WORLD LIBERTY CONGRESS | PLAYBOOK FOR LIBERTY
TRAINING DOCUMENT

Nonviolence and the Defense of Democracy

Principle and Pragmatism

A training document for members of the World Liberty Congress, prepared as part of the Playbook for Liberty curriculum. Anchored in Principle 5 of the WLC Adaptations to Counter-Autocracy Strategic Framework (Berlin, 2025) and the Action Plan 2025-2027.

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1. Why this document exists

Across our network we are hearing the same hard question, sometimes whispered, sometimes shouted: does nonviolence still work? When opposition leaders are jailed, exiled, denationalized, or killed, when entire civic ecosystems are dismantled by decree, when foreign autocracies prop up the regimes we resist, the temptation to abandon nonviolent strategy is real, and we should not pretend otherwise. Frustration is not weakness. It is the rational response of people who have done everything they were told to do and watched the dictatorship grow harder.

This document is written for those people. It is not a sermon. It does not ask anyone to swallow a faith. It asks for something harder: to look at the evidence, to look at the mechanics of how authoritarian power actually breaks, and to ask whether, in our specific circumstances, there is a more effective path than the one we already have. The honest answer in almost every case is no. Nonviolent resistance, properly understood and properly built, remains the best available technology for confronting modern authoritarianism. Not because it is morally pleasant, but because it works more often, costs less in lives, and produces more durable democracies on the other side.

The argument here is therefore pragmatic, not pacifist. The conviction we are asking members of the WLC to hold is not that violence is always wrong (the WLC framework explicitly recognizes that defensive force may be justified, in lawful, proportionate, last-resort form, when all other channels are closed). The conviction is that for the vast majority of struggles against autocracy, the best instrument we

have is the disciplined, organized, strategic withdrawal of consent by large numbers of ordinary people. Everything that follows is a defense of that proposition.

2. The empirical case: what the data actually shows

Until roughly fifteen years ago, the question "does nonviolence work better than armed struggle?" was a debate of intuitions. It is now a question with data. The most rigorous comparative study we have is the work of Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan, whose 2011 book Why Civil Resistance Works examined 323 maximalist resistance campaigns between 1900 and 2006. Their findings were striking enough that they reshaped the field.

Chenoweth and Stephan: the original finding

- Nonviolent campaigns succeeded roughly twice as often as violent campaigns over that century, on the order of 53 percent versus 26 percent.
- Nonviolent campaigns mobilized, on average, around four times as many active participants as violent campaigns in the same context.
- Countries that experienced nonviolent transitions were significantly more likely to be democratic, and to remain democratic, five and ten years later, compared with countries that experienced violent transitions.
- Civil wars and armed insurgencies, even when they win, tend to leave behind militarized successor regimes, weak rule of law, and recurring violence.

Chenoweth would later distill one of the most cited rules of thumb in the field: in the dataset, no campaign that mobilized at least 3.5 percent of the population in active, sustained participation at its peak failed to achieve its goals. This is sometimes called the 3.5 percent rule. It is not a magic threshold and Chenoweth herself has cautioned against treating it as one. It is a useful benchmark for the scale of mobilization that has historically been associated with successful campaigns.

The honest update: things have gotten harder

Anyone defending nonviolence in 2026 must address the elephant in the room. Chenoweth’s own more recent work, including the updated NAVCO data and her 2020 essay The Future of Nonviolent Resistance, shows that success rates for nonviolent campaigns have fallen since around 2010. Different cuts of the data put the post-2010 success rate somewhere in the low-to-mid thirties percent, with violent campaign success rates also falling but staying lower. In other words: nonviolent resistance still outperforms armed struggle. But the absolute environment has gotten worse for everyone.

Why? Several reasons converge:

- Authoritarian learning. Regimes have studied the color revolutions, Otpor, Tahrir, and the Arab uprisings. They have built playbooks of preemption, division, surveillance, and infiltration.
- Transnational autocratic cooperation. China, Russia, Iran, Cuba, Venezuela, Belarus, and Nicaragua now share repression technologies, financial lifelines, propaganda templates, and even personnel. No movement faces only its own regime.
- Digital surveillance. Mass biometric monitoring, spyware, and AI-assisted policing make traditional clandestine organizing more dangerous than at any point in the modern era.
- Fragmented mobilization. Many recent campaigns mobilized large numbers but lacked clear leadership, coherent demands, and a credible vision of the day after. Size without strategy does not win.
- Maximalist, brittle goals. Demanding only "the regime must fall" with no intermediate objectives makes failure binary. Mature campaigns set sequenced milestones.

These findings should not lead us to abandon nonviolent strategy. They should lead us to do it better. The same studies that document the decline also identify what predicts success: broad and diverse participation, clear demands, leadership that survives repression, defections from regime pillars, sustained discipline, and a credible alternative vision. None of those predictors gets stronger when a movement turns to arms. Several of them collapse the moment it does.

What about armed struggle? An honest comparison

It is fair to ask whether the recent decline in nonviolent success means that armed alternatives are doing better. They are not. Across the same period, armed insurgencies have an even lower success rate, longer duration, much higher civilian casualty counts, and a sharply elevated probability of producing a militarized authoritarian successor state rather than a democracy. The post-Arab Spring trajectory of countries that turned to civil war (Syria, Yemen, Libya) tells the story without commentary.

There is a second cost to armed strategies that rarely shows up in the data: the loss of the broad coalition. Nonviolent movements include grandmothers, priests, accountants, doctors, train conductors, and teenagers. Armed movements do not. The moment a struggle becomes violent, ordinary people withdraw from active participation, the coalition shrinks to those willing and able to fight, and the regime gains the narrative gift it has been waiting for. This is not an aesthetic preference. It is a structural law of mass mobilization.

3. How nonviolent action actually works: the mechanics of power

The empirical case tells us that nonviolence works more often. The strategic case explains why. The clearest framework is the one developed by Gene Sharp, refined by Peter Ackerman, Maria Stephan, Hardy Merriman, and operationalized by Srdja Popovic and the team at CANVAS in their work in Serbia and beyond.

The pillars of support: where authoritarian power actually lives

Authoritarian regimes look monolithic from the outside, but they are not. They are sustained by the daily cooperation of dozens of social groups: the military, the police, internal security services, judges and prosecutors, civil servants, the central bank and tax authorities, business elites, state-owned enterprises, religious hierarchies, state and pro-regime media, teachers, doctors, and ordinary workers who keep the lights on, the fuel flowing, and the trains running. Sharp called these the pillars of support.

A regime falls when enough of these pillars stop cooperating. They do not have to defect publicly. They can simply slow down, look the other way, refuse a specific order, retire early, leak a document, fail to deliver. The strategic question for every nonviolent movement is therefore not "how do we beat the dictator," but "which pillar can we move next, and how?" This is a fundamentally different question than the one armed struggle asks, and it leads to a fundamentally different set of tactics.

Sharp’s four mechanisms of change

Sharp identified four ways nonviolent campaigns produce political change. They are worth memorizing because they help diagnose where a campaign is and where it needs to go next.

1. Conversion. The opponent changes their mind because of the moral, emotional, or rational force of the campaign. This is the rarest mechanism and movements should not rely on it.
2. Accommodation. The opponent does not change their mind but concedes specific demands because the cost of refusing has become higher than the cost of accepting. Most negotiated transitions follow this pattern.
3. Nonviolent coercion. The opponent loses so much capacity to act that concessions are no longer voluntary. They are forced. This is what mass strikes, mass noncooperation, and pillar defections produce.
4. Disintegration. The regime collapses because so many of its pillars stop cooperating that it can no longer function as a state. East Germany 1989 and Tunisia 2011 are examples.

Most successful campaigns combine these mechanisms in sequence. They begin with low-risk, high-participation tactics that build numbers and visibility, escalate to noncooperation that imposes real costs, and culminate in a moment when key pillars defect.

Sharp’s 198 methods, and why the catalog matters

In The Politics of Nonviolent Action (1973), Sharp catalogued 198 specific methods of nonviolent action, organized into three families: protest and persuasion, noncooperation (social, economic, political), and nonviolent intervention. The list is not a recipe. It is an inventory of options. Most movements use only a small fraction of what is available, and they often default to the most visible, riskiest, and most easily repressed tactics (street demonstrations) while neglecting the ones that move pillars (strikes, work-to-rule slowdowns, consumer boycotts, mass resignations, refusals of cooperation by professional associations).

Members of the WLC who are designing campaigns should review the 198 methods periodically. The exercise of asking "which of these are we not using, and why?" is one of the most productive strategy-correction tools in the field.

Popovic and CANVAS: dilemma actions and the operational toolkit

Srdja Popovic, who helped lead Otpor in the campaign that brought down Milosevic in 2000, and his colleagues at CANVAS have spent the last two decades training movements in dozens of countries. Their contribution is to translate the theory into operational practice. Three of their core ideas deserve special emphasis here.

Unity, Planning, Discipline

Popovic argues that the three predictors of campaign success, more important than any specific tactic, are unity (broad coalition with shared goals), planning (deliberate sequencing, not improvisation), and discipline (especially nonviolent discipline under repression). Each of these is hard. Each is harder under exile and dispersion. Each is non-negotiable.

Dilemma actions

A dilemma action is a tactic designed so that the regime’s response, whatever it is, costs the regime more than it gains. If the regime represses, it looks brutal and loses legitimacy. If it tolerates, it looks weak and emboldens further action. Otpor became famous for these: painting a portrait of the dictator on a barrel and inviting passers-by to hit it with a hammer for a small donation, then watching the police arrest the barrel. Mature campaigns design dilemma actions deliberately. They do not protest for catharsis. They protest to put the regime in a no-win choice.

Laughtivism and small victories

Humor is not a luxury. It is a strategic weapon. Authoritarian regimes depend on fear, and fear cannot survive ridicule that becomes contagious. CANVAS calls this laughtivism. Connected to this is the principle of small victories: campaigns that win something every few weeks (even tiny things) build momentum, recruit, and sustain morale. Campaigns that demand only the maximalist final goal and win nothing along the way burn out.

Backfire: turning repression into the regime’s liability

The single most counterintuitive feature of nonviolent strategy is that repression, properly anticipated and properly responded to, strengthens the movement. Brian Martin’s research on "backfire" identifies the conditions under which state violence becomes politically costly to the perpetrator: the violence must be visible, the victims must be perceived as innocent and disciplined, and the broader public must have channels to learn about and react to what happened.

This is why nonviolent discipline matters strategically. A movement that returns regime violence with violence loses the backfire effect, because the perpetrator’s narrative ("we were dealing with terrorists") becomes plausible. A movement that maintains discipline under provocation forces the regime to choose: stop the repression and lose control, or continue and lose legitimacy. This is Principle 12 of the WLC framework in operation.

4. The hard cases: where faith wavers and why doubt is mistaken

Defending nonviolence requires engaging honestly with the cases that have shaken people’s faith. The point is not to explain them away. It is to ask what they actually teach.

“Syria proves nonviolence does not work against truly brutal regimes”

The Syrian uprising of 2011 began as a remarkable nonviolent mobilization. By 2012 it had militarized, and the country was destroyed. The lesson many drew was that against a regime willing to massacre its own population, nonviolence has limits. The lesson historians of the conflict draw is different. It is that the militarization, encouraged by external actors who promised support that never came at scale, transformed the conflict from one the regime was struggling to contain into one in which the regime had a structural advantage. The nonviolent movement was not

defeated by Assad's brutality alone. It was defeated by the strategic decision (and the external pressure) to fight on terrain where Assad was strongest.

This does not prove nonviolence would have won. It does mean we cannot use Syria as evidence that armed struggle was a better choice, because the data shows it was not.

"Russia, Belarus, Venezuela, Cuba, Nicaragua: the regimes that did not fall"

Several authoritarian regimes have absorbed massive nonviolent mobilizations and remained in power. Belarus 2020, Venezuela 2017 and 2019, Cuba 2021, Nicaragua 2018 are painful examples for many of us. The question is what these cases have in common. The honest answer is that in each one, the regime had time to learn from prior cases, foreign autocratic backing, control of internal security services that did not crack, and a movement that, however brave and however numerous at peak, did not maintain sustained pressure across multiple pillars of support over multiple cycles.

These cases do not show that nonviolence cannot work in those countries. They show that one cycle of mobilization, however heroic, is rarely enough against a hardened regime with external support. The strategic implication is the opposite of the despair often drawn: it is that movements need to plan for multiple cycles, build resilient infrastructure that survives between waves, and cultivate pillar defections patiently rather than expecting a single decisive moment.

"When the regime kidnaps and tortures, the calculation changes"

Many of us speak from the experience, direct or close, of imprisonment, torture, exile, and bereavement. The case for armed response in those moments is emotional and human, and it deserves to be taken seriously rather than waved away. What the historical record shows is that movements that responded to atrocity with disciplined documentation, international amplification, and continued nonviolent pressure consistently outperformed those that responded with arms. Documentation of abuses is not a substitute for resistance. It is the form of resistance that converts the regime's violence into international cost, sanctions, prosecutions, and asset recovery. This is why the WLC Action Plan places Justice, Accountability, and Anti-Kleptocracy alongside Protection and Solidarity as twin pillars.

"Our movement is too small to reach 3.5 percent"

The 3.5 percent threshold is a benchmark, not a precondition. Movements rarely reach that scale at the start. They reach it through patient growth, coalition-building, and the capacity to recruit beyond the activist core. The relevant question is not "are we at 3.5 percent today," but "are we doing the things that historically grow movements to that scale?" Those things include framing the struggle in terms broader than any one ideology (Principle 1), building coalitions across political and social lines (Principle 8), training new leaders, and producing small, visible victories that demonstrate the movement is alive and effective.

5. Principle and pragmatism: two roads to the same discipline

There are two distinct traditions of nonviolence in modern political thought, and movements should be clear about which one they are operating in, because the operational implications differ.

Principled nonviolence

The principled tradition (Gandhi, King, Romero, Tutu, Havel in his moral writing) holds that nonviolence is a moral commitment derived from the dignity of every human person, including the dignity of the oppressor. Violence is wrong because it dehumanizes both the victim and the perpetrator. This tradition treats nonviolence as non-negotiable regardless of strategic utility.

Pragmatic or strategic nonviolence

The pragmatic tradition (Sharp, Popovic, Chenoweth, Ackerman, Merriman) holds that nonviolence is a strategic choice grounded in the empirical record of what works. It is not a renunciation of the right to defend oneself. It is the recognition that, in almost all conditions of mass political struggle, disciplined nonviolent action produces better outcomes than armed alternatives. This tradition is comfortable with the language of power, leverage, and strategy.

Why both traditions reach the same operational discipline

The two traditions differ in their starting premises but converge on almost every operational decision. Both insist on training participants to maintain discipline under provocation. Both reject violence against persons. Both build broad coalitions and use the full Sharp catalog of methods. Both recognize the importance of moral authority and the backfire effect. Both prepare for the day after.

For the World Liberty Congress, this is good news. Members coming from religious, secular, liberal, conservative, indigenous, and feminist traditions can all converge

on the same operational doctrine. We do not need to agree on metaphysics. We need to agree on tactics, timing, and discipline. The WLC framework, by titling Principle 5 "Principle and Pragmatism" rather than choosing one or the other, deliberately holds space for both.

6. The extreme exception: the defense clause

Principle 5 of the WLC framework includes a clause that some readers will have already noticed: “in extreme cases, defensive force may be justified, but only as a last, lawful resort.” This clause is not a loophole. It is a discipline. It states explicitly that the WLC is not a pacifist organization in the absolute sense. It also states explicitly the conditions under which defensive force may be considered, and those conditions are narrow.

The clause should be read as containing four cumulative requirements, all of which must be satisfied:

5. Last resort. Every available nonviolent channel must have been genuinely tried, not merely gestured at. The burden of proof is on those who would resort to force.
6. Defensive in character. Force is permitted to protect lives directly under attack, not to advance an offensive political agenda.
7. Proportionate. The force used must be proportionate to the threat and must minimize harm to noncombatants.
8. Lawful. The action must be consistent with international human rights and humanitarian law, and conducted under accountable command.

These conditions do not describe the situation of most opposition movements at most times. They describe a small set of extreme situations, mostly involving the active prevention of mass atrocity. Movements that invoke this clause to justify operations that do not meet all four conditions are misusing the framework, and they should expect to be challenged.

The reason for naming the exception explicitly, rather than pretending it does not exist, is that intellectually honest movements gain credibility, and dishonest absolutism collapses on first contact with hard cases. The WLC chooses honesty.

7. What this means in practice: a movement checklist

The argument so far has been theoretical. This section turns it into operational questions every WLC member campaign should be able to answer.

Strategy and analysis

- Have we mapped the regime’s pillars of support, and identified which two or three are most movable in the next twelve months?
- Are our demands clear enough that a movable pillar could imagine acting on them?
- Do we have a sequenced theory of change with intermediate milestones, or only a maximalist final demand?
- Have we reviewed the Sharp catalog of 198 methods in the last six months and identified tactics we are not using?

Tactics and discipline

- Do we train participants in nonviolent discipline before actions, including how to respond to provocation by infiltrators or by the security forces?
- Are we designing dilemma actions, or are we defaulting to symbolic protests that the regime can absorb without cost?
- Do we have plans to document repression in a way that makes it useful to international accountability mechanisms (Magnitsky cases, ICC referrals, treaty body submissions)?
- Are we using humor and creative resistance, or is our public face only outrage?

Coalition and unity

- Have we expanded the coalition beyond the activist core to include professional associations, religious communities, business actors, women’s organizations, and youth networks?
- Do we have working relationships with at least three actors with whom we disagree on policy but agree on the freedom-versus-oppression frame (Principle 1)?
- Is leadership succession planned, or does the movement depend on one or two figures whose detention would collapse it?

Future and vision

- Do we have a credible vision of the day after, communicated in terms ordinary citizens recognize: justice, dignity, prosperity, security?
- Have we begun, however quietly, the work of transition planning (constitutional reform, transitional justice, reintegration of security forces)?
- Are we training a next generation of leaders inside the country, in exile, and in diaspora, who can lead the post-transition phase?

8. Where to get trained

Nonviolent strategy is not improvisation. It is a discipline with a literature, a community of practice, and institutions that exist precisely to train movements. The list below is not exhaustive, but it identifies organizations that have proven track records of working with pro-democracy actors and that are accessible to WLC members. WLC Academy programs cross-reference and complement most of them.

Strategy and tactics for nonviolent movements

CANVAS (Centre for Applied Nonviolent Action and Strategies). Belgrade, Serbia. Founded by veterans of the Otpor campaign that helped end the Milosevic regime. CANVAS has trained activists from more than fifty countries and offers in-person workshops, online courses, and tailored campaign consultations. The organization's reading materials, including *Blueprint for Revolution* by Srdja Popovic, are foundational. Website: canvasopedia.org.

ICNC (International Center on Nonviolent Conflict). Washington, D.C. Offers the most comprehensive curriculum in the field, including a multi-week online academic course on civil resistance, regional workshops, an extensive open-access library of case studies, and the ICNC Press monograph series. ICNC is the first stop for movements that want both theory and applied training. Website: nonviolent-conflict.org.

Albert Einstein Institution. The institution founded by Gene Sharp. Maintains the open-access library of Sharp's work, including *From Dictatorship to Democracy* in more than thirty languages, and *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*. The starting point for the conceptual foundations. Website: aeinstein.org.

Rhize. An international network that supports movement leaders through coaching, peer learning, and strategic accompaniment rather than off-the-shelf courses. Particularly useful for movements in mid-stage development. Website: rhize.org.

Tactics, creativity, and direct action craft

Beautiful Trouble. An open-source toolbox of tactics, principles, and case studies, designed for working organizers. The book and online platform are practical companions to the more theoretical literature. Website: beautifultrouble.org.

Training for Change. Pioneer of the direct-education methodology, with decades of experience training facilitators who in turn train movements. Particularly strong on group dynamics, facilitation skills, and sustaining activists over long campaigns. Website: trainingforchange.org.

War Resisters' International. Publisher of the *Handbook for Nonviolent Campaigns* (used as a reference text in this document), with affiliates in dozens of countries. Strong tradition of antimilitarist organizing and useful for movements operating in militarized contexts. Website: wri-irg.org.

Documentation, accountability, and protection

New Tactics in Human Rights (Center for Victims of Torture). Database of more than two hundred documented tactics for human-rights work, organized by purpose. Especially useful for movements that need to systematize documentation and accountability efforts alongside resistance. Website: newtactics.org.

Front Line Defenders. Specialized in physical, digital, and psychosocial protection of human-rights defenders at risk. Not a strategy training organization, but the right address when an activist needs urgent protective support. Website: frontlinedefenders.org.

Access Now. Digital security helpline and training for activists, journalists, and human-rights defenders. A practical complement to nonviolent strategy training in the surveillance era. Website: accessnow.org.

Academic programs and fellowships

Stanford's CDDRL and Hoover Institution democracy programs, the Fletcher School (Tufts) Institute for Human Security, the Kennedy School (Harvard) Carr Center, and the University of Notre Dame's Kroc Institute all offer fellowships, executive programs, or academic courses on civil resistance, democratic transitions, and human rights. WLC members exploring longer-term study should contact the WLC Secretariat for current opportunities and references.

WLC Academy and the Playbook for Liberty

WLC members have privileged access to the WLC Academy, which integrates the resources above into curricula tailored to specific regions and campaigns. The Playbook for Liberty website serves as the running, updated companion to this training, with country case studies, tactical briefs, and recorded sessions from past assemblies. Members are encouraged to combine WLC Academy programming with at least one external training partnership over the course of any campaign cycle.

9. Selected reading

The following short list assumes a member has limited time and wants to build a working library. Read them in roughly this order.

- Gene Sharp, From Dictatorship to Democracy. The seventy-page primer that has been smuggled into more authoritarian countries than any other text in the field. Free in many languages from the Albert Einstein Institution.
- Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, Why Civil Resistance Works (Columbia, 2011). The empirical foundation. Read at minimum the introduction, chapter 1, and the conclusion.
- Erica Chenoweth, Civil Resistance: What Everyone Needs to Know (Oxford, 2021). The accessible synthesis of the field including the post-2010 challenges.
- Srdja Popovic, Blueprint for Revolution (Spiegel and Grau, 2015). The operational companion. Reads quickly and is full of usable tactics.
- Peter Ackerman and Jack DuVall, A Force More Powerful (Palgrave, 2000). Comparative history of twentieth-century nonviolent campaigns.
- Hardy Merriman et al., Glossary of Civil Resistance (ICNC). The shared vocabulary the field uses. Useful for trainers.
- War Resisters' International, Handbook for Nonviolent Campaigns (2nd edition). Practical, modular, and field-tested.
- Maria J. Stephan and Timothy Snyder, eds., Decentralized Resistance (WLC working paper, 2024). The internal WLC reference for movements operating under full-spectrum repression.

The Playbook for Liberty exists because the freedom of any one country is now inseparable from the freedom of all. Authoritarian regimes coordinate. So must we. Nonviolent strategy is the discipline that has historically produced the most freedom at the lowest human cost, and the discipline that produces the most durable democracies on the other side. It is also the discipline that has the most to teach a generation of activists who have been told, often by people who do not have to live with the consequences, that nothing works anymore.

Something works. This is what works. The task is to do it better than we did yesterday.

Fuerza y fe.
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