

Adopting a Movement Mindset to Address the Challenge of Fragility

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Fragile states, which run the gamut from states in the throes of violent conflict, to those where institutions have collapsed and the state is deemed to have failed, to “strong authoritarian” states that rule with an iron fist, are marked by severe trust deficits between citizens and governments, and between different groups in society. In these inherently unstable and conflict-prone contexts, it can be difficult to see how ordinary citizens can organize and mobilize nonviolently to achieve more inclusive and participatory political processes and accountable governance. Yet, local actors and local solutions must drive effective responses to state fragility.

COLLECTIVE ACTION AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN FRAGILE STATES

Collective citizen action in places such as Colombia, Liberia, Guatemala, Nigeria, and Afghanistan has

played a key role in challenging exclusionary, predatory governance and in advancing peace processes. Collective action refers to action taken by a group of people whose goal is to enhance their status and achieve common objectives. Collective action is often manifested in social movements, which are made up of fluid groupings of different actors, including individuals, organizations, and networks, which share a common identity and use tactics including marches, vigils, boycotts, sit-ins, strikes, monitoring, and other nonviolent methods.¹ More than ad hoc, uncoordinated protests, social movements display a degree of politicization and have change-oriented goals. Their methods are extra-institutional and may involve nonviolent confrontation with power-holders to open up new democratic spaces. They have some degree of organization and can draw on a critical mass of supporters. They have at least some strategic continuity over time, even if their specific goals, leaderships, and collective action methods change.²

The **Fragility Study Group** is an independent, non-partisan, effort of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the Center for a New American Security, and the United States Institute of Peace. The chair report of the study group, *U.S. Leadership and the Challenge of State Fragility*, may be accessed here: <http://www.usip.org/fragilityreport>. This brief is part of a series authored by scholars from the three institutions that build on the chair report to discuss the implications of fragility on existing U.S. tools, strategic interests, and challenges. The complete list of policy briefs may be accessed here: <http://www.usip.org/fragilitypolicybriefs>.

Grass-roots campaigns and movements around the world have advanced civil and political rights, challenged environmental degradation, promoted economic justice, resisted corruption, and challenged institutionalized exclusion and discrimination.³ Corruption, whose link to protracted violent conflict is well-established, has galvanized a number of citizen-led movements in fragile and conflict-affected states.⁴ The social movement against corruption launched in 2009 by Transparency International Bangladesh in 34 districts achieved successes in holding government officials accountable for health, education, and other services. Integrity Watch Afghanistan has empowered local communities to engage in monitoring hundreds of donor-funded reconstruction projects, leading to dozens of exposed and resolved corruption cases. In Kenya, Muslims for Human Rights (MUHURI) has mobilized communities in conflict-prone Mombasa to audit constituency development funds in order to curb their misuse and fight poverty.⁵ Last year in Guatemala, a broad-based national movement used boycotts, strikes, protests, and digital mobilization to challenge entrenched government corruption, forcing a kleptocratic president to step down without violence. This was a remarkable achievement for a country that had endured over three decades of civil war and that even now has one of the highest homicide rates in the Western Hemisphere.⁶

Historically, major nonviolent campaigns have been twice as effective as armed struggle in achieving major goals, including in contexts marked by high levels of violence and repression. Erica Chenoweth and I examined 323 major violent and nonviolent campaigns from 1900-2006 and found that the nonviolent campaigns succeeded, in terms of stated political objectives, about 54 percent of the time, compared with 27 percent for violent campaigns.⁷ Chenoweth and I furthermore concluded that nonviolent

campaigns are positively associated with both democratic and peaceful societies. The power of nonviolent campaigns and movements comes from broad and diverse participation: When large numbers of people collectively assert (or withhold) their economic, social, and political power from state or nonstate authorities, this can shift power to the marginalized and excluded and incentivize new behavior from within existing structures and institutions.

Nonviolent citizen-led movements have also helped end armed conflicts that have been both a cause and a consequence of fragility. Women have been at the forefront of a number of them. In Argentina, where a military dictatorship used state terrorism to wage a decadelong “dirty war,” a group of mothers whose sons had been “disappeared” began to march on the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires in 1977 holding placards with pictures of their missing sons. Their public act of defiance in front of the presidential palace put a spot-

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light on the human rights abuses and inspired further collective action. The junta was later forced from power nonviolently. In Liberia, a country that endured years of brutal civil war between armed rebel groups and the Charles Taylor government, a group of Christian and Muslim women came together and organized a brave direct action campaign that pressured the warring parties to sign a peace agreement in 2003. Peace vigils, sex strikes, and sit-ins were a few of their tactics to create alternative spaces of debate outside official arenas while sustaining pressure on the belligerents.⁸

It needs to be acknowledged that not all social movements espouse socially and politically progressive goals. Mobilization that occurs along ethnic, racial, or other identity lines that advances exclusive ideologies, which occurred as part of the Hutu

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slaughter of the Tutsis during the Rwandan genocide, can be highly dangerous. In fragile contexts, there are legitimate concerns that protests could destabilize the status quo and result in clashes between civilians and authorities. The 2011 Arab Spring popular uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain, which varied in terms of the degree and duration of the nonviolent (compared with violent) resistance, disrupted the status quo on the way to producing very different outcomes.

At the same time, quantitative research challenges the assumption that mass political action in fragile states necessarily contributes to government instability. One study, based on analysis of data produced in the World Values Survey that compared 27 fragile states (16 democracies and 11 autocracies) with 49 states considered stable, found:

Protest in fragile democracies does not represent a backlash against democracy or even the government in power, but rather it is similar in many regards to the background and motivation of activists in stable democracies. Fragile democracies face multiple challenges in consolidating and institutionalizing the regime, and deepening the quality of democratic institutions. But the profile of protestors suggests that this should function as a positive channel of expression and mobilization of civil society.⁹

In contexts where notions of citizenship and social trust are weak, evidence that individuals are sufficiently motivated to engage in collective action, that they understand their rights, and that they can find common ground with other people are net positives. In fragile contexts, the ability of social movements to bridge deep social divisions (based on race, ethnicity, religion, etc.) and to invite large-scale participation in pursuit of shared goals is particularly salient.

OBSTACLES TO COLLECTIVE ACTION IN FRAGILE STATES

Still, the challenges of civic mobilization in fragile and conflict-affected states are formidable. Civil society in these contexts is often weak, social trust between citizens is diminished, and effective mobilizers in repressive or fragile contexts are often the first to be targeted.¹⁰ Because they are capable of forging shared agendas across identity groups, of mobilizing people to challenge violence, and of building up countervailing

power in situations marked by power asymmetries, they are regarded as threats by power-holders.

This is particularly the case in authoritarian regimes, and authoritarianism is on the rise globally. Over the last 10 years we have seen dramatic reversals in respect for democratic principles around the world. Aggregate scores in civil and political liberties have declined in each of the past 11 years. Between 2000 and 2015, democracy broke down in 27 countries across various regions, from Kenya and Thailand to Turkey and Russia.¹¹ A 2015 Freedom House report stated that the “acceptance of democracy as the world’s dominant form of government – and of an international system built on democratic ideals – is under greater threat than at any point in the last 25 years.”¹²

While there is no simple relationship between authoritarianism and fragility, it is worth noting that highly repressive autocracies are the most likely to experience state failure. In the 2016 Fragile States Index, all eight countries listed as “very high alert”¹³ are also designated as “not free” in the 2016 Freedom in the World report.

Studies have shown that how governments treat their citizens is a key determinant of how they behave internationally. Not only are democracies less likely to fight wars against each other, they are more likely to form alliances and cooperate with other democracies than with autocracies.¹⁴ Given the necessity of bilateral and multilateral partnerships to addressing challenges posed by fragility, the quality of domestic politics matters greatly. The trend of authoritarian regimes allying with fragile and “at risk” states, and increasingly sharing approaches and technologies to suppress dissent, renders the fragility challenge even tougher.¹⁵

THE NEED FOR CHANGE: WHY ARE WE FALLING SHORT TODAY?

The United States government (USG) is falling short in addressing the power asymmetries and governance failures that underlie fragile states and responding to the barriers to collective citizen action. Interagency planning and response to resurgent authoritarianism and closing civic space is weak, security assistance is insufficiently tied to governance benchmarks, and those local actors who are best positioned to mobilize and advance more inclusive, participatory political processes receive inadequate attention.

USG short-term security imperatives (or perceived imperatives), such as counterterrorism operations or peacekeeping support, often overshadow longer-term investments in inclusive political processes, legitimate institutions, and strong civil societies. President Barack Obama's Stand With Civil Society initiative¹⁶ and the 2014 Presidential Memorandum on Deepening and Strengthening Engagement with Civil Society¹⁷ have focused on strengthening civic space and making support for civil society an interagency priority. While both were significant advances, these efforts are often not aligned with Department of Defense (DoD)-led security cooperation programs and initiatives with partner countries. Although Presidential Policy Directive 23 (PPD 23) provides the structure to bring institution-building, rule of law, and respect for human rights together with training and weapons provision, in reality PPD 23 has not been implemented. Security assistance is bifurcated within the USG, complicating policy coordination. The inability to transfer funds readily between USG departments makes it even more likely that security assistance is decoupled from efforts to advance good governance and democratic development.

This paper has highlighted the importance of grass-roots actors and movements to addressing the exclusionary and illegitimate practices and institutions that characterize fragile states. Making governance more inclusive requires "building up the countervailing power of those who are excluded." That means bolstering support to the grass roots, since, as one study found, "transformative social change tends to come not from apolitical and technocratic NGOs but from politically influential actors such as social movements [that] external donors are usually uncomfortable supporting."¹⁸ Another quantitative study of 100 civic engagement initiatives concluded that advances toward inclusive politics, governance, and development – through constructing citizenship and rights, challenging exclusionary practices, enabling collective action, and demanding that decision-makers be held to account – is most often accomplished not by professional NGOs undertaking advocacy campaigns, but by citizen-centered organizations and movements.¹⁹

Yet, a 2015 CIVICUS study found that local civil society organizations received just 0.2 percent of official development assistance.²⁰ Although Western aid agencies and other donors have supported collective

action initiatives focused on social accountability,²¹ historically they have paid little attention to social movements. Funding mainly goes to large, high-profile NGOs, whereas those on the front lines of change have minimal access to resources. There are a number of reasons for this, including the fluid, unpredictable, and nonlinear nature of social movement organizing; the movements' focus on political issues and power asymmetries; their lack of formal institutional structures; and their use of extra-institutional (and sometimes extra-legal) direct action tactics such as protests, boycotts, and strikes as a means of exerting voice and shifting power.²² Donors are concerned about governments' reaction to support for groups that could be perceived as confrontational or as "opposition" and are justified in asking whether support for civic groups is worth the risk of being forced to stop operations in the country.²³

Meanwhile, civil society's necessary role in strengthening the social compact and addressing the drivers of fragility has gotten much harder as space for civil society has shrunk and authoritarianism has surged. Just as the weakness of integrated analysis, planning, and preventative action is hampering the USG's ability to effectively respond to fragility and its drivers, the government's uncoordinated, haphazard response to the surge of authoritarianism globally is further weakening the US response.

Counterterrorism and other strategic priorities often require cooperation with unsavory regimes. Focusing on immediate pragmatic issues, however, does not mean abandoning governance reform and democratic development. Nor does it mean, in instances where the U.S. government has strong security or counterterrorism relationships with nondemocratic allies or countries in transition, that those relationships cannot be leveraged to advance democratic norms and practices. Given that U.S. assistance to foreign military, police, and other security forces has jumped from \$5 billion in 2000 to \$15 billion in 2015, according to the Security Assistance Monitor dataset,²⁴ integrated planning assumes even greater importance.

RECOMMENDATIONS: ACHIEVING AN IMPROVED APPROACH

In line with the recommendations put forward by the Chair Report of the Fragility Study Group,²⁵ an improved USG approach to fragility would elevate the

importance of responding proactively to democratic decline and authoritarian resurgence globally and dedicate more resources to creating enabling environments for nonviolent citizen-led movements.

At the National Security Council (NSC) level, an improved USG approach would view governance and democracy initiatives as means of addressing emphasize stronger linkages between fragility, governance, and democracy. This requires greater integration of the security community in efforts to strengthen civil society and democratic development. This was envisaged as a fourth “pillar” of the Stand With Civil Society initiative but was never implemented. USG, which currently holds the presidency of the multilateral Community of Democracies (CD) and has recently launched a “Democracy and Security Dialogue” co-chaired by former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and former Tunisian Prime Minister Mehdi Juma, should use the presidency to support greater integration of security cooperation and democracy assistance both within the USG and among CD member states.

The NSC should coordinate integrated analysis, planning, and action that focus on a set of priority countries that are already fragile or at risk of becoming fragile – resembling an integrated campaign strategy. Part of that effort should include “democracy action plans” developed by the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), which would focus on priority countries, including authoritarian countries or those whose democratic backsliding would pose the greatest risk for violent conflict and instability. Those plans, best developed at embassies with input from civil society, should contain Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC)-like benchmarks for security cooperation that incentivize partner-nation shifts away from repression, exclusionary policies, and systemic corruption. Transfer authorities within USG should be expanded so that DoD can transfer funds to USAID and the State Department to support civilian programming focused on institution-building, good governance, and civil society.

The USG’s human resources policy should incentivize excellence in supporting civil society and democracy as part of an overall effort to prevent and mitigate fragility. Ambassadors should be selected based, in part, on demonstrated excellence in supporting human rights and democracy. Promotion

criteria across the interagency should be linked to the launch of major policy initiatives focused on civil society and democracy, such as Stand With Civil Society, and high-level awards should be bestowed on particularly deserving diplomats and development practitioners. An increased democracy and governance budget should support the creation of 30 to 40 new State/USAID positions for officers who are assigned to key embassies to help integrate human rights, governance, and democracy perspectives and approaches in country planning and operations, while expanding the embassies’ outreach to a broader swath of civil society.

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their voices and efforts at the local, national, regional, and international levels. This means expanding beyond the realm of professional, technocratic NGOs. Adopting a “movement mindset” would mean recognizing and exploiting the comparative advantages among outside actors working with civil society to more effectively engage informal civic actors and help them forge strategic alliances with traditional NGOs and governments. For example, the Civil Society Innovation Initiative, a multistakeholder initiative being spearheaded by USAID and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) that is establishing regional hubs, should focus on building bridges between the grass roots and these other actors.

While providing direct financial support to

movement actors is inadvisable in some cases, since it could jeopardize their safety and local legitimacy, the United States and its governmental and nongovernmental partners have a wide array of tools to support an enabling environment for movement actors. These tools can also strengthen connectivity between different parts of civil society, and between governments and civil society. A World Bank study concluded that “in order to support civic mobilization in fragile and post-conflict settings, it is essential to analyze social networks carefully to identify those with the potential to mobilize others. Where such mobilizers do not seem to exist, a strategy can be to identify actors who could potentially act as mobilizers and support their technical capacity.”²⁶

Building an ecosystem of support for movements involves doubling down on protecting citizens’ basic rights to speech, assembly, and association. The Civic Space Initiative, a coalition that includes the freedom of expression non-profit Article 19, the World Movement for Democracy at the National Endowment for Democracy, CIVICUS, and the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, launched a “right to protest” initiative in 2015 that is focused on strengthening the legal environment for nonviolent protest activity, which is protected under international human rights law. This initiative should be backed by increased investment in the leadership and capacities of activists and community organizers. Movement-building involves skills that can be learned and transferred across cultures, facilitated by organizations such as Rhize, ActionAid, and the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict.

Movements have unique attributes, discussed earlier, that make them difficult to support through normal donor mechanisms. Flexible funding mechanisms that are capable of providing “surged” support when movements need it most are particularly helpful. USAID’s Office of Transition Initiatives has the most flexible support mechanisms in the U.S. government. Longer-term support mechanisms should also be developed, ideally in partnership with private-sector actors. In many contexts it is neither desirable nor strategic for the USG to provide material assistance to movement actors. Private foundations such as Ford, Open Society, and Hewlett are better placed to do this, though this should not preclude State and USAID from experimenting with mechanisms to better support grass-roots actors, including as part of

civil society awards and in conjunction with research about what works.²⁷

At embassies in priority countries, supporting platforms for grass-roots actors to engage with government reformers would help improve trust between these groups and help movements translate effective mobilization into policy changes. This could potentially be done in conjunction with the multi-stakeholder Open Government Partnership. As described in *A Diplomat’s Handbook for Democracy Development Support*,²⁸ diplomats have often been effective connectors between government officials and civil society leaders, including activists, who otherwise would have no standing with those governments. The accompanying handbook for security professionals, *Military Engagement: Influencing Armed Forces Worldwide to Support Democratic Transitions*, offers concrete tools, ranging from military education to

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bilateral and multilateral military exercises, to encourage democratic norms and behaviors in militaries from non-democratic countries.²⁹ These convening opportunities should be expanded and strengthened to help facilitate joint solutions to fragility challenges.

CONCLUSION

Systematic exclusion is a major driver of fragility, and collective citizen action is one of the few mechanisms that really address those issues by redressing power asymmetries and exclusionary mechanisms. Organized citizen action plays an important role in both incentivizing reforms and strengthening social trust, while opening up new political spaces in an era of resurgent authoritarianism. A USG approach that strategically integrated security cooperation with diplomacy and democratic development tools,

emphasized supporting an enabling environment for grass-roots mobilization, and amplified the voices of local movement actors would be a significant step forward in addressing fragility.

NOTES

1. Nonviolent action scholar Gene Sharp famously identified 198 methods of nonviolent action, a list that has been vastly expanded with the rise of social media and expansion of human creativity. See G. Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action: Part Two - The Methods of Nonviolent Action* (Boston: Extending Horizons Books, 1973).
2. David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule, and Hanspeter Kriesi, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* (Maiden, MA: Blackwell, 2004).
3. Hundreds of these cases, including how they emerged, whom they mobilized, the tactics they used, and the outcomes are chronicled in the Global Nonviolent Action Database housed at Swarthmore University. See Global Nonviolent Action Database, <http://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/>.
4. Shaazka Beyerle, "Civil Resistance and the Corruption-Violence Nexus," *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*, Volume XXXVIII, Number 2, June 2011; and Helene Grandvoinnet, Ghazia Aslam, and Shomikho Raha, *Opening the Black Box: The Contextual Drivers of Social Accountability* (Washington: World Bank Group, 2015), <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/21686/9781464804816.pdf?sequence=4>.
5. A summary of these and other examples can be found in Shaazka Beyerle, "People Power Versus Corruption: the Impunity-Authoritarian Nexus," in Mat Burrows and Maria J. Stephan, eds., *Is Authoritarianism Staging a Comeback?* Atlantic Council, 2014.
6. Azam Ahmed and Elisabeth Malkin, "Otto Pérez Molina of Guatemala Is Jailed Hours After Resigning Presidency," *The New York Times*, September 3, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/04/world/americas/otto-perez-molina-guatemalan-president-resigns-amid-scandal.html>.
7. Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).
8. See "Liberian Women Act to End Civil War," *Global Nonviolent Action Database*, 2010., <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/liberian-women-act-end-civil-war-2003>; and *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*, Dir. Gini Reticker. Fork Films LLC, 2008.
9. Pippa Norris, "Political Protest in Fragile States," Paper for the International Political Science Association World Congress, Fukuoka, Japan, July 13, 2006, 14.
10. Ibid., 210.
11. Larry Diamond, "Democracy in Decline, How Washington Can Reverse the Tide," *Foreign Affairs*, June/July 2016, 151.
12. Freedom in the World 2015, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2015#.V74E-U3fPVI>.
13. Those "very high alert" countries are the Democratic Republic of Congo, Chad, Syria, Sudan, Yemen, Central African Republic, South Sudan, and Somalia.
14. Andrea Kendall-Taylor, "How Democracy's Decline Would Undermine the International Order," CSIS, July 15, 2016, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/how-democracy%E2%80%99s-decline-would-undermine-international-order>.
15. Larry Diamond, Mark Plattner, and Christopher Walker, eds., *Authoritarianism Goes Global*, 2016.
16. The Stand With Civil Society initiative, officially launched by the Obama administration on the sidelines of the 2013 U.N. General Assembly meeting, currently consists of three pillars: 1. Working with governments to promote a legal enabling environment for civil society and advancing open government; 2. Coordinating diplomatic responses when governments impose restrictions on civil society activities; 3. Engaging besieged civil society with innovative and effective tools. A fourth pillar, focused on integrating security and democracy approaches, was never formally adopted.
17. 2014 Presidential Memorandum can be accessed at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/23/presidential-memorandum-civil-society>.
18. Cited in Brendan Halloran and Walter Flores, "Mobilizing Accountability: Citizens, Movements, and the State," Transparency & Accountability Initiative, 2015.
19. Fung, A. and E. Wright (2003). *Countervailing Power in Empowered Participatory Governance. Deepening Democracy: Institutional Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance*. A. Fung and E. Wright. London, UK, Verso: 259-289.
20. A new report published by the International Human Rights Funders Group (IHRFG) and Foundation Center found that in 2013, of the \$2.3 billion given by donors to support human rights, the amount allocated to grass-roots organizing was a paltry 2 percent. See International Human Rights Funders Group and Foundation Center Report, 2016, <http://humanrightsfunding.org/>.
21. For an overview, assessment, and critique of these social accountability initiatives, see Jonathan Fox, "Social Accountability: What does the Evidence Really Say?" *Global Partnership for Social Accountability Working Paper*, The World Bank, 2014.
22. See Maria J. Stephan, Sadaf Lakhani, and Nadia Naviwala, "Aiding Civil Society: A Movement Mindset," USIP Special Report, February 23, 2015, <http://www.usip.org/publications/2015/02/23/aid-civil-society-movement-mindset>.
23. Ibid.
24. The Security Assistance Monitor dataset can be accessed at <http://securityassistance.org>.
25. Chair Report of the Fragility Study Group, "U.S. Leadership and the Challenge of State Fragility."
26. Lucy Earle, "Literature Review on the Dynamics of Social Movements in Fragile and Conflict-Affected States," Governance and Social Development Resource Center Issues Paper, August 2011, 211, <http://www.gsdr.org/docs/open/eirs13.pdf>.
27. USAID's Office for Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance funded research in 2014 on understanding social

movements, which focused on the role of social media during the Arab Spring. UK DFID is currently funding a five-year study conducted by the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Sussex focused on collective civic action in fragile contexts. Still, studies on grassroots movements and how external actors can best provide assistance are few and far between.

28. Jeremy Kinsman and Kurt Bassuener, *A Diplomat's Handbook for Democracy Development Support* (Waterloo, Ontario: The Centre for International Governance Innovation, 2013), https://www.cigionline.org/sites/default/files/diplomats_handbook_excerpt_0.pdf.
29. Dennis C. Blair, *Military Engagement: Influencing Armed Forces Worldwide to Support Democratic Transitions*. Washington, DC: Brookings, March 2013. Accessed at: <https://www.brookings.edu/book/military-engagement-2/>.



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