

Know the Enemy

And keep learning about it: how movements turn diagnosis into leverage

A practical training document for members of the World Liberty Congress and the World Liberty Academy. Sixth principle of the WLC Adaptations to Counter-Autocracy Strategic Framework (Berlin, November 2025), and the opening of Pillar II: Building Power and Strategy.

The principle, in one sentence. You cannot dismantle what you do not understand. Authoritarian systems evolve, adapt, and disguise control through institutions, media, and fear. Mapping the regime’s pillars of support, resources, and vulnerabilities transforms abstract opposition into targeted strategy and helps movements act precisely where the system is weakest. Knowledge is leverage.

INTRODUCTION

From moral opposition to strategic understanding

Authoritarian regimes do not survive by repression alone. They survive through systems of power: security forces, courts, propaganda, patronage, corruption, fear, ideology, international allies, surveillance technology, controlled elections, captured business networks, and the fragmentation of their opponents. The task of democratic movements is not merely to condemn those systems. It is to understand how they actually work, where they are strong, where they are brittle, and how they can be weakened.

This shift, from moral opposition to strategic understanding, is the work of Principle 6. Moral opposition is necessary but it is not sufficient. A movement that knows that the regime is wrong but cannot say with precision how the regime sustains itself will spend years protesting symptoms while the underlying machinery continues to function. A movement that has done the diagnostic work knows where to apply

pressure, what to ignore, when to wait, and how to convert moments of opportunity into durable change.

This is why Principle 6 opens Pillar II of the Playbook. The first pillar, Understanding the Struggle, asked us to clarify the moral frame, the comparative discipline, the right mindset, the continuous strategy, and the nonviolent ethic that hold the work together. The second pillar asks us to turn that interior preparation into operational power. The first step is diagnosis, and diagnosis begins with knowing the enemy.



SECTION I

What “Know the Enemy” means, and what it does not mean

Before turning to method, the principle has to be defined precisely, because the phrase is open to misuse. Knowing the enemy does not mean hatred. It does not mean dehumanization. It does not mean paranoia. It does not mean reckless intelligence-gathering or amateur surveillance. It means disciplined political analysis, conducted with moral clarity and operational rigor. For WLC members, the principle should be understood in five concrete ways.

First. Know the system, not just the dictator.

A personalist ruler matters, but even personalist regimes depend on judges, prosecutors, security commanders, business allies, diplomats, propagandists, party officials, foreign patrons, and dense networks of fear. A movement that focuses only on the figure at the top, expecting that the system will collapse if that one person disappears, will be repeatedly disappointed.

Second. Know the incentives.

People obey authoritarian regimes for very different reasons: ideology, money, status, fear, habit, dependency, blackmail, career advancement, or the simple belief that the opposition cannot win. Each motive responds to a different kind of pressure. A movement that treats all regime adherents as if they were ideological believers will fail to reach the others, who are typically the majority.

Third. Know the vulnerabilities.

Every authoritarian system has pressure points: economic dependency, elite rivalry, corruption, legitimacy gaps, international exposure, succession anxiety, security-

force morale, unpopular laws, and contradictions between propaganda and lived reality. The art is to identify the pressure points whose movement is genuinely possible and whose movement would matter, and to focus there.

Fourth. Know the phase.

Tactics that work in a competitive authoritarian setting may endanger people in a closed dictatorship. Competitive authoritarian contexts may require electoral and institutional leverage, parallel vote tabulation, legal challenges, and international observation. Closed authoritarian contexts may require protection, exile coordination, sanctions, accountability mechanisms, and secure clandestine organizing. The same diagnosis would lead to different strategies. The phase decides the form.

Fifth. Keep learning.

Regimes adapt. A map that was accurate six months ago may already be obsolete. Authoritarian systems are adaptive. They learn, reconfigure, outsource repression, manipulate legality, weaponize information, exploit polarization, and rely on external allies. The discipline of knowing the enemy is therefore not a one-time exercise. It is a continuous practice, embedded in the rhythm of the movement's work.



SECTION II

Intellectual foundations: from Sun Tzu to Sharp

The principle of knowing the adversary is ancient. Sun Tzu's Art of War teaches that victory depends on understanding both oneself and the opponent. For democratic movements this lesson must be translated carefully: the purpose is not the militarization of politics, but strategic clarity. Movements must understand the balance of power, the terrain, the opponent's incentives, and their own limitations. The military vocabulary should not mislead us. The discipline is the same, but the means are different.

Carl von Clausewitz's insight that war is a continuation of politics by other means reminds us that strategy concerns the relationship between means and political ends. For nonviolent democratic movements the means are different from war: civic mobilization, noncooperation, strikes, documentation, coalition-building, narrative strategy, sanctions advocacy, electoral defense, legal pressure, and international solidarity. But the strategic question remains Clausewitzian. What political objective

are we trying to achieve, and how do our actions actually create pressure toward that objective?

Gene Sharp gives this principle its most direct relevance for civil resistance. Sharp's central contribution was to show that dictatorships are not all-powerful. They depend on sources of power that can be withdrawn, disrupted, divided, or delegitimized. Political power rests on obedience and cooperation. Rulers require administrators, police, soldiers, workers, judges, media, economic actors, and ordinary citizens to keep the system functioning. When enough of those constituencies stop cooperating, the system cannot run, regardless of the ruler's personal will. Sharp's catalogue of 198 methods of nonviolent action expands the tactical imagination beyond protest into social, economic, and political noncooperation, and into nonviolent intervention. The lesson is not that activists should use all the methods. It is that movements must choose methods according to regime vulnerabilities, social capacity, risk, and timing.

Srdja Popovic and the team at CANVAS translate these insights into operational practice. Their core curriculum addresses unity, planning, branding, dilemma actions, fear management, leadership, and the maintenance of nonviolent discipline under repression. Popovic's Blueprint for Revolution makes the case that successful nonviolent struggle is not spontaneous romanticism. It is teachable, disciplined, creative, and built on the same diagnostic foundations that Sharp identified.

The WLC synthesizes these traditions. Sun Tzu's adversarial diagnosis, Clausewitz's relationship between means and ends, Sharp's theory of pillars of support, Popovic's practical movement craft, and modern political science's regime typologies. Each contributes a piece. The Playbook gives them a single working frame.



SECTION III

The seven dimensions every movement must map

The Playbook for Liberty trains members to map seven dimensions of any authoritarian system. Together these dimensions form the operational picture from which strategy can be built. None of them is optional. A movement that has mapped six well but neglected the seventh is, in practice, navigating with a partial map.

Dimension 1. Regime type

Begin with classification. Is the regime competitive authoritarian, electoral autocratic, closed authoritarian, personalist, military or post-coup, single-party,

hybrid, foreign-backed, criminalized or kleptocratic, theocratic, monarchical, totalitarian, or near-totalitarian? Classification is not academic exercise. Each type has different vulnerabilities. A competitive authoritarian regime may still fear elections, media exposure, parallel vote tabulation, legal challenges, and international observation. A closed dictatorship may fear elite fractures, sanctions, exile coordination, evidence collection, and international isolation. A personalist regime may fear succession crises, family corruption exposure, inner-circle betrayal, and loss of elite confidence. The classification decides what is worth pursuing.

Dimension 2. Pillars of support

Sharp's most useful concept for activists is the idea that regimes depend on pillars of support. The list of pillars in any given country usually includes security forces, military commanders, police, intelligence services, courts and prosecutors, electoral bodies, state media, ruling-party structures, public employees, business elites, religious authorities, universities, state-controlled unions, criminal groups, paramilitaries, foreign patrons, banks and financial intermediaries, digital surveillance providers, and propaganda networks. For each pillar, the movement should be able to answer four questions: Why does this pillar support the regime? What does it receive? What does it fear? What would make loyalty more costly, or neutrality and quiet defection safer?

Dimension 3. Coercive capacity

Map how repression actually works in your country. Is repression centralized or outsourced? Is it legalistic or openly violent? Does it rely primarily on prisons, surveillance, paramilitary militias, administrative harassment, passport cancellation, denationalization, sexual violence, economic punishment, religious persecution, family intimidation, or some combination? The repressive architecture is not the same in every country, and the strategy that confronts it cannot be the same either.

Dimension 4. Information control

Who controls the narrative? Map state media, captured private media, regime influencers, bot networks, fake-opposition accounts, recurring disinformation themes, censorship patterns, internet-shutdown capacity, propaganda directed against exiles, and smear campaigns against women, religious leaders, journalists, or youth. Pay particular attention to the narratives the regime uses internally to divide the opposition, because those narratives often work even on the opposition itself, and recognizing them is the first step to neutralizing them.

Dimension 5. Money and corruption networks

Follow the money. Authoritarian regimes survive through budgets, contracts, concessions, illicit trade, sanctions evasion, mining, oil, customs, state procurement, banks, front companies, and elite patronage. Anti-kleptocracy research is not a side concern. It is central to knowing the enemy. Useful working questions: who finances the regime, who benefits from repression, which companies are linked to security forces, which elites own property abroad, which family members control companies, which foreign firms provide technology or finance, which contracts reward loyalty, and which assets are vulnerable to sanctions or to exposure.

Dimension 6. Elite cohesion and fractures

Regimes weaken or fall when loyalists begin to doubt that loyalty is safer than defection. Map hardliners and pragmatists, technocrats and ideologues, military factions, business factions, family rivalries, generational tensions, regional elites, religious tensions, corruption disputes, succession anxieties, officials vulnerable to sanctions, and officials with children, assets, or business abroad. The objective is not fantasy defection. The objective is to identify where pressure, guarantees, exposure, or changed incentives may produce real cracks.

Dimension 7. Opposition fragmentation

A serious regime map must also map the opposition's own weaknesses, because authoritarian regimes often survive not only because they are strong but because their opponents are divided. Map party rivalries, exile and internal tensions, generational and ideological divides, personal leadership conflicts, donor-driven competition, language barriers, regional imbalance, distrust between civil society and political actors, weak protection systems, unclear decision-making, and the absence of strategic sequencing. This dimension is uncomfortable to map. It is also the one that produces the most actionable insight, because it is the dimension we can change directly.

“Knowledge is leverage. A regime that appears mysterious, inevitable, and total is a regime that has not yet been mapped.”



SECTION IV

The WLC “Know the Enemy” Diagnostic Template

The Diagnostic Template is the working tool that turns the seven dimensions into a structured exercise. National movements, country teams within the WLC, and individual leadership groups are encouraged to fill it out in writing, in a secure setting, and to revisit it at least every six months. An interactive version is available through the Playbook for Liberty website. The static version below is intended for offline use, in a meeting, or in a setting where digital tools are not safe to use.

Before you fill this out. This template, once completed, is operational intelligence. It must be drafted in a secure environment, anonymized where appropriate, stored encrypted, and shared only through verified channels. The methodology for safe documentation is set out in the Playbook training document for Principle 2: A Compass, Not Recipes. The Regional Secretary can advise on storage and circulation.

WLC KNOW THE ENEMY DIAGNOSTIC TEMPLATE

1. Regime snapshot

Country or community. Regime type. Current phase. Level of civic space. Main form of repression. Main source of regime legitimacy. Main foreign backers. Most vulnerable democratic actors right now.

2. Pillars of support

For each pillar that matters most: key actors, what they provide to the regime, what they receive, what they fear, vulnerabilities, possible democratic leverage, and risk level for any movement action targeting them.

3. Repression map

Who orders repression? Who implements it? Who provides legal cover? Who provides propaganda cover? Who finances it? Who benefits? Who can be documented? Who can be sanctioned? Who can be pressured?

4. Information map

Main regime narratives. Main channels. Main audiences. Main disinformation tactics. Specific narratives used to divide the opposition. Counter-narrative opportunities.

5. Money map

Key economic sectors. State contracts. Regime-linked companies. Foreign enablers. Assets abroad. Potential sanctions targets. Investigative leads worth pursuing.

6. Fracture map

Potential elite tensions. Possible institutional cracks. Discontented groups. Succession concerns. Economic grievances. Possible bridge-builders to whom the movement might be able to speak.

7. Opposition vulnerability map

Where are we divided? Where are we predictable? Where are we exposed? Where are we under-protected? Where are we dangerously dependent on one leader, one donor, one platform, or one tactic?

8. Strategic implication

Based on this diagnosis: What should we do more of? What should we stop doing? What should we postpone? What should we protect? What should we investigate further?

The output of the Template is not a research paper. It is a Strategic Diagnosis Brief: short, operational, revisable, and tied to specific decisions the movement is about to make. If filling it out does not change at least one decision the movement was on the verge of taking, the diagnosis was either incomplete or the movement was not honest with itself.



SECTION V

Seven strategic rules for knowing the enemy

The seven rules below are the working principles that make the diagnostic discipline durable over time. They are short on purpose. Movement leaders are encouraged to memorize them, and to use them as a quick check whenever the team is unsure whether a piece of analysis is genuinely strategic or merely emotionally satisfying.

Rule 1. Map systems, not just villains.

A dictatorship is not one person. It is a network of obedience. The map should reflect the network.

Rule 2. Ask why people obey.

Fear, money, ideology, dependency, habit, and the absence of credible alternatives produce different strategic responses. A movement that cannot distinguish among them will use the wrong message on the wrong audience and produce the wrong result.

Rule 3. Distinguish power from noise.

A loud propagandist may matter less than a quiet procurement official. A visible minister may matter less than a hidden financier. The discipline is to focus on actors and pillars whose movement would actually change the regime's capacity, regardless of how much attention they currently attract.

Rule 4. Track change over time.

Regime maps must be updated. Pillars shift. Factions emerge and dissolve. International support changes. Crises create openings. A diagnostic exercise that is never repeated is a diagnostic exercise that is wrong by the time it matters.

Rule 5. Protect sources and analysts.

Information work can endanger people. Never collect or store sensitive data casually. Anonymize from the start. Use encrypted channels. Compartmentalize knowledge so that the loss of one node does not compromise the whole.

Rule 6. Use open sources first.

The most useful analysis usually begins with public information: official records, speeches, budgets, court documents, procurement data, sanctions lists, company registries, media archives, and credible NGO reports. The temptation to escalate to clandestine information-gathering is almost always premature, and it often produces less useful intelligence than careful work with what is already public.

Rule 7. Turn knowledge into strategy.

A map that does not lead to action is research, not strategy. The question every diagnostic exercise must end with: what does this knowledge allow us to do that we could not do before, and what can we do more safely, more precisely, and more effectively as a result?



SECTION VI

Safety and ethics

Principle 6 must be taught with strict ethical and security boundaries. The discipline of knowing the enemy is a discipline of legitimate political analysis, not espionage. WLC members must avoid illegal surveillance, reckless collection of personal data, unverified accusations, public exposure of sensitive sources, and the storage of dangerous information in insecure tools. The goal is strategic understanding based on lawful, ethical, and secure methods. Any departure from those methods undermines the credibility of the movement and endangers people.

Before collecting or sharing sensitive information, the working group should answer the following questions, honestly:

- > *Could this information endanger someone, directly or indirectly?*
- > *Is this information verified, or is it rumor that might cause harm if circulated?*
- > *Is there a lawful basis for collecting it?*

- › *Does it actually need to be public, or is the impulse toward publication driven by frustration rather than by strategy?*
- › *Can it be anonymized without losing its usefulness?*
- › *Where will it be stored, and is that storage secure?*
- › *Who has access, and is that list as small as it can be?*
- › *What happens if the device, account, or facility holding this information is seized?*

Critical rule for AI tools. Do not enter sensitive names, operational plans, addresses, contact details, or unverified allegations into any AI system unless secure protocols are in place and the system has been vetted. The Playbook for Liberty’s own digital tools are designed with protection in mind, but even those tools should be used with caution. When in doubt, less detail rather than more, and when uncertain, consult the Regional Secretary before submitting.



SECTION VII

Practical exercises for the World Liberty Academy

The discipline of knowing the enemy is built through repeated practice with concrete cases. The six exercises below are used in WLC Academy workshops and can be adapted for any leadership retreat, training session, or coalition strategic review. They are most effective in sequence, but each can stand alone.

Exercise 1. Pillars of Support Map

Participants identify five regime pillars in their country. For each pillar they list what the pillar provides to the regime, what it receives, what it fears, and what nonviolent pressure might affect it. The output is a working pillar map that the leadership team can revisit and refine over time.

Exercise 2. “If I Were the Regime”

One group plays the democratic movement. Another plays the regime. The regime team designs countermeasures: arrests, smear campaigns, fake-opposition operations, internet shutdowns, legal harassment, family intimidation, selective concessions. The movement team then revises its strategy in light of what the regime would predictably do. This is the most reliable exercise for surfacing strategic blind spots.

Exercise 3. Follow-the-Money Drill

Participants select one regime-linked actor and map publicly available information: companies, contracts, relatives, foreign travel, properties, sanctions exposure, business partners. The exercise must include strong security and legal guidance from the start, and it should be conducted only with the support of a Regional Secretary or the WLC Academy.

Exercise 4. Narrative Autopsy

Participants collect five regime narratives currently circulating in their country and identify, for each, the target audience, the emotional appeal, the fear mechanism, and the most plausible counter-narrative. The exercise builds the muscle of dissecting propaganda rather than merely reacting to it.

Exercise 5. Defection Logic

Participants choose one pillar (judiciary, police, business elites, public employees, religious institutions) and ask what would shift that pillar from active support to passive neutrality, or from neutrality to quiet noncooperation. The exercise teaches that defection is a continuum, not a single act, and that movements should design pressure for the next step in that continuum, not for the final one.

Exercise 6. Vulnerability Versus Risk

Participants distinguish between what is vulnerable in the regime and what is dangerous for the movement. Not every vulnerability should be attacked immediately. Some vulnerabilities are real but cannot be safely exploited at the current capacity of the movement. The exercise builds the judgment that distinguishes strategic patience from strategic timidity.



SECTION VIII

Practical resources for WLC members

The resources below are the operational toolkit the World Liberty Academy recommends to members beginning serious diagnostic work. They are organized by category, and each entry describes what the tool is best used for. Members should consult the Regional Secretary before using investigative or surveillance-related tools, both for security reasons and to avoid duplicating work that the WLC may already have under way.

Civil resistance and nonviolent strategy

Albert Einstein Institution Digital Library. Gene Sharp's foundational texts in many languages, including *From Dictatorship to Democracy*, *The Anti-Coup*, and the catalogue of 198 Methods. The starting point for the conceptual foundations.

aeinstein.org

International Center on Nonviolent Conflict (ICNC). Academic Online Curriculum, the People Power online course, an extensive library of case studies, and the ICNC Press monograph series. The most comprehensive curriculum in the field. nonviolent-conflict.org

CANVAS (Centre for Applied Nonviolent Action and Strategies). Core Curriculum for movement planning, nonviolent discipline, fear management, dilemma actions, and leadership under repression. Founded by veterans of the Otpor campaign. canvasopedia.org

Beautiful Trouble Toolbox. Open-source toolbox of tactics, principles, and case studies for working organizers. Especially strong on creative resistance, narrative, and action design. beautifultrouble.org

Democracy and regime diagnosis

V-Dem Institute. Hundreds of indicators and the core electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian democracy indices. Best for tracking regime change over time and comparing across countries. v-dem.net

Freedom House. Freedom in the World, Freedom on the Net, and Nations in Transit. Country-level scores and analysis on political rights, civil liberties, and internet freedom. freedomhouse.org

CIVICUS Monitor. Civic-space ratings (open, narrowed, obstructed, repressed, closed) using data on freedoms of association, peaceful assembly, and expression. Best for tracking the operational environment for civil society. monitor.civicus.org

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) World Press Freedom Index. Comparative press freedom across 180 countries. Best for media-freedom mapping and information-control diagnosis. rsf.org

Open-source investigation and anti-kleptocracy

Bellingcat Online Investigations Toolkit. Curated tools for satellite imagery, geolocation, social media research, archiving, verification, and other open-source investigation tasks. The standard reference for investigative method.

bellingcat.com

OCCRP Aleph. Investigative data platform for following the money: public records, sanctions lists, corporate records, and leaks. Designed for journalists but accessible to credentialed researchers. aleph.occrp.org

OpenCorporates. The largest open legal-entity database in the world, drawing from more than one hundred and forty government registries. Best for company and officer searches across jurisdictions. opencorporates.com

OpenSanctions. Aggregated sanctions data, politically exposed persons, and related entities in an open-source database. Useful for entity screening and sanctions research. opensanctions.org

Digital security and protection

Security in a Box. Digital security guide for activists, human-rights defenders, and journalists, developed by Front Line Defenders and Tactical Technology Collective. Covers passwords, encryption, devices, communications, and travel. securityinabox.org

EFF Surveillance Self-Defense. Threat modeling, secure communications, device security, and digital rights. Especially useful for individuals and small teams operating under surveillance. ssd.eff.org

Digital First Aid Kit. Free resource for digital emergencies: lost devices, suspicious accounts, impersonation, doxxing, harassment. The right address when an incident is already in progress. digitalfirstaid.org

Access Now Digital Security Helpline. Real-time direct technical assistance for civil society groups, activists, journalists, and human-rights defenders. Available in multiple languages, around the clock. accessnow.org

Front Line Defenders. Physical, digital, and psychosocial protection of human-rights defenders at acute risk. Not strategy training; the right address when a member or colleague is in danger. frontlinedefenders.org



CONCLUSION

Knowledge is leverage

Authoritarian regimes want their power to appear mysterious, inevitable, and total. Principle 6 breaks that illusion. A regime is not a monolith. It is a system, and a system has parts. Parts have incentives. Incentives can shift. Pillars can weaken.

Loyalty can fracture. Resources can be exposed. Narratives can be challenged. Fear can be reduced. Obedience can be withdrawn.

For the World Liberty Congress, knowing the enemy means building the discipline to study authoritarian systems with moral clarity and strategic precision. It means understanding the regime better than the regime understands the democratic movement. It means turning scattered information into usable knowledge, and usable knowledge into coordinated action. The diagnosis is never finished. The map is never definitive. But the discipline of mapping, refined over years and shared across the network, is one of the most reliable advantages a democratic movement can build.

You cannot dismantle what you do not understand.

You cannot weaken what you have not mapped.

You cannot build power where you have not diagnosed power.

Knowledge is leverage.

And in the struggle for liberty, leverage saves lives.

For WLC members, this principle is the threshold of Pillar II. Everything that comes next in the Playbook depends on the quality of the diagnosis we are willing to do, and on the discipline with which we keep updating it.

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Hardy Merriman, Patrick Quirk, and Ash Jain, *Fostering a Fourth Democratic Wave: A Playbook for Countering the Authoritarian Threat* (Atlantic Council and ICNC, 2023).

World Liberty Congress, *Theory of Change* (2026), and *Adaptations to Counter-Autocracy Strategic Framework* (Berlin, November 2025). Principle 6: Know the Enemy.

CONTINUE TO PRINCIPLE 7

Principle 7 of the Playbook for Liberty is You Win with Power, Not Good Intentions. It takes the diagnosis produced by Principle 6 and turns it into the operational question that follows directly: where, exactly, should democratic power be built, and where should regime power be eroded?