

PEACEWORKS



Overcoming the Challenges of Transitional Mobilization

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UNITED STATES
INSTITUTE OF PEACE
Making Peace Possible

NO. 188 | MAY 2023

PEACEWORKS

NO. 188 | MAY 2023



ABOUT THE REPORT

Civic engagement and mobilization vary in political transitions that originate in nonviolent action, with ramifications for long-term peace and democracy. This report provides recommendations for resolving common challenges that arise during the transition period, drawing on insights from the 2011 Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia and the 2018 Velvet Revolution in Armenia. The report was funded through an interagency agreement between the United States Institute of Peace and the Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance Center at USAID.

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Cover photo: Supporters of opposition leader Nikol Pashinyan protest in Republic Square in Yerevan, Armenia, on May 2, 2018. (Photo by Sergei Grits/AP)

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United States Institute of Peace

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Peaceworks no. 188. First published 2023.

ISBN: 978-1-60127-914-9



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Summary



Political transitions that originate in nonviolent action campaigns are more likely to lead to democracy than transitions that originate through other means. Yet even political transitions that begin with this democratizing advantage face several challenges along the uncertain road to democracy. The organizers, activists, and political parties that unified to initiate the transition often face pressure to fragment into competing factions, a dynamic that can lead to outbreaks of violence. Previously independent civil society forces must decide whether and how to engage with the transitional government, which may deprive them of critical leadership and temper the transformative character of their demands. And actors across the political spectrum must balance retaining autonomy with accepting external support from foreign donors and aid organizations.

A growing literature and the examples of two recent cases, the 2011–2014 transition in Tunisia, the so-called Jasmine Revolution, and the 2018 transition in Armenia, the Velvet Revolution, serve to illustrate these challenges. While the details differ from case to case, an overarching finding is that the challenges, and hence their solutions, are embedded in the kinds of relationships activist movements develop internally and with civil society, the transitional government, and external actors. This schema provides a way for activists and supporters to understand better how to respond to and mitigate disruptions that could threaten the success of a transition, particularly preventing outbreaks of violence.

The actionable recommendations provided in this report emphasize excellent communication among the different actors, shared strategies for engagement among activist groups, and clarity in the roles external partners may play, all as means to improve the likelihood of achieving a robust and lasting post-transition democracy.

Among activists and civil society actors, the report recommends developing dense networks of communication, expanding tactical repertoires to include tactics that have lower risks of violent escalation, and pursuing contention through systematized, structured interactions that lower the stakes of any single political struggle. For the relationship between activists and transitional governments, the report recommends fostering a wide spectrum of civil society–government interactions, from confrontational to cooperative, to build the capacity of transitional governments to bring about political reforms while maintaining external accountability structures to ensure they will do so. Finally, for the relationship between civil society activists and

international actors, the report emphasizes the importance of local autonomy and providing types of support (particularly training and convening) that allow local actors to be the primary drivers of transitional reforms.



Protesters demonstrate against President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali in Tunis, Tunisia, on January 14, 2011. The longtime authoritarian leader left the country for Saudi Arabia that day. (Photo by Christophe Ena/AP)

Introduction

Nonviolent action, in which ordinary citizens use such tactics as unarmed protests, strikes, and boycotts to shift the power dynamic in a political conflict, can be a powerful way to bring about peaceful political transitions. From the anticolonial movements of Ghana and Cameroon in the 1960s to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the streets of the color revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan from 2003 to 2005, and the 2011 uprising in Egypt that filled Tahrir Square with protesters, the history of mass collective action over the last half century offers many compelling moments of hope. In such moments, previously unimaginable change for the better seems not just possible but inevitable.

When it comes to turning those hopes into long-term political change, however, activists frequently find their efforts frustrated, their gains partial, and the long-term

prospects for their movement bleak. In the worst cases, hope gives way to despair as authoritarian counterrevolutions restore the politically repressive status quo or increasing political fragmentation leads to rising social conflict and a pivot to violent tactics. Even in the best cases, many of the issues that motivated people to hit the streets for change fail to be adequately addressed in the end.

This trajectory with its all too frequent ending of failure highlights a daunting impediment to continued mobilization: How can activists and civil society organizations (CSOs) that come together during a major nonviolent action campaign sustain the democratizing momentum of that campaign over the long term? It is one thing to bring about a change. It is another to see that change through to a more just and democratic political

order. Yet working toward a more lasting solution is crucial. In a time of rising political violence and declining democracy, ensuring that nonviolent action campaigns can successfully be sustained to induce a more just, inclusive, and sustainable democratic order demands global attention.¹

A report published by the United States Institute of Peace in August 2022 examined a dataset comprising thousands of instances of political mobilization in transitions² initiated through nonviolent action to identify patterns predictive of higher levels of democracy and lower levels of violence during the transition. Analysis of this dataset revealed several robust associations. Mobilization by organized labor appears to be a key factor rigorously correlated with future levels of democracy, and mobilization that eschews both violence and partisan goals has the strongest democratizing effects. When it comes to violence, the interaction between government repression and high-profile confrontational tactics appears to pose unique challenges. Nonviolent tactics such as public marches, demonstrations, and sit-ins that gather large numbers of people in a single place and thus may put participants at higher risk of repression were correlated with greater outbreaks of future violence.

This report dives deeper into the dynamics of transitional mobilization that influence two key and related outcomes: whether transitions initiated through nonviolent resistance lead to democracy, and whether they break down into violence. It highlights three common challenges that arise during political transitions following nonviolent action campaigns and provides recommendations for how activists, civil society leaders, and external supporters can meet these challenges in ways that promote a peaceful transition to democracy. The three challenges relate to three key relationships of the major political forces during a transition, particularly the activists and civil society groups that typically spearhead nonviolent action campaigns: their horizontal relationships with one another, their vertical relationships with the transitional

government, and their external relationships with international actors.

The first challenge is to avoid political fragmentation and upticks in violence as a result of the campaign's efforts. This challenge is closely related to the kinds of relationships—collaborative or confrontational—that develop between and among activists, civil society actors, and political entities outside government. The second challenge is determining whether nonviolent action participants and previously marginalized groups can or will choose to be part of a transitional government; the outcome of that “in-or-out” challenge depends on the relationship between those actors and the government. The third challenge is to balance the critical advantages possible from international support with the need to maintain local autonomy, and its resolution depends on the relationships developed between activists and international supporters. These three challenges are not exhaustive but are broadly generalizable across contexts and are directly informed by preexisting research. In particular, their embeddedness in key relationships that shape all transitions makes them broadly applicable across different sociopolitical contexts.

To illustrate the challenges, the report discusses two recent political transitions that began in nonviolent action: the 2011 “Jasmine Revolution” in Tunisia and the 2018 “Velvet Revolution” in Armenia. These two instances of transition were selected because, on most accounts, they exemplify a best-case scenario with respect to mobilization after a major nonviolent action campaign. In both cases, a high level of civic action put pressure on the transitional authorities to continue democratization efforts and engage in major political reforms. Yet both transitions continued to face major challenges: the Tunisian transition saw several outbreaks of violence and real fears of civil war, while in Armenia, a renewal of armed conflict with Azerbaijan over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region has put the postrevolutionary government of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan at risk.³

Two Cases: Tunisia and Armenia



Tunisia's 2011 Jasmine Revolution was sparked by the self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi, a produce vendor from the town of Sidi Bouzid, after his cart was confiscated by local police. Protests following Bouazizi's death spread rapidly through the country, fueled by long-standing disillusionment with the lack of economic progress and political repression of longtime authoritarian president Zine el Abedine Ben Ali.⁴ The movement's initial breakthrough took place in early January 2011 during a roughly four-week period of civil resistance. While experts debate the specific sequence of events, most sources report that the Tunisian military refused to violently disperse nonviolent protesters.⁵ President Ben Ali left the country for Saudi Arabia shortly thereafter, marking the beginning of a political transition.

The post-Ben Ali transition fell into three phases. In the initial phase, a caretaker government led by Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi sought to maintain the state and set up elections for a constituent assembly. The presence of many leading figures from the Ben Ali regime in this government, including Ghannouchi himself, led to widespread, ongoing protests and demands for more sweeping changes. The second phase began with the constituent assembly elections in October 2011, which brought to power the so-called Troika government, led by the formerly banned Islamist Ennahda party. The Troika came under increasing criticism after extending its original one-year mandate, and in particular following the assassination of two left-wing political leaders.⁶ A sense of impending crisis led to the third phase of Tunisia's transition: the late 2013 to early 2014 National Dialogue, the passage of a new constitution, and parliamentary and presidential elections held under that constitution in October and November 2014.

Mobilization by civil society, labor unions, and newly empowered political parties was high throughout the Tunisian transition. For example, two youth movements, *Manich Msamah* (I Will Not Forgive) and *Fech Nestanew* (Why Do We Wait?), were established to mobilize against injustice and corruption.⁷ Both movements organized regular demonstrations and pursued other nonviolent tactics throughout the transition, and continue to sustain such mobilization today.⁸

Because this report concerns the period of political transition, it treats the 2014 elections as the end of the transition and thus does not address the events in Tunisia that transpired after those elections.⁹ However, it would be remiss not to mention recent uncertainty about the future direction of Tunisia's democracy following President Kais Saied's decision to dissolve parliament and the subsequent passage of a new constitution that creates a heavily centralized presidential system.¹⁰ These developments highlight the fragility of even the most successful political transitions.

Armenia's 2018 Velvet Revolution was sparked by the announcement that longtime president and ruling party leader Serzh Sargsyan would be elected the country's prime minister, after parliament passed a series of constitutional amendments increasing the powers of the prime minister's role. Opposition leader Nikol Pashinyan spearheaded a nationwide protest march with the slogan "Take a Step: Reject Serzh," inspired by Gandhi's salt march.¹¹ Violent repression of the participants by police when the march reached Armenia's capital, Yerevan, backfired, leading to massive protests that quickly undermined support for the Sargsyan government. Just forty days after it began,



Armenian opposition leader Nikol Pashinyan, right, shakes hands with a police officer in Yerevan, Armenia, on April 29, 2018. On May 8, Pashinyan would be elected prime minister. (Photo by Sergei Grits/AP).

the Velvet Revolution was over as Armenia's parliament elected Pashinyan prime minister.¹²

The subsequent political transition was less formally institutionalized than in Tunisia. The Pashinyan government did not seek to rewrite Armenia's constitution but rather focused on bringing about political reform through existing channels. These efforts included a major push to end political and economic corruption, put a halt to human rights violations, and undertake judicial reforms utilizing transitional justice procedures.¹³

The Armenian transition faced a major challenge late in 2020 when war broke out between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the contested Nagorno-Karabakh region. Following six weeks of armed conflict, the Armenian government agreed to a settlement whereby

Prime Minister Pashinyan ceded disputed territory after suffering a military setback.¹⁴ This settlement and Pashinyan's handling of the war were unpopular in Armenia and led to opposition protests, which took shape as the March of Dignity and criticism of his government by the military.¹⁵ In response, Pashinyan called for snap elections late in 2021, which led to his Civil Contract Party's retaining power with 54 percent of the vote and 71 of the 105 seats in the National Assembly.¹⁶

More recently, in May and early June 2022, opposition parties led by former Armenian presidents Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan attempted to organize protests in Yerevan demanding Pashinyan's ouster.¹⁷ However, after just over six weeks of demonstrations, the opposition called off its actions, citing a lack of popular support.¹⁸

Challenge 1: Avoiding Political Fragmentation and Violence

The first major challenge of mobilization during post–nonviolent action transitions is to avoid the threat of political fragmentation and possible upticks in violence. This challenge is rooted in the relationships between the various civic and political actors (social movements, CSOs, and sometimes opposition political parties) who brought about the transition, and careful attention to the dynamics of those relationships can help navigate through it.

Major nonviolent action campaigns like the Jasmine and Velvet Revolutions can provide a moment of unity for civic forces with a variety of goals and constituencies. They are often patriotic, with national flags flying and anthems sung by protesters in city squares. For example, protesters in Armenia during the Velvet Revolution consistently described a sense of “love and solidarity” during the largest protests, in which “strangers seemed to treat each other with more kindness and courtesy.”¹⁹ If victory comes, it often feels like a vindication for the national spirit and the birth of a new era in which people will continue to be united in improving their country.

Yet these moments of unity almost by definition do not last. Transitions are often periods of intense political fragmentation, sometimes spilling over into wider social conflict, as disparate visions of ways to realize the promise of the revolution emerge.²⁰ Many groups and organizations that employ nonviolent action and express support for democracy when struggling against an authoritarian regime do so out of purely tactical considerations and may be open to using violence or

suppressing their former allies when they no longer jointly face a powerful opponent. The high degree of uncertainty surrounding the transition period is one catalyst of fragmentation and may encourage a move to the political and tactical extremes. When the rules of the political game are uncertain, any kind of contention can feel high stakes and chaotic and bears significant potential for escalation into violence. Political rivals often fear that the slightest concession to their opponents will lead to a permanent loss of political power. Political dynamics can then stiffen into a series of back-and-forth, all-or-nothing struggles that prevent the consolidation of new institutions. These struggles, particularly if they escalate into violence, can then undermine ordinary people’s faith in democracy and lead to nostalgia for the imagined stability of the pre-transition authoritarian regime.²¹

Both Armenia and Tunisia saw some of these fragmenting dynamics at play. In Tunisia, one of the core issues of political contention during the transition was the role of Islam in public life. The months after Ben Ali’s ouster saw increasing disagreement over the degree to which Islam should influence postrevolutionary political institutions, with both sides claiming the mantle of revolutionary popular legitimacy. As the scholar Asma Nouria observed,

As the scholar Asma Nouria observed, “The best illustration of this was a recent incident . . . in Tunis’s main street, Habib Bourguiba avenue. . . . On one side of the boulevard protesters chanted ‘the people want a secular state’ while just across the street the others were saying ‘the people want an Islamic state.’”²²

The conflict over the role of Islam in public life escalated when the previously banned Islamist Ennahda party received the largest number of votes in the 2011 constituent assembly elections and subsequently became the senior-most member of the so-called Troika three-party government.²³ Ennahda's position of power heightened concern among more secular political forces over possible religious radicalization in Tunisian society, resulting in more people joining the opposition and more back-and-forth protest campaigns. This period of contention culminated in 2013 in the assassination of two left-wing political leaders and the onset of real fears that Tunisia was on the verge of civil war.

Initially, the transition period in Armenia was marked by fewer of these dynamics, as there were fewer dramatic, preexisting social and political cleavages by which contention could be radicalized and as the postrevolutionary government of Nikol Pashinyan enjoyed broad support. Even in the early days, however, when there was widespread optimism about the transition, divisions began to emerge over issues of environmental quality—particularly with respect to the controversial Amulsar gold mine—and economic policy.²⁴

This lack of significant political and social fragmentation changed with the outbreak of armed conflict with Azerbaijan in 2020 and the subsequent political crisis around Prime Minister Pashinyan's confrontation with the military. Months of back-and-forth protests heightened political tensions, fed public disillusionment with the postrevolutionary transition, and led to occasional outbreaks of violence. These tensions continued in 2022 with mass sit-ins by opposition forces demonstrating against Pashinyan's government.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADDRESSING POTENTIAL FRAGMENTATION AND VIOLENCE

Prior research on the Tunisian and Armenian revolutions and similar cases suggests three practical ways that activists and civil society figures can try to avert fragmentation and violence, productively manage their internal

relationships, and continue to advance peace and democracy. The recommendations focus on actors who may be open to some level of cooperation. Extremist groups that are fully committed to violent struggle as a means to achieve their political objectives may still seek to disrupt a peaceful democratic transition (as happened with the previously mentioned assassinations in Tunisia). Yet the following recommendations can help minimize the impact of such violence and keep it from escalating into broader conflict.

Maintain lines of communication. Clear lines of communication between actors in the civil society, social movement, and political space can help prevent differences in goals and interests from advancing to radicalized contention. Research in multiple contexts shows that cross-cutting relationships, particularly between and among civil society, community leaders, and political (nongovernmental) leaders, can increase the likelihood of peaceful resolution of conflict.²⁵ Forums for regular discussion across community lines, particularly if facilitated to generate a shared vision of a peaceful, prosperous, and democratic future, may be particularly helpful.

Attempts to generate these lines of communication once a political crisis has already broken out are likely to face significant headwinds. A more productive route is to create a habit of communication and cooperation before a crisis emerges. Once communication becomes routine, it can be employed to address and mitigate early intimations of trouble. Moreover, routine communication among different actors in the social movement space can transform the norms and beliefs around the kinds of collaboration that are acceptable, generating narratives of cooperation that can be called on in moments of crisis.

The Tunisian transition provides an important example of this recommendation at work. The Tunisian National Dialogue, widely credited with saving the country from falling into civil war, was built on the foundation of years of formal and informal discussions between

the key actors in the civil society and political spaces, supported by four major CSOs that became known as the Quartet.²⁶ While secularist and Islamist groups still vigorously fought over the future direction of the country, the key actors in those spaces knew each other and had extensive past experience working together against the Ben Ali regime.²⁷ When the political crisis emerged, these relationships formed the basis for the initial trust-building, which eventually blossomed into a comprehensive national dialogue.²⁸

Expand the repertoire of tactics for avoiding violence.

Civil society actors have a wide range of tactics to choose from in advancing their goals during political transitions. Often, however, the tactics selected to continue the mobilization effort are drawn from an existing repertoire. It is easier to continue doing what is familiar than to experiment with new approaches. Some of the most familiar tactics are large, public, spatially concentrated actions such as public protests and sit-ins. Yet tactics of this kind come with risks. Highly spatially concentrated public tactics are more likely to trigger government repression and subsequently a breakdown in nonviolent discipline.²⁹ Any violence during a political transition is likely to exacerbate fragmentation and polarization of the polity.

Civic actors can address this aspect of the fragmentation and violence challenge through training in a wide spectrum of nonviolent action tactics and adopting a creative approach to devising potential avenues of action. Often, activists feel that their options are limited to confrontational public tactics with the potential for violence, on the one hand, or complete inaction and passivity on the other. But just as violence is not the only answer to injustice, so public protests, sit-ins, or other confrontational tactics are not the only nonviolent tactics available. The nearly 200 nonviolent action tactics described by Gene Sharp are a good starting place, but even that list only scratches the surface of what is possible for the creative organizer.³⁰ During Armenia's Velvet Revolution, for example, youth activists


spearheaded a new kind of protest. Instead of holding large, centralized rallies in major public squares, activists organized hundreds of micro-protests that temporarily blocked roads across Yerevan. Whenever police arrived to break up one of these micro-protests, the activists would immediately disperse and redeploy to another nearby road. The fluidity and dispersive tactics of this protest method reduced opportunities for violent state repression and helped prevent the protests from escalating into violent confrontations.³¹

Encourage systematization and structuring of contention.

One of the factors that make fragmentation so potentially dangerous during transitions is the uncertainty of the rules of the political system. Both formal laws and informal norms of political behavior are established during transitions and then often endure for decades after. Activists, political parties, and civil society groups fear that if those rules put them at a disadvantage, they will forever be denied political influence. This makes every minor victory or loss a matter of huge importance, with existential stakes. Moves to lower these stakes and constrain the power of any one transition actor can help address this challenge. Conversely, a short-term victory that relies on breaking up an institutional structure is likely to complicate the formation of a longer-term, new institutional structure that could benefit all.

In Armenia, for example, Nikol Pashinyan and other opposition leaders restrained themselves from seeking to unconstitutionally overthrow the Sargsyan government. Although the numbers of protesters on the streets and the wavering loyalty of state institutions made victory for the opposition near certain, the opposition did not seek to storm parliament and declare itself in charge of the government. Instead, Pashinyan called on the supporters of the revolution to use nonviolent action to pressure the ruling party to legally vote him into office.³² This set up the more institutionalized pattern of contention that has characterized the Armenian transition since that time and that, even in moments of major political crisis, has not produced significant outbreaks of violence.

Challenge 2: Participating in the Transitional Government



In addition to their relationships with one another, civic forces in a post–nonviolent action transition face the question of whether and how to directly engage with, and sometimes join, the new government. Will they be in or out? While authoritarian regimes typically restrict avenues for outside influence on government, political transitions open up new possibilities.

More so than almost any other transition, a transition initiated through nonviolent action affords promising opportunities for the previously marginalized to take up positions of power and influence.³³ While elements of the old government almost always remain, the shift in power dynamics wrought by nonviolent action typically brings unexpected figures to the corridors of government and opens the door for more equality in civil society–government interactions. For example, early in Tunisia’s transition, Mohammed Ghannouchi’s interim government instituted new laws of association that “encouraged [civil society] to testify, comment on and influence pending government policy and legislation.”³⁴

In both Armenia and Tunisia, many figures chose not just to engage with the government but to enter it. For instance, in Armenia, activists such as Artak Zeynalyan, a former human rights defender and lawyer, and Lilit Makunts, a longtime human rights and democracy activist, both entered the cabinet of the new Pashinyan government.³⁵ In Tunisia, the activist Samia Abbou conducted a campaign against the Ben Ali government and battled for political freedoms and human rights before the Jasmine Revolution. She then participated as a deputy in the National Constituent Assembly of 2011.

Sihem Badi was a political and social activist during Ben Ali’s rule. Badi was given a two-year prison sentence for her activism against the old dictatorship, and fled to France. But on December 20, 2011, she was appointed a minister for women’s affairs under the interim government of Hamadi Jebali.³⁶

Having a more inclusive set of actors in government brings obvious advantages. Electing to positions of power decision-makers who have a more pro-democratic orientation and are less enmeshed in historical structures of corruption is a basic way in which political transitions can successfully move toward democracy. Activists in top government roles have opportunities to listen, speak to, and forward the concerns of their former colleagues in civil society and on the streets, increasing avenues of government accountability.

Entry into government may also be associated with a reframing of positions and a resetting of relationships, as happened in both the Armenian and the Tunisian transitions. Moreover, the exigencies of politics can undermine the democratic and inclusive trajectories that some activists formerly pursued. There are multiple reasons for this, ranging from a lack of autonomy to inexperience with the practicalities of policymaking and a shift in perspective once activists are no longer struggling against those in power but are themselves in power. Artak Zeynalyan, for instance, was a vocal advocate for LGBTQ rights before entering government. Once in office, however, when social media users accused him of wanting to “legalize homosexuality,” his

public statements sought only to defend his political interests, and did not condemn the discrimination against LGBTQ people embedded in these accusations.³⁷

As a practical matter, too many activists being swept up in government may gut the movements from which they emerged. This is especially the case if the most effective organizers and leaders, those who fought for peace, human rights, and political freedoms under an authoritarian regime, are now part of government. The loss of talent and know-how from the organizing side may reduce civil society's ability to effectively regroup and push forward with other transition tasks, a dynamic that some have identified in the Armenian transition.³⁸

While many activists in both Armenia and Tunisia chose to enter government, many others chose to remain outside government. Yet others sought to ensure that their entry into government would take place only after the internal balance of power had shifted sufficiently to make their participation meaningful. For instance, the national unity government under Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi, the first transitional government after Ben Ali's ouster, sought to include eleven leading figures from civil society and the opposition. Several of these figures, however, under pressure from protesters on the streets, refused to join as long as members from the old ruling party remained in positions of influence.³⁹

In Tunisia, one of the preeminent forces that engaged with the various transitional governments but remained independent from them during the transition was the Tunisian General Labor Union (in French, Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail, or UGTT). The UGTT, along with numerous other civic and religious organizations, played a vital role in coordinating nonviolent action both during and after the Jasmine Revolution. During the first phase of the transition, the UGTT took steps to safeguard the revolution's achievements. This approach signaled the beginning of a new era in the relationship between and among civil society, government, and the public, one that valued cooperation, mediation, and social discourse.⁴⁰

The UGTT and the National Bar Association, for example, held a preliminary conference on the formation of the National Council on January 25, 2011 with 28 civic groups in attendance, including the Tunisian Communist Workers Party, the Patriotic Democratic Movement, and other political parties.⁴¹ After the council was established, an announcement asking for approval from the new administration was made.

The UGTT's balance of independence and institutional engagement bore fruit at several other points in the transition process. For instance, the Committee of the Higher Authority for Realization of the Revolutionary Objectives, Political Reform, and Democratic Change was created in March 2011 through the UGTT's collaboration with 19 communities. Additionally, the UGTT and several CSOs were successful in compelling governments to enact laws, including the Transitional Justice Law in 2013. The Transitional Justice Law was created to address violations of human rights and corruption that occurred between July 1955 and December 2013 to reveal the truth about previous crimes, bring justice to victims, and pursue criminal prosecution for major crimes.⁴²

In 2017, the groups were also successful in getting the government to pass a comprehensive law to address violence against women.⁴³ As a result, the government named a minister in charge of constitutional institutions and civil society. And in its most well-known step, the UGTT in conjunction with three other major CSOs (which together formed the National Dialogue Quartet) helped avert outbreaks of major violence through mediation and facilitating the Tunisian National Dialogue.⁴⁴

Organized labor played less of a role as a mobilizing force in the Armenian transition owing to the historical weakness of the nation's labor movement.⁴⁵ Yet activists who were focused on workers' rights, as well as on a broader critique of the perceived "neoliberalism" of the Pashinyan government, played an important role in continuing to mobilize during the transition. They reported



Tunisia's newly elected constituent assembly holds its inaugural meeting on November 22, 2011, in Tunis. The Islamist Ennahda party won the most seats in the assembly, escalating conflict over the role of Islam in public life. (Photo by Hassene Dridi/AP)

often moderating their critiques to keep open lines of communication with the (more sympathetic) government.⁴⁶

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADDRESSING THE IN-OR-OUT CHALLENGE

Specific measures to address this challenge and the specific actors best positioned to do so will vary across contexts; however, a balance between influences that are internal and external to government appears to be one key to a peaceful political transition to democracy. Activists and opposition figures should take advantage of the opportunities that a transition creates for exerting direct influence on politics and policymaking but should remain sensitive to the potential weakening of an activist movement once a critical portion of the leadership enters formal politics. Democracy is fostered by creating a healthy ecosystem that responds to different pressures emanating from internal and external institutions. This

observation leads to the report's core recommendations on dealing with the in-or-out challenge.

Foster a spectrum of responses. There is no one-size-fits-all answer to the question of whether activists and CSOs should take advantage of the political opening up to engage with or enter government during a political transition. An uncritical embrace of even the most democratic and progressive transitional government is likely to undermine accountability. And historical patterns of marginalization mean that for many groups, engagement with even the most democratic governments may be regarded as abandoning the cause and diluting the solidarity of the movement. On the other hand, a blanket refusal to enter or engage with a transitional government is likely to prevent the government from effectively leading the country through the transition. In Armenia, one strategy that bore fruit was the intentional fostering

of different levels of engagement with the new government. Some figures entered government, others built close relationships with the new government, and still others continued their oppositional stance, pushing the Pashinyan government to fulfill its promises of reform. Activists consulted broadly across the spectrum of civil society and learned from other cases of transition in the region, particularly Georgia and Ukraine in the mid-2000s, to avoid massive co-optation of civil society by the new government.⁴⁷

A history of civil society action may create space for this spectrum of responses to arise more or less naturally. In settings with a history of significant repression or co-optation of civil society, however, there are likely to be major gaps in the engagement spectrum that need to be filled. Activists and external supporters should examine the civil society landscape to identify these gaps and then funnel support to relevant proto-organizations that have the potential to fill them.

As an example, and in light of the findings on the importance of organized labor's support to a peaceful transition, interventions that help build labor solidarity and union organizing would be expected to yield significant benefits. Armenian activists have taken this to heart, focusing on supporting "collective self-organization and trade unions."⁴⁸ In cases where organized labor is already a significant public force, other areas of focus may take priority. In particular, one fruitful area of endeavor obtaining in many cases is mobilizing among groups that have historically been marginalized, since they are typically among the least resourced groups in civil society. The key guiding principle should be to identify and fill the gaps in the engagement spectrum.

Develop a comprehensive dialogue on government engagement. A rich and coordinated strategy across social movements, CSOs, and political opposition forces for engaging with the transitional government encourages

the major players in civil society to come together and discuss their varying approaches. While such a recommendation is simple to formulate, it is often difficult to implement, as divisions within civil society and opposition political spaces may be significant. During a political transition, differences over ideology, objectives, and strategy with respect to government engagement are heightened. The question of attitude toward new transitional authorities is likely to be among the most contentious of these issues.

These differences may lead to combative dialogues with vigorous disagreement about the appropriateness of individuals' and organizations' chosen strategies. Such conflict should not be seen as indicative of failure. The goal of dialogue should not be to force all actors to adopt similar attitudes toward the transitional government but to understand one another's perspectives and find commonalities in strategy and approach that can be leveraged to achieve synergy.

Conduct a strategic analysis of government engagement. One key component of successfully balancing engagement and distance from transitional governments is a careful and comprehensive strategic analysis of the avenues for engagement and most critical areas for maintaining distance. A broad spectrum of civil society responses is unlikely to develop effectively without an underlying intentional strategy to support it. Thus, it is insufficient merely to foster a variety of organizations that can engage in a spectrum of responses, and to have those organizations engage in dialogue with one another. There should be regular forums for developing careful analysis and coordinating strategic responses. For example, in Armenia in the months following the revolution, the Eurasia Partnership Foundation Armenia organized a three-day gathering to strategize over how civil society could most effectively interact with the new Armenian government and support a long-term vision of a new, democratic Armenia.⁴⁹

Challenge 3: Balancing Autonomy and External Support



The third challenge concerns the relationship between domestic civic actors and the international community. Political transitions arising out of nonviolent action movements are almost always perceived as democratic “bright spots,” and the international community typically seeks to ensure their success through enhanced levels of foreign assistance. The Obama administration allocated over half a billion dollars to support the Tunisian transition from 2011 to 2014.⁵⁰ The World Bank and the European Union also provided tens of millions of dollars and euros to promote democracy in Tunisia.⁵¹

US support for the transition in Armenia was more modest but still amounted to tens of millions of dollars, much of it directed toward support for free and fair elections.⁵² The EU and other international donors have also provided extensive support directed at both the Pashinyan government and Armenian civil society.⁵³

Nor are foreign governments and major international donor organizations interested in democracy the only relevant external actors. An extensive and highly active diaspora community has long played a key role in Armenian politics. While established diaspora organizations played a less prominent role in the Armenian transition, younger diasporans were major actors both in the initial nonviolent resistance campaign and during the subsequent transition.⁵⁴ And while this report focuses on domestic actors’ relationships with external supporters interested in promoting democracy, it is worth noting that international actors opposed to democracy also may play a key role in shaping transition dynamics. Armenia’s long-standing relationship with

Russia, for example, has been a major factor shaping the post–Velvet Revolution transition. While intense diplomatic efforts by the Pashinyan government appear to have averted any significant effort by the Russian government to roll back the transition, the Kremlin has attempted to use its leverage over Armenia to ensure that a democratic transition does not result in a closer relationship between Armenia and the West.⁵⁵

External support can help fill critical gaps in local capacity, particularly in resolving the many technical challenges associated with a transition from an authoritarian regime. Running a free and fair election, fostering genuine political debate in a democratically elected parliament, and engaging in advocacy campaigns are all areas in which local skills and resources may simply not be available. For example, Tunisia’s 2011 constituent assembly elections faced several implementation challenges owing to a lack of technical capacity and expertise, from a media strategy that “became something of a national joke” to a poorly regulated campaign finance system that led to accusations of vote buying.⁵⁶ Support from a variety of international actors that included training political party members and training and providing election observers helped ensure the election’s success despite the shortfall in local resources and know-how.⁵⁷

External support also comes with known risks, however, and the relationship between activists and civil society figures and their external supporters during a political transition must be handled with care. External supporters, even those who, with the best of intentions,

approach activists and CSOs during a political transition after a nonviolent action campaign with offers of assistance, may undermine the activists' objectives if the external supporters' modes of support have a negative impact on what civic actors do best.

As an example, external funding may promote competition rather than collaboration between different segments of civil society or between nascent political parties. This competition may itself exacerbate the potentially polarizing dynamics of the first challenge. Huge amounts of international funding flowing into local CSOs can also undermine public trust, increase perceptions of corruption (or foster actual corruption), and reduce effective collaboration. This was particularly the case during the transition in Tunisia, when civil society leaders reported widespread perceptions of mismanagement and unfair favoritism on the part of foreign donors.⁵⁸ This situation increased the suspicion of foreign manipulation of the political transition, even though attitudes in Tunisia toward foreign funding were generally positive.⁵⁹

Even when handled with perfect financial transparency, massive amounts of foreign aid may threaten civil society's autonomy, redirecting CSOs' priorities away from the issues of deepest concern to their constituencies and toward the priorities of international actors.⁶⁰ A growing dependence on donor money in Tunisia undermined several organizations' work during the transition. The interactions between the donors and the local organizations weakened their sense of solidarity and interfered with their capacity for communicating and maintaining mutual trust. The surge in foreign money to CSOs after 2011 has raised concerns with the public about the goals of these organizations and whether they are working with other nations to advance a disruptive political or religious agenda.⁶¹ Some have reported that the massive influx of cash transformed major CSOs into "business-minded" groups primarily dedicated to obtaining grants rather than to pursuing their missions.⁶²

Armenia has seen similar trends. Activists have described a rise in "conformist NGOs" hesitant to engage in the confrontational work that could sustain the gains of the Velvet Revolution out of fear of losing international donor funding. Some have even called the actions of organizations that accepted international funding "dead activism."⁶³ Competition over international funding also increased perceptions in the past that activists and civil society groups in Armenia were functioning more as profit-seekers than as defenders of human rights and public interests.⁶⁴

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADDRESSING THE AUTONOMY AND EXTERNAL SUPPORT CHALLENGE

Lessons from past democratic transitions initiated after nonviolent action campaigns, including those in Tunisia and Armenia, suggest a few key ways for external donors to provide financial and technical support while not compromising the autonomy, legitimacy, or influence of local activists and civil society groups.

Promote local ownership and direction. External supporters have their own priorities, timelines, and objectives, which may or may not overlap with those of local activists seeking to promote a peaceful transition to democracy. The translation of external supporters' priorities into internal political dynamics will always be imperfect and, as a result of the typical power imbalance between domestic activists and external supporters, will likely reflect more the preferences of the external actors. Ensuring that support flows to the needs and preferences of local actors requires constant vigilance on the part of external actors to be sure they defer to local partners.

This need for deference goes beyond major donors simply directing funds to local organizations. Rather, what is required is a real change in the external-internal dynamic such that local partners can truly control the direction of externally funded programming. Efforts to put substance behind long-standing rhetoric



People visit a polling station in Yerevan during Armenia's parliamentary election on June 20, 2021. The election took place after a renewal of armed conflict with Azerbaijan put the postrevolutionary government of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan at risk. (Photo by Sergei Grits/AP)

on localizing the provision of aid (such as USAID's vision for local development) are good steps in this direction.⁶⁵ Similarly, international partners need to incorporate avenues for local agency early on, in the initial program design phase. Codesign processes, such as listening campaigns and codesign workshops, should be foundational elements of future foreign assistance programs and lay the groundwork for local ownership in the implementation phase.

Local ownership also requires more than an elite local partner based in a capital city. During the Tunisian transition, for example, Tunisian civil society criticized international donors for focusing almost exclusively on Tunis, and for the halting pace of decentralization.⁶⁶ Removing bureaucratic hurdles and intentionally spreading out assistance efforts to more equitably

represent constituencies across the urban-rural divide are critical steps toward ensuring local ownership of a political transition.

Provide support through training and convening.

The challenge of activists needing to retain autonomy while accepting and directing foreign aid during a political transition can be eased if local partners view each other as resources rather than competitors for external money and attention, and here external supporters can play a key role. Providing forms of support that enable dialogue, open communication channels, and facilitate strategic planning can be an effective way to encourage cooperation over resources. Research on external support for non-violent action broadly shows that training and providing opportunities for convening are among the

most effective means of supporting activist groups, and evidence from Tunisia specifically upholds this general finding.⁶⁷

The impact of training and convening may be heightened further by focusing such sessions on ways to address the two other challenges discussed in this report. For example, international efforts to fill the gaps in the existing civil society landscape or to train civil society actors in the different types of engagement that are possible in their political environment could help local actors understand better the kind of relationship they want to have with the transitional government.

A final concern is that while there is no shortage of interested local partners—individuals and groups—that could both benefit from and enhance externally supported training sessions and convenings, inequities in access to global funding sources exclude many otherwise promising local actors. International partners should therefore embrace creative funding models to initiate and build stronger links between local CSOs that could facilitate training sessions and donors that have both expertise and resources but lack local connections. For instance, external partners could develop easily accessible platforms that match local organizations with relevant international funders.

Conclusion



Supporting the bright spots of democratic transitions initiated through nonviolent action is one of the greatest needs of the early 21st century. Much attention has been paid to the needs of the global community as it strives to combat democratic backsliding. Yet the sad reality of the current moment is that democratic backsliding and autocratization across many formerly strong democracies show without a doubt that merely preventing democratic backsliding is insufficient.

There is an urgent need for the peaceful transformation of autocratic and pseudo-democratic political regimes. One of the most effective ways to achieve these peaceful transformations historically has been through nonviolent action. Few transitions achieve even a minimal democracy without it.⁶⁸ The vision of a just, peaceful, and rights-respecting international order will never be realized if the moments in which ordinary people use nonviolent action to achieve political breakthroughs do not result in a sustainable democracy. Recent events in Tunisia and Armenia highlight the need for continued vigilance, even when a transition period may be

seen as having come to a close. The emergence of a democracy at the end of a transition, such as in Tunisia in 2014, is no guarantee of its long-term permanence. Yet the patterns of continued mobilization, a range of strategic forms of engagement with government, and dense, interlocking networks of relations among different social movements, CSOs, and political parties can provide some degree of resilience or capacity to react when challenges to democracy arise. These elements are especially pertinent to the transitional period, though they often require a strong foundation in the pre-transitional period and contribute to a robust transitional and post-transitional government.

The challenges and recommendations detailed in this report provide clear direction for how those going through a political transition rooted in civilian nonviolent action, and the broader international community interested in supporting such internal efforts, can effectively navigate the key relationships of the transition period and help turn an initial democratic bright spot into an enduring beacon.

Notes

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NO. 188 | MAY 2023

Political transitions that originate in bottom-up nonviolent action are more likely to result in a lasting democracy than transitions achieved through the violent overthrow of an existing regime or top-down liberalization. Yet the activists and organizers who have initiated these transitions face significant challenges in navigating the path from an initial political breakthrough to a new democracy. This report draws on the examples of transitions in Tunisia and Armenia to illustrate three of these challenges: avoiding political fragmentation and a decline into violence, deciding whether and how to engage with the transitional government, and retaining autonomy while working with external supporters. The challenges reflect and are embedded in an expanding range of relationships, from those internal to the activist movement to relationships with foreign donors, and the solutions to the challenges are similarly to be found in how those relationships are managed.

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