

# Setting the stage for peace processes

## The role of nonviolent movements

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Most peace processes focus on brokering deals between armed actors. However, this often obscures the important role that unarmed groups play in preparing the ground for peace, particularly organisations or movements that engage in nonviolent action or civil resistance to help create an enabling political environment and support sustainability.

Foundational figures such as Mahatma Gandhi highlighted the moral or ethical dimensions of nonviolent action. Today, a more practical definition of nonviolence emphasises the exercise of power by unarmed civilians outside formal avenues of politics and without the use or threat of physical violence, using tactics such as public protest, demonstrations, strikes and sit-ins. Its core rationale is that structures of power and oppression require the explicit or implicit cooperation of subordinate, often excluded and marginalised actors. Strategic use of nonviolent action is intended to bring about the withdrawal of this cooperation, leading to the downfall of the targeted power structure.

Nonviolent movements typically comprise combinations of social groups, individuals or formal civil society organisations. They include hierarchical movements as in the Armenian 'Velvet Revolution' of 2018, which was largely organised by pre-existing political parties, but also much more diffuse movements, such as the current pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong. Identifiable nonviolent movements can be traced back to ancient Egypt and Rome, and they have achieved major gains in extremely hostile environments, including Nazi Germany.

This article explores the ways that nonviolent action movements can help to set the stage for peace processes today. It concludes with recommendations to enhance conflict analysis, for targeted capacity building and to help link nonviolent movements to peace processes.

### Setting the stage for peace processes

Seminal research by Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan found that in the 20th and early 21st centuries, nonviolent movements that sought 'maximalist' goals of bringing down a political regime, ending a military occupation or seceding from an existing state were more than twice as successful in achieving those goals as violent movements, and that countries that had a nonviolent movement were significantly more likely to become democratic and significantly less likely to experience a civil war in the five years following the end of the movement.

Despite claims of political neutrality, many nonviolent movements play a critical and often explicit political role in changing the power dynamics so that conflict resolution becomes possible, such as by engaging directly in transforming the power structures that gave rise to the conflict in the first place. A prominent recent example is the 2019 ouster of President Omer al-Bashir in a primarily nonviolent revolution in Sudan, which has opened space for peace negotiations with several of the country's rebel movements in Darfur.

There has been an explosion in nonviolent resistance movements recently, in places as disparate as Iraq, Algeria and Chile. The reasons behind this are not well understood, but analysts have pointed to increased diffusion of ideas and inspiration across borders through information technology and the rise of social media as an organising tool.

Detailed data has shown that nonviolent action is often used in contexts of the most extreme armed violence. The availability of a rich array of data is a decisive development of the past decade, mirroring the growth in similar datasets curating and cataloguing elements and themes in peace agreements. This has made identifying and analysing the roles and impacts of nonviolent actors much more straightforward (see Table 1 at the end of this article providing examples of databases).

Three types of nonviolent action have been especially influential in setting the stage for peace processes: *mitigating violence*, *pressuring for peace*, and *coordinating with an armed actor*.

### **Theme 1. Mitigating violence**

Nonviolent movements may exclusively aim to protect civilians from violence. Local movements often declare themselves to be 'neutral' in the conflict and may try to establish their local territory as a 'peace zone'. Such movements are typically low-profile but can have significant protective effects during periods of intense violence and peace negotiations, helping to maintain the social structures that will subsequently facilitate social recovery during later peacebuilding phases.

The peace communities of Colombia, described in the work of authors such as Catalina Rojas and Oliver Kaplan, typically arose in areas contested between the government, right-wing paramilitaries and left-wing guerrillas. Peace communities declared their neutrality and monitored their members to ensure that none of them supported any of the armed actors in the conflict. This convinced armed actors to leave the civilian population alone in several places, believing that they would not support their opponents. While some incidents of violent repression continued to occur, in most cases the emergence of an organised local nonviolent movement resulted in a significant decline in civilian casualties, and in stronger communities that were in a better position to recover from the conflict when a peace process occurred.

### **Theme 2. Pressuring for peace**

Nonviolent movements may also act as a powerful source of pressure for peace. Again, a key *modus operandi* is neutrality and not taking a side on the underlying political issues in the conflict, but actively pushing for an end to the armed struggle. Nonviolent movements can tap popular dissatisfaction with the ravages of conflict and prepare the ground for peacemaking by uniformly pressuring conflict parties to come to the negotiating table.

One of the best-known examples is the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace movement, whose leader Leymah Gbowee was later awarded the Nobel peace prize. The movement emerged in the later years of the Liberian Civil War as a reaction against increasing violence towards women. They organised public demonstrations, inter-religious dialogue and a national 'sex strike'



People gather to stage an anti-government protest in Beirut, Lebanon, 10 November 2019. © Mahmut Geldi/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

to pressure both Liberian President Charles Taylor and Liberian rebel groups to attend peace negotiations. When negotiations began in Accra, the Women of Liberia group were proximate, at one point blockading the negotiation building and refusing to allow the parties to leave until they came to a peace agreement. Their pressure was a vital element in motivating the warring parties both to attend peace talks and, ultimately, to make a deal.

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### **Theme 3. Coordinating with armed movements**

Nonviolent movements can coordinate with armed movements – working with them, and sometimes influencing their behaviour. Armed and unarmed movements can have a close, cooperative relationship, functioning as wings of a single underlying organisational structure. They may coordinate violent and nonviolent actions to increase the overall pressure on their opponent, as well as to incorporate the civilian population in the process of struggle. Where relationships between armed and unarmed movements are more collaborative, the distinction between them can be more blurred. But the ability of a movement to deploy both violent and nonviolent pressure can help to advance their cause.

Throughout its long period of anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, the African National Congress (ANC) and its armed wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe, alternated between pursuing primarily violent and nonviolent tactics in its attempt to bring an end to apartheid. In the 1980s, the nonviolent scope of the struggle expanded, as the ANC organised action in coordination with other civil society groups to boycott South African goods, establish alternative governance structures in the townships, and increase international pressure on the South African economy. Yet, while most participants engaged in nonviolent actions, they did so while continuing to endorse Umkhonto violence.

When a nonviolent movement is relatively independent of the armed actor, then coordination between the two can help motivate the armed actor to significantly change their behaviour towards nonviolent action. In the 1996–2006 Nepalese civil war, the Maoist rebels by the early 2000s found themselves in a military stalemate with the government – in control of the countryside but unable to challenge the Nepalese army in urban centres. The Maoists

joined with civil society groups and political parties that had been engaging in nonviolent action for greater democracy. Their combined nonviolent protest against the autocracy of the monarchy, known as the ‘Second People’s Movement’, was able to successfully pressure the king to step down. When the political parties subsequently took power, they initiated a negotiation process with the rebels that resulted in a formal peace agreement, ending Nepal’s civil war and initiating a transition to democracy.

In all these cases, nonviolent movements are engaged in the exercise of political power. Even when their stated priority is mitigating violence, this involves pressure on armed actors to change their behaviour. Nonviolent movements can be much better placed to impose this kind of pressure than international actors because of their intimate connections to the core constituencies over which armed actors are competing, and their greater claims to local social and political legitimacy. Nonviolent movements can also be influential during formal peace talks. The Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace did not have a formal role in peace negotiations but were a source of outside pressure.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

So, how should peacemakers interact with nonviolent movements in the opaque pre-formal phases? First, it is critical to identify existing local peace activism. Often, conflict analysis focuses exclusively on armed actors and the dynamics of violence. Understanding the roles that nonviolent movements are already playing in many conflicts demands close attention to local dynamics, and in many cases a shift in thinking about whose actions matter when.

Clear-eyed analysis and mapping of the goals and intra-group dynamics of nonviolent movements is crucial, as nonviolent movements in a complex conflict environment are unlikely to speak with a single voice. There is no shortcut to intensive study of the local context. Cross-contextual comparative research can provide important pointers on which movements are likely to have the greatest impact for peace. For instance, work by Erica Chenoweth suggests that movements with greater participation by women are more likely both to be successful in achieving their aims and to remain nonviolent. (For more on analysis for peacemaking, see the article ‘Digital analysis – Peacemaking potential and promise’ in this edition.)

Second, international support can help enhance nonviolent movements’ capabilities. There is a growing set of resources available to help nonviolent movements improve their strategic planning, tactical sequencing and political impact. For instance, the United States Institute

of Peace has piloted a comprehensive curriculum with its ‘Synergizing nonviolent action and peacebuilding’ programme. Training in nonviolent action, particularly in how to think more strategically about deploying the tools of nonviolent action to change conflict dynamics, can help improve nonviolent movements’ chances of having a meaningful impact. However, international actors should think carefully, informed by robust political analysis, about the long-term consequences of intervention even with nonviolent actors, doing the crucial work of understanding the local landscape before intervening.

Third, nonviolent movements’ involvement in negotiation and dialogue processes should be supported. Nonviolent movements’ connections to grassroots constituencies can help to encourage popular buy-in for peace talks and settlements, raise issues of core concern to the general population, and try to pressure armed actors to stay on track when negotiations threaten to break down. The diffuse structure and horizontal leadership of many

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nonviolent movements makes involving them in peace talks difficult. Challenges are especially acute in the early stages of negotiation processes due to concerns over secrecy, and reluctance to ‘over-complicate’ the negotiation process. The specific mechanisms of inclusion need to be adapted to the context, from direct involvement in talks, to multiple negotiation ‘tracks’ and alternative pathways for more diverse representation.

Nonviolent action is not a panacea for violence nor a guarantee of successful conflict resolution. But two contemporary trends suggest that there is increasingly a key role for it to play in reducing violence and sustaining peace. First, the tendency of increased authoritarian

**Table 1: Examples of databases cataloguing nonviolent action**

Database	Host	Content
Nonviolent and Violent Campaigns and Outcomes (NAVCO) Data Project <a href="http://www.navcodata.com">www.navcodata.com</a>	Harvard University	Several different datasets that examine nonviolent action in various ways. NAVCO 1 contains campaign-level data on nonviolent action from 1900 to 2013, NAVCO 2 contains annual-level data from 1945 to 2013, and NAVCO 3 contains event-level data from 26 countries from 1990 to 2012.
Nonviolent Action in Violent Contexts (NVAVC) <a href="http://www.nvavcdata.org">www.nvavcdata.org</a>	University of Denver Sie Cheou-Kang Center for International Security and Diplomacy	Dataset of more than 3,000 instances of organised nonviolent action by unarmed actors during civil wars in Africa from 1990 to 2012. The data provides critical insight into the dynamics not just of high-profile actions such as protests or strikes, but also subtler forms of nonviolent action such as formal communication or meetings to coordinate action. This could be relevant to better understand the impact of less easily observed forms of nonviolent action.
Global Nonviolent Action Database (GNVAD) <a href="https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/">https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/</a>	Swarthmore College	Over 1,000 narratives of nonviolent resistance movements from around the world from Ancient Egypt to 2019, with rich descriptions of movement dynamics and outcomes, as well as sources for further examination. The database is not an encyclopedia of all movements, or a representative sample of movements, but rather a subset of particularly prominent movements.
Social Conflict Analysis Database (SCAD) <a href="http://www.strausscenter.org/scad.html">www.strausscenter.org/scad.html</a>	The University of Texas at Austin Robert Straus Center for International Security and Law	A dataset of both violent and nonviolent conflict events, including protests and strikes, in Africa, Central America, and the Caribbean from 1990 to 2017. Useful for mapping long-term patterns of violent and nonviolent action.
Armed Conflict Location Events Data (ACLEDD) <a href="http://www.acleddata.com">www.acleddata.com</a>	Independent nonprofit organisation	A dataset of conflict-related events, initially just in Africa but now updated frequently for most regions of the world (major exceptions are Western Europe and North and South America). The data include incidents of peaceful protest and can be used to closely observe current trends. Data for Africa go back to 1997, while historical coverage of other regions varies.

Note:

repression and shrinking civic space globally, as documented by organisations such as Freedom House and the Varieties of Democracy Project, means that the need for nonviolent action is growing. And second, the current spike in nonviolent movements shows their potency and potential, with the largely nonviolent uprisings in Armenia, Hong Kong and Sudan among the many movements that have successfully mobilised huge populations for major change. But while nonviolent action

may be becoming more common, it is also increasingly likely to face severe repression and be met by violent response. Therefore, closing the gap between nonviolent action and peacemaking is imperative.

*The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Institute of Peace.*