual tactics of violent voter intimidation, crackdowns on media to deny Gonzalez a campaign platform, and barriers to voting. Independent vote counts by observers, as well as exit polls, showed Gonzalez was the more popular candidate, but his victory was not recognized by the Maduro regime. The military's tight control over the electoral process gave Maduro the pillars of support necessary to cling to power even though he lost the elections. In short, the opposition won the election, provided proof that it won the election, but the government simply ignored it.

The international community has been divided in its response - some countries have showed solidarity with the movement, recognizing Gonzalez as the new president (the US, Argentina, El Salvador, the EU) while others denied the evidence of fraud and maintained ties with Maduro (China, Russia, Iran). Gonzalez fled to Madrid, while the opposition insists his exile will only be temporary. They promise a return to power in January 2025, through unspecified means.





LESSON 1:

Importance of Unity in Nonviolent Movements

The Venezuelan opposition's unified front played a crucial role in challenging the Maduro regime. Historically fragmented, the opposition coalesced around a single candidate, amplifying their collective voice and enhancing their legitimacy both domestically and internationally. This unity demonstrates that nonviolent movements can achieve greater impact when disparate groups align their objectives and strategies.

LESSON 2:

Strategic Nonviolent Action as Leverage

Nonviolent action has been pivotal in Venezuela's pro-democracy movement. Sustained peaceful protests, civil disobedience, and creative activism have applied pressure on the regime, drawing international attention and support. These actions have provided necessary leverage for negotiations, highlighting the efficacy of nonviolent strategies in confronting authoritarianism.¹

LESSON 3:

Small Wins Build Momentum

The Venezuelan experience underscores the significance of small wins in nonviolent struggles. Incremental victories, such as successful demonstrations or international endorsements, have bolstered the movement's morale and legitimacy. These achievements, though modest individually, cumulatively build momentum toward substantial change.²

LESSON 4:

Repression as a Catalyst for Resilience

The Maduro regime's repression, including arrests and intimidation, aimed to stifle dissent. However, such actions often galvanized the opposition, fostering resilience and solidarity among activists. Nonviolent movements can draw from this by recognizing that repression, while challenging, can also strengthen collective resolve and attract broader support. Indeed, effective nonviolent movements from India, the United States, Serbia, and beyond have often accounted for and incorporated repression as a key inflection point for movement growth.

LESSON 5:

Role of Women as Leaders

Women have played a crucial role as insider mediators within Venezuela's pro-democracy movement. Their involvement in building bridges for nonviolent change has been instrumental in navigating the complex



THE MADURO REGIME'S REPRESSION, INCLUDING ARRESTS AND INTIMIDATION, AIMED TO STIFLE DISSENT.

¹ <https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/08/venezuela-nonviolent-action-key-negotiated-democratic-transition>

² <https://canvasopedia.org/2024/09/13/venezuelas-struggle-for-democracy-lessons-from-the-2024-disputed-elections/>



CREDIT: Matias Delacroix

THE GREATER THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN A CAMPAIGN, THE LARGER THE CORRELATION WITH NONVIOLENT METHODS

social and political landscape. This highlights the importance of inclusive participation in nonviolent movements, ensuring diverse perspectives and approaches are integrated into the struggle.³ It also dovetails with separate research showing: 1) that the greater the role of women in a campaign, the larger the correlation with nonviolent methods, and 2) that the meaningful participation of women on the frontlines of movements is highly correlated with successful resistance campaigns.⁴

LESSON 6:

International Solidarity and Pressure

International actors have been instrumental in supporting Venezuela's nonviolent movement. Countries like Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico have called for transparency and the release of full vote tallies, applying diplomatic pressure on the Maduro regime. This international solidarity underscores the importance of global support in legitimizing and bolstering nonviolent movements.

LESSON 7:

Adaptability in Strategy

The Venezuelan opposition's ability to adapt its strategies in response to the regime's actions has been vital. Shifting from street protests to diplomatic negotiations and leveraging international platforms have allowed the movement to maintain pressure and relevance. Nonviolent movements benefit from such adaptability, enabling them to navigate complex and changing political landscapes effectively.

³ <https://berghof-foundation.org/library/women-as-insider-mediators-venezuela>

⁴ https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/resource/womens-participation-and-the-fate-of-nonviolent-campaigns-english_page/



THE VENEZUELAN OPPOSITION HAS EFFECTIVELY UTILIZED INTERNATIONAL PLATFORMS TO RAISE AWARENESS ABOUT THEIR STRUGGLE



LESSON 8:

Importance of Clear Communication & Building Awareness

Effective communication has been essential in mobilizing support and conveying the opposition's message. Utilizing social media, public statements, and international interviews, the Venezuelan opposition has kept both domestic and global audiences informed and engaged. Clear and consistent communication strategies are crucial for nonviolent movements to articulate their goals and galvanize support.

The Venezuelan opposition has effectively utilized international platforms to raise awareness about their struggle. Engaging with global media and participating in international forums have brought attention to their cause, garnering support and applying pressure on the regime. Nonviolent movements can learn from this approach by building international awareness to strengthen their position.

LESSON 9:

Persistence Amidst Adversity

Despite facing significant challenges, including repression and limited resources, the Venezuelan opposition has demonstrated remarkable persistence. Their unwavering commitment to nonviolent principles, even in the face of adversity, serves as a testament to the power of resilience in achieving democratic change.

LESSON 10:

"Plans are worthless, but planning is everything..."

Perhaps the biggest lesson from Venezuela is, however, that it is not enough to win an election, especially in an autocratic regime, which simply ignored the results of the election. In interviews, movement leaders and activists acknowledged that they were naive in assuming proving fraud would be enough to prevent the election from being stolen. "We won, we have the proof, and they don't care," is how one leader described it, "the theory of change failed." In addition, protests contesting the election were met with severe repression. When describing the situation, one movement leader noted that "Plan A was to win the election. Plan B was to prove it was stolen. But it turns out we also needed a Plan C." At the same time, this leader quoted US President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who said that "Plans are worthless, but planning is everything." In other words, while a specific plan may not always work out perfectly in changing circumstances, **the process of planning itself is crucial for understanding a quickly evolving situation, contributing to "a more flexible and strategic approach** and having the capacity to think quickly and flexibly." Even this is not enough, noted the leader, "we need to distrust them until the very end...they will do anything to survive."

CONCLUSION

The 2024 Venezuelan election offers a rich tapestry of lessons for nonviolent movements globally. Unity, strategic nonviolent action, resilience in the face of repression, and effective communication have been pivotal in the Venezuelan opposition's efforts. International solidarity and the inclusion of diverse voices, particularly women as leaders, have further strengthened the movement. Nonviolent movements worldwide can draw inspiration and practical strategies from Venezuela's ongoing struggle for democracy.





LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE 2024 GEORGIAN ELECTION FOR NONVIOLENT MOVEMENTS

Background: Georgia's Evolving Political Landscape

Georgia, a post-Soviet democracy, has navigated decades of territorial conflicts, Russian aggression, and internal political instability. Since billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream party came to power in 2012, the country has experienced democratic backsliding. Ivanishvili's informal control over state institutions has been characterized as "state capture" by international watchdogs and the country's descent into a Russian-style mafia state.

The 2024 elections showcased the growing power imbalance. While opinion polls indicated GD had only 30% support compared to 70% for opposition parties, election fraud ensured GD's victory. The Georgian Dream party's grip on power, coupled with economic instability and rising corruption, has eroded public trust in democratic processes.



Six Opposition Parties have signed the Declaration of Unity of the Georgian Opposition, signifying their unification before and after the October 26 parliamentary elections.

LESSON 1:

The Importance of Unity and Inclusion

One of the critical weaknesses of Georgian civil society has been its fragmentation. Opposition parties and grassroots movements often operate in silos, with limited coordination and trust between them. Historically, situational alliances have dissolved once short-term goals are achieved.

The recent protests, however, demonstrated an emerging culture of solidarity. Grassroots movements, NGOs, and diaspora groups began to collaborate more effectively, pooling resources and supporting activists who were arrested. This growing sense of unity has enabled the movement to maintain momentum despite government crackdowns. Nonviolent movements elsewhere can learn from Georgia's struggle by prioritizing coalition-building and fostering inclusivity to amplify their impact.

LESSON 2:

Leveraging Grassroots Movements

Georgia's resistance movement has evolved significantly, with grassroots organizations playing a pivotal role. Spontaneous groups formed through social networks have sustained protests and coordinated long-term campaigns. However, the lack of formalized structures has limited the sustainability of these efforts.

For nonviolent movements, investing in grassroots mobilization and formalizing networks can strengthen their resilience. Local leaders should be empowered to take ownership of initiatives, ensuring continuity even when central figures are targeted.

LESSON 3

Effective Use of Media and Social Platforms

In Georgia, social media has been a double-edged sword. Activists have used platforms like Facebook and Instagram to share evidence of police aggression and expose government misconduct. These efforts have galvanized public support and brought international attention to the protests.

However, the government has also weaponized media, spreading disinformation and hate speech to discredit activists. State-controlled outlets have accused protesters of being "traitors" and fomenting division. For nonviolent movements, countering propaganda through coordinated digital strategies and partnerships with independent media is essential to maintain credibility and combat polarization.



IN GEORGIA, SOCIAL MEDIA HAS BEEN A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD.

CREDIT: David Mdzinarshvili



MAINTAINING NONVIOLENT DISCIPLINE HAS PRESERVED THE MOVEMENT'S MORAL HIGH GROUND AND BROADENED ITS APPEAL



HIGHLIGHTING THE PERSONAL AND SOCIETAL COSTS OF PARTICIPATING IN REPRESSIVE ACTIONS CAN WEAKEN THE REGIME'S ENFORCEMENT CAPACITY.

LESSON 4:

The Role of Nonviolent Discipline

Despite provocations, Georgian activists have largely adhered to non-violent principles. Leaders have emphasized “active nonviolence,” encouraging activists to defend themselves without inflicting harm. For example, fireworks have been used to deter police aggression without causing injuries.

Maintaining nonviolent discipline has preserved the movement's moral high ground and broadened its appeal. For other movements, this approach underscores the importance of training participants in nonviolent tactics to ensure their actions remain peaceful, even under pressure.

LESSON 5:

Addressing Government Tactics of Repression

The Georgian government employs Soviet-era methods to undermine dissent, including mass surveillance, arrests, and intimidation. It also passed what's become known as a “Foreign Agents” law aimed at restricting support that civil society and others can receive from abroad. Activists have responded by exposing perpetrators, often confronting their families and communities to create social accountability. This strategy has been particularly effective in Georgia's close-knit society.

Nonviolent movements facing similar repression can adapt these tactics to deter aggression and shift public opinion. Highlighting the personal and societal costs of participating in repressive actions can weaken the regime's enforcement capacity.

LESSON 6:

Building Unity Across Divides

One of the movement's successes has been its ability to unite diverse groups, including religious communities, ethnic minorities, and political factions. Protests have expanded beyond urban centers, reaching rural areas and traditionally government-aligned regions.

This inclusivity has been crucial for broadening the movement's base. Nonviolent movements should prioritize bridging divides, fostering dialogue, and emphasizing shared goals to create a more unified resistance.



A SIGNIFICANT WEAKNESS OF GEORGIA'S PRO-DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT HAS BEEN ITS LACK OF COHESIVE PLANNING.

LESSON 7:

Strategic Planning and Coordination

A significant weakness of Georgia's pro-democracy movement has been its lack of cohesive planning. Many groups entered the election cycle without clear strategies for responding to fraud, relying instead on spontaneous actions.

To enhance their effectiveness, nonviolent movements must prioritize strategic planning, scenario-building, and coordination among stakeholders. Developing contingency plans and long-term objectives can help movements navigate crises and sustain their efforts.

LESSON 8:

Mobilizing the Diaspora

The Georgian diaspora has become an increasingly influential force in the resistance movement. In addition to providing financial support, diaspora groups have organized political campaigns and lobbied international organizations to pressure the Georgian government.

Nonviolent movements can benefit from engaging their diaspora communities, leveraging their resources, and amplifying their voices on global platforms. International solidarity can serve as a powerful counterweight to authoritarian regimes.

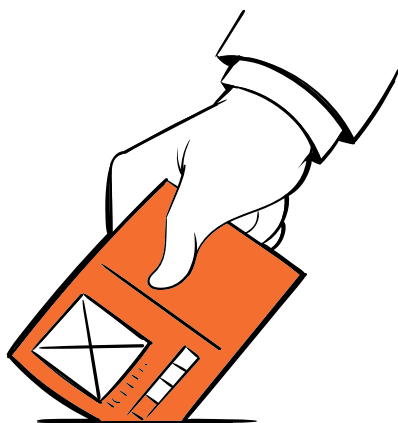


LESSON 9:

Exposing Disinformation

The Georgian government has employed a coordinated disinformation campaign to weaken the opposition and discredit activists. Protests have been portrayed as anti-national or foreign-funded, while state-controlled media and troll farms spread false narratives. This has deepened divisions and created skepticism about the legitimacy of the movement.

In response, Georgian activists have countered disinformation by leveraging independent media and social platforms to fact-check claims and expose government lies. Collaborative efforts with international media outlets have also helped amplify their narratives beyond government-controlled channels. Nonviolent movements elsewhere can learn from these tactics by establishing robust fact-checking mechanisms and engaging trusted voices to combat propaganda effectively.



5 <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/how-to-defend-the-vote-from-authoritarians/>

LESSON 10:

Defending the Vote through Proactive Measures & Nonpartisan Movements

As highlighted in the article "How to Defend the Vote from Authoritarians", safeguarding elections under authoritarian regimes requires proactive and participatory approaches- and often a nonpartisan movement that is seen as less politically biased, allowing them to recruit a wider base of support.⁵ Georgian activists failed to prepare a comprehensive defense of the vote during the 2024 elections, which allowed the Georgian Dream party to manipulate results. Efforts to defend democracy must begin long before election day, with strategies to monitor polls, build grassroots oversight, document irregularities, and mobilize citizens following the election to defend the vote and demand accountability.

MOVEMENTS CAN ADOPT A MULTI-PRONGED APPROACH THAT INCLUDES:



Training Election Observers:

Equipping citizens with the skills to monitor polling stations and report misconduct.



Using Technology:

Leveraging secure apps for real-time reporting of voter suppression and irregularities.



Mobilizing Communities:

Building a strong presence at polling sites through collective action to deter fraud.

These efforts should also extend to pressuring election commissions and judicial bodies to ensure accountability and transparency.

SUSTAINING MOMENTUM BEYOND THE ELECTIONS

Protests in Georgia continued well after the 2024 elections, largely fueled by the government's suspension of EU accession talks and violent crackdowns on demonstrators. Sustaining such momentum requires a combination of strategic planning and grassroots energy. Georgian activists have increasingly relied on decentralized organizing to maintain flexibility, ensuring that leadership arrests or targeted repression do not paralyze the movement.

For other nonviolent movements, the Georgian case underscores the importance of sustaining public engagement through diverse tactics, from large-scale demonstrations to symbolic acts of resistance. Developing clear, achievable objectives and communicating them effectively can help maintain focus and inspire continued participation.





CONCLUSION: LESSONS FOR NONVIOLENT MOVEMENTS

The 2024 elections in Georgia illustrate both the challenges and opportunities faced by nonviolent movements confronting authoritarianism. Despite widespread fraud and repression, Georgian activists have demonstrated resilience and creativity in their fight for democracy. Their experience offers a blueprint for movements worldwide, emphasizing the need for unity, strategic planning, and effective use of media and grassroots mobilization.



KEY LESSONS INCLUDE:

Building Coalitions:

Unified opposition strengthens movements and amplifies their legitimacy.

Embracing Nonviolence:

Peaceful resistance maintains moral high ground and broadens appeal.

Countering Disinformation:

Proactive fact-checking and media engagement combat propaganda.

Defending the Vote:

Preparing for electoral fraud is essential in undermining authoritarian regimes.

Sustaining Momentum:

Decentralized leadership and diverse tactics ensure movements endure beyond flash-points.

By learning from Georgia's experience, nonviolent movements worldwide can adapt and innovate to confront repressive regimes, striving for justice and democratic governance in even the most challenging circumstances.



LESSONS LEARNED FROM

THE 2021 NICARAGUAN ELECTIONS FOR NONVIOLENT MOVEMENTS

In November 2021, Nicaragua held presidential elections that were universally condemned as fraudulent. These elections, orchestrated by President Daniel Ortega and his wife and Vice President Rosario Murillo, solidified their grip on power and marked a decisive consolidation of authoritarian rule. For activists and nonviolent movements globally, the events in Nicaragua provide critical lessons about confronting entrenched regimes, building coalitions, and navigating the challenges of autocracy.

A HISTORY OF AUTHORITARIAN CONSOLIDATION



Daniel Ortega's journey from revolutionary leader to autocrat tells a cautionary tale of power unchecked. Ortega, a prominent figure in the 1979 Sandinista revolution that toppled the Somoza dictatorship, returned to power in 2007. His return marked the beginning of a new era of authoritarian consolidation. By dismantling democratic institutions, silencing dissent, and systematically discrediting opposition, Ortega created a political landscape devoid of meaningful resistance.

In 2018, mass demonstrations against Ortega's government swept the country. However, the regime quickly responded

with a violent crackdown, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of people and thousands injured.⁶ Since then, Ortega continued his attack on civil liberties, leaving Nicaraguans with no freedom of expression, no association or organizational rights, and no free or independent media.

The 2021 elections exemplified this trend. In the months leading up to the vote, seven opposition presidential candidates were imprisoned, alongside well-known civil society activists. Major opposition parties were disqualified, and thousands of civil society organizations were shut down. Ortega's government declared any form

of dissent as treasonous, branding opposition members as "terrorists" or "foreign agents." An AP headline at the time noted, "Nicaragua essentially bans opposition from 2021 elections...", with the move appearing, "aimed at sweeping aside the last roadblock to Ortega's continuing his near-perpetual rule over the Central American nation."⁷ The Secretary General of the Organization of American States described the run up to the election as "the worst possible circumstances for an electoral process."⁸

Amid this climate of fear, though the government claimed 65% of the electorate had voted, observers claimed turnout was less than 20%. It appeared that many Nicaraguans had heeded calls for a boycott, spread using the hashtag #QuedateEnCasa, or "stay home."⁹

Nevertheless, the government declared a resounding victory, claiming it had received 75% of the vote and underscoring the regime's strategy of coercion.

⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-58125419>

⁷ <https://apnews.com/article/elections-blockades-central-america-daniel-ortega-nicaragua-14d04033e443f6d-a9bf3d11aec0dae47>

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/live/zv1krsld7PA?si=HbiKKEQA4BIAjdTo>

⁹ <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2021-11-10/how-hundreds-of-nicaraguans-secretly-monitored-the-presidential-election>

LESSONS FOR NONVIOLENT MOVEMENTS

Nicaragua's experience illustrates the complex challenges faced by movements resisting authoritarianism. While the regime's repression was pervasive, the tactics and resilience of pro-democracy actors offer key insights for movements worldwide.



DIVIDED BY PERSONAL RIVALRIES, IDEOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES, AND STRATEGIC DISAGREEMENTS, THE OPPOSITION FAILED TO PRESENT A UNITED FRONT.

LESSON 1:

The Power of Unity and Coalition Building

A fractured opposition was one of the most significant weaknesses in Nicaragua's resistance to Ortega. Divided by personal rivalries, ideological differences, and strategic disagreements, the opposition failed to present a united front. In contrast, recent examples- including most recently in Venezuela in 2024- demonstrate that coalition building- rooted in shared goals and mutual compromise- is critical to mounting an effective resistance. Indeed, for effective nonviolent movements in authoritarian contexts, fostering unity must be a strategic priority. These efforts require substantial negotiation, compromise, and shared goals to align diverse groups under a single strategy. "Coalition building is key. It's taken for granted. But it's actually quite complex and requires trainings, skill, negotiations, and time," reflected one interviewee. "The movements that are able to be effective, that score more wins, and more small wins, are able to do it because they have built a common tent and common cause between many different groups."

Nicaragua's challenges were compounded by the absence of a robust tradition of democratic elections, which has made unifying opposition forces even more difficult. Without a historical precedent for multiparty cooperation or trust in electoral processes, opposition groups were forced to navigate uncharted territory while facing relentless repression.

In Nicaragua, the inability to rally behind a unified candidate or plan nevertheless allowed Ortega to exploit divisions and discredit the opposition. For nonviolent movements, this underscores the need to prioritize coalition-building as a foundational step in their strategy.





ALTHOUGH THE ELECTION RESULTS WERE MANIPULATED, THE PROCESS CREATED OPPORTUNITIES TO HIGHLIGHT SYSTEMIC INJUSTICES AND BUILD ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY.



FROM MASS ARRESTS TO DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS, ORTEGA'S GOVERNMENT SOUGHT TO UNDERMINE OPPOSITION EFFORTS AT EVERY TURN.

CREDIT: Oswaldo Rivas

LESSON 2:

The Role of Elections in Nonviolent Resistance

Even in the face of electoral fraud, elections can serve as a critical platform for resistance and advocacy. In Nicaragua, activists used the campaign period to raise awareness about the regime's abuses and mobilize support. Although the election results were manipulated, the process created opportunities to highlight systemic injustices and build organizational capacity.

What is more, Ortega's suppression of opposition primaries in 2021 revealed his fear of a unified opposition, even if it posed no immediate threat to his control. It also allowed him to delegitimize the opposition. This demonstrates the importance of participating in electoral processes, not necessarily to win, but to maintain visibility, challenge the ruling party's legitimacy, and galvanize public support.

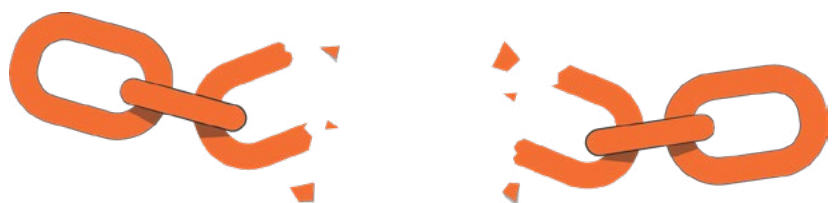
At the same time, election boycotts can prove tricky for nonviolent movements to navigate. On one hand, boycotts may emphasize an election's lack of fairness and transparency, strengthening support for a nonviolent movement. But on the other, boycotts can fracture an opposition, as was the case in parliamentary elections in Serbia in the 1997. More fundamentally, choosing to boycott virtually guarantees victory for authoritarian rulers who, history shows, will stop at nothing to claim victory.

LESSON 3:

Adapting to Repressive Environments

Authoritarian regimes often respond to dissent with extreme measures, as seen in Nicaragua. From mass arrests to disinformation campaigns, Ortega's government sought to undermine opposition efforts at every turn. In response, Nicaraguan activists have shown remarkable adaptability. For instance, when public gatherings were banned under the guise of COVID-19 restrictions, activists used technology creatively, hosting virtual campaigns and leveraging social media to reach supporters.

Such innovations highlight the need for movements to anticipate regime tactics and develop contingency plans. Digital security, secure communication channels, and alternative organizing methods are essential tools for activists operating under repressive conditions.



THE NICARAGUAN
OPPOSITION'S
COMMITMENT TO
NONVIOLENCE HAS
BEEN A DEFINING
CHARACTERISTIC OF ITS
STRUGGLE.



CREDIT: Amnesty International

LESSON 4:

Maintaining Nonviolent Discipline & Momentum

The Nicaraguan opposition's commitment to nonviolence has been a defining characteristic of its struggle. Memories of the country's civil war and its devastating consequences have reinforced the belief that armed resistance is not a viable solution. By adhering to nonviolent principles, movements can maintain moral legitimacy, attract broader support, and counter government propaganda that seeks to label them as extremist or violent.

However, nonviolence alone is not enough. Effective nonviolent movements require discipline, planning, and unity. And they must constantly find ways to maintain momentum. When asked what advice could be offered to other nonviolent movements, one interviewee responded, "Do not wait for the movement to be eroded and under such threat that you cannot do anything. Movements need to stay ahead."

The lack of a clear strategy among Nicaraguan opposition groups has limited their ability to sustain momentum and achieve tangible victories.

LESSON 5:

The Importance of Diaspora Engagement

Diaspora communities have been instrumental in supporting Nicaragua's pro-democracy movements. From providing financial resources to lobbying international organizations, Nicaraguans abroad have played a crucial role in keeping the resistance alive. Innovative approaches, such as using cryptocurrency to bypass government restrictions, have demonstrated the potential of diasporas to contribute to movements even from afar.

For other movements, engaging diasporas can be a powerful strategy to mobilize resources, raise awareness, and maintain pressure on authoritarian regimes. Establishing strong connections with expatriate communities and leveraging their networks can amplify the impact of resistance efforts.

EXTERNAL SUPPORT MUST BE CAREFULLY CALIBRATED TO ALIGN WITH THE MOVEMENT'S GOALS AND AVOID THE PERCEPTION OF FOREIGN INTERFERENCE.



LESSON 6:

International Solidarity and Support

The role of the international community in supporting nonviolent movements cannot be overstated. In Nicaragua, international condemnation of the 2021 elections helped delegitimize Ortega's regime and highlighted the plight of political prisoners and civil society. However, as Nicaraguan activists have noted, external support must be carefully calibrated to align with the movement's goals and avoid the perception of foreign interference.

Building relationships with international organizations, engaging diplomatic allies, and coordinating with global networks are essential components of a successful resistance strategy. However, movements must also be prepared to navigate the complexities of international politics and assert their autonomy in the face of external pressures.

LESSON 7:

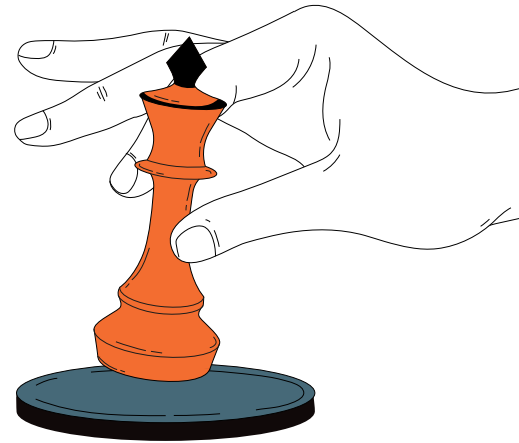
The Strategic Use of Technology

Technology has become both a tool and a battleground in modern resistance movements. In Nicaragua, activists have used digital platforms to mobilize supporters, share information, and coordinate actions. At the same time, the regime has deployed sophisticated surveillance and disinformation tactics, often with the support of foreign allies like Russia and China.

For movements, investing in digital security and counter-disinformation strategies is crucial. Training activists in secure communication practices and leveraging technology creatively can help level the playing field against authoritarian regimes.

CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIC RESPONSES

Despite their resilience, Nicaraguan movements face significant challenges. These include the regime's use of propaganda to discredit opposition efforts, the suppression of civil liberties, and the lack of credible electoral processes. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach:



Countering Disinformation

Opposition movements must develop clear, transparent messaging to counter government propaganda and build trust with the public. Highlighting the regime's abuses and showcasing positive alternatives can help shift public opinion.



Strengthening Civil Society

Rebuilding Nicaragua's civil society infrastructure is essential for sustaining resistance efforts. This includes providing training, resources, and support to grassroots organizations and activists, especially nonpartisan groups.



Expanding International Alliances

Building alliances with international organizations, governments, and advocacy groups can amplify pressure on the regime and provide crucial support to activists.



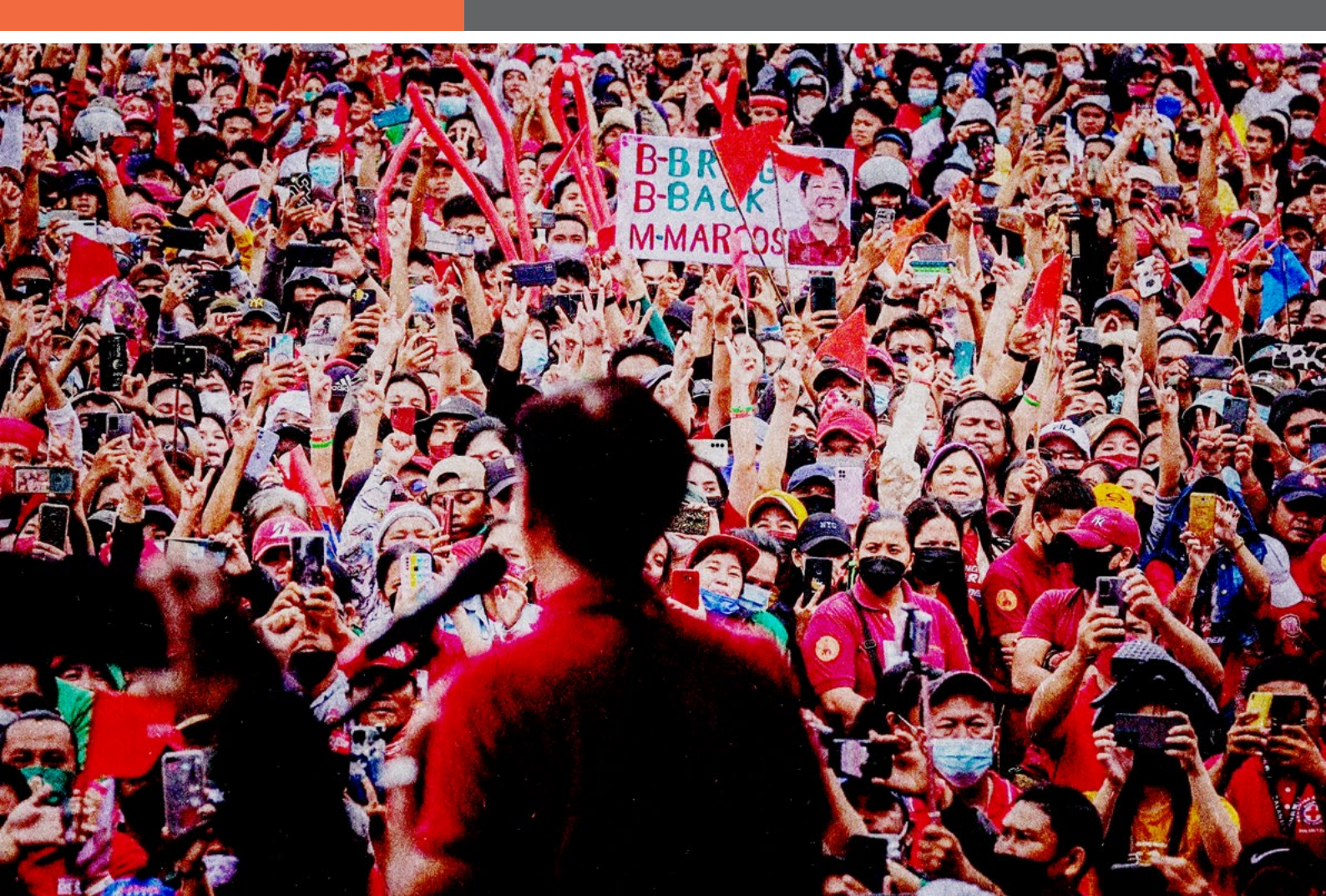
CREDIT: Jorge Mejía

THROUGH PERSISTENCE, CREATIVITY, AND SOLIDARITY, NONVIOLENT MOVEMENTS CAN CONTINUE TO CHALLENGE OPPRESSION AND PAVE THE WAY FOR A MORE JUST AND DEMOCRATIC FUTURE.

CONCLUSION: LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

The 2021 elections in Nicaragua offer a sobering reminder of the challenges faced by nonviolent movements in authoritarian contexts. Yet, they also provide valuable lessons about resilience, adaptability, and the importance of unity. By learning from Nicaragua's experience, activists and movements worldwide can better equip themselves to confront autocracy and advocate for democratic change.

Nicaragua's struggle is far from over. Despite the odds, the determination of its people to fight for freedom and dignity serves as an inspiration to others. Through persistence, creativity, and solidarity, nonviolent movements can continue to challenge oppression and pave the way for a more just and democratic future.



CREDIT: Yummie Dingding

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE 2022 PHILIPPINE ELECTIONS FOR NONVIOLENT MOVEMENTS

The 2022 Philippine presidential elections were pivotal, highlighting both the resilience of grassroots activism and the entrenched challenges of campaigning in an era of disinformation, political dynasties, and polarization. Ferdinand Marcos Jr., the son of former dictator Ferdinand Marcos, and Sara Duterte, daughter of former President Rodrigo Duterte, won by a landslide under the banner of unity. Their victory represented a significant setback for the opposition, led by Vice President Leni Robredo, and underscored the challenges for nonviolent movements advocating for democratic reform and human rights.

By examining the strategies, challenges, and innovations of civil society during this election, nonviolent movements worldwide can learn valuable lessons about resisting authoritarianism and mobilizing for meaningful change.

BACKGROUND: A DIVIDED POLITICAL LANDSCAPE



CREDIT: Julia Wytrazek

DECADES OF POLITICAL DYNASTIES, DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS, AND HISTORICAL REVISIONISM CREATED A POLITICAL CULTURE DEFINED BY BINARY PERSPECTIVES SUCH AS “US VERSUS THEM.”

The Philippines entered the 2022 elections deeply polarized. Decades of political dynasties, disinformation campaigns, and historical revisionism created a political culture defined by binary perspectives such as “us versus them.” The pandemic exacerbated economic and social divides, shrinking civic spaces and leaving many Filipinos focused on survival rather than civic participation.

The Marcos-Duterte alliance effectively co-opted the message of “unity,” while leveraging populist rhetoric and extensive propaganda networks to consolidate power. Activists and opposition groups faced red-tagging, anti-terror legislation, and harassment, further complicating efforts to mount a co-

hesive resistance.

Vote-buying has also become a deeply entrenched and pervasive tactic in Philippine elections. While primarily aimed at securing electoral victories, this practice has severe repercussions for democratic movements. Political dynasties often possess vastly superior financial resources, enabling them to engage in extensive vote-buying campaigns that effectively drown out the voices of movements advocating for free and fair elections and true democratic participation. This allows candidates with more financial resources to manipulate election outcomes. This practice also often targets vulnerable populations, perpetuating a cycle of corruption and patron-client relationships and eroding trust in the democratic process.



In future campaigns, movements must prioritize coalition-building and developing shared strategies to amplify their message and mobilize broader support.

LESSON 1:

Unity Among Civil Society Is Crucial

One of the most significant challenges during the 2022 elections was the fragmentation of civil society organizations (CSOs). Many groups operated independently, pursuing their own agendas and struggling to coordinate efforts.

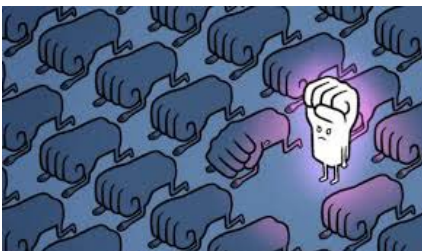
For nonviolent movements, unity is essential. The lack of cohesion among Philippine CSOs diluted their collective impact. In future campaigns, movements must prioritize coalition-building and developing shared strategies to amplify their message and mobilize broader support.

LESSON 2:

The Power of Youth Mobilization

Youth activism played a vital role in the 2022 elections, with organizations like Dakila focusing on voter education and first-time voters. Creative initiatives, such as leadership training, art installations, and open mic events, engaged young Filipinos and empowered them to participate in the electoral process.

Nonviolent movements worldwide can learn from this emphasis on youth engagement. By investing in the next generation of activists and leveraging their creativity, movements can build a sustainable base of support.



"Tumindig" campaign- meaning, roughly, "To Stand Firm" or "Arise"- to counter propaganda and educate voters.

LESSON 3:

Combating Disinformation with Creativity

Disinformation was a cornerstone of the Marcos-Duterte campaign, which used social media platforms like TikTok to spread historical revisionism and undermine opposition narratives. In response, activists employed creative tactics such as comics, film screenings, and the viral "Tumindig" campaign- meaning, roughly, "To Stand Firm" or "Arise"- to counter propaganda and educate voters.

Nonviolent movements should adopt innovative approaches to combat disinformation, using art, storytelling, and social media to reach audiences in compelling and accessible ways.

**FOR NONVIOLENT MOVEMENTS,
GRASSROOTS ENGAGEMENT IS A
POWERFUL TOOL FOR BUILDING TRUST
AND MOBILIZING MARGINALIZED
COMMUNITIES.**



LESSON 4:

Expanding Grassroots Engagement

Activists in the Philippines expanded their outreach beyond urban centers, working with grassroots communities in rural areas to organize and educate voters. This decentralized approach was crucial in countering the dominance of political dynasties in these regions.

For nonviolent movements, grassroots engagement is a powerful tool for building trust and mobilizing marginalized communities. Localized strategies tailored to the unique needs and perspectives of these communities can create lasting change.

LESSON 5:

Defending the Vote

Defending the vote was a major focus during the 2022 elections. Activists volunteered as poll watchers and worked with organizations like the Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting (PPCRV) to monitor polling stations and ensure transparency.

For movements operating under authoritarian regimes, election monitoring and voter vigilance are critical. Training citizens as election observers and using technology to report irregularities can safeguard the democratic process.

LESSON 6:

Nonviolent Discipline and Adaptability

Despite provocations, Philippine activists maintained nonviolent discipline throughout the campaign. This commitment to peaceful resistance preserved their moral high ground and broadened their appeal. Additionally, movements adapted their campaigns to the political climate, employing creative activism to engage the public while minimizing risks.

Nonviolent movements can learn from this approach by emphasizing nonviolence as a core principle and remaining flexible in their strategies to navigate changing circumstances.



**FOR NONVIOLENT MOVEMENTS,
PARTNERSHIPS WITH CULTURAL
AND CREATIVE SECTORS CAN
PROVIDE VALUABLE RESOURCES
AND AMPLIFY THEIR MESSAGE**

LESSON 7:

Leveraging Solidarity Among Artists and Communities

Artists and filmmakers played a significant role in the 2022 elections, offering their expertise to develop campaigns and raise awareness. Solidarity within these creative communities helped overcome financial challenges and expanded the movement's reach.

For nonviolent movements, partnerships with cultural and creative sectors can provide valuable resources and amplify their message. Art and storytelling have the power to inspire action and foster a sense of unity.

LESSON 8:

Addressing Polarization and Red-Tagging

Polarization and red-tagging were significant obstacles during the elections. Activists were often labeled as terrorists or enemies of the state, creating a climate of fear and mistrust. This not only discouraged participation but also limited the movement's ability to build broad coalitions.

Nonviolent movements must actively counter these tactics by fostering dialogue, building trust with skeptical communities, and highlighting the shared values that unite them.

**VIRTUAL CAMPAIGNS,
DECENTRALIZED ORGANIZING,
AND CREATIVE GATHERINGS
ALLOWED MOVEMENTS
TO ADAPT AND CONTINUE
THEIR WORK DESPITE THESE
CHALLENGES.**

LESSON 9:

Adapting to Shrinking Civic Spaces

The pandemic and anti-terror legislation severely restricted civic spaces in the Philippines, forcing activists to find new ways to engage the public. Virtual campaigns, decentralized organizing, and creative gatherings allowed movements to adapt and continue their work despite these challenges.

For nonviolent movements, adaptability is key. Finding innovative ways to operate within restrictive environments ensures their continued relevance and impact.

LESSON 10:

Building Sustainable Movements Beyond Elections

While the 2022 elections served as a rallying point, sustaining momentum beyond election day remains a challenge. Many movements struggled to maintain their cohesion and focus once the immediate campaign ended.

Nonviolent movements must develop long-term strategies that extend beyond electoral cycles. By focusing on issues such as human rights, governance, and civic education, they can remain active and influential even between elections.





CONCLUSION:

INSIGHTS FOR NONVIOLENT MOVEMENTS WORLDWIDE

The 2022 Philippine elections highlighted both the potential and the limitations of nonviolent movements in challenging entrenched power structures. Despite significant obstacles, activists demonstrated resilience, creativity, and a commitment to democratic values.

KEY TAKEAWAYS INCLUDE:

Fostering Unity:

Building coalitions among diverse groups strengthens movements and amplifies their impact.

Engaging Youth:

Investing in the next generation of activists ensures a sustainable base of support.

Combating Disinformation:

Creative tactics and compelling narratives counter propaganda effectively.

Defending the Vote:

Election monitoring and voter vigilance safeguard the democratic process.

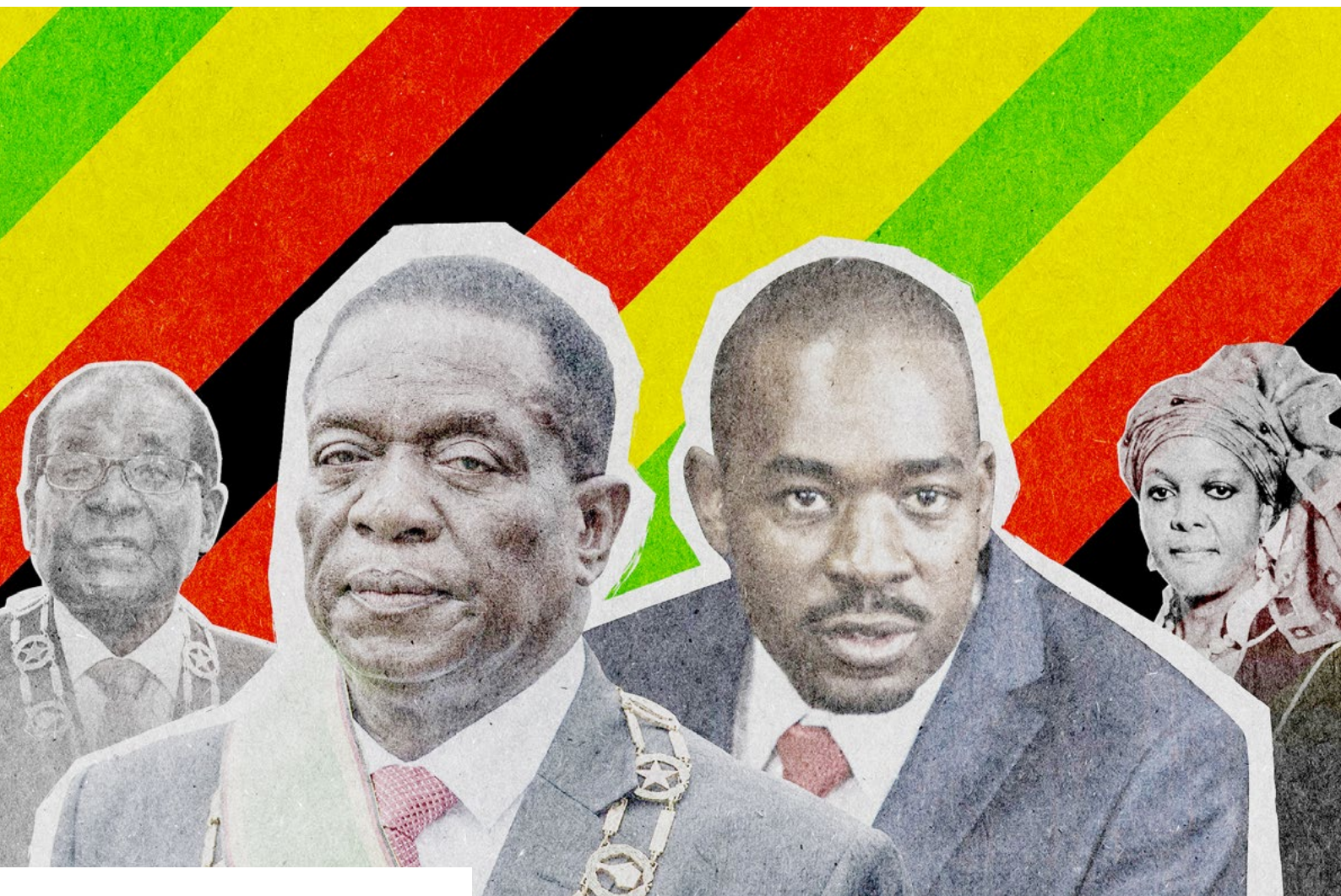
Sustaining Momentum:

Long-term strategies that address broader societal issues keep movements active and relevant

By learning from the Philippine experience, nonviolent movements worldwide can refine their strategies and continue to advocate for justice, democracy, and human rights in the face of authoritarianism.

CREDIT: eastasiaforum.org





LESSONS LEARNED FROM

ZIMBABWE'S ELECTIONS FOR NONVIOLENT MOVEMENTS

Zimbabwe's 2023 general elections serve as a crucial case study for nonviolent movements operating under authoritarian regimes. With President Emmerson Mnangagwa and the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) retaining power through widespread irregularities, voter suppression, and repression, the elections highlight the entrenched challenges faced by opposition groups. Despite these obstacles, civil society and grassroots movements continue to show resilience, offering valuable lessons for nonviolent resistance worldwide.

BACKGROUND OF ZIMBABWE'S POLITICAL LANDSCAPE



CREDIT: Luis Tato

THE 2023 ELECTIONS, HELD ON AUGUST 23–24, WERE MARRED BY IRREGULARITIES.

Since independence in 1980, Zimbabwe has been dominated by ZANU-PF. Initially led by Robert Mugabe, the party consolidated its power through authoritarian measures, such as suppressing opposition, manipulating elections, and silencing dissent. Mugabe's 37-year rule ended in 2017 with a military coup, bringing Mnangagwa to power. However, Mnangagwa has largely continued his predecessor's tactics, maintaining an authoritarian grip on the country.

The 2023 elections, held on August 23–24, were marred by irregularities. Allegations of voter suppression, biased electoral processes, and harassment of opposition candidates drew criticism from international observers, including the Southern African Development Community (SADC). Opposition leader Nelson Chamisa and the Citizens' Coalition for Change (CCC) faced significant obstacles, including the arrest and harassment of party leaders and supporters.



**NONVIOLENT MOVEMENTS
MUST PRIORITIZE COALITION-
BUILDING TO COUNTER
AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES
EFFECTIVELY.**

LESSON 1:

The Importance of Unity

A recurring challenge in Zimbabwean opposition politics is the lack of unity among anti-regime forces. ZANU-PF has consistently exploited divisions within the opposition, weakening their collective strength. Following the 2023 elections, internal discord in the CCC escalated, culminating in Chamisa's resignation in January 2024. This fracture further undermined the opposition's ability to mount a unified challenge to the regime.

Nonviolent movements must prioritize coalition-building to counter authoritarian regimes effectively. Unity fosters a sense of shared purpose and amplifies the movement's credibility, enabling it to draw support from broader segments of society and international allies.

LESSON 2:

Leveraging Traditional Community Platforms

Zimbabwe's cultural practices offer untapped opportunities for engagement. Traditional fora, such as the "Dara," are democratic spaces where local communities discuss challenges and engage with leadership. While government officials often use these platforms for propaganda, they also offer opportunities for opposition representatives to challenge narratives and advocate for change.

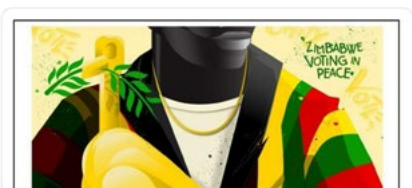
Nonviolent movements can harness such traditional structures to connect with grassroots communities, build trust, and mobilize local support.

LESSON 3:

The Role of Social Media and Technology

In a repressive media environment, social media platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and X, have emerged as critical tools for organizing and disseminating information. Activists use these platforms to circumvent government censorship, mobilize protests, and coordinate campaigns.

However, the government has also exploited technology for surveillance, intimidation, and internet shutdowns during critical periods. This underscores the need for secure communication tools and digital literacy among activists to counter these tactics effectively.



Zimbabwe Summons US Diplomat
Over Social Media Posts



CREDIT: KB Mpofu

**AFTER CHAMISA'S
RESIGNATION, CCC INTERIM
LEADER JAMESON TIMBA
FACED SIGNIFICANT
REPRESSION, INCLUDING
HIS ARREST ALONGSIDE 78
ACTIVISTS IN MID-2024.**

LESSON 4:

The Need for Resilience in Leadership

The Zimbabwean government frequently targets opposition leaders for arrest, intimidation, or exile, destabilizing movements and eroding morale. For instance, after Chamisa's resignation, CCC interim leader Jameson Timba faced significant repression, including his arrest alongside 78 activists in mid-2024.

Nonviolent movements should develop decentralized leadership structures to mitigate the impact of such repression. By empowering local leaders and fostering horizontal networks, movements can maintain continuity even when central figures are targeted.

LESSON 5:

Addressing Divisions

Zimbabwe's history of divisions, such as between the Shona and Ndebele groups, has been a persistent obstacle to national unity. ZANU-PF has skillfully exploited these divisions to weaken opposition movements and maintain control.

Efforts to bridge these divides are essential for building a cohesive resistance. Activists must prioritize inclusivity, emphasizing shared grievances such as economic inequality and government corruption, to foster solidarity across tribal and social lines.

LESSON 6:

Sustaining Movements Beyond Elections

A significant challenge for Zimbabwean opposition movements has been sustaining momentum beyond election cycles. Movements like #ThisFlag, which gained international attention for its anti-corruption campaigns, often dissolve after initial successes due to repression, limited resources, or the exile of key leaders.

Nonviolent movements must focus on long-term strategies that go beyond electoral participation. Establishing robust organizational frameworks and diversifying their objectives can help sustain activism over time.



CREDIT: Tsvangirayi Mukwazhi

STATE-CONTROLLED MEDIA IN ZIMBABWE HEAVILY FAVORS THE RULING PARTY, MARGINALIZING OPPOSITION VOICES AND DISSEMINATING PROPAGANDA.

LESSON 7:

Confronting State-Controlled Media

State-controlled media in Zimbabwe heavily favors the ruling party, marginalizing opposition voices and disseminating propaganda. Independent media outlets face harassment and restrictive laws, further limiting their reach.

To counter this, nonviolent movements should invest in alternative communication channels, such as social media, podcasts, and international partnerships, to amplify their message and reach wider audiences.

LESSON 8:

The Importance of Nonviolent Discipline

While some Zimbabweans express skepticism about the effectiveness of nonviolence, the broader consensus remains in favor of peaceful resistance. Maintaining nonviolent discipline is crucial for preserving moral legitimacy, attracting diverse support, and minimizing state justification for repression.

Movements should provide training on nonviolent tactics and emphasize the strategic advantages of peaceful resistance.

**THROUGH ONLINE CAMPAIGNS
AND LOBBYING INTERNATIONAL
ORGANIZATIONS, THE DIASPORA
PLAYS A VITAL ROLE IN
MAINTAINING PRESSURE ON THE
REGIME.**

LESSON 9:

Engaging the Diaspora

Zimbabwe's diaspora has become increasingly active in advocating for democratic reforms. Through online campaigns and lobbying international organizations, the diaspora plays a vital role in maintaining pressure on the regime.

Nonviolent movements should strengthen ties with the diaspora, leveraging their resources and networks to amplify their campaigns and sustain international attention on Zimbabwe's struggles.

LESSON 10:

International Solidarity and Pressure

While international criticism of Zimbabwe's elections has been consistent, tangible action to address the country's democratic deficits has been limited. Activists argue that authoritarian regimes often draw support and tactics from each other, necessitating coordinated global responses.

Nonviolent movements should engage international actors proactively, advocating for targeted sanctions, election monitoring, and diplomatic interventions to support democratic transitions.



CONCLUSION

Zimbabwe's 2023 elections underscore the challenges faced by nonviolent movements in authoritarian contexts. However, they also highlight opportunities for resilience, innovation, and adaptation. By learning from Zimbabwe's experience, nonviolent movements worldwide can refine their strategies and strengthen their resolve to confront and dismantle oppressive regimes.

The lessons of unity, decentralization, digital security, and long-term planning are not only relevant to Zimbabwe but also resonate with struggles for democracy and human rights globally.

**THROUGH PERSISTENCE AND STRATEGIC ACTION, NONVIOLENT
MOVEMENTS CAN CONTINUE TO INSPIRE HOPE FOR A MORE
JUST AND EQUITABLE WORLD.**

CREDIT: Tendai Marima





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LEARNING FROM RECENT NONVIOLENT MOVEMENTS: STRATEGIES FOR TUNISIA'S DEMOCRATIC FUTURE

INTRODUCTION

Tunisia's 2011 revolution ignited the Arab Spring, leading to the ousting of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. While the uprising led to democratic progress, it was not driven by an organized non-violent movement. Since then, Tunisia has faced a steady erosion of democracy, culminating in President Kais Saied's growing authoritarianism. Following his re-election in October 2024, concerns about Tunisia's democratic backsliding are more urgent than ever. To resist Saied's autocratic tendencies and protect democratic values, Tunisia's civil society and opposition groups can draw inspiration from the experiences of nonviolent movements in Venezuela, Georgia, Zimbabwe, Nicaragua, and the Philippines, offering insights for building a resilient, rights-based nonviolent movement to confront growing autocracy.



ANY TUNISIAN MOVEMENT SHOULD DEVELOP DETAILED STRATEGIES FOR MONITORING ELECTIONS, DOCUMENTING FRAUD, AND MOBILIZING SUPPORTERS BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER THE POLLS.



ANY TUNISIAN MOVEMENT MUST PRIORITIZE NEGOTIATION AND COMPROMISE TO ALIGN ON SHARED GOALS, SUCH AS RESTORING DEMOCRACY AND SAFEGUARDING HUMAN RIGHTS.

LESSON 1:

Strategic Planning & Preparedness

The 2024 Georgian election underscores the importance of strategic planning and scenario-building for nonviolent movements. Georgian activists entered the election cycle without a cohesive strategy to respond to anticipated fraud, relying instead on spontaneous actions and protests. This lack of preparedness allowed the ruling Georgian Dream party to manipulate results and maintain power with minimal resistance.

For Tunisia, this highlights the necessity of planning ahead to defend elections from authoritarian interference. Any Tunisian movement should develop detailed strategies for monitoring elections, documenting fraud, and mobilizing supporters before, during, and after the polls. This includes training election observers, creating contingency plans for post-election repression, and coordinating responses across grassroots and political organizations. A well-prepared strategy ensures that movements can adapt to evolving challenges, maintain momentum, and effectively challenge attempts to undermine democratic processes.

LESSON 2:

The Power of Unity & Coalition Building

The 2021 Nicaraguan election highlights the critical importance of unity in resisting authoritarian regimes. In Nicaragua, opposition groups were deeply divided by ideological differences, personal rivalries, and a lack of trust, which weakened their ability to present a unified challenge to Daniel Ortega's rule. These divisions allowed Ortega to exploit the opposition's fragmentation, discrediting their efforts and consolidating power.

For Tunisia, the lesson is clear: building coalitions and fostering unity among opposition groups and civil society organizations is essential. Any Tunisian movement must prioritize negotiation and compromise to align on shared goals, such as restoring democracy and safeguarding human rights. A unified front amplifies the legitimacy and strength of resistance movements, enabling them to mobilize broader public support, challenge authoritarian tactics, and sustain momentum in their struggle for democratic change. Coalition-building requires sustained effort, but it is a foundational step toward effectively resisting autocratic regimes.

LESSON 3:

Planning Beyond the Ballot Box

The 2024 Venezuelan election underscores a crucial lesson for Tunisia: winning an election in an authoritarian context is only the beginning of the struggle. Tunisia's pro-democracy forces must recognize that autocratic regimes often disregard electoral outcomes, relying on repres-



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sion, media control, and institutional capture to maintain power. To avoid such pitfalls, a Tunisian movement need not only have a “Plan A” to win an election and a “Plan B” to prove and expose fraud but also a “Plan C” that addresses what comes next if the regime refuses to relinquish power.

This means planning for sustained, strategic nonviolent action beyond election day, such as organizing mass protests, mobilizing international support, and maintaining pressure on the regime through creative, adaptable tactics. It also requires building coalitions capable of navigating post-election repression and ensuring that public momentum remains strong. Clear communication, contingency planning, and mistrust of authoritarian tactics- distrusting them until the very end- are essential for nonviolent movements to outmaneuver a regime desperate to cling to power. By embracing these lessons, Tunisia can prepare not just to contest future elections, but to safeguard their outcomes and restore democracy.

LESSON 4:

Combatting Disinformation with Creativity & Grassroots Engagement

The 2022 Philippine elections illustrate the powerful role disinformation can play in shaping public opinion and undermining democratic processes. The Marcos-Duterte campaign weaponized social media platforms like TikTok to spread propaganda and historical revisionism, influencing voter behavior on a massive scale. In response, Filipino activists employed creative approaches—such as comics, viral campaigns like “Tumindig,” and community-based voter education efforts—to counter false narratives and mobilize public awareness.

Similarly, in Zimbabwe, state-controlled media heavily favored the ruling ZANU-PF party, marginalizing opposition voices and disseminating propaganda to undermine the credibility of nonviolent movements. Despite these challenges, activists turned to alternative platforms, such as social media, international partnerships, and independent digital outlets, to share their message and mobilize support.

For Tunisia, where disinformation is likely to be used as a tool to suppress dissent and manipulate elections, creative and grassroots strategies are critical. Any nonviolent movement should focus on crafting compelling, relatable narratives that resonate with diverse communities. Leveraging art, storytelling, and social media platforms can make truth and democratic values more accessible and engaging. At the same time, grassroots efforts that engage rural and marginalized populations can help counter the deep reach of disinformation and foster trust within communities. By combining creativity with localized strategies, Tunisian movements can effectively challenge propaganda and build a more informed and engaged electorate.



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**BY COMBINING CREATIVITY WITH
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A KEY LESSON FOR TUNISIA IS THE IMPORTANCE OF FOSTERING AND SUPPORTING INDEPENDENT ORGANIZATIONS AND ELECTION MONITORING BODIES TO STRENGTHEN DEMOCRACY.

LESSON 5:

The Critical Role of Independent Groups and Election Monitoring

Across the case studies of Venezuela, Georgia, Zimbabwe, Nicaragua, and the Philippines, one recurring theme is the importance of independent groups and election monitoring in resisting authoritarianism and safeguarding democratic processes. Independent organizations- including nonviolent movements- free from partisan affiliations, play a crucial role in mobilizing citizens, ensuring accountability, and exposing fraud.

A key lesson for Tunisia is the importance of fostering and supporting independent organizations and election monitoring bodies to strengthen democracy. These groups can act as watchdogs to ensure transparency, hold officials accountable, and mobilize citizens to actively participate in the democratic process. By ensuring any future elections are free and fair, Tunisia can safeguard its democracy and resist the erosion of democracy.

CONCLUSION

Tunisia's path to democracy is fraught with challenges, especially under increasing authoritarianism. However, by learning from recent nonviolent movements in countries like Venezuela, Georgia, Zimbabwe, Nicaragua, and the Philippines, Tunisian activists can adopt effective strategies tailored to their context.

EMPHASIZING UNITY, LEVERAGING ELECTORAL OPPORTUNITIES, MAINTAINING NONVIOLENT DISCIPLINE, ENGAGING THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY, AND ADAPTING TO EVOLVING THREATS ARE ALL CRITICAL FOR SUCCESSFUL NONVIOLENT ADVOCACY IN THE TUNISIAN CONTEXT.



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