

NON-VIOLENT STRATEGIES IN VIOLENT CONTEXTS

WORKSHOP REPORT



UNIVERSITY *of*
DENVER

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INTERNATIONAL STUDIES



The workshop "Non-Violent Strategies in Violent Contexts" was held at the Josef Korbel School of International Studies, University of Denver from 10 – 12 October 2013. It was sponsored by the Sié Chéou-Kang Center for International Security and Diplomacy at University of Denver with support from the Center for Middle East Studies at the Josef Korbel School of International Studies and the One Earth Future Foundation. The content of this report reflects the interpretation of the discussion by the Sié Center. Special thanks are owed to Kyleanne Hunter, Kara Kingma and Jonathan Pinckney for drafting this report.

INTRODUCTION

The Sie Cheou-Kang Center for International Security and Diplomacy held a workshop entitled “Nonviolent Strategies in Violent Contexts” at the University of Denver October 10-12, 2013. The purpose of the workshop was to bring together scholars and practitioners to discuss existing work on the topic and important issues for future study. In particular, organizers of the workshop hoped to set a research agenda aimed at better understanding how nonviolent actors can influence violent conflict without using violence themselves. Participants represented a wealth of knowledge on the strategies of various nonviolent actors, including citizens, civil society groups, IGOs, transnational NGOs, and private companies.

INTRODUCTORY ROUNDTABLE: FRAMING THE ISSUES

The workshop began with an introductory roundtable during which the themes of the workshop and current and future research on the topic were discussed. As presented at this roundtable, the workshop focused on the objectives of nonviolent actors, the types of strategies they choose, and the interactions of these strategies in violent contexts. In order to address these themes, workshop participants included those who research nonviolence and those who study development, peacebuilding, and security. These participants stressed that the role of nonviolent strategies in violent contexts is a very timely inquiry and the field is open for immediate research with unprecedented access to data.

A pressing question that came out of the roundtable is whether or not these nonviolent strategies are effective in producing change when compared to armed struggle. Not all conflict is violent, and actors have a choice in what type of strategies to use. Nonviolent strategies are difficult to use and difficult to study. Consequently, it is important to investigate these strategies and how and why they are successful. This type of research is particularly important as it can help those on the ground using strategies of nonviolence to advance their aims.

NGOs, IGOs, businesses, and other public and private actors have an interest in why civilians choose nonviolent strategies and how they use them against armed forces. There is a need to characterize these strategies and to assess their effectiveness. Other actors may support civilians’ use of nonviolent strategies or employ the strategies themselves. Acknowledging this possibility, some participants expressed an interest in the role of the UN and its response to violent and nonviolent struggles. Opportunities may exist to bring different UN country offices together in this type of research to identify points of reference and to share and benefit from the latest thinking on the subject. Other participants pointed to the role of private economic actors in some instances in securing the peace through nonviolent strategies.

A number of more specific questions were posed by participants during this roundtable. First, what nonviolent strategies are most effective, and what strategies exacerbate conflict? Second, do nonviolent strategies work on armed, nonstate actors, and under what conditions? Third, what are the long-term impacts of nonviolence on a country as measured by human development indicators, for example? Fourth, under what conditions do violent actors adopt nonviolent strategies? Finally, how can third party actors become involved? More specifically, what types of actors should give what types of support, and at what stage in the struggle?

At this point, growing interest in and growing availability of data on nonviolence are helping to advance the field. Further advances will lead others to take the scholarship of nonviolent strategies in violent contexts seriously.

PANEL I: CIVILIAN STRATEGIES

The first panel of the workshop focused on civilian strategies. Participants began by describing the major trends in civilian nonviolent strategies. First, women have become more active and gender-based strategies have grown in use in the past ten to twenty years. Second, civilians have increasingly taken advantage of the new technologies in computers, the internet, and digital computers. These technologies allow leaders to better organize movements and for movements to be coordinated across physical and geographic space.

Many questions arise from these new trends that should be addressed. To begin, researchers must seek to better understand the position of women in these contexts, particularly the special cultural roles they occupy that can be exploited by nonviolent movements. It would also be interesting to explore whether movements headed by women are more likely to be nonviolent – and if so, why? Some suggested that because of their unique abilities to engage in collective action women may be more likely to lead nonviolent movements. Additionally, it was suggested that researchers should look at the differences in the roles played by women at the local versus national level. In terms of new technology, researchers should be much more specific in its effects and look at both the positives and negatives of increased access to media tools.

Participants also gave attention to future developments. Demographic trends require researchers to consider how elderly populations might change tactics given their tendency to not engage in campaigns of nonviolence. This is particularly important because aged people have moral authority and may play an important part in civil resistance. There is also interest in the cumulative impact social movements have on repressive regimes, such as in the case of Iran. Protesters there have gone after power centers indirectly rather than attacking the regime directly. Finally, the new media trends mentioned earlier may lead to increased impacts by diaspora communities.

Participants described the use of nonviolent strategies by civilians in Colombia and Syria and drew lessons from their experiences. Colombia is very rich in nonviolent strategies and they take various forms through the participation of women, indigenous communities, and “peace communities.” Peace communities, as described by participants, declare themselves neutral and refuse to engage in violence. Colombia is somewhat unique in the sense that there is a low level of contentiousness in response to collective action against violence. Perhaps this is because such collective action is the result of wide mobilization and organization from the ground up.

In Syria, a largely nonviolent movement has become violent because activists there lacked a sufficient foundation for nonviolence and found themselves in reaction mode. Lacking alternatives, activists engaged in mass protests and were met by great regime repression. Participants noted that Assad wanted a violent revolution from the beginning so that the regime could forcefully reassert itself. The regime has been very strategic in terms of who it has targeted to avoid blowback and heighten sectarian issues. As the Syrian conflict moved from nonviolent to violent, outside actors with various political goals have become increasingly important.

A number of lessons and additional questions came out of these discussions. In the Colombian case, nonviolence was most successful in areas where there had previously been social movements. Quick mobilization in these areas was due to organizational experience. Further research is needed to get a better sense of the structure of nonviolent movements there and to assess the importance of external support. One particularly important lesson from the Syrian case is that diversification of tactics is important for the success of nonviolent movements. Actors there relied too heavily on street demonstrations and made themselves vulnerable to suppression. Perhaps NGOs and IGOs could have promoted communication and the dissemination of valuable knowledge for activists in earlier stages of the conflict, an important question as regards future movements against violent governments or other actors.

In general, participants agreed that a better understanding of state responses and group interaction is important. States may act differently based on the size of the movements and the the groups that comprise them. The number of violent and nonviolent groups in a conflict and their relationships may matter in particular ways. On a related note, further research is needed to determine when nonviolence is more attractive than violence and if there are ways to ensure that violent strategies are unappealing. Finally, participants agreed that though context is important, very few contexts absolutely limit the actions that movements can take. Certain contexts do favor one action over another, but all states have pillars of support that can be pressured in different ways through different strategies.

PANEL II: CIVIL SOCIETY/ADVOCACY GROUP STRATEGIES

The second panel of the workshop discussed the future of human rights’ advocacy groups in advancing civil resistance strategies. Participants were generally divided among those who were “pessimistic” and those who

were “optimistic” about the role international humanitarian groups can play. Participants who held the pessimistic view primarily believed that human rights have been promoted by Western organizations, and Western influences are declining worldwide. There is also belief that advocacy organizations are too “detail” focused, historically tending to only address the symptoms of a problem, thus not creating a broad, sweeping, human’s right movements. There have also been accusations that Western-backed rights groups use their influence to shape the geopolitical landscape rather than just advocate for human right on behalf of groups who need them. Participants brought up that the U.S. has also come under great criticism for being unable to hold itself to many of the standards large organizations have attempted to enforce world wide, leading to a credibility problem for Western-backed rights groups.

Participants who held the counter “optimistic” view believed large Human Rights groups capable of bringing much needed attention and focus to a particular issue. Large (primarily Western backed) NGOs still lend credibility to causes, have the resources to make a real and substantial impact, and are able to verify or authenticate social media reports coming out of conflicts. Large NGOs also have the capacity to fund local groups and promote local interests.

Both the pessimists and optimists expressed concern over degree to which some large human rights groups have become more frequently associated with military intervention. Most participants agreed that it is of great concern that if avowed nonviolent groups associate themselves with righteous violence. Their credibility as defenders of human rights rests not just on their advocacy but also on their adherence to rights-friendly processes.

This panel also discussed the relationship between human rights advocacy and humanitarian action. Interaction between these two agendas and the nature of the current conflicts exacerbate what is seen as an increasingly poor definition of “neutral” or “humanitarian” space. It is likely that issues surrounding humanitarian NGOs will be further complicated in the future. Attempts to create a “neutral humanitarian space” large enough help all sides can create moral hazard, especially in religiously fueled conflict.

The panel also answered questions about market-driven dynamics’ role in increasing the promotion of human rights. If, as countries move into the middle class, citizens are more likely to demand human rights consummate with their socioeconomic status, then the economic rise of several countries may take some of the pressure off of the West to be the sole promoter of human rights. Many agreed that this is an area ripe for empirical research.

In concluding the panel, participants in the workshop agreed on a need for professionalism, transparency and communication in the Human Rights profession as a whole in order to ensure that rights are promoted throughout the post-conflict and reconstruction phase and that norms become diffused. There must be a concerted effort made to manage ideas about human rights with those of humanitarian space. Cases such as Syria highlight the difficulty in managing this relationship.

PANEL III: IGO Strategies

The third panel of the workshop focused on the role that Intergovernmental Organizations (IGO) can plan in aiding nonviolent actors. The panel began with a brief discussion on how, in recent years, IGOs have shifted their focus from peacekeeping to statebuilding. In general, there has also been an increased emphasis on regional organizations. This is primarily due to the regional nature of conflict in the two decades since the fall of the Soviet Union.

Participants in the panel began with a discussion of the advantages of UNDP’s involvement in stabilizing conflict zones. UNDP has particularly been active in the promotion of statebuilding. The size and scope of UNDP allows it to address the causes of violence at all levels of instability) before, during and after conflicts) and works to prevent the relapse of violence after conflicts. UNDP also has the ability put resources into “nationally owned” projects, thus connecting global resources to local agendas and focusing on long term development goals while completing short term projects.

Participants also discussed UNDP's international reach, highlighting how it gives the capacity to tie multiple actors together. Its "small to big" focus gives it legitimacy with both the state and international actors, leading to historical success in creating humanitarian space during conflict and stability after. The political expertise of UNDP actors allows for comprehensive evaluation of conflicts and their solutions.

Participants also discussed the "academic-practitioner" dilemma. While academic research is necessary for fully understanding why actors behave certain ways, and predicting future actions, they focus on the "100% solution," and academic studies are very time consuming. Practitioners are often focused on getting the "good enough" solution in a timely manner in order to ensure that work can get done. The intersection of the two, however, has shown that early and sustained action is necessary to promote successful nonviolent movements. Academic-practitioner research is essential, however, to ensure that IGOs are both "doing it right" and "doing the right thing."

Participants raised many questions about the norm-setting ability of large international organizations. Large IGOs have the ability to set standards, influence key leaders, and apply political pressure in return for aid. Several participants brought up how regional organizations (such as the OAS in South America) have proven particularly adept at promoting norms and standards while simultaneously administering humanitarian aid. These organizations were largely agreed upon as being more successful at coopting local leaders.

The role of IGOs as norm setters versus norm enforcers was also discussed. Focusing on regional organizations allows for more specific norms to be promoted, lessening the accusations of IGOs being puppets of Western governments. As long as IGOs are working towards norms that practically benefit the local population, working to be both a setter and an enforcer has its advantages.

While UNDP was presented in a favorable light, many participants engaged in discussion as to the overall effectiveness of the UN. There was criticism that the UN only entered into "winnable" interventions, due to fear from its past failures. Yet despite criticism, there was agreement that since the UN was free to engage in political capacity building and statebuilding since the end of the Cold War, armed conflict has declined greatly.

PANEL IV: TRANSNATIONAL NGO STRATEGIES

The fourth panel of the workshop focused on the actions of transnational NGOs in both aiding nonviolent actors and promoting peace in violent contexts. Participants began by focusing on setting a research agenda for the interaction between the practice of international nonviolent protective accompaniment (INVPA) and the diversity of tactics used by nonviolent actors. Accompaniment has been proven to promote human rights, crystalize solidarity among nonviolent actors and open spaces for dialogue among different groups.

Three potential research agendas were proposed for studying the effects and implications of INVPA. First, to what degree does INVPA embolden local actors to use nonviolent tactics? This question centers around whether the presence of INVPA changes the calculus of campaign strategists. Second, what is the impact of an INVPA's "conditioned provision" on the overall strategy of nonviolent groups? This focuses on whether or not INVPA can shape the dynamics of a movement by placing conditions on their inclusion. It also forces a definition of "nonviolent" to be agreed upon by the movement and the group providing the INVPA. Third, what is the link between INVPA and the "paradox of oppression" or the "dynamics of backfire"? Repression of groups by regimes often leads to tactics backfiring. This question seeks to explore whether or not INVPA can undercut this dynamic.

Participants raised concerns that all the research questions had problems with measurement and generalizability. The particulars of each nonviolent movement make research particularly difficult, as does the subjective nature of "success."

Participants then moved to discussing the importance of ecological preservation in nonviolent movements. Using the case study of Virunga National Park in the DRC, it was shown how Conflict Sensitive Conservation (CSC)

could bring together a multitude of stakeholders during a conflict. CSC focuses on finding common denominators (ie resources) that all players in a conflict agree are necessary for the preservation of peace and stability.

Related to both INVPA and CSC, the issue of violence against aid workers was discussed. 2012 saw an increase in violence against aid workers, especially members of the indigenous population. Kidnapping was the most prevalent tactic used; however, murder, rape and pillaging also saw a rise. Participants raised concerns that a comprehensive strategy aimed at protecting aid workers is still lacking, and therefore many groups tend to be naive to the risks involved with work in conflict zones. To protect aid workers, it was agreed upon that NGOs must focus on skill set development, rigorous vetting of local staff and negotiating for access to humanitarian space with local armed groups.

Questions were raised as to with which actors it was most important to engage to ensure the safety and success of nonviolent actors. Participants debated whether or not engagement with violent groups would ever be a positive, and decided that if it allows for access to otherwise denied areas it is beneficial.

Participants concluded by discussing the identification of stakeholders on the local versus international level, and whether it was possible to distinguish between the two when conducting research. Most INVPA groups are requested by local groups, however staffed internationally, creating a potential conflict in interests. The same is true of CSC measures, as those with the means to ensure ecological preservation are not the same as those who require access to resources. It was agreed upon that further data is needed in all cases to understand the impact of these strategies on local norms.

PANEL V: BUSINESS STRATEGIES

The fifth panel of the workshop explored how actions of business actors in conflict environments are also a central part of many conflicts. It was explained how critically, a productive business environment is crucial to development, and thus to peace. Thus understanding the strategies which businesses can use to reduce violence is centrally important. Workshop participants discussed the unique characteristics of businesses as actors in violent environments and the role of business in both causing and in working to prevent conflict.

Businesses hold many similarities with other actors, including a desire to avoid conflict if possible, a tendency to withdraw when conflict occurs, and a concern for their reputation. However, businesses were presented as distinct from other actors in violent conflicts because they ostensibly operate with an apolitical profit-seeking agenda, often bring extensive outside resources and capacity to conflict situations, and are often considered complicit in violence rather than directly responsible for violence. Perhaps most centrally, businesses have a distinct relationship with the state, since they must operate with the licensure of the state, rely on the state to protect property rights, etc.

Participants discussed this close connection to the state as a fundamental source of business' complicity in violence. A corrupt or oppressive state can use business to seek rents and gain resources to suppress dissent, a dynamic seen primarily in the global extractive industries. The entrance of extractive industries was also presented as a source of potential conflict in states with ill-defined property rights, in which corrupt governments seeking rents privilege giving land and resources to multinational corporations, a practice which sparks local backlash and can lead to violent conflict.

However, workshop participants also emphasized that violence is fundamentally against businesses' interests. Violence is a source of instability and uncertainty and thus against business' long-term interests. The unique characteristics of businesses allow them to utilize a number of innovative nonviolent strategies, including investment, due diligence systems, and certification systems.

Panel participants also discussed the importance of a deep understanding of the local context for business to engage in strategies of violence reduction. Corporations often prefer generalized prescriptions which can apply across multiple contexts (e.g. "engage with local stakeholders") but these general prescriptions must be balanced

with detailed knowledge of the local environment if they are to be effective in reducing violence.

Because of the traditional focus on large multinational corporations in the extractive sector, workshop participants called for additional research into the practices and effects of smaller companies, including local companies, in a wide range of sectors. One example brought up were cell phone providers in Kenya, which sent pro-peace text messages during the contentious 2013 elections in Kenya and suppressed hate speech. National companies' deep knowledge of local context and dense social network connections can also be invaluable assets in violence reduction strategies. However, because of the outsized impact of multinationals, conference participants also said that there should be continued focus on their practices.

Participants also discussed the possible applicability of the "Responsibility to Protect" framework to business. Since business is such an important actor in many conflict settings, limiting the scope of "R2P" to states was presented as radically incomplete. A "white-listing" process of certifying businesses which comply with R2P standards was presented as a possibility for incentivizing businesses to use context-specific strategies to prevent violence against civilians.

Many workshop participants were deeply skeptical about the application of the "Responsibility to Protect" to businesses. In particular, several emphasized the degree to which the "R2P" label has been tarnished around the world after its use as a justification by the United States for regime change in Libya. Thus, involving business in preventing mass atrocities might be desirable, but should be pursued under a different ideological framework.

CLOSING ROUNDTABLE

The substantive discussion of the workshop was concluded with a roundtable on the general state of study into nonviolent strategies and directions for future research. Two major challenges discussed were strengthening the theoretical underpinnings of the study of nonviolent action and developing more comprehensive data through which to meaningfully test hypotheses on nonviolent action.

The theoretical challenges spring, in part, from the difficulty of properly defining violence and nonviolence. Purely physical definitions of violence may be the most straightforward empirically but exclude important analytical categories such as structural violence and cultural violence. A physically nonviolent strategy may nonetheless strengthen deeper structural violence. However, attempting to fully solve this theoretical dilemma may simply lead to a proliferation of definitions of "violence" which eventually become so broad as to become meaningless. Thus in some circumstances researchers were encouraged to use a more empirical, physical definition of violence, while in others a more comprehensive definition of violence would be more appropriate.

In general workshop participants also emphasized the importance of first answering basic questions of the who, what, why, etc... of nonviolence so as to have a clear analytical framework with which to address more specific empirical questions. Nonviolent strategies as a general category can be applied across a number of different levels of analysis, from the individual to the international system, and so clearly understanding what level particular research operates at and thus what questions it can be expected to answer was emphasized.

Theories which have been used to explain violence may also be usefully cross-fertilized to the study of nonviolence. In particular, the extensive body of research on revolutionary collective action may have many helpful insights to inform nonviolence research.

Empirically, the study of nonviolent action, traditionally pursued through case studies (an approach which often suffers from selection bias) has recently been productively expanded through the use of broad, quantitative analysis to understand nonviolent action in the book *Why Civil Resistance Works*. However, significant data challenges remain in answering questions related to nonviolent action on all fronts.

Participants offered several suggestions for overcoming the challenge and cost of data collection on nonviolent action. A strong theoretical basis is a necessary first step so that the type of data which is collected directly informs

relevant questions. Working with the extensive existing data on violent conflict was also presented as a possible resource. Participants encouraged researchers to work alongside practitioners and NGOs, organizations which have significant on-the-ground resources which can be used for data collection and which can benefit from the expertise of skilled researchers.

Data collection also presents the separate challenge of dataset proliferation and divergent findings based on disparate coding rules across datasets. Participants called for greater standardization of datasets, as well as transparency on data collection and coding so as to make meta-analysis of the findings of various quantitative research projects possible.

Discussion thus concluded with thoughts on the ways forward for study of all the various violence-reduction strategies pursued by the many actors discussed at the conference. Participants were optimistic about the many possibilities for productive future research and the fruitful connections between academics and practitioners to be utilized in the future. ■