

Understanding the Struggle

The Foundation for Democratic Resistance

The first pillar of the Playbook for Liberty. Anchored in Principles 1 through 5 of the WLC Adaptations to Counter-Autocracy Strategic Framework (Berlin, November 2025).

WHY THIS PILLAR EXISTS

Before tactics, understanding

Authoritarianism is not simply a bad government or a temporary political crisis. It is a system of domination. It captures institutions, manipulates truth, spreads fear, divides society, criminalizes dissent, and gradually convinces citizens that freedom is impossible, dangerous, or naive.

For that reason, democratic movements cannot begin with tactics alone. They must begin with understanding. Before deciding what to do, a movement must understand what it is facing, what kind of regime it confronts, how that regime maintains obedience, what divisions it exploits, what fears it manipulates, and what principles must guide democratic action under pressure.

Understanding the Struggle is the first pillar of the Playbook for Liberty because every later decision depends on this foundation. If a movement misunderstands the regime, it may choose the wrong tactics. If it misunderstands society, it may speak only to those already convinced. If it misunderstands repression, it may panic when repression comes. If it misunderstands itself, it may confuse moral conviction with strategic effectiveness.

This pillar brings together the first five principles of the WLC strategic framework: Freedom vs. Oppression, Not Ideologies; A Compass, Not Recipes; The Right Mindset; Strategizing as a Continuous Process; and Nonviolence and the Defense of Democracy. Together they form the diagnostic and ethical foundation on which everything else in the Playbook is built.

WHAT YOU WILL FIND IN THIS PILLAR

- Five strategic principles, each with a guiding insight, a deeper exposition, what it requires in practice, and reflection questions for movements.

- Diagnostic prompts that help leaders adapt these principles to their own regime context.
- Connections to later pillars of the Playbook, where these principles become operational tools.



PRINCIPLE 1

Freedom vs. Oppression, Not Ideologies

Why it matters. Framing the struggle as freedom versus oppression unites diverse actors who would otherwise divide over ideology. It keeps the movement focused on human dignity and self-determination, the universal language that transcends political labels and mobilizes solidarity across borders.

Authoritarian regimes try to define the struggle in ways that divide society: left versus right, religious versus secular, nationalist versus foreign, order versus chaos, East versus West, tradition versus modernity. These frames are useful to the regime because they narrow the democratic coalition and make citizens suspicious of one another. A movement that accepts the regime's framing has already lost half the battle, because the question that decides who joins the struggle is no longer "do you want to live in dignity" but "are you on my political team."

The Playbook for Liberty begins from a different premise: the central struggle is freedom against oppression. This is not a slogan. It is a strategic decision about how to widen the coalition and how to deny the regime its preferred terrain of fight.

This does not erase ideological differences. Democratic movements are naturally pluralistic. They include liberals, conservatives, social democrats, religious believers, secular citizens, workers, students, entrepreneurs, journalists, artists, lawyers, families of political prisoners, exiles, and ordinary citizens who have never thought of themselves as political. What unites them is not agreement on every policy question. What unites them is the conviction that no ruler, party, military clique, or ideological project has the right to destroy human dignity, silence conscience, imprison opponents, monopolize truth, or deny people the right to shape their own future.

This principle is especially important for coalition-building in countries where the regime has spent years polarizing society against an internal enemy. In Nicaragua, Venezuela, Belarus, Russia, Iran, and Cuba, the regime has worked hard to define its opponents as foreign agents, traitors, oligarchs, religious fanatics, or enemies of

the nation. A movement that accepts those categories has accepted the regime's map. A movement that insists on the freedom-versus-oppression frame keeps redrawing the map until ordinary people can recognize themselves on it.

WHAT IT ENTAILS

- Refusing to allow the regime to define the struggle as a fight between two ideological camps.
- Speaking in the language of human dignity, conscience, justice, and self-determination, terms that translate across ideological lines.
- Building coalitions wide enough to include people the activist core would not normally consider allies.
- Recognizing that the goal is not to replace one ideological project with another, but to restore the conditions under which citizens can choose freely.
- Treating human rights and dignity as the non-negotiable floor on which any future political competition will rest.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- › *Which ideological frame is the regime using to divide our society, and how is it working?*
- › *Which potential allies are we currently treating as opponents because of policy disagreements that have nothing to do with the freedom struggle?*
- › *Does the language we use in public communications open or close the coalition we want to build?*
- › *Could a religious conservative, a labor unionist, and a liberal entrepreneur all recognize themselves in our message?*



PRINCIPLE 2

A Compass, Not Recipes

Why it matters. Every authoritarian system is different, so imported blueprints often fail. Seeing strategy as a compass reminds movements to learn from others while staying grounded in their own realities, turning knowledge into adaptability instead of imitation.

No two authoritarian regimes are identical. A strategy that works in a competitive authoritarian regime, where elections still happen and some independent media survives, may be dangerous in a closed dictatorship where every public space is

controlled. A tactic that succeeds during an election cycle may fail after mass arrests have decimated leadership. A protest method that worked in one country may expose activists to disproportionate risk in another. Strategy is local even when knowledge is global.

That is why the Playbook for Liberty must be a compass, not a recipe book. A recipe tells people what to do. A compass helps people understand how to think.

The purpose of the Playbook is not to export formulas from one country to another. It is to help activists compare cases intelligently, ask better questions, and adapt strategic lessons to their own reality. Comparative knowledge matters. Movements should learn from Serbia, Poland, South Africa, Chile, the Philippines, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Belarus, Hong Kong, Iran, Myanmar, and Ukraine, among many others. But comparative learning is not the same as imitation. Each of those cases unfolded under specific conditions: a particular regime structure, a particular civic ecosystem, a particular international moment, a particular generation of leaders. The visible tactic was made possible by invisible conditions, and those conditions rarely travel.

The most common strategic mistake in democratic struggle is copying what was visible in another movement without understanding what was invisible. A street tactic that worked in Belgrade in 2000 may be suicide in Caracas in 2026, not because the tactic is wrong but because the regime has read the same books we have, and is waiting for it. The compass principle is the discipline of asking, every time, what is the same and what is different about our context.

WHAT IT ENTAILS

- Treating comparative case studies as material for reflection, not as blueprints to follow.
- Distinguishing between universal lessons (the importance of unity, of pillars of support, of nonviolent discipline) and context-specific tactics that may not transfer.
- Mapping our own regime's type, civic space, repression level, and social geography before deciding what tactics make sense.
- Adapting, testing, and refining tactics rather than importing them whole.
- Building feedback loops so that what works in our context becomes part of the next iteration of strategy.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- › *What kind of regime are we facing: competitive authoritarian, electoral autocracy, closed dictatorship, hybrid, or something newer?*

- › *What civic space, even narrow, still remains: independent media, religious institutions, professional associations, diaspora networks?*
- › *Which historical case feels closest to ours, and what about our context is genuinely different?*
- › *Which tactics are we using because they worked somewhere else, rather than because they fit here?*



PRINCIPLE 3

The Right Mindset

Why it matters. Movements win not only through courage but through empathy, humility, and learning. Understanding those who support the regime, and questioning our own assumptions, helps build bridges, prevent polarization, and sustain legitimacy over the long struggle.

Democratic struggle requires courage. But courage alone is not enough. Movements also need humility, empathy, curiosity, discipline, patience, and the capacity to learn from people outside their own circles. Without those qualities, courage becomes brittle, and the movement becomes a closed circle that cannot grow.

Authoritarianism does not survive only through fear. It also survives by exploiting real grievances: insecurity, poverty, corruption, social resentment, distrust of elites, fear of instability, fatigue with politics, and disappointment with previous democratic experiences. Many people who tolerate or even support authoritarian rule are not necessarily enemies of freedom. Some are afraid. Some are misinformed. Some depend economically on the regime. Some have been persuaded that democracy brings chaos. Some have never heard a democratic message that speaks to their daily life.

The right mindset does not mean moral relativism. Oppression must still be named clearly. Political prisoners must not be forgotten. Torture, censorship, religious persecution, forced exile, denationalization, and repression must never be normalized. Naming the regime accurately is a duty. But democratic movements must understand the society they seek to persuade, not merely condemn it from a distance. A movement that cannot listen to the people it claims to represent will eventually find itself without those people.

This mindset is especially important for leadership. A democratic leader must be firm in values and flexible in method. Conviction provides direction; humility allows learning. The movement must listen not only to activists, but also to workers, mothers, religious communities, youth, rural citizens, business owners, public employees, migrants, and those who have lost faith in politics. Each of those constituencies sees the regime from a different angle. Each of them holds part of the picture. Leaders who only speak to the already-convinced will mistake the volume of their own circle for the size of the country.

WHAT IT ENTAILS

- Approaching potential allies and persuadable citizens with curiosity rather than judgment.
- Mapping the real grievances the regime exploits and asking whether the democratic alternative speaks to them.
- Treating regime supporters as people who can be reached over time, not as a permanent enemy bloc.
- Developing leaders who are firm in values and flexible in method.
- Building habits of listening across class, region, faith, age, and political background.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- › *Who are we currently failing to reach, and why?*
- › *What real grievances does the regime exploit, and how can a democratic message answer them?*
- › *What language are we using that alienates potential allies without us realizing it?*
- › *How can democracy be connected to the daily concerns of dignity, security, justice, faith, family, opportunity, and national belonging?*
- › *Are our leaders trained to listen, or only to speak?*



PRINCIPLE 4

Strategizing as a Continuous Process

Why it matters. Authoritarian contexts change constantly, so static plans quickly become obsolete. Continuous strategizing builds resilience: it turns

reflection into action, action into feedback, and keeps a movement one step ahead of repression and disillusionment.

Authoritarian regimes learn. They study protests, sanctions, elections, civil resistance, media campaigns, international pressure, and opposition coalitions. They adapt laws, rotate security officials, infiltrate movements, divide coalitions, manipulate information, and alternate between repression and concession. A movement that does not learn continuously will eventually become predictable, and a predictable movement is a movement the regime can manage.

Strategy, therefore, cannot be a document written once. It must be a living discipline. A plan does not guarantee victory, but the absence of a plan guarantees defeat. The work is not to produce a strategy and defend it, but to produce a strategy and revise it as conditions change.

The Playbook for Liberty teaches activists to move through a constant cycle: diagnose, plan, act, observe, learn, adapt, and act again. Every campaign should produce knowledge. Every mistake should produce correction. Every act of repression should produce evidence. Every tactical success should be studied before it is repeated, because tactics that worked once are precisely the tactics the regime is now preparing to defeat.

This is one of the reasons the Playbook will not be a static archive. It is meant to be a living, AI-supported resource that helps movements think in real time, compare cases, assess risks, record lessons, and refine strategy as conditions evolve. Knowledge that does not circulate becomes dead weight. Knowledge that circulates becomes power.

WHAT IT ENTAILS

- Treating strategy as a process, not a document.
- Building disciplined cycles of diagnose, plan, act, observe, learn, adapt.
- Conducting after-action reviews after every major action or campaign cycle.
- Investing in training, facilitation, and strategic coaching, not just in mobilization.
- Documenting lessons in ways that the next generation of leaders can learn from when current leaders are imprisoned, exiled, or exhausted.

STRATEGIC QUESTIONS FOR EVERY CYCLE

- > *What did we expect to happen?*
- > *What actually happened?*
- > *How did the regime respond?*

- › *Did our action build power, or only express frustration?*
- › *Did we expand the coalition or narrow it?*
- › *Did we increase protection or expose people unnecessarily?*
- › *What should we change next time?*



PRINCIPLE 5

Nonviolence and the Defense of Democracy

Principle and Pragmatism

Why it matters. Nonviolent action preserves moral authority while expanding participation and legitimacy. Recognizing extreme exceptions responsibly strengthens, rather than weakens, the ethical core of the movement and affirms that democracy must be defended with discipline, not vengeance.

Nonviolence is both a moral principle and a strategic instrument. Morally, it affirms that democratic movements must not reproduce the logic of domination they oppose. A movement that defeats a dictator by using the dictator's methods has not built a democracy. It has changed the name of the regime. Strategically, nonviolence expands participation, preserves legitimacy, exposes the regime's dependence on coercion, and makes it harder for authoritarian rulers to justify repression to their own citizens, their own security forces, and the wider world.

Nonviolence does not mean passivity. It is not weakness. Organized nonviolent struggle can be disruptive, courageous, disciplined, and powerful. It can mobilize workers, students, families, religious leaders, professionals, artists, and ordinary citizens who would never join a violent struggle. It can shift public sympathy, create moral contrast, and open pathways for defections from the regime's pillars of support. The historical record is consistent: nonviolent campaigns have been roughly twice as likely to succeed as armed alternatives across the modern era, and far more likely to produce democracies that endure.

At the same time, the Playbook addresses this principle with realism. Many activists face brutal repression. Communities may be attacked by police, paramilitaries, gangs, militias, or military forces. People naturally ask how to protect themselves and their families. The framework recognizes that extreme circumstances may raise questions of lawful, defensive action. But the core lesson remains: democratic movements must be disciplined, ethical, and protective of civilian life. Vengeance,

provocation, and tactical indiscipline can destroy legitimacy and give regimes the excuse they seek for wider repression.

Nonviolent discipline is therefore not a sentimental commitment. It is a strategic asset. It is the discipline that converts repression into the regime's liability rather than the movement's defeat. A more detailed treatment of this principle, including the empirical evidence, the operational toolkit, and the institutions that train movements in it, is available in the Playbook training document *Nonviolence and the Defense of Democracy: Principle and Pragmatism*.

WHAT IT ENTAILS

- Treating nonviolence as both a moral principle and a strategic discipline, not as one or the other.
- Training participants to maintain discipline under provocation, including provocation by infiltrators.
- Documenting abuses systematically, so that repression becomes evidence rather than only suffering.
- Building protection plans, rapid response after arrests, and ethical communication under pressure.
- Recognizing the narrow conditions under which lawful, defensive action may be considered: last resort, defensive in character, proportionate, and lawful, all four together.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- › *Are we training participants in nonviolent discipline before actions, or only after problems arise?*
- › *Do we have systematic documentation of abuses, and channels to make that documentation useful internationally?*
- › *How do we respond to provocation, and how do we prepare new participants to respond?*
- › *Are we able to articulate, in our own words, why nonviolent discipline is a source of strength rather than a limitation?*



DIAGNOSTIC

How to use this pillar

The Understanding the Struggle pillar is the entry point into the Playbook for Liberty. It is meant to be used before tactical decisions, not after them. Its function

is to help activists clarify the moral frame, diagnose context, avoid imitation, build the right mindset, establish learning cycles, and preserve democratic discipline.

Used well, this pillar produces a strategic brief, not a generic answer. It tells the movement what kind of regime it faces, what civic space remains, what divisions the regime is exploiting, what mindset the leadership needs to cultivate, what learning cycles need to be in place, and what ethical disciplines must hold under pressure. Subsequent pillars of the Playbook then become operational: Building Power and Strategy, Acting Together, and Winning and Defending the Future.

DIAGNOSTIC PROMPTS

If your movement is just beginning to use this Playbook, start by answering the following questions together as a leadership group. The answers should be revisited at least once per campaign cycle, and any time the regime's posture shifts significantly.

- › *What kind of regime are we facing?*
- › *What civic space, formal or informal, still remains?*
- › *What divisions does the regime exploit, and how do we refuse to accept its framing?*
- › *What is our movement's current capacity, in numbers, leadership, finances, and protection?*
- › *What is our level of risk, and what protection plans are in place?*
- › *What are we trying to achieve in the next twelve months: awareness, protection, mobilization, coalition-building, international advocacy, or transition preparation?*

These questions do not have a single right answer, and the Playbook does not pretend otherwise. They are the questions that disciplined movements ask themselves regularly. The next pillar, Building Power and Strategy, takes the answers as its starting point.



BOTTOM LINE

Five commitments before tactics

Understanding the Struggle is the foundation of the Playbook for Liberty because democratic resistance must begin with clarity. The fight is not ideology against ideology, but freedom against oppression. The Playbook offers a compass, not

recipes. It calls for humility as well as courage, continuous strategizing rather than improvisation, and nonviolent discipline rooted in both principle and pragmatism.

We fight for freedom, not faction.

We learn from others, but do not copy blindly.

We listen beyond our own circles.

We adapt faster than the regime.

And we defend democracy in a way that proves democracy deserves to win.

CONTINUE TO PILLAR II

Pillar II of the Playbook for Liberty, Building Power and Strategy: The Strategic Core, takes the foundation laid here and turns it into power. It covers Principles 6 and 7 of the WLC framework: Know the Enemy and You Win with Power, Not Good Intentions.

Fuerza y fe.

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