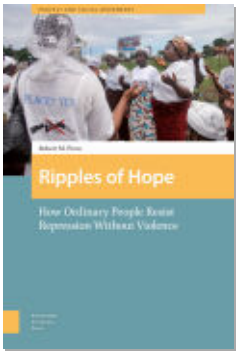
Conclusion



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Conclusion

Implications for the Study of Social Movements and Nonviolent Resistance

We started this exploration of people standing up for human rights and democratic freedoms with a statement made by Robert F. Kennedy in 1966 in Cape Town, South Africa, during apartheid, and it is worth repeating:

> Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.[1]

Just two years before Kennedy spoke in South Africa, Nelson Mandela had been imprisoned in a small cell on nearby Robben Island off the coast of Cape Town. He was freed after almost twenty-seven years then led four years of tough negotiations with the South African white government. He was elected president in 1994 when blacks could vote for the first time. His sense of reconciliation and leadership helped avert a civil war. By the time of Mandela's death in 2013, South Africans were no longer separated by color and the laws of apartheid. But the realities of economic disparities between the races, as well as high levels of unemployment and crime meant millions were still living in hardship. Mass political activism had helped bend the course of history in South Africa toward good, but for many, the goal of justice remained distant.

In the three sub-Saharan Africa countries studied in this book – Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Kenya – the goal of justice remains distant for many today in terms of poverty, education, and health. Human rights abuses continue. But the progress in all three countries has been impressive in those same categories. The accomplishment of ordinary people in all three countries in helping overcome the tyranny and abuses of past regimes is now a matter of record. The resistance was mostly nonviolent despite the violence against them. Gandhi, a main proponent of nonviolence observed

1 Robert F. Kennedy, "A Tiny Ripple of Hope" (Day of Affirmation address at Cape Town University, Cape Town, South Africa, June 6, 1966), *American Rhetoric*. http://www.americanrhetoric.com/ speeches/rfkcapetown.com/.

that tyrants eventually fall. "When I despair, I remember that all through history the ways of truth and love have always won. There have been tyrants, and murderers, and for a time they can seem invincible, but in the end they always fall. Think of it – always" (Gandhi 2010).

But that statement does not explain *how* tyrants fall. This study of three sub-Saharan African countries has argued that nonviolent resistance can take different forms than what one normally pictures when thinking of social movements. In Sierra Leone at one point a small independent newspaper, *The Tablet*, became the focus of opposition; in Kenya, opposition political parties took the lead in the resistance after an earlier period of mostly individual activism. In Liberia, where repression was more intense than in those two countries, resistance took a variety of forms. There were few if any obvious "opportunities" for resistance: the repression was intense much of the time. At times elements of resistance operated in abeyance, at low levels, until they managed to emerge more openly.

This book has shown how ordinary people can rise up courageously against tyrants and challenge them. Most of the events highlighted in this book – the repression and the nonviolent responses – were known to residents of the countries, though the full panoply of activism over a decade or two had not been collected or examined in the way this book does. The contributions of many of the individuals had not been woven together into visible patterns. An advance reader of the Sierra Leone chapters, political author Lans Gberie, wrote: "The cacophony of voices, which could have cluttered the text, feels fresh and original, because they are drawn from many sources, some expected, some not. They add up to a very convincing account of the political history and social activism of the country for the past few decades" (Gberie 2013). Liberian scholar T. Debey Sayndee, director of the Kofi Annan Institute for Conflict Transformation at the University of Liberia observed that the section on Liberia "highlights deep-rooted issues that any serious person seeking to engage the Liberian society can take clues from. It brings out hidden reasons for the way the society operates" (Sayndee 2013). Kenyan, historian Macharia Munene wrote that the nonviolent resistance there started "with uncoordinated individuals each trying to right perceived wrongs in different places within a given polity … then develops into a *Culture of Resistance* to the *Culture of Repression* [emphasis in original] which in turn attracts additional attention and support both locally and internationally … The argument, using Kenya, is very persuasive" (Munene 2013).

Activism and Structural Conditions

The focus has been on people, not on conditions; on domestic resistance, not international pressures and interventions. This focus is intentional. The study does not make the claim that activism led to the regime changes that came in all three countries. Rather, the argument is that without the domestic resistance it is unlikely that changes would have come when they did. Domestic opposition to a regime opens the door to the kind of international pressures and, in the case of Sierra Leone and Liberia, to international military intervention which pushed the tyrants aside. The example of Sierra Leoneans welcoming the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC), a military junta, in 1992 is illustrative. With people literally dancing in the street at their arrival, the international community had no reason to intervene. But the massive noncooperation that greeted the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) coup in 1997 sent a different signal to West African troops (and eventually the British) that the regime had to go. It was defeated by these forces. In all three countries, international diplomatic pressures played a role. In Kenya, for example the US and Germany, especially, were quite clear about their opposition to the Moi regime. Donors cut off aid more than once in Kenya, though this study has argued it was primarily the growing domestic unrest and resistance that pushed Moi to accept multiparty elections.

External conditions (usually referred to in the social movement literature in terms of "structure" and "opportunity') were important. For one thing, repression was the condition which sparked the nonviolent resistance. Poverty may have pushed some to join the resistance though it likely held many others back who were focused on making a living, on keeping whatever job they might have risked by openly confronting the regime. The book argues, however, against a deterministic interpretation of events in all three countries, against the notion that conditions primarily determined what happened politically. This has been a detailed account of how individuals, small groups, informal and formal organizations, and mass demonstrations, became part of what eventually amounted to a *culture of resistance* in all three countries. In the process they defied the main structural limitations, the repression, and the danger of opposing regimes that at times were ruthless and vindictive. Some in the resistance stayed in the shadows of anonymity, though perhaps participating in a demonstration, spontaneous or planned; others helped organize such demonstrations; a smaller number stepped directly into the regime spotlight and openly challenged the repression in various ways.

Uncertainties

This study does not argue that the presence of a social movement, in abeyance or in full operation, will lead to a particular outcome or result. The author makes no predictions based on the findings of this study other than, as mentioned above, to argue that without the resistance that took place, change of regimes would likely not have come when they did. In other cases regime change may not occur. In these three cases, change did come. People stood up for freedom, often at great risk. Activists sometimes were saved or helped by the spontaneous assistance of minor actors, making prediction of their activism uncertain. Taxi drivers, jail keepers, and others warned activists of pending arrests, helping them survive harsh confinement or to seek legal defense (as in Kenya).

Chenoweth and Stephan (2011) and Ackerman and Karatnycky (2005) found that nonviolent resistance is much more successful in obtaining regime change than violent campaigns and that a country is much more likely to remain a democracy if the campaign for change was nonviolent (see the theory chapter for details). But the nature and behavior of the new governments achieved with the help of nonviolent resistance is never a certainty. Another uncertainty is what role activists will play once a regime change occurs.

Some former activists later accepted government posts once there was a transition. In Liberia, several courageous human rights attorneys took cabinet posts under Africa's first elected female president. In Sierra Leone when I interviewed her, Zainab Bangura, who helped lead a women's movement for peace and democracy in the mid-1990s, was minister of foreign affairs. Hindolo Trye was minister of tourism; and another former key *Tablet* newspaper contributor, I.B. Kargbo was minister of information and communication, both in an APC government, the same party they had opposed in their activist days.

In all three countries, some former activists have been criticized for their performances in the new governments; in a few cases they have been blamed for corruption and even for obstructing moves toward greater human rights and other reforms. Activists seen as heroes at one point in their country's struggles for human rights are not always seen that way later. In Kenya, for example, attorney Martha Karua, one of the most fearless advocates for human rights and democracy, later became a senior government official when her ethnic group won the presidency. She was criticized for vouching for the authenticity of the 2007 presidential election, widely condemned as flawed. She ran unsuccessfully for president in 2013. Kenyan attorney Kiraitu Murungi, once a human rights advocate, was seen by some of his former fellow activists as an obstructionist after he joined the Kibaki government.

Arguments Supported

Six arguments were introduced in the chapter on theoretical perspectives. The evidence presented to support them contributes to the literature on social movements, democratization, and our understanding of how nonviolent movements operate in repressive settings.

1 **Individual activism, a much understudied part of social movements, can play a significant part in nonviolent resistance.**

The literature is practically silent on the contributions of activists acting as individuals and not members of an organization. But in all three countries, to varying degrees, individual activists played an important role in building a nonviolent resistance at a time when organized resistance was not prevalent. The term "individual activism" is defined herein as activism unsupported by an organization. In some cases, the activists' organizations opposed their resistance; in other cases the "organization" they belonged to was so weak it offered little or no support. In Sierra Leone, during a period of high repression under the military junta the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), some independent journalists went underground with their skeletal staff and continued publishing clandestinely. In Kenya, for example, before most organizations joined in the open resistance to Moi's regime, individual writers, lawyers, mothers, and others challenged the regime openly, drawing both domestic and international attention to the abuses of the regime. Another source of resistance in all three countries was the individuals drawn into the resistance not as members of an organization but as people committed to the principles of their profession, including independent journalists, attorneys, and some academics. In such cases they were generally operating as individuals, not representatives of their profession.

2 **During periods of high repression, nonviolent social movements may lack a formal structure but continue in abeyance, informally, at a lower level of resistance, waiting for safer times to emerge more openly and formally.**

This happened in all three countries at times. In Sierra Leone, a university student protest in 1977 against the president that spread to a nationwide student strike was thwarted from becoming a full social movement by regime repression and co-optation, and by lack of planning and alliance

building on the part of the students. Resistance continued in abeyance, in the form of an independent newspaper, *The Tablet*, organized by earlier activists and in the 1980s with more university student demonstrations. The resistance in abeyance set a model for the open social movements that did emerge in the mid-1990s. By the time the AFRC seized power in the late 1990s, a culture of resistance had been developed but resistance efforts were forced to operate in abeyance because it was too dangerous to mount an organized, open resistance. There was mass, informal noncooperation that closed schools, many businesses, and slowed government bureaucracy to a crawl. A clandestine radio station encouraged the noncooperation that continued until the junta was ousted by international military intervention. In Liberia, the extreme violence of the Samuel Doe regime blocked formation of a full social movement. But some journalists, lawyers, clergy, and others kept a low level of resistance alive in the 1980s that blossomed in the 1990s into two social movements, one against the regime, and one led by women who campaigned for an end to the civil war. In Kenya, in the late 1980s when the regime was torturing political dissidents, the individual attorneys and other activists informally mounted a social movement in abeyance, one that grew bolder and bigger in the 1990s in the push for multiparty elections.

3 Nonviolent resistance can take place even under severe repression, and without favorable conditions or "political opportunities," and with only limited material resources.

As shown, most of the openings or opportunities often cited in the literature – external conditions that could encourage a movement's advance – were not present. Instead activists and supporters often faced a wall of repression: armed police attacks; detentions; torture; execution. This study concurs with more recent studies which argue that repression can stimulate resistance; it provides fresh evidence of this. With regard to material resources, the resistance studied took place in countries still developing and under circumstances of poverty for the majority. Many of the activist leaders were elites, educated and with a profession. Many who joined in resistance demonstrations were poor, though some in the middle class also took part. In a pre-cell phone era, some activists had access to offices and fax machines, but often material support for the resistance was meager. As shown through interviews, however, many activists were motivated by ideas, including a stubborn commitment to justice and human rights, while others were motived by hopes of personal gain.

4 Nonviolent social movements in repressive settings involve a broader and more complex array of participants than is generally recognized.

In addition to the large organizations and mass demonstrations that usually feature in most social movement studies, the three case studies showed the important role individual activists and small, informal groups can play in building a nonviolent resistance movement. This includes persons drawn into the resistance by way of their commitment to their profession (e.g., attorneys; independent journalists). In Sierra Leone, it was a small group of students who planned the demonstration against Stevens. In Liberia and Kenya, small, informal groups of attorneys helped each other in the defense of accused political activists. A group of Kenyan mothers challenged the illegal detention of activists.

5 From modest starting points, nonviolent activism can grow into a "culture of resistance" unless blocked by extreme repression.

Building on an historic record of nonviolent resistance, activism in all three countries led to the establishment of a culture of resistance. The study defined the development of a culture of resistance as a process in which public challenges to the abuse of power by a regime become a norm for activists and for a visible segment of the general public. The student demonstrations in Sierra Leone in 1977 and the 1980s broke the silence that had engulfed much of society during the repression of the Stevens years. The women-led push against a military junta in the mid-1990s involved a broader-based, public resistance that grew further into the mass noncooperation against a second junta in the last half of the 1990s. In Liberia, resistance in the 1970s, followed by some courageous examples in the 1980s under severe repression, grew into a culture of resistance in the 1990s. An example was the dramatic marches by women for peace. Kenya's wall of fear began to crack in the late 1980s when individual, and some organized, resistance took place against the regime. It cracked further in the early 1990s with two non-licensed major rallies by political opposition figures. It openly flourished after that and included mass demonstrations, an active media and open criticism of the regime.

6 There is a need for a universal model of social movements, one that can work in the democratic West as well as in repressive settings.

This study suggests a new model for social movements to help bridge this gap, recognizing social movements as a *process of challenges to targeted authorities that may involve individual as well as organizational activism, and at times mass public support, aimed at either regime reform or regime change*. Though emerging primarily from the democratic West, social movement theory has been applied increasing to repressive settings elsewhere, especially in Latin America and more gradually in Africa. For reasons noted above, social movements in dangerous conditions are obliged to adopt more flexible approaches than those in less harsh settings. There is another important difference: social movements in democratic settings usually seek regime reform; in repressive setting they may seek regime change. This makes activists targets of the regime. Often activists cannot be open and formally organized or they risk being blocked or crushed by the regime. Yet another difference: they do not always have "opportunities" favorable to them, or significant material resources. A broader, more flexible concept of a social movement is needed to apply to both repressive and non-repressive settings. The model presented in this book involves individual, organizational, and mass activism, allowing for goals of regime reform or regime change. The model does not limit social movements to the usual characteristics often cited in the literature of being "sustained, organized, and public." The model recognizes that repression sometimes makes these goals impractical and dangerous.

Longtime Kenya resident Harold Miller, an advocate for peace, cautions about trying to see African societies through the lens of Western theories.[2]

> I find the Western need for a clear theoretical framework that makes sense within the world of Western academia not fully satisfying … Perhaps the closest approximation to a continually (sub-Saharan) recognized ideological concept is *Ubuntu*,[3] which … more recently associated with South Africa in the context of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission established by Mandela, chaired by [Archbishop Desmond] Tutu.

2 Harold Miller, in an e-mail to the author, November 25, 2013.

3 There are many interpretations of the term, including the concept of "living harmoniously in community," in *I Am Because We Are: African Wisdom in Image and Proverb*, by photographer Betty Press with proverbs compiled by Annetta Miller (2011, 1).

Miller does see more "commonalities" than differences among people. He is discouraged that some Kenyans (and the same concern was recognized in Sierra Leone and Liberia) "deploy the term or concept 'human rights' largely [for] opportunist ends." This study does not disagree with his concern. Some activists clearly sought political benefit. But many others did not. They stood up for greater freedom, for human rights, including the right to be treated with dignity and to be able to live safely and make one's living in a dignified way. Those who stepped forward as part of the resistance did so at risk, sometimes grave, personal risk. The results anticipated or not, are a heightened awareness of human rights and other democratic freedoms and greater sensitivity of attempts by governments to abuse them. A lingering question is whether a society anywhere that once experiences that spirit and awareness will mobilize to protect those rights if they are threatened anew. This author remains optimistic that they will. Once a culture of resistance has been established in a society, it is not likely to disappear again, at least not without a struggle.

In our journey we have seen fresh evidence of the power of the human spirit.

Figure 14 Family in their street sales stall, Nairobi, Kenya, 1991

Photo by Betty Press

Figure 15 Hope for the future: sign board with image of Africa's first elected female President, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Monrovia, Liberia, 2006

Photo by Betty Press