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NONVIOLENT STRUGGLES FOR PEOPLES' RIGHTS: LESSONS FROM HISTORY AND TODAY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Today's geopolitical landscape presents unrepresented nations and peoples with an increasingly restrictive environment for pursuing self-determination through peaceful means. Intensifying geopolitical competition, the global diffusion of authoritarian practices, and the securitisation of internal dissent have converged to narrow civil space worldwide. Across political systems, states are expanding counter-terrorism, public order, and national security frameworks in ways that disproportionately affect unrepresented communities whose political claims challenge dominant narratives of sovereignty and territorial integrity. In this context, nonviolent resistance has become simultaneously more constrained and more strategically significant.

This policy paper examines nonviolence as both a foundational principle and a strategic response to structural power asymmetries in the international system. Drawing on UNPO's 2025 webinar Non-Violent Struggles for Peoples' Rights: Lessons from History and Today, this report situates nonviolent movements within a global order that privileges state coercion over right-based claims. UNPO occupies a distinct position within this landscape: as an organisation representing peoples excluded from formal diplomatic recognition, it functions as a rare institutional space where nonviolent self-determination claims can be articulated across regions and political contexts.

The paper argues that nonviolence persists not because it is safe or idealistic, but because it remains the most viable form of resistance available to communities lacking military power, diplomatic recognition, or territorial control. Case studies from Tibet, East Turkestan, Assyria, and West Papua illustrate how nonviolent resistance functions as a mode of political organisation, cultural survival, and legitimacy-building rather than mere protest. Through institution-building in exile, cultural preservation, legal advocacy, and digital documentation, these movements enact self-determination as a lived practice, even in the absence of sovereignty. At the same time, the report highlights how contemporary repression directly targets the mechanisms that make nonviolence effective. By criminalising speech, monitoring diaspora networks, and collapsing the distinction between peaceful dissent and security threats, states seek to neutralise nonviolence precisely because of its normative and strategic power.

The current geopolitical moment renders nonviolence both more vulnerable and more essential. In a global order where states possess overwhelming military and technological advantages, violent resistance often entrenches repression and legitimises further abuses. Nonviolence, by contrast, allows unrepresented peoples to operate in arenas where they retain comparative strength: moral authority, narrative power, international law, and transnational civil society. For policymakers, international organisations, and human rights actors, recognising and protecting nonviolent movements is therefore not only a normative obligation but a strategic necessity. Safeguarding civic space, ensuring rights-compliant counter-terrorism frameworks, and confronting digital and legal repression are essential steps to uphold the right of unrepresented peoples to pursue self-determination peacefully, with dignity and legitimacy.

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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

Across the world today, unrepresented nations and peoples are confronting an increasingly complex landscape in which the pursuit of fundamental rights is shaped not only by local repression but also by global geopolitical realignments. Rising authoritarianism, the securitisation of dissent, and the strategic use of technology by states to surveil and silence unrepresented communities have transformed the conditions under which minority, unrecognised and Indigenous peoples advocate for their rights. In this environment, nonviolence resistance, long recognised as a powerful tool for political change, carries renewed significance and heightened risk. It is within this challenging context that the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) convened its 2025 webinar, "Non-Violent Struggles for Peoples' Rights: Lessons from History and Today,"[1] held to commemorate the International Day of Non-Violence (2 October), as part of the wider "Peoples' Rights, Peoples' Future"[2] series which highlights the interdependence of self-determination and other fundamental rights. Each session explores different dimensions of denial and resistance, followed by a paper amplifying member perspectives. This webinar builds on UNPO's sustained engagement with nonviolent advocacy, from commemorations and training on the International Day of Non-Violence highlighting peaceful resistance strategies for members,[3] to detailed reports such as Tools of Repression: Spain and Global Trends in Silencing Self-Determination Movements[4] (documenting how states use legal mechanisms to suppress non-violent activism), Legal Warfare as a Tool of Repression[5] (analysing legal repression of peaceful dissent), and UNPO's input to the UN Special Rapporteur on Counter-Terrorism and Human Rights urging for rights-compliant counter-terrorism definitions.[6]

Self-determination is the right of peoples to determine their own destiny and to have a voice in the form of their economic, cultural and social development, including their political status. Yet the international order continues to privilege the coercive sovereignty of recognised states over the nonviolent claims of unrepresented peoples. This asymmetry has created a profound moral paradox: while states reserve the right to wage war in defence of their sovereignty, those denied statehood are often expected to remain within the narrow bounds of nonviolence, even when confronted with militarised repression. The challenge for unrepresented nations and peoples, therefore, is not only moral but structural; how to sustain nonviolent struggle within a world system that rewards power over principle?

UNPO's role in this space is both unique and essential. As an organisation representing nations and peoples excluded from formal diplomatic arenas and vital decision-making processes, UNPO provides a

[1] UNPO, "Non-Violent Struggles for Peoples' Rights: Lessons from History and Today," webinar, October 2, 2025, posted October 8, 2025, 46 min., 31 sec., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e4siukT4dRE

[2] "UNPO Launches its 2025 Webinar Series with Webinar on Linguistic Rights," UNPO, February 24, 2025, accessed September 26, 2025, https://unpo.org/unpo-launches-its-2025-webinar-series-with-webinar-on-linguistic-rights/

[3] "UNPO Training Held the International Day of Non-Violence," UNPO, October 2, 2024, accessed January 6, 2026, https://unpo.org/commemoration-of-the-international-day-of-non-violence/

[4] UNPO, *TOOLS OF REPRESSION: Spain and Global Trends in Silencing Self-Determination Movements* (The Hague: UNPO Academy, September 2022).

[5] UNPO, *LEGAL WARFARE AS A TOOL OF REPRESSION: Suppressing the Right to Self-Determination* (The Hague: UNPO Academy, December 2025).

[6] UNPO, *Input to the UN Special Rapporteur on Counter-Terrorism and Human Rights: The Misuse of Counter-Terrorism Measures to Justify Human Rights Violations Against Unrepresented Communities*, December 2025, https://unpo.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/UNPO-Call-for-Inputs-on-Definition-of-Terrorism.docx.pdf

rare platform where peoples can articulate their aspirations, share strategies, and collectively reflect on the evolving meaning of self-determination. Crucially, UNPO approaches self-determination not solely as a question of territorial sovereignty or statehood, but as a lived practice: the preservation of identity, the ability to participate in shaping one's political future, and capacity to resist erasure through collective organisation.[7] This multidimensional understanding becomes especially vital for communities operating under occupation, forced assimilation, or transnational repression, where the very act of speaking publicly, let alone organising politically, can trigger severe reprisals.

The 2025 webinar underscored the strategic centrality of nonviolence within these constrained environments. Representatives from East Turkestan, Assyria, West Papua, and Tibet offered insights into how nonviolent action adapts to contemporary forms of repression and why, despite extraordinary hardship, it remains their movement's core principle. Their testimonies illustrate that nonviolence is not an abstract ideal, nor a passive acceptance of injustice; it is a calculated and often perilous strategy grounded in moral clarity and the need to maintain international legitimacy. Whether through institution-building, cultural preservation, digital documentation of abuses, or diplomatic engagement, these communities deploy nonviolence as a means of asserting agency where political space has been systematically denied. At the same time, the webinar made clear that the decision to remain nonviolent is neither safe nor simple. For many unrepresented peoples, state authorities and occupying powers respond to peaceful resistance with severe retaliation, from imprisonment and surveillance to collective punishment of families and entire communities. Under such conditions, maintaining a commitment to nonviolence becomes itself an act of profound resistance. Yet it is precisely this disciplined adherence that strengthens their credibility, sustains global solidarity, and challenges prevailing narratives that often equate non-state activism with instability or extremism.

This report draws on the analysis and experiences shared during the webinar to examine how nonviolent resistance functions as both a principle and a strategic framework for unrepresented peoples navigating a hostile geopolitical environment.

NONVIOLENCE AS A FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLE

Nonviolence is not merely one of many values upheld by the UNPO; it is a founding principle and strategic core of the organisation's identity and mission. From UNPO's inception in 1991, member nations and peoples consciously rejected the use of violence and terrorism as instruments of political change, affirming instead that peaceful resistance and civil engagement are essential to advancing collective rights and combating oppression.[8] This commitment was enshrined in the UNPO Covenant alongside other principles such as self-determination, human rights, democratic pluralism, and environmental protection.[9]

The Covenant explicitly affirms that the "principles, methodology, and practice of Gandhian nonviolence and nonviolent resistance are the most effective means of pursuing and enforcing both collective and

[7] UNPO, *Strategy-2024-2027* (UNPO, 2024), https://unpo.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/UNPO-Strategy-2024-2027-Final-Online.pdf
[8] UNPO, *Strategy-2024-2027*, 7.
[9] UNPO, *UNPO Covenant*, 2023, https://unpo.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/UNPO-Covenant.pdf

individual rights,"[10] and that all participating nations and peoples reaffirm their "unreserved commitment to such principles," while rejecting "terrorism, extremism, and violence in all its forms."[11] In this sense, nonviolence is not a passive ideal but a deliberate ideological stance and a framework for political action rooted in moral conviction and strategic calculation.

Self-determination is deeply intertwined with the practice of non violence. However, although non-violent resistance constitutes a predominant pathway for many communities, it is neither universally adopted nor internally uncontested. Some movements pursue alternative strategies, and in certain cases factions within the same community mobilise different repertoires of action in response to shifting political conditions. Through non-violent resistance specifically, communities engage in a process of nation-building, one that is both overt and covert and relies on the strategic use of legal and political spaces. This form of resistance is not only about dismantling oppressive structures, but also about constructing alternative frameworks of governance and community. Through non-violent movements, nations and peoples are able to create new cultural, social, economic, and political norms that challenge the status quo, gradually reimagining the very foundations of their society. This process of reimagining collective identities and the means and ways of governance empowers peoples to realise their right to self-determination, grounded in a common understanding of their cultural and social roots. Non-violence thus becomes both method and message, and advances a transformative project of self-rule grounded in dignity, inclusion, and democratic legitimacy. In this way, the struggle for self-determination through non-violence is not simply a rejection of violence but a radical affirmation of a people's right to shape their own future, on their own terms.

A UNIQUE GEOPOLITICAL MOMENT: WHY NONVIOLENCE MATTERS NOW

The current geopolitical moment is marked by an intensification of pressures on unrepresented nations and peoples. Around the world, states are increasingly using militarisation, digital surveillance, securitised borders, and expansive counter-terrorism frameworks to suppress dissent and silence unrepresented peoples. These dynamics are not isolated trends; they reflect a broader shift in global politics in which many governments feel emboldened to consolidate control, curtail civil liberties, and frame internal dissent as an existential security threat. Compounding these developments is the growing instrumentalisation of self-determination rhetoric by states, which selectively invoke the principle to justify geopolitical ambitions or territorial intervention. Such selective or opportunistic uses of self-determination undermine the principle's normative integrity and further disadvantage communities whose claims are already marginalised or dismissed. For communities already living under occupation, statelessness, or structural marginalisation, this environment has dramatically narrowed the space for activism and accelerated the risks associated with even modest forms of peaceful resistance. In such a climate, the pressures on unrepresented peoples are at once acute and cumulative. Cultural repression, forced assimilation, demographic engineering, and economic exclusion are often accompanied by punitive state measures. These overlapping forms of coercion create a sense of urgency and desperation among communities struggling to preserve their identity and survive as distinct peoples. It is within this tightening landscape that some may feel compelled to consider violent resistance as a means of asserting agency or responding to sustained aggression.

[10] *UNPO Covenant,* Preambule.
[11] *UNPO Covenant,* Preambule.

FROM RHETORIC TO REPRESSION: HOW STATE FRAME AND OUTLAW NONVIOLENT REPRESSION

In many contemporary contexts, the first line of assault against nonviolent movements is discursive: states portray peaceful dissent not as legitimate political expression, but as a threat to sovereignty, stability, or even the national moral order. This rhetorical strategy serves two interlocking functions: first, it delegitimises the movement in the eyes of the public and international observers; second, it lays groundwork for legal and coercive repression.[12] Through discussions in the webinar, representatives from UNPO member communities illustrated how this framing creates a pretext for violent repression that makes nonviolent activism especially precarious.

Governments frequently frame activism from unrepresented groups as "separatism," "terrorism," "affronts to territorial integrity," or "foreign interference." Such frames serve to mobilise nationalistic sentiment and to justify extraordinary legal measures. They recast demands for rights as existential threats to the state, allowing governments to portray repression as self-defence. For example, environmental protest or cultural expression tied to unrepresented identities is often branded as a vehicle for separatist politics.[13] This is particularly dangerous when state laws are vaguely worded, allowing repression to masquerade as law enforcement under the banners of "public order," "national unity," or "security." Even in democratic contexts, rhetorical framing can lead to repression. After the 2017 independence referendum in Catalonia, Spain charged organisers with sedition and rebellion, despite the movement's explicitly nonviolent nature.[14] Authorities invoked the constitutional principle of the state's "indissoluble unity" to criminalise the Catalan independence movement, targeting elected representatives, journalists, and activists.[15] Prosecutions and investigations under counter-terrorism legislation extended to artists such as rappers Pablo Hasél and Valtonyc, as well as members of civil society movements including Tsunami Democràtic and the Committees for the Defence of the Republic (CDR), resulting in imprisonment, exile, prolonged pre-trial detention, and political exclusion.[16]

Once the rhetorical groundwork is laid, unrepresented peoples often see laws enacted or enforced in ways that outlaw peaceful forms of dissent. "Foreign agent" or anti-terrorism laws, defamation statutes, laws criminalising "misinformation," and broad public order laws become tools to arrest, harass, or silence activists, cultural workers, journalists, even land defenders.[17] Because unrepresented peoples often lack effective political leverage and sometimes lack legal recognition, the enforcement of such laws is often extreme, with fewer opportunities for accountability.[18] Peaceful protests by West Papuan students and activists are routinely labeled as "separatist" or "pro-terrorist" by the Indonesian government. Even symbolic acts, such as raising the Morning Star flag, are punished with long prison

[12] Lester R. Kurtz and Lee A. Smithey, eds., *The Paradox of Repression and Nonviolent Movements* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2018), 1–12.
[13] UNPO, *Peoples And The Planet: Self-Governance, Land Rights And Climate Justice* (The Hague: UNPO Academy, September 30, 2025).
[14] "Spain Supreme Court to Rule Whether Catalan Separatists Are Guilty of Rebellion," *Euronews*, October 14, 2019, https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2019/10/14/spanish-supreme-court-to-rule-whether-catalan-separatists-are-guilty-of-rebellion
[15] UNPO, *Input to the UN Special Rapporteur on Counter-Terrorism and Human Rights.*
[16] UNPO, *Input to the UN Special Rapporteur on Counter-Terrorism and Human Rights.*
[17] Amnesty International, *Human Rights Defenders Under Threat – A Shrinking Space for Civil Society* (London: Amnesty International, April 26, 2017).
[18] UNPO, "Compromised Spaces," *UNPO*, accessed October 14, 2025, https://unpo.org/compromised-spaces/

sentences for treason, demonstrating how the state's discursive framing translates directly into legal persecution.[19]

This progression, from rhetorical vilification to legal criminalisation, constitutes a continuum of repression that erodes the moral foundations of nonviolent struggle. It does more than punish individual activists: it fractures collective identity and movement coherence. When peaceful protest, language rights, or land claims are framed as threats to national security, public sympathy diminishes, and international partners may hesitate to engage for fear of diplomatic fallout. The resulting isolation feeds cycles of despair and delegitimisation, where nonviolence itself becomes a liability rather than a shield. Over time, the costs of peaceful resistance can lead to self-censorship, fragmentation, or even the abandonment of nonviolence in favour of riskier forms of confrontation.

MILITARISATION AND THE EROSION OF THE RIGHT TO PEACE

Militarisation, both of state security structures and political narratives, places unrepresented peoples under severe pressure. For communities without formal protection or recognition, militarised repression often strikes hardest and undermines their right to peace, interacting with nonviolent activism in complex ways. In regions predominantly occupied by unrepresented peoples, states often deploy special forces, paramilitary units, or militarised police to monitor, patrol, or forcibly suppress gatherings. Curfews, checkpoints, military roadblocks, or martial law may be used to limit movement, assembly, or aid delivery. Disputed borderlands or territories with historical secessionist tensions are especially prone to these tactics. Militarised responses to land and environmental protests for instance are common where identity overlaps with geography (ethnic home lands, Indigenous territories), and the states frame any resistance as a challenge to sovereignty.[20]

Militarisation does not just involve physical force; it also transforms the meaning of peace, civic engagement, or what it means to protest. The presence of armed forces in everyday life shifts the baseline: peaceful assembly becomes high risk. States may justify lethal or near-lethal responses under emergency laws; public spaces are regulated or closed; even trails, lands, or customary routes may become militarised zones.[21] This normalisation of coercion erodes not only physical safety but also psychological freedom—embedding fear, surveillance, and self-censorship into the social fabric. In Balochistan, decades of conflict and heavy militarisation have made nonviolent civic activism exceedingly dangerous. Peaceful student protests, political meetings, and rights campaigns are often broken up by force under the Pakistani state. Balochi activists often face enforced disappearances, intimidation, and surveillance.[22] Similar dynamics can be observed in regions such as West Papua and northern Myanmar, where Indigenous communities live under permanent military presence, and where nonviolent activism is

[19] "Indonesia's Presidential Amnesty for Six Papua Flag Raisers Signals Softer Government Approach toward Separatism," *West Papua Voice*, July 14, 2022, https://westpapuavoice.ac/politics/indonesias-presidential-amnesty-for-six-papua-flag-raisers-signals-softer-government-approach-toward-separatism

[20] International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA), "Land Rights Protests Met with Militarised Response and Brutality," February 15, 2017, https://iwgia.org/en/india/2483-land-rights-protests-met-with-militarised-response

[21] Andrew Crosby and Jeffrey Monaghan, *Policing Indigenous Movements: Dissent and the Security State* (Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2018).

[22] Human Rights Council of Balochistan, *Balochistan: 151 Enforced Disappearances, 80 Killings, and a Widespread Crackdown on Peaceful Protests in March 2025* (Quetta: Human Rights Council of Balochistan, April 2025).

equated with sedition. The militarised atmosphere blurs the line between civilian and combatant, making nonviolent engagement almost indistinguishable, in the state's view, from insurgency.[23]

Activists from unrepresented nations are often forced into a difficult calculus. On one hand, they must resist very real violations or rights—land grabbing, cultural suppression, environmental harm, political exclusion. On the other hand, violent repression is more likely to follow any action perceived as defiant. Maintaining nonviolent discipline under such conditions is extraordinarily challenging: provocations may be used by security forces or third parties; misinformation and infiltration risk turning peaceful protests into confrontations; and militants sometimes exploit repression to argue for violent response. The militarisation of civic life thus produces a double bind, where unrepresented peoples are denied both the right to resist and the right to peace.

Despite this, nonviolent strategies remain critical: they preserve legitimacy, widen participation, reduce the risk of internal fractures, and appeal more strongly to international opinion and legal norms. For unrepresented peoples, nonviolent resistance is often their best hope to shift narratives, law, and policy without triggering escalation that brings worse harm. By confronting militarisation through steadfast nonviolence, they expose the incompatibility between militarised governance and the international system's professed commitment to peace.

DIGITAL SURVEILLANCE AND TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION

In our increasingly connected world, digital technologies and transnational mechanisms of control are amplifying threats to the safety, cohesion, and voice of unrepresented peoples. Such tactics can target not only those acting within their territory but also diasporas, exiles, and advocacy networks abroad; extending repression beyond borders and across the digital space.[24] While these forms of surveillance and transnational repression affect human rights defenders broadly, they are particularly acute for self-determination activists and for communities whose very identity is constructed as a security threat by states. Groups such as Tibetans and Uyghurs, for example, are frequently targeted not only for their activism but simply for who they are, which means that even individuals with no direct political engagement may face monitoring, intimidation, or coercion. This identity-based targeting deepens vulnerability and further constrains collective mobilisation.

States are investing in biometric data collection, facial recognition systems, geolocation, mobile phone tracking, internet traffic monitoring, and other forms of digital surveillance. For unrepresented peoples, these tools serve to monitor their everyday lives as well as activist activity. For example, Chinese surveillance of Uyghurs, Tibetans, and Mongols includes widespread biometric collection, AI-driven monitoring of public behaviour, control of movement via checkpoints, and suppression of online dissent.[25] The consequences are chilling: activism becomes riskier; trust is eroded among community networks;

[23] Human Rights Watch, *We Can Torture, Kill, or Keep You for Years: Enforced Disappearances by Pakistan Security Forces in Balochistan* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2011).
[24] UNPO, *Compromised Space Europe: Voices of Victims of Espionage and Reprisals in Europe* (The Hague: Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization, 2022), https://unpo.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Compromised-Space-Europe-Voices-of-Victims-of-Espionage-and-Reprisals-in-Europe.pdf
[25] U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, *China Uses High-Tech to Monitor Uyghurs in Xinjiang* (Washington, D.C.: USCIRF, September 16, 2019).

movement organising needs to encrypt, decentralise, and hide much more than in less-surveilled contexts.

Many unrepresented peoples live partly or wholly in exile, or depend on diaspora networks for advocacy, fundraising, cultural preservation, and global awareness. Yet even these transnational lifelines are increasingly targeted. States are increasingly extending repression mechanisms across borders: cyber-attacks, surveillance of diaspora communication, harassment of family members remaining at home, disinformation campaigns, extradition demands, or leveraging international policing bodies.[26] In September 2025, China's draft "Ethnic Unity Law" further expanded ideological control by mandating conformity with state-defined narratives of national identity, extending surveillance and censorship to online activity, religious expression, and even academic discourse abroad.[27] This "transnational authoritarianism" extends coercion into what were once safe havens, shrinking the political and psychological space for unrepresented communities to organise freely.

Digital tools also offer crucial opportunities: for communication, documenting violations, rallying support, publicising stories to an international audience, coordinating movements. However, for unrepresented peoples, these opportunities come with high risk. Because state surveillance is intense and because legal frameworks often criminalise online expression (e.g. "hate speech," "anti-state content," "foreign funding of NGOs" or "cyberterrorism"), digital activism can lead swiftly to arrests, or disruption of network infrastructure.[28] Furthermore, censorship, state pressure on technology companies, and content removal are frequent. States may impose backdoors or demand user data, turning the very architecture of connectivity into a tool of control. Following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, Crimean Tatar activists who spoke out against the occupation faced online monitoring, raids, and criminal charges under Russia's anti-extremism laws. Digital repression extended into the diaspora, where activists abroad were surveilled, harassed, or targeted through coordinated disinformation campaigns. The Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (FSB) has even used social media posts (such as sharing of religious content or statements on self-determination) as evidence in criminal trials, conflating peaceful speech with extremism.[29]

Despite these severe challenges, nonviolent resistance remains essential for unrepresented peoples. Although some movements may consider or adopt other strategies, particularly under extreme repression, the long-standing argument for nonviolence as the most sustainable and legitimate pathway to self-determination continues to hold. Peaceful digital activism (secure messaging, anonymous documentation, diaspora networking) can build more leverage, shift discourses internationally, and increase pressure for accountability. In many cases, strong documentation of repression (video, social media, satellite imagery) has been key to mobilising global support or triggering international

[26] Amnesty International, *China: Overseas students face harassment and surveillance in campaign of transnational repression*, May 2024, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/05/china-overseas-students-face-harassment-and-surveillance-in-campaign-of-transnational-repression
[27] "China: Draft 'Ethnic Unity' Law Tightens Ideological Control," Human Rights Watch.
[28] Freedom House, *Freedom on the Net 2019*, (Washington, D.C.: Freedom House, 2019).
[29] Human Rights Watch, "Russia Jails Crimean Tatar Blogger on Bogus 'Terrorism' Charges," October 2, 2019, https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/10/02/russia-jails-crimean-tatar-blogger-bogus-terrorism-charges

investigations.[30] Nonviolent struggle in digital spaces can also reduce risk of violent escalation, which for unrepresented peoples often leads to disproportionate suffering. This asymmetry reinforces why nonviolence remains the most viable long-term strategy, both practically and normatively.

The central challenge is adaptation. Movements must combine digital resilience with civic discipline—using decentralised platforms, encryption, redundancy, and trust networks—while coupling domestic activism with international legal advocacy.[31] At the same time, external actors must recognise that unrepresented communities who choose nonviolence do so under conditions where alternative strategies may be heavily constrained or carry existential risks. Policymakers and international organisations should recognise digital repression as a human rights violation, subject to monitoring and sanction. Protecting digital freedom for unrepresented peoples is inseparable from protecting their right to peace and self-determination. Over time, building secure, networked, and transparent movements can make digital repression less effective and transform technology from a weapon of control into a medium of liberation.

This geopolitical moment reveals why nonviolence matters more than ever. Not simply as a moral commitment but as a strategic response to a transformed geopolitical environment. Over the past decade, the architecture of global power has shifted in ways that disadvantage communities without statehood, diplomatic leverage, or military capacity. Authoritarian states have grown more assertive, geopolitical blocs more polarised, and multilateral institutions more constrained, fuelling state impunity. Against such asymmetries, violent resistance is neither viable nor effective; states now possess overwhelming coercive advantages that can crush armed movements rapidly and justify doing so under the banners of counter-extremism and national security. Nonviolence, by contrast, has adapted more effectively to the conditions of the 21st century. First it operates in the realm where unrepresented peoples have the greatest comparative strength: international legitimacy, moral authority, and narrative power. In a world saturated with information, nonviolent movements can expose repression, mobilise global solidarity, and challenge state narratives in ways that violent tactics never could. Secondly, nonviolent resistance is strategically adaptive to modern repression. Today's most widespread forms of control (such as digital surveillance, cultural erasure, administrative detention, etc.) cannot be countered through conventional force. They require alternative forms of resistance: documentation, digital mobilisation, cultural transmission, diaspora organisation, and institution-building. These are precisely the kinds of strategies that nonviolence enables and strengthens.

In this geopolitical moment, then, nonviolence is not the absence of action but the most strategically advanced form of action available to unrepresented nations and peoples. It allows them to operate in the arenas where they possess leverage, to expose the disproportionality of state repression, and to maintain a credible presence in international political and moral discourse. Its importance is heightened today not only because it is effective, but because it remains the only sustainable and internationally legitimate route through which unrepresented peoples can pursue and defend their right to self-determination. These dynamics take concrete shape in the lived experiences of UNPO's members, whose movements demonstrate the resilience and strategic depth of nonviolent action.

[30] "The Int'l Criminal Court's Ukraine Investigation: A Test Case for User-Generated Evidence," JustSecurity, June 2022, https://www.justsecurity.org/80404/the-intl-criminal-courts-ukraine-investigation-a-test-case-for-user-generated-evidence

[31] UNPO, *Compromised Space Europe: Voices of Victims of Espionage and Reprisals in Europe*.

MEMBERS PERSPECTIVES: NONVIOLENCE IN PRACTICE

TIBET – BUILDING DEMOCRACY WITHOUT A STATE

The Tibetan movement for self-determination represents one of the world's most enduring and disciplined practices of nonviolent resistance and democratic governance without sovereignty. Since the military invasion and subsequent colonisation of Tibet by the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1950, Tibetans have endured systematic repression, ranging from the destruction of monasteries during the Cultural Revolution to ongoing restrictions on religion, speech, and assembly today.[32] Dorjee Tseten, a member of the 17th Tibetan Parliament-in-Exile, recalled in his presentation that this repression has been accompanied by political imprisonment, enforced disappearances, and sustained efforts to erode Tibetan identity.[33] Yet, in contrast to many colonised or occupied peoples, the Tibetan response, led by His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, has been defined by an unwavering commitment to nonviolence (ahimsa) and compassion (karuṇā). These principles, deeply rooted in Tibetan Buddhism, have been extended into the political sphere, shaping the moral and strategic foundations of Tibetan resistance.[34]

Tibet has played a central and formative role within the UNPO since the organisation's founding. As one of the founding members, Tibetan representatives have contributed to shaping UNPO's institutional identity, particularly its emphasis on nonviolent resistance. Within the organisation, the Tibetan movement has also acted as a mentor and model for other member communities, sharing lessons on institution-building in exile and democratic governance without sovereignty. Tibet's engagement has informed UNPO's collective frameworks for peaceful advocacy, helping codify nonviolence not only as a founding principle of membership but also as a practical methodology for sustaining long-term movements under repression.

For Tibetans, nonviolence is not merely a tactical choice but a moral and ontological position, inseparable from their worldview. The Dalai Lama has consistently maintained that violence contradicts the moral and philosophical foundations of Tibetan civilisation, "because violence can only breed more violence and suffering, our struggle must remain non-violent and free of hatred. We are trying to end the suffering of our people, not to inflict suffering upon others."[35] Dorjee Tseten emphasised that this ethical consistency has been essential to maintain the legitimacy of the Tibetan cause internationally, particularly given the asymmetry of power between Tibetans and the Chinese state.[36] Scholars also note that this fusion of spirituality and politics has enabled Tibetans to preserve a resilient collective identity, ensuring that nonviolence functions as both strategy and survival.[37]

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[32] Minority Rights Group International, "Tibetans," *Minority Rights* (web page), accessed October 31, 2025, https://minorityrights.org/communities/tibetans/

[33] UNPO, "Non-Violent Struggles for Peoples' Rights: Lessons from History and Today."

[34] Dalai Lama, *My Land and My People: The Original Autobiography of His Holiness the Dalai Lama of Tibet* (New York: Warner Books, 1997).

[35] His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, "Acceptance Speech on the Occasion of the Award of the Nobel Peace Prize," University of Oslo, December 10, 1989, in *Nobel Lectures, Peace 1981-1990*, ed. Tore Frängsmyr (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 1997).

[36] UNPO, "Non-Violent Struggles for Peoples' Rights: Lessons from History and Today."

[37] Melvyn C. Goldstein, *The Snow Lion and the Dragon: China, Tibet, and the Dalai Lama* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Tsering Shakya, *The Dragon in the Land of Snows: A History of Modern Tibet since 1947* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

The decade-long Cultural Revolution, beginning in 1966, marked one of the most devastating assaults on Tibetan cultural life: over 6,000 monasteries were destroyed, religious practice was banned, and tens of thousands of monks and nuns were imprisoned.[38] Yet Tibetan Buddhism became the backbone of a quiet, dispersed resistance. Acts such as secret prayer gatherings, the establishment of unofficial monastic hermitages and religious encampments in eastern Tibet (known as chogars), and clandestine language instruction emerged as forms of everyday subversion.[39] These practices reframed spirituality as a form of political endurance, allowing Tibetans to resist assimilation by the PRC not through confrontation, but through cultural continuity.

Perhaps the most remarkable outcome of this philosophy of nonviolence has been the construction of a functioning democratic polity in exile. Following his flight to India in 1959, the Dalai Lama established the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) in Dharamsala, which serves as the de facto Tibetan government-in-exile. The CTA administers education, healthcare, and culture preservation for Tibetans across the world.[40] As Tseten explained, "self-determination is something a people practice, not only something they claim."[41] Since 1960, Tibetans in exile have directly elected representatives to the Tibetan Parliament-in-Exile, and since 2001, they have elected their executive leader (Sikyong) through universal suffrage—a transition the Dalai Lama described as "a part of advancing [the] democratization process."[42] This experiment in "exilic democracy" demonstrates that self-determination is not solely territorial but also institutional and performative.[43] By enacting democratic practices the Tibetan diaspora performs statehood even in the absence of sovereignty. Tibetan schools, such as those operated by the Tibetan Children's Village (TCV) and the Dalai Lama Institute for Higher Education, serve as hubs for transmission of both linguistic and civic education, embedding democratic values within Tibetan cultural reproduction.

Cultural production has also become a central site of Tibetan nonviolent resistance. Music, visual art, literature, and film act as vehicles of political expression and collective healing. During the 2008 Beijing Olympics, for instance, Tibetans and their allies staged peaceful global protests that used symbolism rather than confrontation (raising the Tibetan flag, performing traditional songs, and organising hunger strikes) to draw attention to China's repression.[44] These acts embodied a politics of moral visibility: the assertion that dignity, not domination, is the foundation of Tibetan nationhood. Cultural nonviolence functions on dual levels: internally, as a means of sustaining unity and intergenerational continuity; and externally, as a soft-power strategy to mobilise international empathy.

In the 21st century, digital technology has reconfigured Tibetan activism into a transnational networked movement. Despite pervasive Chinese surveillance and censorship, exiled Tibetans use online platforms to document human rights abuses, coordinate advocacy, and educate younger generations. Organisations

[38] Tsering Shakya, *The Dragon in the Land of Snows: A History of Modern Tibet since 1947*.
[39] Save Tibet, *Cultural Genocide in Tibet: 60 Years of Chinese Misrule*, report (New York: Save Tibet, May 2013), https://savetibet.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Cultural-Genocide-in-Tibet-single-pages-2-1.pdf
[40] Central Tibetan Administration, *About the CTA* (webpage), accessed October 31, 2025, https://tibet.net/about-cta/tibet-in-exile/
[41] UNPO, "Non-Violent Struggles for Peoples' Rights: Lessons from History and Today."
[42] His Holiness the Dalai Lama, "Remarks on Retirement from Political Responsibilities," English transcript of public teaching, Dharamsala, India, March 19, 2011.
[43] Fiona McConnell, *Rehearsing the State: The Political Practices of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016).
[44] "Key Places and Events in the Tibetan Unrest, Beijing," *BBC News: Asia-Pacific*, March 19, 2008, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7305288.stm

such as Students for a Free Tibet (SFT), the Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD), and independent media outlets like Phayul and Tibet.net have become crucial nodes of digital mobilisation. Digital tools serve dual functions: as archives of resistance (recording political imprisonments, protests, and self-immolations) and as arenas of participatory democracy, enabling dispersed Tibetan communities to deliberate, vote, and organise across borders. Scholars describe this phenomenon as "digital diaspora diplomacy," whereby stateless or displaced peoples use virtual networks to perform state-like functions and sustain political legitimacy.

The Tibetan case challenges conventional understandings of political power. It illustrates that nonviolent resistance can be more than moral symbolism; it constitutes a practice of governance, a means of enacting sovereignty without territory. As Dorjee Tseten concluded, the Tibetan experience shows that democracy, culture, and ethics can themselves become instruments of liberation.[45] In this sense, Tibet's struggle transcends its specific geopolitical context, offering a powerful model of nation-building in exile in which spiritual principles are transformed into political capacity, and nonviolence becomes both the method and the message of self-determination.

EAST TURKESTAN – COURAGE BEYOND SUPPRESSION

The Uyghur people's nonviolent struggle for self-determination and human rights in East Turkestan (so-called Xinjiang) demonstrates how peaceful resistance can persist even under extreme authoritarian repression. Despite pervasive state violence—including mass internment, forced labour, cultural erasure, and extensive digital surveillance[46]—the Uyghur movement has remained overwhelmingly committed to nonviolence, expressing resistance through advocacy, documentation, education, and diaspora mobilisation rather than armed conflict. As Zumretay Arkin, Member of the UNPO Presidency and Vice President of the World Uyghur Congress (WUC), emphasised in her opening address, "nonviolent actions are acts of extraordinary courage capable of creating lasting impact, contrary to the misconception that they are passive."[47] Inside East Turkestan, ordinary acts such as preserving the Uyghur language, maintaining religious practice, wearing traditional dress, or transmitting oral history have become quiet yet profound forms of civil resistance.[48] These everyday assertions of identity, what scholars call "micro-resistance," carry immense political weight precisely because they defy a system designed to erase them. They represent a collective ethical stance: the refusal to allow oppression to dictate moral terms or to extinguish culture, memory, and hope.

In exile, the WUC has emerged as the most visible representative body for Uyghurs worldwide, embodying a disciplined and explicitly nonviolent approach to political struggle. Under conditions where even peaceful advocacy can result in the detention or punishment of family members inside China, the WUC has centred its strategy on international legal engagement, human rights documentation, and coalition-building with global civil society. As Arkin noted, the movement's task is to "ensure that truth

[45] UNPO, "Non-Violent Struggles for Peoples' Rights: Lessons from History and Today."
[46] Human Rights Watch, *"Break Their Lineage, Break Their Roots": China's Crimes Against Humanity Targeting Uyghurs* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2021); Amnesty International, *"Like We Were Enemies in a War": China's Mass Internment, Torture, and Persecution of Muslims in Xinjiang* (London: Amnesty International, 2021)
[47] UNPO, "Non-Violent Struggles for Peoples' Rights: Lessons from History and Today."
[48] Sean R. Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign Against a Muslim Minority* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020); Darren Byler, *In the Camps: China's High-Tech Penal Colony* (New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2021).

survives even when our people are silenced."[49] This approach frames the Uyghur cause not as separatism, as portrayed by the Chinese state, but as a legitimate struggle for human dignity and fundamental rights.[50] In line with classic nonviolent strategy, it seeks to withdraw legitimacy from an oppressive system through exposure, moral appeal, and international accountability rather than confrontation through force. These efforts have contributed to parliamentary resolutions, UN statements, and corporate due-diligence initiatives that increasingly recognise China's responsibility for widespread abuses.[51]

Beyond institutional advocacy, nonviolence also shapes the Uyghur movement's cultural and digital resistance. Artists, writers, and scholars have turned creative expression into a vehicle for solidarity, using music, literature, and film to preserve collective identity.[52] Diaspora initiatives—such as online Uyghur language schools, documentation networks, and global remembrance events like Uyghur Genocide Memorial Day—translate grief and survival into acts of political endurance.[53] As Arkin underscored, these practices are not symbolic alone; they are "how a people denied space at home create presence in the world."[54] Together, they form a "transnational moral community" that sustains cohesion despite displacement and fear, turning culture itself into a strategy of resistance.[55]

The challenges remain immense. The Chinese state continues to tighten ideological control, most recently through its 2025 draft Ethnic Unity Law, which codifies conformity and criminalises expressions of distinct identity under the guise of "national unity."[56] Surveillance technologies, transnational repression, and propaganda have further narrowed the fragile space for peaceful dissent, both domestically and abroad.[57] Uyghur activists in exile face cyber-attacks, intimidation, and harassment through their families in East Turkestan, forcing movements to innovate through encrypted communication, decentralised networks, and international partnerships.[58] Yet, despite these conditions, the Uyghur struggle remains deeply anchored in nonviolence. Its persistence reflects a profound strategic and ethical conviction: that the moral high ground, legitimacy, and sustainability of their cause depend on peaceful means. In this sense, the Uyghur movement offers a powerful example of how unrepresented peoples transform vulnerability into resilience; demonstrating that even under total surveillance and repression, nonviolence can remain both a form of survival and a path toward justice.

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[49] UNPO, "Non-Violent Struggles for Peoples' Rights: Lessons from History and Today."
[50] Ismah Rustam and Arida Meilani, "The Strategy of World Uyghur Congress (WUC) to Strive for Human Rights for Uyghur People," *Resolusi: Jurnal Sosial Politik* 4, no. 2 (2021): 53–70.
[51] European Parliament, Resolution on the mass arbitrary detention of Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang (Text adopted 20 October 2022), TA-9-0237/2022; United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *Assessment of Human Rights Concerns in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, People's Republic of China* (Geneva: OHCHR, 2022).
[52] Nimrod Baranovitch, "From Resistance to Adaptation: Uyghur Popular Music and Changing Attitudes among Uyghur Youth," *The China Journal*, no. 58 (2007): 59-82; Rachel Harris, *Soundscapes of Uyghur Islam* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020).
[53] World Uyghur Congress (WUC), *Annual Report* (Munich: World Uyghur Congress, 2023).
[54] UNPO, "Non-Violent Struggles for Peoples' Rights: Lessons from History and Today."
[55] Tian Guang and Mahesh Ranjan Debata, "Identity and Mobilization in Transnational Societies: A Case Study of Uyghur Diasporic Nationalism," *China & Eurasia Forum Quarterly* 8, no. 4 (2010): 59-78.
[56] "China: Draft 'Ethnic Unity' Law Tightens Ideological Control," September 28, 2025, Human Rights Watch, https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/09/28/china-draft-ethnic-unity-law-tightens-ideological-contro
[57] Freedom House, *Out of Sight, Not Out of Reach: The Global Scale and Scope of Transnational Repression* (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2023).
[58] Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP), *Weaponized Transnational Repression: China's Long Arm of Control* (Washington, DC: UHRP, 2023).

ASSYRIA – NONVIOLENT STRATEGIES FOR SURVIVAL AND RECOGNITION

The Assyrian nation, one of the world's oldest continuous cultures, has endured centuries of dispossession and violence while maintaining a steadfast commitment to nonviolence as both principle and strategy. Descended from the ancient Mesopotamian civilisation, Assyrians today are dispersed across Iraq, Syria, Iran, Turkey, and a vast global diaspora. The Sayfo, genocide carried out by Ottoman forces in 1915, marked a devastating rupture, leading to mass displacement and the near destruction of a people who once formed a vibrant presence in their ancestral homeland. As Dr. Eden Nabi Frye, a cultural historian of the Middle East and Central Asia, emphasised, this history of violence has not produced a turn toward militarisation but instead "a long tradition of survival through culture, education, and organisation."[59] Despite genocide, forced migration, and ongoing pressures of cultural assimilation, particularly under Syrian and Iraqi state policies, the Assyrian response has been grounded in institution-building rather than armed resistance.[60] This commitment to nonviolence is not a posture of passivity but an active process of self-preservation and transformation. It is a deliberate choice to transform vulnerability into organisation, and historical memory into moral legitimacy. In contexts where state structures have repeatedly failed to protect them, Assyrians have constructed their own parallel systems of community power—schools, churches, cultural centres, and civic associations—that sustain identity and advocacy without recourse to violence.[61]

Education has long stood at the centre of Assyrian nonviolent strategy. Dr. Nabi Frye highlighted that for Assyrians, "education is where resistance becomes sustainable,"[62] ensuring that language, history, and collective memory are transmitted across generations. From the early 20th century to the present, networks of private Assyrian schools have served as spaces of intellectual autonomy and cultural transmission. In Iraq and Iran, these schools, often situated in key regions such as oil-producing areas, have operated alongside strong church institutions and civic organisations, preserving language and heritage amid discrimination.[63] Such institutions function as microcosms of national life, teaching modern Aramic and Assyrian history while fostering civic engagement. Their impact extends beyond pedagogy: they are expressions of continuity, linking local identity to a transnational sense of belonging. This educational infrastructure is reinforced by a vibrant cultural movement. Assyrian publishing initiatives have produced books, periodicals, and calendars that record collective memory and historical scholarship, while choirs, theater groups, and artistic collectives serve as vehicles of national expression.[64] Through these initiatives, culture itself becomes an act of resistance—what scholars of civil resistance call "constructive program": the creation of alternative systems that embody the society a movement seeks to achieve.[65]

In recent decades, technology has expanded the reach and resilience of Assyrian nonviolent activism. As Dr. Nabi Frye noted, digital space has become "a new terrain of survival,"[66] allowing an ancient people

[59] UNPO, "Non-Violent Struggles for Peoples' Rights: Lessons from History and Today."
[60] UNPO, "Non-Violent Struggles for Peoples' Rights: Lessons from History and Today."
[61] UNPO, "Non-Violent Struggles for Peoples' Rights: Lessons from History and Today."
[62] UNPO, "Non-Violent Struggles for Peoples' Rights: Lessons from History and Today."
[63] Eden Naby, "The Assyrian Diaspora: Cultural Survival in the Absence of State Structure," in *Central Asia and the Caucasus: Transnationalism and Diaspora*, ed. Shorab Mehendale and Touraj Atabegi (London: Routledge, Kegan Paul, 2005), 214–230.
[64] UNPO, "Non-Violent Struggles for Peoples' Rights: Lessons from History and Today."
[65] Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*.
[66] UNPO, "Non-Violent Struggles for Peoples' Rights: Lessons from History and Today."

fragmented by borders and exile to reconstitute a community. The internet enables the diaspora to overcome geographic dispersal, linking communities from all over the world through virtual education, media, and advocacy networks.[67] Digital communication has become a new form of nationhood: online Assyrian classes, archives of ancient manuscripts, and digitized liturgical texts sustain linguistic and spiritual heritage.[68] Informal study groups and international broadcasting initiatives have amplified Assyrian visibility, while online activism connects younger generations to their heritage and to global human rights coalitions.[69] These practices exemplify a distinctly Assyrian model of nonviolence: a fusion of cultural continuity, technological adaptation, and moral endurance.

The Assyrian experience demonstrates that nonviolence can be both a strategic and principled pathway for the survival of unrepresented peoples. In the face of displacement, historical trauma, and marginalisation, Assyrians have relied on education, religious institutions, and transnational networks to preserve their identity and sustain community cohesion. Cultural preservation (through language, literature, music, and collective memory) has been central to this strategy, enabling Assyrians to assert their existence and maintain solidarity without resorting to armed conflict. As Dr. Nabi Frye underscored, survival itself becomes a form of resistance when it is organised, transmitted, and shared.[70] These nonviolent practices transform vulnerability into resilience: every educational initiative, choir performance, or digitally shared manuscript is simultaneously an act of cultural continuity and political assertion. By embedding nonviolence in the preservation of heritage, Assyrians demonstrate that ethical action, strategic endurance, and cultural vitality can reinforce one another, offering a model of resistance that safeguards identity, strengthens communal bonds, and advances recognition across generations.

WEST PAPUA – EXILE ADVOCACY AND DIGITAL RESISTANCE

West Papua's struggle for self-determination illustrates how disciplined, principled nonviolence can persist and adapt under intense militarisation, legal exclusion, and international isolation. Since annexation processes in the 1960s, and the contested 1969 "Act of Free Choice," West Papuans have experienced sustained human rights abuses, limitations on freedom of expression, and heavy military presence.[71] In response, many West Papuans have chosen a strategy of peaceful assertion: building civic institutions in exile, investing in education and documentation, and using diplomacy and digital technology to tell their story to the world.[72]

Nonviolence in West Papua is deliberate and strategic rather than merely symbolic. The International Center on Nonviolent Conflict's overview of the movement highlights classic nonviolent practices—public demonstrations of identity such as the banned Morning Star Flag, cultural revival, and sustained noncooperation—which functionally withdraws consent from an occupying order and seeks to delegitimise it on moral and legal grounds.[73] These practices are fragile under occupation—raising a flag

[67] UNPO, "Non-Violent Struggles for Peoples' Rights: Lessons from History and Today."
[68] UNPO, "Non-Violent Struggles for Peoples' Rights: Lessons from History and Today."
[69] UNPO, "Non-Violent Struggles for Peoples' Rights: Lessons from History and Today."
[70] UNPO, "Non-Violent Struggles for Peoples' Rights: Lessons from History and Today."
[71] Hipolitus Ringgi Wangge, "Securitization of a Political Conflict in Southeast Asia: Disengaging the Indigenous Audience in West Papua," Asian Security 19, no. 3 (2023): 207–27.
[72] UNPO, "Non-Violent Struggles for Peoples' Rights: Lessons from History and Today."
[73] Jason MacLeod, "The Struggle for Self-Determination in West Papua, 1969–Present," International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, March 2011, https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/struggle-self-determination-west-papua-1969-present/

or singing traditional songs can provoke violent reprisals—yet they persist because they assert collective dignity and continuity without reproducing cycles of violence.

A crucial figure in this lineage was Dr. Thom Wainggai, whose life and actions crystallised a legalistic, nonviolent model for West Papuan activism. Trained as a lawyer and active in politics from a young age, Wainggai publicly proclaimed the "Republic of West Melanesia" in December 1988 as an explicitly nonviolent political act designed to contest the legality of Indonesian rule and to assert Melanesian identity and claim to self-determination.[74] He framed the movement in terms of legal argumentation and moral legitimacy, rejecting armed confrontation and instead using reasoned appeals to international law. Indonesian authorities arrested him, convicted him of subversion, and sentenced him to twenty years; he died in custody in 1996. Amnesty International and contemporary human-rights reporting document both the harshness of his treatment and his enduring symbolic role for subsequent generations of peaceful activists.[75] Wainggai's legacy survives in exile institutions and civil-rights networks that explicitly model nonviolent, lawful challenge rather than militarised insurgency.

Two features make the West Papuan application of nonviolence especially distinct. First, the movement's heavy reliance on exile advocacy—organised communities in Australia, the Netherlands, the United States, and elsewhere—functions as an alternative public sphere. As Herman Wainggai, founder of the West Papua Human Rights Center, explained in his presentation, exile-based organisations have become "our classrooms, our archives, and our diplomatic channels."[76] Diaspora organisations run legal-documentation projects, lobbying campaigns, and community radio programs (for example, the long-running "Voice of West Papua" programming on community radio in Australia) that keep the story alive, preserve cultural memory, and exert pressure on foreign governments and institutions.[77] In the absence of reliable domestic press access, these exile platforms are both lifeline and megaphone.

Second, digital resistance is essential. Communications blackouts, restricted access for journalists, and criminalisation of peaceful advocacy inside West Papua make technology indispensable for nonviolent action. Drawing on his work documenting abuses from exile, Herman Wainggai emphasised that "every testimony shared, every document published, and every connection made with supporters worldwide strengthens our cause."[78] Activists use social and multimedia platforms to public eyewitness testimonies, video of abuses, legal analyses, and cultural programming that contest state narratives and mobilise international solidarity.[79] While digital tools do not replace physical organising, they extend reach and allow dispersed communities to coordinate, teach language and history, and sustain identity without territorial sovereignty. These practices have contributed to parliamentary motions, NGO reporting, and

[74] Peter King, *West Papua & Indonesia since Suharto: Independence, Autonomy or Chaos?* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2004).
[75] Amnesty International, "Death of Prisoner of Conscience: Dr Thomas Wainggai," AI Index ASA 21/11/96 (25 April 1996), https://www.amnesty.org/ar/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/asa210111996en.pdf.
[76] UNPO, "Non-Violent Struggles for Peoples' Rights: Lessons from History and Today."
[77] "Voice of West Papua," 3CR community radio (Australia), program archive and description, https://www.3cr.org.au/voiceofwestpapua. See also reporting on diaspora organisations such as the West Papua Human Rights Center (wphumanrightscenter.org) and advocacy by West Papuan exiles.
[78] UNPO, "Non-Violent Struggles for Peoples' Rights: Lessons from History and Today."
[79] UNPO, "Non-Violent Struggles for Peoples' Rights: Lessons from History and Today."

international media coverage, gradually reframing the issue from security management to human-rights and dignity.[80]

This emphasis on peaceful means is not naive: it is a strategic calculus grounded in risk management and legitimacy. Armed resistance has emerged in West Papua and conflicts are still ongoing to this day, often in response to extreme repression and the closing of civic space; however, as Wainggai noted, "lasting change cannot come through violence."[81] Nonviolent tactics retain greater capacity to mobilise broad participation, engage civil-society allies, and exert moral leverage internationally. Education, diplomatic outreach, cultural assertion, exile institution-building, and digital testimony together create a multi-pronged nonviolent strategy that preserves community cohesion while pressing for recognition and remedy. As West Papuan advocates consistently emphasise, freedom must be rooted in peace and dignity; durable change will depend on reconciliation and rights, not retaliation.[82]

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The experiences shared during the UNPO webinar reaffirm that nonviolent resistance is neither an abstract ideal nor a relic of past struggles, but a dynamic and strategic response to the realities of contemporary geopolitics. What unites these cases is not the similarity of their historical trajectories, but the common geopolitical constraints under which they operate. Whether facing mass surveillance and cultural erasure in East Turkestan, long-term displacement and institutional marginalisation among Assyrians, militarised repression and information blackouts in West Papua, or decades of occupation and exile in Tibet, each community confronts forms of control that render violent resistance both unsustainable and politically counterproductive.

What distinguishes the current moment is the convergence of two trends: the narrowing of political space for unrepresented peoples and the expansion of state capacity to control narratives, populations, and territory. These dynamics intensify pressure on communities to abandon restraint and adopt confrontational or violent approaches. Yet the experiences of UNPO members demonstrate that such a shift often produces strategic closure rather than political opening. Violence collapses the distinction between resistance and threat in the eyes of international actors, allowing states to subsume legitimate claims for self-determination under security discourses that dominate global governance. Nonviolence, by contrast, preserves this distinction, enabling movements to remain legible within international normative frameworks even when those frameworks are inconsistently applied.

Nonviolence functions not only as resistance to oppression but as a mode of political production. Through institution-building, cultural continuity, documentation practices, and transnational advocacy, unrepresented peoples enact forms of governance, identity, and collective decision-making that prefigure self-determination without requiring immediate sovereignty. In this sense, nonviolence is generative: it creates political space where none formally exists, sustaining communities as political actors rather than reducing them to objects of humanitarian concern or security management.

[80] Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International reports document communications blackouts and restrictions on journalists; see Human Rights Watch, *Protest and Punishment* (2007) and Amnesty International, *Civil and Political Rights Violations in Papua* (2020). These reports describe how online documentation and exile media have been crucial to exposing abuses.
[81] UNPO, "Non-Violent Struggles for Peoples' Rights: Lessons from History and Today."
[82] UNPO, "Non-Violent Struggles for Peoples' Rights: Lessons from History and Today."

By providing a shared platform for movements, UNPO enables the circulations of strategies, norms, and analytical frameworks that would otherwise remain fragmented. The organisation's insistence on nonviolence does not deny the realities of repression; rather, it reflects a collective assessment of how power operates in the contemporary international system.

Ultimately, the insights emerging from this webinar challenge prevailing assumptions about resistance, effectiveness, and political agency. They suggest that, for unrepresented peoples, nonviolence is not a strategy of last resort but a sophisticated engagement with geopolitical constraint. In a global order that increasingly privileges force and exclusion, nonviolent resistance remains one of the few means through which unrepresented peoples can assert continuity, coherence, and future-oriented claims to self-determination. Far from signaling weakness, it reflects a precise reading of the world as it is and a disciplined effort to transform it without reproducing the logics that sustain domination.