

7 April 2015

Manufacturing Dissent? Why Civil Resistance Starts

Why do some resistance movements remain non-violent while others do not? Charles Butcher believes that a society's level of industrialization may be the key variable, as illustrated by the experiences of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya during the once promising Arab Spring.

By Charles Butcher for ISN

Citizens have resisted dictatorship for as long as there have been [dictators](#). The nature of this resistance has varied considerably, however – at least in the last 60 years. Some regimes must battle violent insurgencies, while others confront nonviolent, civilian uprisings. President François Bozizé, for example, was overthrown by a coalition of rebel groups that stormed the capital of the Central African Republic, Bangui, in March 2013. President Mohammed Morsi, by contrast, was overthrown by a mass, nonviolent uprising of Egyptian citizens in the same year. What explains this variance? Why does collective dissent take the form of violent insurgency in some countries, at some times, and nonviolent 'civil resistance' in others?

Answering this question is important from a policy perspective. The economic and social costs of [civil wars are enormous](#) and higher than the costs of civil resistance movements, on average. Regime transitions affected by nonviolent tactics are also more likely to result in [democratic states, post conflict](#). Moreover, civil wars make other forms of extreme violence more likely, [such as genocides and mass killing campaigns](#). Uncovering the conditions that channel collective dissent into nonviolent forms of 'civil resistance' can help prevent civil wars and create structures that make the emergence of peaceful, democratic states more likely.^[1]

Why, then, does civil resistance start? Does 'modernization' [affect the chances](#) that nonviolent or violent movements seeking regime change or territorial independence will emerge? Indeed, as the 'Arab Spring' seems to suggest, industrialization in particular may play an important role in triggering non-violent rather than violent conflict.

Modernization and civil resistance?

Put yourself in the shoes of an imaginary dissident who wants to overthrow a dictator. You can choose between resisting the government with violent tactics, resisting the government with nonviolent tactics, or not initiating a resistance campaign at all. Assuming that you are rational and responsive to incentives, the question is this: under what circumstances will you consider nonviolent tactics superior to violent ones?

What would the 'ideal' civil resistance movement look like? Research tells us that successful civil resistance movements are [big](#), have support from sectors upon which the government depends, and can [withstand severe repression](#). Ideal civil resistance movements, in other words, are *big*, they *hurt* and they *survive*. When you – the dissident – believe that you have a good chance of creating such an ideal movement, it stands to reason that you will be more likely to initiate a civil resistance campaign instead of a violent insurgency. Under what circumstances, then, are you likely to believe that such an ideal civil resistance movement can be built? [Recent findings](#) suggest that 'modernization,' and industrialization in particular, may be what tips the calculus in favor of civil resistance.

Modernization is a multifaceted process of economic and social transformation. Three processes that are often considered part of modernization include: industrialization, increasing education, and urbanization. Broadly, industrialization is a transition from the production of primary goods (such as agricultural goods or natural resources) to secondary goods (i.e, manufacturing). Industrialization tends to coincide with rising levels of education as governments create national education systems to fill the demand for an educated workforce. In turn, modernization also creates urbanization as people relocate from rural areas in the hope of realizing job opportunities in the cities.

Industrialization may be associated with the onset of nonviolent conflict for three reasons. First, industrialization breaks down parochial bonds and replaces them with (mass) shared bonds of experience in wage labor. These networks tend to be geographically and socially extensive, and to cross social divides of ethnicity, gender, and religion. Extensive social networks are critical for mass mobilization, especially networks with the capacity to [mobilize 'moderates' as opposed to extremists](#). In other words, extensive social networks are important if your movement is going to be *big*.

Second, it is costly for the government when organized labor joins (or initiates) civil resistance. These costs include lost taxation revenue, lost trade in manufactures and the dysfunction of critical infrastructure such as ports, railways and public transport. [Kurt Schock](#) calls these costs 'leverage' and you need leverage if your movement is going to *hurt*.

Third, organized labor can withstand repression, what [Schock calls resilience](#). Labor-based social networks often coalesce into (formal or informal, legal or illegal) institutions, such as independent trade unions. These decentralized but expansive networks and leadership structures make it hard for governments to target a single leader or location. Organized labor also excels at conducting strikes, which are useful under repression because participants are dispersed and difficult to target. You need resilience if your movement is going to *survive*.

Industrialization, organized labor, and the Arab Spring?

This helps to explain why civil resistance movements seem to emerge more frequently in industrialized states. Based on a global sample between 1960- 2006 (using the [Nonviolent and Violent Campaigns and Outcomes Data](#)), states with higher proportions of manufacturing to GDP were more likely to see the onset of civil resistance. This effect is plausibly independent of other factors such as population size, income, and democracy, and other aspects of the modernization process, such as urbanization. The effect appears to be strongest in the most authoritarian states, suggesting that when dissidents believe that they can withstand (almost certain) government repression, they are more likely to initiate civil resistance. In the global sample over this period, education (measured as the average years of schooling) had the strongest positive effect on the probability that nonviolent conflict would occur. On the other hand, there was not a strong relationship between urbanization and the onset of nonviolent conflict.

A similar pattern is discernible [in a sample of African states between 1990 and 2009](#). Higher levels of

manufacturing to GDP were correlated with the onset of nonviolent pro-democracy movements, although there was not the same strong relationship between education and the onset of civil resistance.

Importantly, industrialization was not positively related to armed conflict onset in either sample. This means that industrialization does not appear to increase the probability of dissent in general (violent and nonviolent) but specifically *nonviolent* forms of conflict.

Reading these quantitative findings in conjunction with the acknowledged role of organized labor can shed light on the contours of the so-called 'Arab Spring'. In 2008 (the last year that the World Bank has data), value added manufacturing accounted for just 4% of Libya's economy. Tunisia, on the other hand, had a relatively strong manufacturing sector, accounting for 18.2% of GDP in 2010, and Egypt had a similar level – 16.8%. Moreover, the [Tunisian General Labor Union](#) was central in the resistance against the Ben Ali regime in Tunisia, and [Egyptian workers played a crucial role in the last days of the Mubarak regime](#). Indeed, there is also evidence that civil resistance movements that attract the participation of organized labor are bigger, more successful, and more likely to create post-conflict democracies.^[2]

Of course, the quantitative study of civil resistance is at an early stage. Industrialization, education and urbanization are closely intertwined, making it difficult to tease out the precise causal processes that link modernization to nonviolent conflict. This causal complexity makes it hard to derive clear policy recommendations. It would appear, however, that the transition from an economy dependent upon primary commodities (which may be [correlated with the onset of civil war](#)) where the population is largely uneducated, to an economy characterized by educated workers and the manufacture of goods (and potentially services) also entails that grievances will be more likely to manifest as nonviolent forms of dissent.

Overall, this emerging research into civil resistance points to a central role for organized labor in channeling collective action away from organized violence. Recently, the idea of a '[responsibility to assist](#)' dissents using nonviolent tactics to resist dictatorship has arisen. Strengthening the ability of labor to organize independently of the state may make nonviolent tactics more attractive, more common, and 'safer' in the sense that post-conflict societies are more likely to be democratic. This suggests that supporting the work of the International Confederation of Labor, and the International Labor Organization, for example, may have important externalities that help create a more peaceful and democratic world.

For more information on issues and events that shape our world, please visit the [ISN Blog](#) or browse our [resources](#).

^[1] This is not to say that 'civil resistance' is harm/less. It is not. By mobilizing huge numbers into collective dissent, failed civil resistance movements may be more likely to transition into civil wars. Successful civil resistance movements are sometimes also followed by continued spells of authoritarianism. Civil resistance is something of a gamble – the 'dice' may be loaded in terms of [regime transitions and democracy when compared with the 'dice' for violent insurgency](#), but by rolling in the first place this also (probably) makes other adverse outcomes more likely.

[2] This working paper is in the International Studies Association online archive. If you would like to request a copy, please email the author (charles.butcher@otago.ac.nz).

Dr. Charles Butcher is a Lecturer at the National Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies and Coordinator of the Masters Program at the University of Otago in New Zealand. He received his PhD from the University of Sydney.

Publisher

[International Relations and Security Network \(ISN\)](#)

Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivatives 4.0 International

<http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Articles/Detail?id=189695&lng=en>

ISN, Center for Security Studies (CSS), ETH Zurich, Switzerland