

Session Report: Authoritarian Regimes II – Social and Political Movements

Date: Monday 17 July, 14:00 – 16:00 CEST

Introduction

Organized by: KPSRL, in collaboration with GRIP and the Transnational Institute.

This webinar was an opportunity to explore the work of civic and social movements in hybrid and authoritarian regimes, and their influence on the social contracts of those countries. We explored the following questions:

1. Which movements are most likely to grow and evolve in hybrid and authoritarian regimes?
2. What results connected to changes in the social contracts can be expected from social and political movements in such repressive environments or in the presence of pro-authoritarian movements?
3. How do social and political movements and the people inside them evolve over time?
4. What are the implications for external support?

Which movements are most likely to grow and evolve in hybrid and authoritarian regimes?

Natalia Forrat from the University of Michigan and Freedom House presented the results of a recent study¹ that investigated the determinants of mass mobilization in repressive environments. The study looked at examples of mobilizations in repressive environments, some of which scaled up and some of which did not, and covered four cases in depth.

The main factors associated with scaling up of mobilizations are:

1. **New leadership and leadership from outside the established civil society.** New mobilizations take place in a context shaped by a history of political contention. In all analyzed cases, there was a moment in history when the system was more open than it currently. At that moment in time, one of several competing actors won and became the dominant actor. The loser side was either eliminated or continued to exist in this repressive environment to become the entrenched opposition. There are several reasons why this entrenched opposition tends to be less likely to lead a movement that scales up. It is difficult for the entrenched opposition to change their agenda, which has already been defeated in the past, and to adapt to new practices, such as the use of social media. Besides, the established opposition is the first target for repression. In contrast, new leaders from business, academia, or the grassroots are more flexible and innovative in agenda and tactics and less likely to be repressed right away. The study presents an example in the case of the Oromo Liberation Movement in Ethiopia. The goal of the older generation of the Oromo resistance was secession from Ethiopia, and the movement got heavily repressed. When a new generation of Oromos advanced a new agenda of decentralization, it opened the space to have a different kind of conversation in the public arena. Something similar also

¹ <https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2022/civic-mobilizations-authoritarian-contexts>

happened in Russia. Putin won the elections in the early 2000s because he was popular, and the liberal opposition had a lot of baggage related to the economic troubles of 1990s. It was only in the 2010s that new activists, technology savvy and with a new agenda, emerged and led to some of the widest protests that Russia had seen.

- 1) **The framing of the movement's messages should focus on the same societal values that sustain the authoritarian regimes but offer different solutions.** In the cases of mobilizations that scaled up, new leaders actively embraced the same values as the ones that the regime invoked but rethought their answer of how to implement these values. They preserved the cultural framing but presented better means. They contested the regime on its terrain. For example, in Ethiopia, the Oromo moved from separatist to devolutionist. They developed a New Oromo agenda that accepted that Ethiopia is a federal State and then he demanded that the Constitution be applied. As another example, in Zimbabwe, the opposition used the national flag as its symbol and rethought the meaning of patriotism.
- 2) **Other factors: repression dynamics, the internet, social media, and the role of the diaspora.** Repression works if the regime uses it before the movement grows past a certain threshold, but if the regime represses after the movement has grown, then it causes a backlash, and the movement is likely to grow further. Diaspora and international organizations help the movements when they use complementary identities and resources to support movements in the country.
- 3) **In countries where a wide social contract with the population exists, movements are likely to rise when there is a public violation of this social contract.** Such as the violation of the social contract that is about providing the basics for livelihoods. When those basics are violated then people get upset. For example, in Kazakhstan, it was a fire where a family died. In other countries, it was the denial of the Covid pandemic that led to the formation of the self-help network.

If we are considering the chances that mobilization will not only grow but also succeed, there are additional factors, including the movement's organizational effectiveness. The study however did not investigate the movements' success; only whether they scaled up.

What results can be expected of social and political movements? What is their nature? And how do they evolve over time?

Michel Luntumbue from GRIP presented insights from an eBook he recently wrote on the experiences of civic and social movements in West Africa.² The eBook looked at innovative practices by civil and social movements to increase youth political participation in urban areas.³

The latest wave of civic and political movements in West Africa emerged around the need to reinvent the political bond and the need for a better government. Initially, most of these movements emerged against unconstitutional bids for third mandates by incumbent Presidents. Often their initial demands were successful.

² <https://www.grip.org/projet-jeunesse-urbaine-urban-youth-kmf/>

³ Most West African countries that were the focus on the study have 50% of their population below 25 years old. 1/3 of the African population in 2050 will be young and urban. So, youth in urban areas are an important factor to consider in the political life of these countries. They tend to be excluded from current political practices by ageist norms and mindsets. Power is in the hands of older generations. In West African countries, 10% of MPs are below 25 years old. The average age of political actors is higher than the citizens.

After they had achieved their initial objective, they found that it did not lead to a situation where everything was suddenly fine. Poor living conditions and weak governance remained since they were systemic problems. They had to confront the question of whether and how to expand their scope and continue working past their initial struggle.

Civic and Social movements should be distinguished from normal CSOs. They are not classical organizations with headquarters, offices, and business plans. They are flexible and fluid. Indeed, when regimes repress a given individual, other members continue in a flexible fashion so that the Movement in its entirety sometimes can hardly be repressed by brute force.

All the movements included in the study were non-violent. And they often worked through social media, also to break silos across countries. At continental level, the network Afrity, for example, is formed to bring together the more structured movements that promote reciprocal support.

The challenges faced by social movements are also special.

1. **The demobilization of activists.** Part of the population had thought that the success of the initial fight meant that there was no reason to continue. But social movements became aware that their fight is not so much against one individual, such as the incumbent President, but against a system. They need strategies to keep people active overtime against the system. For example, in DRC, FILIMBI moved during the Covid pandemic to work on ensuring that funds allocated to the pandemic response had been effectively used. In this, FILIMBI worked with an established organization, an NGO, on something that was far from their original fight.
2. **Social movements cannot always work with foreign donors because this can be a source of criticism domestically.** Besides, social movements do not want to become NGOs and comply with all their reporting and financial requirements. They want to remain free to fight for their ideals. Partnerships are possible, however, such as in the case mentioned above between FILIMBI and NGO Odette. The NGO in this case was handling all the administrative tasks.
3. **The goal of the social movement itself, is to transform society without the Movement being part of the power structure that guides society.** There were cases where in DRC and Senegal activists trained the next generation of politicians and leaders at the municipal level.

Floribert Anzuluni, co-founder of Filimbi (Whistle) one of the major citizen movements in the DRC, presented his experience in DRC.

“I acted as coordinator and not manager. It is a symbolic role. Last December I passed the torch to someone else who we have trained in the last five years. We started becoming active when the DRC president decided to modify the constitution to run for a third mandate. During this period, we had this objective.

We contacted other movements and exchanged information on how to develop our model with expertise from Senegal and Burkina. In Senegal, the regime was not harmed, but in Burkina, the regime was really harmed so we could see different experiences. We interacted with other forces to achieve political changes. We made many sacrifices. I was exiled and continued the fight in exile and kept working on the movement remotely. We achieved the change we were looking for.

Our movement was born in a period of fragility and gave new impetus to the political arena. Political parties tried to bandwagon on us. We brought together all political and civic demands to materialize change.

After the period of change came a period of assessment. The previous President did not get a third mandate. We had elections and the main person from the opposition got elected. But if we look back at how governance evolved, well it has not changed much. The long-awaited foundations for change have not materialized. And the population is now disappointed.

As a movement, we were shaking to our core. Some members said that the objectives were reached. However, others said that we had only achieved the first step in a long journey. So, we decided to work on the next steps, such as the campaign: "DRC is not for sale." It is a platform that is incredibly active.

FILIMBI is now presenting itself as an awareness-raising civic movement and entering partnerships with NGOs. These partnerships allow us to continue our struggle. We have expanded the thematic scope of our campaigns, to include corruption and environmental protection, whilst maintaining a key character of our work: that we raise awareness among citizens. We support those who have a theory and funding.

Now we are also getting into popular consultations to draft a new social contract to raise attention to the commitment that leaders need to abide by. We will come to the elections with a set of demands. The social contract will allow us to have a clear basis for what we demand. Politicians are discussing everything but what people want. We want DRC people to understand this social contract."

Conservative and anti-democratic political movements

Walden Bello, a former member of the House of Representatives in the Philippines (2007 to 2015), presented a second case study focused on the Philippines that explored how social movements can drive social change towards authoritarianism in particular conditions.⁴

In the 2010s, left-wing parties lost the support of their traditional base in the working class in many countries of the Global North and South because of neoliberal policies. This is directly connected to the fact that liberal democracy, also supported by leftist parties, failed to deliver on the socio-economic front. In the new context of fragility, the traditional working class became vulnerable to anti-migrant and racist movements.

For example, in the Philippines, 1997 marked the end of Marcos' dictatorship. It was a moment when redistributive policies could have been put in place, such as land reforms and redistribution of wealth. Instead, the Philippines were pushed to implement policies of liberalization of the economy. There was formal democracy, but no economic rights. There has instead been the destruction of factory and agricultural jobs.

Duterte in 2016 ran on a campaign called "kill all the criminals" and had the support of the population. His campaign resonated because Duterte also promised economic reform that spoke to a very deep discontent within the Philippines.

⁴ <https://practicalactionpublishing.com/book/415/counterrevolution>

In May 2022, the son of dictator Marcos was elected because people have not seen any improvements in their conditions from the democratic forces. It was an electoral counterrevolution that brought people associated with the dictatorship back to power. It was the re-installation of discredited elites through democratic means and a revision of history.

Recommendations to practitioners

1. **Support professionals such as lawyers and journalists** who will help movements once they emerge. However, be careful because such support will make these people the target of the regimes.
2. **Connect activists across borders** so that they can learn how to build a nonviolent movement from other countries.
3. International organizations can use their authority to create **cross-cutting networks inside the country between diverse groups of people** who may collaborate in the future. **Support Movements to become wide and enter alliances**, representing women, LGNTQ+, and the labour movements.
4. **Offer the means to activists to be one step ahead in terms of technology**, especially providing tools that help activists avoid being monitored.
5. Have **rapid response funding available** in case the regime does not crack a movement down immediately.
6. Support **liberal democracy and socio-economic redistributive reforms as one package**. Formal democracy elements are not enough. Countries need the promotion of positive rights, economic and social. Democratic forces must really look after the social imagination. The importance is the substance of participation and equality.
7. **Avoid raising the expectations of domestic actors** that international actors will support them because this will lead them to take on more risk than they would otherwise do.