Report #1 - From Margins to Movements: The Evolution, Success Factors, and Challenges of Grassroots Advocacy in a Changing Global Order

Basel Abdulla, Maria Fernanda De Almeida, Nicole Harris & Jhanvi Mahajan

GLA2000H Justice Capstone - Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization

Dr. David Zarnett

April 2, 2025

Table of Contents

Executive Summary

<u>Key Trends</u>

- From 1945 to 2006, nonviolent movements had an increasing success rate, on average achieving their goals 62% of the time, compared to 30% for violent movements.

- Between 1945 and 2013, there was a significant increase of mass participation in nonviolent movements, both online and offline, which proved essential for generating strong political or social pressure.

- Since the 1980s, globalization and the expansion of international solidarity networks and communication channels have significantly enhanced the organizational capacity, outreach, and global visibility of nonviolent movements.

- Digital media has become a powerful tool for rapid mobilization, real-time strategy sharing, and global coalition-building. However, overreliance on online activism exposes movements to risks such as censorship, surveillance, and harassment.

- Combining digital mobilization with strong on-the-ground structures has emerged as a new strategy for staying resilient amid state crackdowns. The shift toward documenting experiences, learning from past outcomes, and adapting tactics across diverse contexts underscores a growing commitment to reflective and adaptive advocacy.

- In the past five years, there has been a noticeable decline in the number of well-organized civil rights movements, reflecting broader shifts in global civic engagement and state repression.

- Intelligence agencies and authoritarian regimes have leveraged artificial intelligence (AI) advances to enhance surveillance and repression. Meanwhile, grassroots movements are still exploring how best to integrate AI into their mobilization and strategy.

- A growing trend of foreign aid withdrawal, led by the United States, has reduced financial and logistical support for civil society, limiting the capacity of many movements, especially in the Global South.

<u>Success Factors</u>

- Grassroots movements are more likely to succeed under democratic or semi-democratic regimes, where limited repression allows for civic engagement and tactical dissent.

- Urban-based movements have strategic advantages over rural ones due to better access to resources, infrastructure, and the population density needed to achieve critical mass.

- Religious institutions can enhance grassroots legitimacy and participation through moral authority and trusted networks, though they risk being co-opted by state actors.

- Women-led movements tend to be more successful due to their association with nonviolence and their ability to expand mobilization through strong social networks.

- Capacity-building is a key driver of movement effectiveness. Training in nonviolent discipline, digital security, advocacy, and self-protection strengthens activist resilience against repression and supports sustained nonviolent action.

- Peer networking and mentorship from veteran activists enhance strategy, coordination, and movement resilience.

- Safe convening spaces, both locally and internationally, enable activists to strategize, build solidarity, and exchange knowledge.

- International advocacy and media amplification by external actors boost movement legitimacy, expose repression, and mobilize international sympathy and resources. It can also help deter repression and generate diplomatic costs for abusive states.

- However, risks of external involvement include movement co-optation, weakened grassroots autonomy, foreign interference narratives, and the possibility of escalating covert repression.

Introduction

This report comprehensively explores the evolution, success factors and challenges of grassroots advocacy movements, defined as collective actions initiated by ordinary citizens at the local level, focusing on nonviolent strategies. Nonviolent movements typically rely on peaceful methods such as protests, sit-ins, and boycotts, whereas violent movements use armed force or aggression to pursue their objectives. Building on existing research from recognized databases like the Non-Violent and Violent Campaigns and Outcomes (NAVCO) data set, Minorities at Risk, and USAID, our study adopts a primarily qualitative approach to understand movement trends and why certain grassroots efforts succeed or fail. Here, movement "effectiveness" refers to the degree to which a movement achieves its foundational goals (e.g., policy reform, recognition of rights, or structural changes) and how well it maintains momentum and public support over time. Research questions guiding our analysis include: What are the principal historical milestones in grassroots advocacy, and how have recent evolutions differed? How do global institutions such as the UN and transnational networks influence these campaigns? What political and cultural factors shape movement strategy and outcomes in diverse regions? And in what ways do new technologies, including digital platforms and emerging AI tools, offer both opportunities and risks for nonviolent activism?

After an overview of our methods, Part I of this report highlights key historical trends in grassroots organizing from the mid-20th century to 2011, including the heightened success rates of nonviolent campaigns and the pivotal role of digital tools in mobilization. These longer-term developments are followed by changes over the past five years, which have been marked by geopolitical shifts, technological advancements, and fluctuating external funding and support. Then, Part II highlights domestic and external factors that influence the success of movements. The report closes with a summary of findings on what fosters or undermines movement success, setting the stage for a deeper investigation into how UNPO clients navigate these issues in pursuit of state recognition and social inclusion.

Methods

As mentioned above, the initial stage of data collection relied on recognized quantitative databases such as the NAVCO dataset, the Minorities at Risk project, and USAID publications, which provided foundational information on historical trends in civil resistance, group marginalization, and patterns of external support. These sources helped identify broader global patterns of nonviolent and grassroots activism, informing the selection of more focused case studies.

To complement these datasets, a wide array of academic literature and grey literature was reviewed, including policy reports, NGO publications, news coverage, and advocacy documents. Sources were selected to ensure a balance between theoretical insights and current developments,

especially those reflecting recent shifts in movement strategies, digital activism, and responses to authoritarian repression or democratic backsliding.

Finally, a snowball sampling method was used to identify and compile relevant literature. This involved tracing citations and recommendations from key texts to discover additional materials, especially those related to lesser-known or underrepresented groups. This approach was particularly useful in capturing the lived experiences and evolving strategies of marginalized communities whose struggles are often omitted from mainstream academic discourse.

PART I - KEY TRENDS

This section offers a comprehensive overview of grassroots advocacy movements from the end of World War II through to 2011, with a particular focus on pivotal developments between the 1980s and the early 21st century. Drawing on tables and findings from the NAVCO 2.1 dataset, we highlight how nonviolent resistance grew in scale and impact during this period, especially when supported by transnational networks and digital technologies. Key turning points include the 1980s' rise in global solidarity campaigns and the rapid expansion of grassroots participation in the 1990s and 2000s. These trends reveal how shifts in global power structures and communications tools reshaped activism, prompting higher success rates for nonviolent movements that mobilized large numbers of people and secured international backing.

We then compare these historical patterns to the past five years, identifying both parallels and divergences in tactics and outcomes. Like their predecessors, contemporary grassroots movements emphasize collective organizing and strategic alliances. However, they also face new challenges ranging from heightened digital surveillance to the withdrawal of foreign aid.

The Evolution of Grassroots Advocacy Movements from 1945 to 2011

<u>Higher Success Rates</u>

From 1945 to 2006, nonviolent campaigns demonstrated significantly higher success rates than violent campaigns. Data from the NAVCO 2.1 dataset, a global database tracking the outcomes of major resistance movements, show that 62% of nonviolent movements achieved their objectives, compared to just 30% of violent campaigns (Chenoweth & Shay, 2022; see Figure 1). These findings underscore the relative effectiveness of nonviolent resistance in driving political and social change.

A prominent example is the US Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, which relied on mass mobilization and peaceful protest to challenge systemic racism. Key actions such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955–1956) and the March on Washington (1963) exemplified the

use of nonviolent resistance (Morris, 1986). Additional milestones, such as the Greensboro Sit-Ins (1960) and the Freedom Rides (1961), generated widespread public support and media attention, contributing to landmark legislation reforms like the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (Cobb, 2014). However, some grassroots actors adopted limited self-defence in response to violent repression by law enforcement and white supremacist groups (Cobb, 2014). While nonviolence remained the movement's core principle, these dynamics reveal the tactical complexity grassroots campaigns often face in hostile environments. The Civil Rights Movement thus illustrates both the transformative potential of nonviolent resistance and the adaptive strategies movements may employ to withstand repression and sustain momentum.

Increasing Role of International Support

From the 1980s onward, globalization increasingly shaped the trajectory of grassroots advocacy movements. According to the NAVCO 2.1 dataset, movements that secured international support consistently achieved higher success rates than those that operated in isolation. This pattern was particularly evident in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when transnational advocacy networks placed sustained pressure on authoritarian regimes. This will be further explored in Part II.

Changing Goals

This period also saw a shift in movement goals, partly influenced by heightened global attention. NAVCO 2.1 data indicate that campaigns advocating for policy reforms peaked in the early 1980s, the early 1990s, and again around 2011 (Chenoweth & Shay, 2019). Meanwhile, movements seeking greater regional autonomy gained momentum between 1985 and 1995. In contrast, campaigns demanding systemic institutional change, such as constitutional reforms or comprehensive political restructuring, peaked in 2007–2008 (Chenoweth & Shay, 2019). Later sections will delve deeper into the range of external assistance these movements received and the specific successes facilitated by such support.

Higher Participation Rates

Over the years, the increased capacity of nonviolent movements to mobilize mass participation has been a key determinant of their success. Between 1945 and 2013, nonviolent campaigns mobilized over 160 million people, more than doubling the roughly 74 million who engaged in violent struggles (Chenoweth & Shay, 2022; see Figures 1 and 2). These high participation rates appear across a variety of regional contexts. In Latin America, for instance, large-scale nonviolent civil mobilizations in Peru (2000) and Venezuela (1958) led to rapid political concessions and regime change. Chile's sustained protests from 1983 to 1989 against General Pinochet further illustrate the transformative potential of nonviolent collective action. Through widespread strikes, mass demonstrations, and civil disobedience, Chileans forced a plebiscite in

1988. Pinochet lost and was ultimately removed from power in 1990, paving the way for a democratic transition (Chenoweth & Shay, 2019).

As seen in Figures 1 and 2, participation in nonviolent movements surged globally during critical years such as 1983 and 1989. Millions across Eastern and Central Europe challenged authoritarian regimes during these periods. At the same time, hundreds of thousands of protestors in China, Panama, Zambia, and South Korea mounted powerful, primarily peaceful campaigns against entrenched rulers. More recently, the 2011 Arab uprisings mobilized over five million individuals in the Middle East and North Africa alone (Chenoweth & Shay, 2022). NAVCO's codification of campaign size reveals that many of these initiatives reached "large" or even "extremely large" thresholds, often surpassing one hundred thousand participants (Chenoweth & Shay, 2019).

These experiences illustrate how mass engagement enhances the legitimacy and leverage of grassroots movements, often surpassing the influence of armed insurgencies. By uniting broad swaths of society, these campaigns have prompted democratic openings and meaningful policy shifts that endure.

<u>The Role of Digital Tools</u>

Shifts in political and communication landscapes have also reshaped how grassroots advocacy unfolds. In particular, digital platforms and social media have radically heightened movements' capacity to spread information, coordinate protests, and amplify messages beyond national borders (Tufekci, 2017). The rise of online activism provides local communities with novel avenues for collective action, allowing them to engage in broad-based dialogues and influence public opinion rapidly (Earl & Kimport, 2011)

Nonviolent campaigns have been exceptionally well-positioned to capitalize on such tools (Chenoweth & Shay, 2022). During the 2010–2011 Arab uprisings, for example, activists turned to social media to disseminate video evidence of state crackdowns and seek external support, which contested official propaganda and garnered international solidarity (Howard & Hussain, 2011). These digital spheres also enable a "leaderful" organizational style, where activists and citizens jointly shape campaigns without centralized leadership structures (Juris, 2008). Along with live-stream capabilities, such arrangements support quick mobilizations and more agile responses to censorship (Tufekci, 2017).

Notably, the NAVCO 2.1 dataset confirms that many contemporary movements combine face-to-face demonstrations with online calls to action, underscoring how virtual outreach and physical presence can reinforce each other (Chenoweth & Shay, 2022). That said, governments have likewise upgraded their digital surveillance and repression strategies, including internet blackouts and targeted arrests. Even so, numerous cases reveal that such crackdowns do not

always quell activism; in fact, digitally savvy campaigns can adapt, rebound, and grow in the face of these challenges (Gerbaudo, 2012). Ultimately, integrating digital practices has become a decisive factor in how modern grassroots initiatives shape political discourse and demand transformative change.

Increasing Reflective Practices & Knowledge Production

Grassroots movements have increasingly adopted deliberate reflection and knowledge-sharing processes in tandem with technological changes. While early advocacy often responded to immediate crises without strategic planning or documentation, modern movements increasingly engage in "knowledge loops" emphasizing continuous learning, self-assessment, and the systematic exchange of best practices, particularly as campaigns expand across borders (Pleyers, 2010; Milan, 2013). These practices enhance strategic agility and strengthen alliances by embedding lessons from past successes and setbacks into ongoing work (Chenoweth & Shay, 2022). As a result, knowledge production has become a central pillar of effective mobilization.

A Decreasing Success Rate Post-2006

While NAVCO 2.1 data show that nonviolent movements had a 62% success rate between 1945 and 2006, this dropped to 38% between 2007 and 2013 (Chenoweth & Shay, 2022). This decline raises a key question for grassroots advocates and supporting organizations like the UNPO: Why have nonviolent campaigns become less successful in recent years? Researchers point to several contributing factors behind this trend.

First, as more movements emerge, they can appear less effective overall. Many of these newer campaigns lack the robust organization, unified leadership, and broad grassroots support that have historically driven high-impact nonviolent resistance (Chenoweth, 2021). For instance, some post-2006 efforts inspired by the "Color Revolution", which sought to challenge autocratic regimes, often attempted to copy protest and social media strategies without achieving the widespread participation seen in Georgia (2003) or Ukraine (2004), leading to lower success rates (Tufekci, 2017).

Second, states have developed more effective countermeasures against nonviolent mobilizations, including advanced surveillance, the criminalization of civic space, and rapid disinformation campaigns (Cammaerts, 2018; Howard & Hussain, 2011). This is exemplified by regimes in Egypt and Bahrain that shut down internet and telecommunications networks, detained key organizers, and portrayed activists as foreign operatives after the Arab Spring uprisings (Tufekci, 2017). In this environment, movements relying heavily on online communication face an uphill battle to maintain secure channels and keep momentum, leading to more frequent stagnation or defeat (Chenoweth, 2021).

Third, the rise of violent flanks in otherwise nonviolent settings often triggers harsh repression and erodes local and global solidarity (Chenoweth & Shay, 2022). For example, in some Arab Spring contexts, such as in Libya and Syria, early peaceful protests evolved into protracted armed struggles, diminishing the broad civic engagement that typically sustains nonviolent grassroots movements.

Finally, evolving campaign tactics have also shaped recent outcomes. Some campaigns invest heavily in digital mobilization at the expense of face-to-face organizing, underestimating the importance of strong local networks and enduring coalition building (Milan, 2013). This shift can inadvertently erode movement cohesion and diminish the consistent, day-to-day presence on the ground that anchors effective civil resistance (Castells, 2012). Together, the proliferation of smaller campaigns, intensified state repression, the emergence of violent flanks, and the challenges of overreliance on digital tools create a more complex, often less favourable landscape for nonviolent activism. Recognizing these trends is essential for strengthening the strategic foundations of grassroots movements.

Global Trends and Repression Over the Past 5 Years

<u>Shorter Term Mobilizations</u>

Over the past five years, grassroots movements have faced evolving challenges worldwide. Between 2017 and 2025, there have been 800 anti-government movements, with 18% lasting over 3 months (Carnegie Endowment, 2025). Given the challenges that most grassroots movements face during the initial stages, the three-month metric is used to demonstrate the organizational quality of the movement. A closer look at the numbers will reveal that between 2017 and 2020, there have been a total of 233 protests, with 17.7% lasting over 3 months (Carnegie Endowment, 2025). While the total number of protests increased between 2021 and 2024 to 585, only 12.14% lasted over three months (Carnegie Endowment, 2025). On one hand, these numbers suggest an increase in the number of grievances that may inspire protests worldwide. On the other hand, these numbers suggest that there has been a decrease in the number of well-organized movements.

<u>The Influence of AI</u>

The emergence of open source AI presents a promising opportunity for grassroots movements to innovate their operations. Calingaert (2024) argues that civil society can leverage AI to mobilize support and expand reach, particularly on social media. Building on this, Guevara (2024) outlines how AI can improve civil rights movements' efficiency by democratizing access to knowledge, training activists, and analyzing public feedback at scale, all while saving time and resources (Guevara, 2024). AI can also serve as a tool for countering repression, such as by monitoring and analyzing police responses following contentious events, assisting in the strategic

planning of mobilizations, and combating misinformation by identifying bots, trolls, and deepfakes (Chenoweth, 2025). As Chenoweth (2025) notes, AI can also help sharpen messaging and assist with narrative control in ways that improve public engagement. As these tools become more accessible, they offer grassroots actors new ways to scale their impact and adapt to rapidly changing political environments.

At the same time, the rise of technologies like AI also introduces significant geopolitical challenges. While grassroots movements have only begun to explore AI's potential, authoritarian governments and intelligence agencies are rapidly deploying it for surveillance and repression. China, for instance, has been accused of using facial recognition technology to target Uyghurs for detention systematically (Chin, 2018) . Similarly, the Israeli army has developed a platform similar to Chat-GPT to enhance surveillance, track and target individuals, and automate military operations (Davies & Abraham, 2025). As repressive regimes weaponize AI, the operating space for grassroots advocacy is becoming increasingly constrained and dangerous.

<u>Withdrawal of Foreign Aid</u>

Perhaps the most significant geopolitical challenge to grassroots movements and civil society today is Western governments' growing trend of foreign aid withdrawal. Outright International (2025) warns that the loss of US support alone could lead to increased risk of violence, arbitrary arrests, and silencing of marginalized voices worldwide. While the US is the most significant actor in cutting foreign aid, it is not alone. In February 2025, the British Prime Minister announced plans to cut foreign aid from 0.5% to 0.3 % of GDP by 2027 to prioritize defence spending (Lovett & Rivera, 2025). In Canada, the Conservative Party leader has similarly pledged cuts, framing aid as contrary to national interests (Longhurst, 2025). As traditional donor states pull back, authoritarian actors are likely to increasingly fill the void, leaving civil society more vulnerable than ever.

PART II - FACTORS OF SUCCESS

This section examines the internal and external success factors that shape the outcomes of grassroots advocacy movements. Success factors are defined as conditions that increase the likelihood of movements achieving their core objectives. These factors may be internal, such as domestic institutions or civil society organizations, or external, including international organizations and third-party non-state actors.

Drawing on recent research and case studies, we explore how these can enhance or complicate nonviolent campaigns' effectiveness. The analysis considers how regional political systems and cultural and religious dynamics influence both the strategic choices and long-term sustainability of grassroots mobilization. Special attention is given to the role of international solidarity

networks, INGOs, and multilateral institutions in offering resources, visibility, and strategic support. We also examine the specific conditions under which these factors contribute to movement success while acknowledging external involvement's potential risks and unintended consequences. Together, these insights offer a nuanced understanding of how grassroots movements operate within complex environments to advance transformative change.

Domestic Factors: The Role of Domestic Political and Cultural Factors

<u>Less Repressive Political Regimes</u>

Political regimes play a central role in shaping grassroots movements. Research suggests that movements in democratic or semi-democratic contexts tend to adopt nonviolent strategies, as they are more likely to receive state concessions (Edwards, 2020). Democratic regimes are more likely to prioritize civic engagement and to permit a certain level of dissent within their societies (Carey, 2006). While democracies are just as likely as other regime types to employ repressive tactics such as censorship or military intervention, they must be more selective in doing so. This is because prolonged use of these tactics is not strongly correlated with successfully suppressing dissent, as movements tend to adapt, innovate, and reemerge with new strategies (Carey, 2006). As Francisco (1995) argued, state repression in democratic regimes may temporarily discourage protests and civil unrest, but movements evolve and continue expressing dissent in new ways. In other words, the very tactics used to suppress dissent can also create conditions for its resurgence (Mason & Crane, 1989). As such, regimes, especially democratic ones, must exercise repression with care. This makes the success of social movements more likely compared to their authoritarian counterparts.

<u>Urban vs. Rural Divide</u>

The urban–rural divide can act as a powerful success factor for grassroots mobilization as urban environments offer more conducive conditions for sustained civic engagement. Urban movements often have greater access to infrastructure, resources, communication networks, and international allies, making large-scale mobilization more feasible than in rural areas (Edwards, 2020). Urban settings also provide fertile ground for network-based mobilization, where diverse actors such as tenants' associations, cultural initiatives, and ecological groups can coordinate through shared urban platforms (Domaradzka, 2018). Additionally, urban spaces have better access to physical, human, economic and political resources. This is vital to consider, as successful social movements require participation from at least 3.5% of the population (Chenoweth, 2011). Urban centers allow for broad access to human capital and as such, increase the likelihood of movements reaching that critical mass point of 3.5%.

In contrast, rural mobilization is constrained by limited infrastructure, geographic dispersion, and weaker access to formal institutions. While rural grassroots organizations can accurately identify points of contention within daily life and inadequacy of local infrastructure, they cannot easily

meet their goals without external support (Uphoff, 1993). Successful rural mobilization often depends on "assisted self-reliance," where external actors provide targeted support while allowing communities to lead to make the changes they wish to see. By contrast, urban movements are more likely to thrive independently due to embedded civil society infrastructures and institutional responsiveness (Uphoff, 1993). As such, the urban–rural divide becomes a success factor when movements in urban areas are able to capitalize on these spatial advantages.

Religious Institutions as a Dubious Force

Religious institutions (RIs) can be critical enablers of grassroots mobilization when they provide structural legitimacy, moral authority, and access to deeply rooted community networks. These institutions often experience high levels of trust from their congregation, broader communities, and even government actors, making them uniquely positioned to lead or support social action (Green, 2017). This positioning allows them to be successful particularly under decentralized or hybrid regimes, where the state is more likely to tolerate informal religious organizing as a mechanism for localized stability. As Reny (2012) posited, authoritarian regimes may even permit the operation of unregistered religious institutions if they are compliant and seen as contributing to local order. In such contexts, RIs can negotiate informal space for collective action, gaining autonomy while avoiding direct confrontation with the state.

Furthermore, the strategic use of religious framing tends to increase the likelihood of mobilization of religious groups. Faith-based messaging resonates more deeply with religious communities than secular messaging, particularly when paired with the physical and psychological safety provided by religious spaces (Green, 2017). In regimes that view religious institutions as stabilizing forces, grassroots movements embedded within these networks may receive more lenient treatment (Reny, 2012).

However, as observed in interviews with Sindhi activists, some regimes, particularly those that intertwine a singular religion with state identity, can prevent grassroots mobilization from succeeding. In such contexts, where religion is conflated with the authority of the state itself, criticism of the state can be interpreted as being anti-religion and hinder participation in the anti-state movements. For the Sindhi community, opposing the government's policies has been perceived as an attack on religion itself. This dynamic severely constrains mobilization, as dissent risks alienating deeply religious communities or provoking harsh state reprisals. In such cases, RIs may act as gatekeepers for state ideology rather than as allies of grassroots change. More information on the Sindhs' experience can be found in Report #2.

Women's Roles in Civil Movements

Gender dynamics intersect with political factors in shaping the strategies of grassroots movements. Research shows that women-led or women-majority movements tend to be more successful than those led solely by men (Batliwala, 2002). One reason for this is that women tend

to be more committed to nonviolence, which makes it harder for regimes to justify violent crackdowns against them (Cebul, 2022). Additionally, women often bring strong social networks into movements, encouraging broader participation by mobilizing their communities (Gupta & Leung, 2010). This creates a cycle of engagement and recruitment, which boosts overall participation and, in turn, the chances of success.

The success of women's grassroots leadership is not just symbolic or incidental. Studies show that women play essential roles in building long-term community resilience by combining practical survival strategies with long-range structural goals (Gupta & Leung, 2010;(Cebul, 2022). For instance, grassroots women's organizations have consistently developed localized, innovative responses to risks, often in contexts where formal institutions have failed or been slow to act. Their ability to form and sustain networks, especially in decentralized political environments, allows them to negotiate with government actors and secure resources, creating a strong feedback loop between civic engagement and institutional responsiveness (Gupta & Leung, 2010).

Importantly, the impact of women's mobilization is especially potent in decentralized or democratic regimes, where participatory governance frameworks are in place (Gupta & Leung, 2010).These environments are more likely to formally recognize and resource grassroots women's leadership, seeing them not as passive victims but as agents of change. Such regimes can foster political accountability by institutionalizing grassroots input into public planning and budget decisions. This contrasts sharply with more centralized or authoritarian systems, where grassroots women's organizations are often excluded from disaster risk reduction, development, or relief planning, despite having proven track records in these areas (Gupta & Leung, 2010).

However, even minor departures from nonviolent tactics can undermine these advantages of women's involvement in social movements. The moral high ground associated with women's involvement in nonviolent civil society groups can quickly erode if the movement is seen as engaging in or inciting violence (Cebul, 2022).

External Factors: The Role of Third-Party Non-State Actors

<u>Training & Safe Spaces</u>

One of the most impactful forms of support that external partners can offer social movements is training. Training in nonviolent discipline, digital skills (like video editing), physical safety (such as surveillance protection and safehouse establishment), public relations, and advocacy strengthens activists' abilities to resist repression while sustaining nonviolent action (Jackson et al., 2022; Dudouet, 2015). Through their quantitative research, Chenoweth and Stephan (2021) find that training is linked to higher movement participation, lower levels of violence within the movement, a greater likelihood of regime security force defections, and fewer civilian fatalities

at the hands of the regime. This is largely because trained activists are better equipped to maintain nonviolent discipline, making it harder for authorities to justify harsh repression. When repression does occur, it is more likely to backfire, potentially prompting defections from security forces who question the legitimacy of using violence against peaceful protesters. Training is also strongly correlated with the success of nonviolent campaigns, making it one of the most consistent contributors to movement effectiveness (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2021). Peer networking and learning with other activists, especially when veteran activists are involved, fosters resilience and improves strategic coordination (Dudouet, 2015; Jackson, 2019).

Providing access to safe convening spaces is equally crucial. Both international and domestic spaces enable activists to strategize, share knowledge, and build transnational solidarity with other activists (Jackson et al., 2022). International convenings played key roles in mobilizations in Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine, while in East Germany, local institutions like the Lutheran Church provided critical organizing spaces in repressive contexts (Jackson et al., 2022). This also reflects the discussion above regarding the potentially supporting role of religious institutions for nonviolent mobilization.

Media Visibility & Diplomatic Pressure

External actors can also strengthen movements by increasing their visibility through advocacy and media engagement. Publicizing repression and framing grievances as human rights violations mobilizes international sympathy and resources while strengthening activist morale (Dudouet, 2015; Jackson et al., 2022). In East Timor, global condemnation emboldened local resistance, signalling to the movement that it had allies and was not operating in isolation (Dudouet, 2015). Beyond shaping global narratives, INGOs can also help shift domestic public opinion by challenging state narratives and exposing rights violations, leading to further local mobilization (Davis et al., 2012).

Additionally, third-party actors can help local activists bypass domestic barriers to social change by leveraging international networks, which in turn exert external pressure on the regime. Called the "boomerang effect" (Keck & Sikkink, 1998), this dynamic is often reinforced by global media coverage, which compels states to moderate repression (Jackson et al., 2022). Naming and shaming campaigns are most effective when they complement domestic mobilization (Murdie & Davis, 2012), and can impact how other governments interact with repressive regimes, increasing the likelihood of diplomatic consequences such as sanctions for repressive behaviour (Murdie & Peksen, 2013). Even symbolic gestures, such as the presence of high-profile diplomats and prominent journalists at dissident trials, can signal to the offending government that it is under international scrutiny, deterring it from engaging in continued repression. (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2021). This effect is especially pronounced when representatives of dominant geopolitical powers direct such actions toward weaker states.

<u>Risks of External Engagement</u>

However, external involvement carries risks. The involvement of INGOs and international institutions may unintentionally weaken movements by fostering dependency, diluting grassroots agendas, or creating disconnects between leaders and their base (Morgan, 2007; Ana, 2024; Batliwala, 2002). For example, research shows how Indigenous activists at the UN have had to conform to institutional norms to maintain access to officials and how the NGO-ization of feminist movements has made them more vulnerable to co-optation and depoliticization (Morgan, 2007; Ana, 2024). There is also concern regarding how offending governments may respond to external involvement. In some cases, governments adapt by using covert repression tactics or portraying movements as foreign-controlled, undermining local legitimacy (Allendoerfer et al., 2020; Dudouet, 2015). To be most effective, NGOs should prioritize the empowerment of local actors, maintain movement autonomy, and balance international advocacy with strategies that minimize backlash to preserve grassroots credibility.

Conclusion

The evolution of grassroots advocacy movements since 1945 highlights their pivotal role in driving political, social, and economic change. Over time, these movements have increasingly embraced nonviolent resistance, expanded participation, and leveraged digital tools to mobilize support. Their objectives have also shifted in response to globalization, political transformations, and transnational networks. However, contemporary movements face growing challenges, including declining success rates, heightened state repression, and the complexities of external influence.

A key takeaway from this review is the deepening interdependence between grassroots movements and global institutions. While international support, digital platforms, and transnational networks have amplified movement visibility and provided critical resources, they have also introduced vulnerabilities, such as surveillance risks and co-optation by external actors. Increasing state repression and the rise of violent flanks within nonviolent campaigns further complicate the effectiveness of grassroots advocacy in today's geopolitical climate.
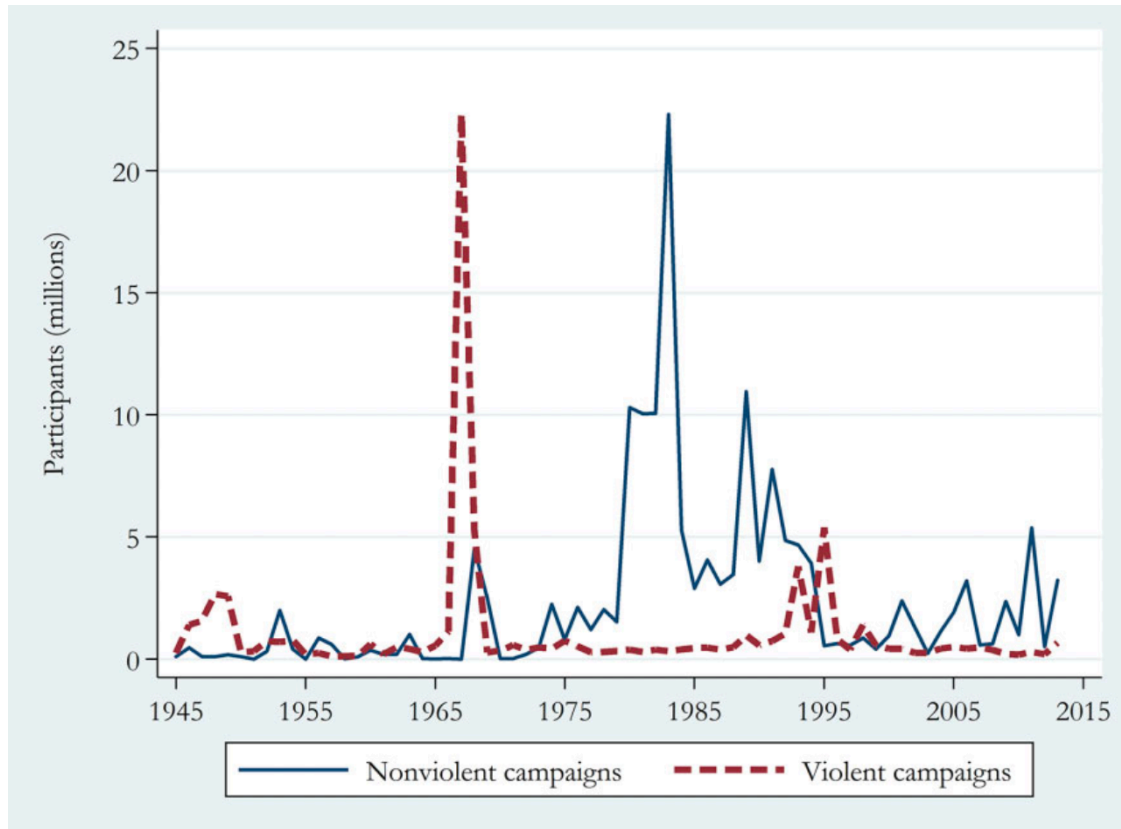
Looking ahead, the sustainability of grassroots movements will depend on their ability to adapt to shifting political and technological landscapes. Movements must balance digital activism with offline organizing, expand broad-based participation, and develop resilient strategies against repression. Their continued impact will also rely on their capacity to innovate, build coalitions, and sustain nonviolent discipline in the face of evolving political realities. As global institutions and non-state actors' roles continue to grow, movements must navigate these partnerships carefully to maintain autonomy and legitimacy.

These challenges are further explored in our next report, which examines UNPO clients and the tactics they have used to advocate for state recognition and inclusion.
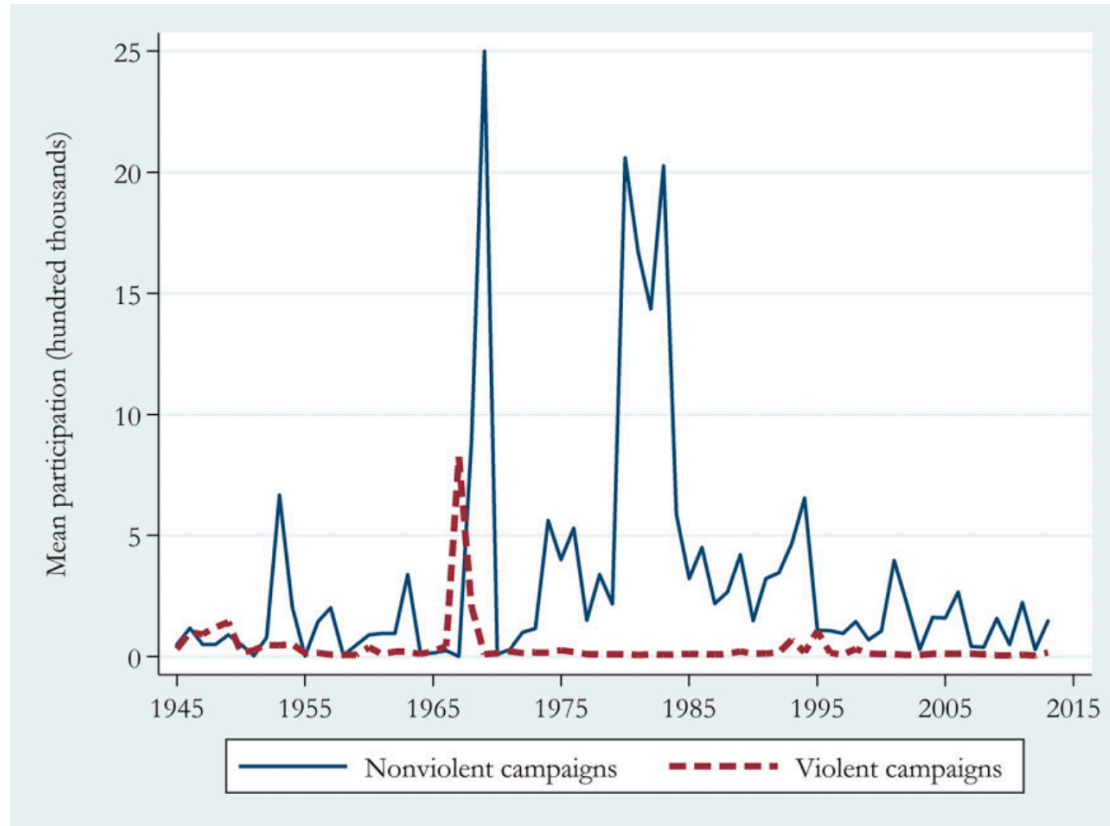
Appendix

Figure 1

Aggregate participation

Note. Adapted from "Updating nonviolent campaigns: Introducing NAVCO 2.1," by Chenoweth, E., & Shay, C. W, 2022, *Journal of Peace Research, 59*(6), p. 883
Copyright 2022 by Journal of Peace Research

Figure 2

Annual participation

Note. Adapted from "Updating nonviolent campaigns: Introducing NAVCO 2.1," by Chenoweth, E., & Shay, C. W, 2022, *Journal of Peace Research, 59*(6), p. 883
Copyright 2022 by Journal of Peace Research

References

Allendoerfer, M. G., Welch, R. M., & Murdie, A. (2020). The path of the boomerang: Human rights campaigns, third-party pressure, and human rights. *International Studies Quarterly, 64*(1), 258–258. https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqz097

Ana, A. (2024). The NGOization of social movements: Between opportunities and constraints. In *The NGOization of Social Movements in Neoliberal Times*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-45131-7_1

Batliwala, S. (2002). Grassroots movements as transnational actors: Implications for global civil society. *International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations, 13*(4), 393–409. http://www.jstor.org/stable/27927808

Calingaert, D., & Petrovic, V. (2024, October 14). AI for activism. *TechPolicy.Press.* https://www.techpolicy.press/ai-for-activism/

Cammaerts, B. (2018). *The circulation of anti-austerity protest.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Carey, S. C. (2006). The dynamic relationship between protest and repression. *Political Research Quarterly, 59*(1), 1–11. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4148070

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. (n.d.). Global protest tracker. https://carnegieendowment.org/features/global-protest-tracker?lang=en

Castells, M. (2012). *Networks of outrage and hope: Social movements in the internet age.* Polity Press.

Cebul, M. (2022, November 9). Women help nonviolent campaigns succeed, but nonviolent discipline remains crucial. *United States Institute of Peace.* https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/11/women-help-nonviolent-campaigns-succeed-nonviolent-discipline-remains-crucial

Chenoweth, E. (2025). How AI Can Support Democracy Movements: Summary Report of a Research and Practice Workshop. *The Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation.* https://ash.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/How-AI-Can-Support-Democracy-Movements-Final.pdf

Chenoweth, E. (2021). *Civil resistance: What Everyone Needs to Know.* Oxford University Press.

Chenoweth, E., & Shay, C. W. (2019). *NAVCO 2.1 Dataset (Version 2).* Harvard Dataverse. https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/MHOXDV

Chenoweth, E., & Shay, C. W. (2022). Updating nonviolent campaigns: Introducing NAVCO 2.1. *Journal of Peace Research, 59*(6), 876–889. https://doi.org/10.1177/00223433221092938

Chenoweth, E., & Stephan, M. J. (2021). The role of external support in nonviolent campaigns: Poisoned chalice or holy grail? *International Centre from Nonviolent Conflict.* https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/ICNC_Monograph_External _Support_Poisoned_Chalice_or_Holy_Grail.pdf

Cobb, C. E. (2014). *This nonviolent stuff'll get you killed: How guns made the civil rights movement possible.* Basic Books.

Davis, D. R., & Murdie, A. (2012). Shaming and blaming: Using events data to assess the impact of human rights INGOs. *International Studies Quarterly, 56*(1), 1–16. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41409819

Davis, D. R., Murdie, A., & Steinmetz, C. G. (2012). "Makers and shapers": Human rights INGOs and public opinion. *Human Rights Quarterly, 34*(1), 199–224. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41345476

Domaradzka, A. (2018). Urban social movements and the right to the city: An introduction to the special issue on urban mobilization. *Voluntas, 29*, 607–620. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-018-0030-y

Dudouet, V. (2015). Sources, functions, and dilemmas of external assistance to civil resistance movements. In *Civil resistance: Comparative perspectives on nonviolent struggle* (pp. 125–146). University of Minnesota Press. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctt16d6975.9

Earl, J., & Kimport, K. (2011). *Digitally enabled social change: Online and offline activism in the age of the Internet.* MIT Press.

Edwards, P. (2020). The politics of nonviolent mobilization: Campaigns, competition, and social movement resources. *Journal of Peace Research, 58*(5), 945–961. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343320958456

Francisco, R. A. (1995). The relationship between coercion and protest: An empirical evaluation in three coercive states. *The Journal of Conflict Resolution, 39*(2), 263–282. http://www.jstor.org/stable/174413

Gerbaudo, P. (2012). *Tweets and the streets: Social media and contemporary activism.* Pluto Press.

Green, D. (2017, September 28). Are grassroots faith organizations better at advocacy/making change happen? *From Poverty to Power.*

https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/are-grassroots-faith-organizations-better-at-advocacymaking-change-happen/

Gupta, S., & Leung, I. S. (2011). Turning good practice into institutional mechanisms: Investing in grassroots women's leadership to scale up local implementation of the Hyogo Framework for Action. Brooklyn, NY: Huairou Commission and Groots International.

Harcourt, S., Rivera, J., & Lovett, A. (2025, February 28). Cuts to UK aid will cost hundreds of thousands of lives. *ONE Data & Analysis.* https://data.one.org/analysis/uk-aid-cuts

Howard, P. N., & Hussain, M. M. (2011). The upheavals in Egypt and Tunisia: The role of digital media. *Journal of Democracy, 22*(3), 35–48.

Jackson, J., Pinckney, J., & Rivers, M. (2022). External support for nonviolent action. *United States Institute of Peace.* https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/External-Support-NVA-Evidence-Review-Paper.pdf

Juris, J. S. (2008). *Networking futures: The movements against corporate globalization.* Duke University Press.

Keck, M., & Sikkink, K. (1998). *Activists beyond borders: Advocacy networks in international politics.* Cornell University Press.

Longhurst, J. (2025, January 28). Aid groups respond to Poilievre's pledge to cut foreign aid funding. *Canadian Affairs.* https://www.canadianaffairs.news/2025/01/28/aid-groups-respond-to-poilievres-pledge-to-cut-foreign-aid-funding/

Milan, S. (2013). *Social movements and their technologies: Wiring social change.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Morgan, R. (2007). On political institutions and social movement dynamics: The case of the United Nations and the global Indigenous movement. *International Political Science Review / Revue Internationale de Science Politique, 28*(3), 273–292. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20445095

Morris, A. D. (1986). *The origins of the civil rights movement: Black communities organizing for change.* The Free Press.

Murdie, A., & Peksen, D. (2013). The impact of human rights INGO activities on economic sanctions. *The Review of International Organizations, 8*, 33–53. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11558-012-9146-9

Outright International. (2025). *Defunding freedom: Impacts of U.S. foreign aid cuts on LGBTIQ people worldwide.* https://outrightinternational.org/sites/default/files/2025-02/Defunding%20Freedom_Impacts_US_Foreign_Aid_Cuts_on_LGBTIQ_People_Worldwide_2.pdf

Pleyers, G. (2010). *Alter-globalization: Becoming actors in a global age.* Polity Press.

Davies, H., & Abraham, Y. (2025, March 6). Israel's military develops AI surveillance system using vast Palestinian data. *The Guardian.* https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/mar/06/israel-military-ai-surveillance

Reny, M. E. (2012). *Thinking beyond formal institutions: Why local governments in China tolerate underground Protestant churches* (Doctoral dissertation). University of Toronto (Canada).

Tufekci, Z. (2017). *Twitter and tear gas: The power and fragility of networked protest.* Yale University Press.

Uphoff, N. (1993). Grassroots organizations and NGOs in rural development: Opportunities with diminishing states and expanding markets. *World Development, 21*(4), 607–622. https://doi.org/10.1016/0305-750x(93)90113-n