Ripples of Hope

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This study contributes to our understanding of nonviolent social movements in repressive settings in several ways. It shows how a broader concept of such movements and their participants reveals a wider range of activists than noted in most studies. This includes individual activists operating without the support of organizations but closely linked to the movements. The study also provides new evidence that in times of high levels of repression, a nonviolent social movement may operate “in abeyance,” which is to say at a lower level, until repression is reduced. During such periods resistance continues but less openly; indeed, sometimes clandestinely. At times it is fragmented, making it harder for a regime to clamp down on it.

The study adds important nuance to the theory of “opportunity.” Major social movement theorists have acknowledged that activists can proceed in the absence of opportunities and despite repression, but in the words of one of the theorists most closely associated with the opportunity theory, such instances are likely to be rare (McAdam 2004, 226). This research provides evidence that resistance in the absence of perceived opportunities may not be so rare. It happened repeatedly in all three countries examined, often in the face of severe repression. The scholarly spotlight on movements in repressive settings tends to focus on large, organized movements and mass demonstrations. This study, however, shows that paying closer attention to small, informal groups and networks provides a more complete understanding of how a nonviolent resistance operates in repressive settings. The concepts of minor actors and their often spontaneous role in a resistance movement helping major actors, as well as the unpredictability of a social movement are also introduced.

This study makes several major arguments:

1. **Individual activism, a much understudied part of social movements, can play a significant part in nonviolent resistance.** The literature on social movements is practically silent on the topic of individual activism. Individual activists are not members of a self-identified resistance

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1 Malamud (1952, p. 154).
organization. They may contribute to the resistance, for example, as part of their professional duties, such as lawyers or journalists, when their professional organizations are either reluctant to be active or unable to provide support for their activism. They are linked to the movements by professional or personal ties. Sometimes they later join resistance organizations and even help lead them.

During periods of high repression, nonviolent social movements may lack a formal structure but continue in abeyance, informally, at a lower level of resistance, waiting for safer times to emerge more openly and formally. During such times, nonviolent activists may have informal organizational structures, as small groups and individual activists meet, sometimes clandestinely, to coordinate and plan their activism. They continue challenging authorities in a variety of ways that may include legal challenges, critical reporting, public speeches, and spontaneous demonstrations aimed at chipping away at a regime’s power and legitimacy. When repression lessens, formal organizations may appear or reappear, supported by mass demonstrations at times, until a new wave of repression curtails them. At such time, smaller-scale acts of resistance may resume.

Nonviolent resistance can take place even under severe repression without favorable conditions or “political opportunities” and with only limited material resources. In resisting repression, activists lacking structural opportunities or encouraging external conditions, are often motivated by a strong desire for dignity, freedom, and a chance to make a decent living, or in some cases by political ambition. They proceed despite repression, taking considerable risks to achieve their goals. In developing countries with only minimal material support, they are fueled in part by commitment and courage.

Nonviolent social movements in repressive settings involve a broader and more complex array of participants in more fluid actions than is generally recognized. The usual focus in social movement studies is on large organizations and mass demonstrations. But this misses a lot of what happens. Small groups and informal networks of activists, in addition to individual activists operating without organizational support, play an important role. Their involvement in the resistance is often more fluid than is generally recognized. Activists or “players” may shift in and out of various “arenas,” or centers of activity, making strategic choices as to when to move in or out of a resistance campaign, often more than once.²

² The terms in quotes are used by Jasper (2012).
From modest starting points, nonviolent activism can grow into a “culture of resistance” unless blocked by extreme repression. In this study, a culture of resistance is defined as a process in which public challenges to the abuse of power by a regime become a norm for activists and a visible segment of the general public. Nonviolent resistance in repressive settings, once started, is akin to the downward flow of water; it moves around obstacles (repressive responses from a regime) and gathers force (supporters) unless blocked, at least temporarily (by severe repression by a regime).

There is a need for a universal model of social movements, one that can work in the democratic West as well as in repressive settings. Typically social movements in peaceful settings are aimed at regime reform, but in repressive settings the aim is often regime change. This study suggests a new model for social movements to help bridge this gap, defining a social movement as a process of challenges to targeted authorities that may involve individual as well as organizational activism, and at times mass public support, and is aimed at either regime reform or regime change. The model or definition does not insist on the usual characteristics cited in the literature that a social movement be “sustained, organized and public” (Tilly 2004, 3).

Individual Activism

Nonviolent social movements in repressive settings are likely to include individual activists who are not supported by any organization. Many key participants in the movements studied were professionals, drawn into the resistance not as members of a resistance organization but out of a commitment to the principles of their profession. They were linked by professional ties or personal friendships to others in the resistance and were thus part of an overall movement. But they acted as individuals when their

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3 Noted social movement scholar Doug McAdam, in an e-mail message to the author, March 6, 2013, said that in protest event counts, “individual acts in the name of a movement are routinely counted as part of the struggle.” Counting individual acts, however, is not the same as noting nonviolent resistance by individuals acting on their own and not as part of an organization. The individual activism shown in the current study as part of nonviolent social movements is generally overlooked in the literature. Tilly (2008, 210) ended his last book with this note: “Most of all, the book argues that students of contentious politics should move away from classified event counts and single-episode narratives toward procedures that trace interactions among participants in multiple episodes.”
professional organization was not part of the resistance or in some cases opposed political activism. Their actions soon marked them as opponents of the regime. Their activism is part of the broader array of social movement participants that many studies miss.

Examples of this category of professionals acting as individuals, without the support of any organization, include the lawyers in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Kenya who defended political detainees. They often did so as individuals when their bar association was not willing to challenge the regime and they were not members of a resistance organization. The same was true for independent journalists who continued to write critical articles despite regime threats. They were not part of any formal resistance organization and acted essentially as individuals when their newspapers consisted of little more than a couple of small rooms with some old typewriters and offered little protection or support. At times their press union did speak out for journalists’ rights, though that offered them little tangible protection. Some journalists were detained and tortured; a few were killed.

Some individual activists later join formal organizations that are part of a resistance. Their contribution to change, either as individuals or later as organizational activists, is recognized in the nonviolent resistance literature of Gene Sharp (2005, 419, 458) who emphasizes the importance of weakening the authority and legitimacy of the targeted regime. By challenging regimes on rule of law, defending activists, or exposing abuses through the media, individual (and organizational) activists in all three countries studied helped weaken the legitimacy of the regimes both at home and abroad and signaled to others that resistance was possible, though often at a cost.

James Scott, in Weapons of the Weak (1985, 297), makes a strong argument for paying close attention to “both individual and collective acts of resistance” and resistance that is not part of a formal organization. “If we were to confine our search for peasant resistance to formally organized activity, we would search largely in vain, for in Malaysia as in many other Third World countries, such organizations are either absent or the creations of officials and rural elites. We would simply miss much of what is happening.” He adds, “The inclination to dismiss ‘individual’ acts of resistance as insignificant and to reserve the term ‘resistance’ for collective or organized action is as misguided as the emphasis on ‘principled’ action.” Scott criticizes the “privileged status accorded organized movements.”
Resistance in Abeyance: Organization without Organizations

There tend to be two general, and not so surprising, relationships between repression and resistance: the level and type. (1) When repression is at a very high level, resistance is likely to decline into abeyance, possibly even going underground then resurfacing when it is safer. This pattern may repeat itself depending on levels or cycles of repression in the future. (2) During periods of high repression, the types of resistance are also likely to change. When repression makes formal organizations too dangerous, activists are likely to resort to a less formal approach, resulting in fragmented resistance by individual activists or members of small groups. Some of the mechanisms of this kind of low-level resistance are (a) individual activism without support of an organization; (b) small, informal group activism; and (c) clandestine meetings to plan further resistance.

Lack of formal organizations during a period of abeyance does not mean resistance is totally unorganized or even chaotic. In most instances, except for spontaneous demonstrations, there was organization without organizations. Some of the social movement literature argues that this kind of high-risk activism is supported by “[s]trong, pre-existing friendship ties” (Gamson 1990, 61). In the current study, activists were connected by professional or personal ties. In all three countries, they operated in the relatively small world of their national capitals, where most of the resistance took place. It was an even smaller world when one considers that, for the most part, the key activists typically were among the educated elites of the country. They had frequent contact with each other as longtime professional colleagues and friends. In all three countries these kinds of activists gathered informally to discuss their resistance and sometimes to coordinate it.

The study also notes the relationships between the theories of abeyance and cycles of protest (e.g., Tarrow 1998, 128-30, 141-60). A resistance in abeyance refers in this study to a resistance that is limited in scope because of the repression. When it is too dangerous to have a central or formal organization or organizations, a practice of resistance in abeyance nevertheless continues to challenge the regime. Some portion of the challenge may be clandestine; it may be intentionally fragmented for survival purposes. Tarrow argued that during periods of decline or inactivity by a formal resistance organization or organizations, smaller, more informal organizations sometimes continue their activism. Groups such as churches, cooperatives, or trade unions provide “abeyance structures” which keep resistance alive on a lower scale until the opportunity for
larger activism is present again. Tarrow also argued that there was a cyclical rise and decline of movements for various reasons. In the three countries examined there were numerous ebbs and flows of resistance, depending on the intensity of repression, but also on the issues. For example, in Kenya, participation in the resistance peaked during election periods but was lower and more fragmented between elections and during periods of intense repression.

In her study of women’s social movements in the 1900s, Taylor (1989, 761) defines abeyance as “a holding process by which movements sustain themselves in nonreceptive political environments and provide continuity from one stage of mobilization to another.” Taylor also adds: “My approach relies heavily on the central premises of resource mobilization theory: political opportunities and an indigenous organizational base are major factors in the rise and decline of movements.” The current study finds the contrary to be the case: the resistance in abeyance often took place with few, if any, political opportunities evident to the participants and often it took place with minimal material resources. Material resources in all three countries, especially in Liberia and Sierra Leone, poorer countries, were very limited. Activists at least partially made up for this in terms of the “resource” of motivating ideas, including a commitment to human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

From Abeyance to Formally Organized Resistance

When repression subsides in an authoritarian state, there is likely to be a reemergence of a more formally organized social/resistance movement (the terms are used interchangeably in this study). The transition is gradual: it takes a while before activists and their supporters are convinced that things have really gotten better, safer. Some regimes gyrate between periods of concessions and repression, undermining a transition. There is never a guarantee that the worst is over. When a transition from abeyance to formal organizations occurs, it emerges from the fragmented centers of resistance that have been operating quietly, waiting for better times. The

4 Tarrow notes (1998, 129-30) that theorizing on this concept of “decentralization” traces back at least to the 1960s in the United States and Europe; for Gerlach and Hine (1970) it meant lack of a single leadership and the absence of card-carrying membership. Taylor adds that decentralization was part of the model of the civil rights movement in the US South and later promoted by activist Saul Alinsky (1971) for use in US cities.
mechanisms of transition may include a growing willingness on the part of the general public to show up at public demonstrations once police have stopped arresting or even shooting at participants in such events. Lawyers associations may become politically active after a dormant period when the chairs of such groups no longer shy away from direct challenges to the regime. Independent newspapers forced to shut down or go underground may resume publishing openly. Women’s organizations that have met behind closed doors may begin holding open meetings and staging marches. Human rights organizations that were in touch informally may begin meeting in open coalitions and issuing public statements in the name of the organized groups.

While the theory of abeyance is a useful theory that describes what happens when the repression gets too intense for a traditional social movement – a nonviolent resistance movement – to continue openly, a weakness in the theory is that it assumes that at some point when the repression lessens, the movement can resume a more open stance. There are two problems with this: (1) The concept of a “movement” is vague: is it one big organization with members who come out of hiding and take public stances? Is it a coalition of organizations? Is it the same people who reemerge, or a new cast of players? Could it be a combination of small groups and individuals acting outside of organizational support, as this book suggests? (2) The theory also seems to imply that when things get safer, a central organization emerges (or reemerges) to lead a resistance. In Sierra Leone, in a period of reduced repression in the mid-1990s, many women’s organizations successfully formed a centrally organized coalition to push the ruling military junta out of power and restore democracy. But in fact when things get safer, instead of a central organization, there may be a proliferation of organizations engaged in a resistance campaign or campaigns (as happened in Kenya in the 1990s), despite occasional violent outbursts by police against a strengthening political opposition. No main organization emerged to lead the continuing resistance. In one sense this was a positive reflection of the growing advocacy for change; in another sense it signaled growing competition among organizations for international funding, publicity, and membership.

Resistance without “Opportunity”

Several recent studies have shown the effectiveness of nonviolent resistance (Bartkowski 2013; Chenoweth and Stephan 2011; Ackerman and Karatnycky
Others have provided convincing evidence that favorable structural conditions – often known as political “opportunities” – even when present, are not necessary conditions for resistance (Goodwin and Jasper 2012). Opportunities are generally considered to be conditions in the economic or political circumstances in a society that encourage activists to proceed. These are exogenous circumstances, ones beyond the control of those engaged in the resistance.

In the current study of three sub-Saharan African countries with repressive regimes, the resistance took place with little in the way of perceived opportunities. Instead, there was repression; still, there often was nonviolent resistance in the face of this repression. When the repression was overwhelming, some resistance continued in a less organized and open way, resuming in a more formal approach when the repression lessened. This reduced repression could be described as an “opportunity,” but not in the usual way the term has been used in social movement studies. Whether using McAdam’s 1996 illustrative set of opportunities, or his initial macro set from 1982, there were few if any political “openings” that made resistance easier or safer. In his earlier work, McAdam (1982, 176) lists factors likely to produce “shifts in the structure of political opportunities … wars, industrialization, international political realignments, prolonged unemployment, and widespread demographic changes.” In his later list (1996, 27), synthesized from various scholars, McAdam includes as potential political opportunities: “1. The relative openness or closure of the institutionalized political system; 2. The stability or instability of that broad set of elite alignments that typically undergird a polity; 3. The presence or absence of elite allies; 4. The state’s capacity and propensity for repression.”

McAdam is usually identified in the literature with his emphasis on “opportunity” as key to social movements. Tilly (2008), Meyer (2002), Tarrow (1998), and numerous other key movement scholars have also identified the importance of political “opportunity.” In their collaborative work, McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001) sought to move beyond a static identification of opportunity and emphasize the dynamics of interactions between those making claims and those upon whom the claims were made. McAdam had earlier argued (1982, 48, 50): “While, important, expanding political

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5 Ackerman and Karatnycky (8) found that there was “more than a three to one chance” of a country achieving transition to political freedom where the civic opposition is nonviolent or mostly nonviolent. Chenoweth and Stephan found (215) that the probability of a country remaining a democracy five years after a nonviolent resistance campaign was 57 percent compared to 6 percent for successful violent campaigns.
opportunities and indigenous organizations do not, in any simple sense, produce a social movement ... Expanding political opportunities combine with the indigenous organizations of the minority community to afford insurgents the ‘structural potential’ for successful action ... All three factors, then, are regarded as necessary, but insufficient, causes of social insurgency.”

In 2004 McAdam complained of the “wooden manner in which it [the concept of opportunity] has been applied by movement scholars" (205). He called for greater attention to “culturalist and rationalist tenets” (230). More recently, McAdam argued that scholars have made the political process model he developed “overly structural” and not paid enough attention to the importance of people acting on structural conditions. McAdam has also acknowledged that people can mount resistance in “unpromising structural circumstances,” though arguing that such cases “are bound to be rare” (226). The current study of three countries suggests that such cases may not be as rare as one might think. Structural conditions are analyzed in the country chapters, but the study provides evidence from those countries that significant nonviolent resistance took place in the absence of clear and perceived political opportunities and in the face of considerable repression. But repression can stimulate resistance, as Goldstone and Tilly (2001) have shown, citing various other studies.

**Broader, More Fluid Participation in Resistance**

In addition to the less-studied phenomenon of individual activism, small group resistance receives far less attention than do large organizations and mass movements. Most studies of social movements in repressive settings tend to concentrate on large movements and mass public demonstrations, as in Eastern Europe (e.g., Karklins and Petersen 1993; Kuran 1991; Lohmann 1994); in the Soviet Union (Beissinger 2002); in Latin America (e.g., Eckstein 2001); or in Iran (Kurzman 2004). Even the relatively few studies of social

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6 In an e-mail message to the author, March 6, 2013, McAdam wrote: “It is certainly true that in the way that it developed, the political process model was overly structural. That was not, however, true of my original formulation of the model. For me two factors – the political opportunities and existing organizations/networks available to would be activists – defined the structural potential of a movement. But whether that potential would be realized, was entirely dependent on processes of social construction and collective interpretation among the aggrieved population. Bottom line: at root the theory was exactly the blend of culture and theory, and top down facilitation and bottom up agency you are calling for.”
movements in sub-Saharan Africa, while providing excellent insights into nonviolent resistance, focus mostly on large movements (e.g., Zunes, Kurtz, and Asher 1999; Tripp, et al. 2009; Ellis and Kessel 2009).7

The current study examines some large organizations and mass demonstrations. But often the nonviolent resistance profiled herein was carried out by small groups, informal networks, and individuals. In Sierra Leone it was a small group of students that initiated a demonstration in 1977 that developed into a nationwide boycott by university and secondary school students. A small group of mothers used a dramatic protest in Kenya to challenge authorities to release political prisoners. To overlook such contributions to the social movements/nonviolent resistance movements that developed in all three countries studied would be to miss important parts of the story.

As noted above, activists or “players” move between “arenas” (Jasper 2012). For example, as shown in this study of three sub-Saharan countries that suffered under repressive regimes, professional people may move into the arena of activism and file legal challenges against a repressive regime or write critical articles and editorials, then slip back into their normal roles as attorneys or journalists, occupied with the more mundane features of their jobs. It is this fluidity that is missing in many social movement studies. Instead of being a “member” of a “social movement,” these professionals, and others – mothers, students, market women, clergy – were part of a more fluid, less formal, but active and important resistance that ebbs and flows depending on the needs and challenges of the moment. Contrary to the more traditional and structural concepts of political “opportunity,” these part-time activists were not necessarily cowed into submission by repressive acts of the regime. On the contrary, it is often those very acts that spurred them into action as players in various arenas of political contention. “A social movement is never a unified player, but a shifting coalition of players (groups and individuals) who come together for occasional events based on perceived overlapping goals” (Jasper 2012, 21-2). In this study of nonviolent resistance in sub-Saharan Africa, the players acted at times as members of organizations, and at other times with little or no formal organizational support, functioning on their own, though usually in touch with other individual or organizational activists.

7 Stammers (2009, 39) argues that the link between human rights and social movements has received inadequate scholarly attention.
Scott’s arguments on resistance (1985, 290) have relevance for the study of non-organizational, nonviolent resistance by individuals, small groups, and informal networks against repressive rulers. The focus of the current study on challenges to regimes takes a more political edge than Scott, however. Scott was studying small-scale farmers in Malaysia. The resistance by the farmers, Scott noted, was primarily to “mitigate or deny claims (for example rents, taxes, prestige) made on that class by superordinate classes (for example, landlords, large farmers, the state) or to advance its own claims (for example work, land, charity, respect) vis-à-vis those superordinate classes.” In the current study, the resistance focused on demands on the state to allow such basic human rights as freedom of speech and assembly. When those in the resistance concluded that the state would not grant these rights adequately, their focus switched from regime reform to regime change. This resistance took many forms, including using the courtroom to challenge regime abuses; investigative media and think tank exposure of regime weaknesses and abuses; and secret planning sessions to coordinate small-scale acts of resistance. These and other small types of nonviolent resistance often are missed in an overly narrow focus on large resistance organizations and large-scale actions.

Establishing a Culture of Resistance

A social movement is a composite of many small steps, decisions and actions by individuals, sometimes acting on their own, sometimes in organizations, angered by a sense of injustice, inspired by the hope of justice, hungry for dignity and freedom, or in some cases seeking personal gain. For many, human rights and democracy are gateways to a better life and worth a struggle, worth the risk. The real heart of a social movement is the living, pulsating, emotional, day-to-day efforts of activists. There comes a moment when participants in a social movement/resistance movement do something to put their hopes and words into action. At that moment they cross a line. In a repressive setting, they leave the relative safety of anonymity, of compliance, and join others as marked opponents of repression.

This growing resistance, if not overwhelmingly repressed, can develop into a “culture of resistance,” defined in this study, as noted above, as a process in which public challenges to the abuse of power by a regime become a norm for activists and a visible segment of the general public. Early activists and activism encourage additional resistance. Through planned or spontaneous demonstrations led by activists, public resistance can become more common even in the face of continuing repression. More people attend
political rallies, even when those are banned; the media becomes bolder in its criticism; people talk more openly against the regime. In all three countries, the resistance exposed the abuses of the regimes, weakened their legitimacy and encouraged more resistance. The resistance in all three countries that are the focus of this study eventually led to a culture of resistance that helped set the stage for the regime changes that occurred.8

There are three major elements to the establishment of a culture of resistance; they are likely to overlap each other and their sequence is not always the same.

1. **Individual activism.** The concept of individual activism, a topic generally not analyzed in social movement studies, involves resistance not supported in any significant way by an organization. For example, an attorney may decide to legally challenge the treatment of political detainees by the state; yet the attorney’s professional law organization may be unwilling to offer any support of this challenge, preferring to shy away from political actions. The attorney’s own law firm may be too small and financially weak to provide much support. This happened in Kenya, Liberia, and Sierra Leone.

To overlook such challenges in the analysis of regime change and nonviolent resistance would be to miss important elements of the pressures that can build up against a repressive regime. The usual focus in social movement studies on organizational activism is thus limited. Regime leaders are aware of any kind of challenges: individual, organizational, or mass. Why shouldn’t political analysts also take notice of individual activism when it occurs? One reason individual activism is almost always overlooked, and rarely analyzed, may be that it isn’t easy to track. It requires locating activists or former activists and interviewing them (or in historical cases, documenting their actions via archival records) instead of tracking the easier-to-detect actions of organizations. The order of these elements is not always the same. In Kenya, there was an important period of mostly individual activism/resistance by independent journalists, attorneys, in the late 1980s and into 1990-91. Organizational activism became dominant in Kenya after the adoption of multiparty elections. In Sierra Leone and Liberia, there were examples of individual activism at various times, especially by attorneys and journalists, depending on the level of repression of the regimes: sometimes individual and organizational activism overlapped.

8 Mass violence and deaths after the disputed 2007 presidential election in Kenya was a major setback for Kenyans.
2 Organizational activism. This is the more traditional focus of social movement studies, yet even here the focus tends to be on large, well-established organizations. Tracking informal organizations, as some studies do, is also important, especially in a repressive setting where overt, open, and centralized organizations make easy targets for a regime. In this study, organizational resistance – by opposition political parties, women’s groups, students, unions, and others – played a key role in turning a society away from silent enduring to open resistance. Individuals can help break the wall of silence, but they are limited in what they can accomplish. Organizations are usually better equipped to conduct the more routine and day-to-day activities that keep pressure on a regime.

3 Mass resistance. This is an important element of a nonviolent resistance movement. It is one thing to have a few brave individuals challenging a regime; organizational resistance can keep the pressure on and even increase it. But without some indications of mass public support, a regime may be encouraged to continue repression, confident of survival in the absence of overt, widespread opposition. In Kenya, two major but illegal (at least in the eyes of the incumbent regime) rallies, offered clear evidence to the regime that the resistance by individual activists had much more public support than was evident. That mass resistance resurfaced again before the 1997 elections and in the years leading up to the election in 2002 which finally saw a change of regime. In Sierra Leone, when a military coup took place in 1997, it was met with some individual and organizational opposition. But it was the mass nonviolent response (in terms of strikes, staying home, and closing businesses, for example) that gave a clear signal to the regime and the diplomatic world that the junta lacked credibility in the eyes of the people. In Liberia, mass marches by women demanding an end to the war in 2003 kept pressure on the regime.

It is important to add that this study does not argue that the establishment of the three elements of a culture of resistance always leads to a regime change, or that the existence of a culture of resistance is necessary to effect regime change. Nor is the establishment of a culture of resistance part of a deterministic model: the appearance of one element in the resistance culture does not lead automatically to the others. In addition, this study notes that there is always uncertainty involved. The resistance can be blocked by mass repression, but it can be helped by unpredictable events and the actions of sympathizers. As noted later, minor actors sometimes
spontaneously play a role in the survival of key activists. *This study does argue that in all three countries, change would not have come when it did without the nonviolent resistance.*

**New Universal Model for Social Movements**

In general, the focus in social movement studies on organizations – often large organizations – and mass demonstrations, has proven highly useful. But where repression has limited formal, open activism, there is a need to look closer at both individual and small, informal group activism. As noted, nonviolent resistance in repressive settings can occur not just under dangerous conditions but without much in the way of material resources or structural opportunities normally associated with movements in the democratic West. This raises an important question: is there room for a universal model of social movements, one that fits movements in the democratic West as well as repressive settings anywhere? Under repressive conditions, social movements may not exhibit the typical hallmarks of resistance in peaceful settings as noted above: “sustained, organized and public” (Tilly 2004, 3). Goodwin and Jasper (2004, 3) use a similar definition but add that the “collective, organized, sustained” challenges may also target “cultural beliefs and practices.” David S. Meyer in his study of social movements in America offers this definition: “collective and sustained efforts that challenge existing or potential laws, politics, norms, or authorities, making use of extra-institutional political tactics” (Meyer 2007, 10).

Social movements operating in the face of repression can ill afford this kind of openness and organization; the repression can interrupt activism. Typically social movements in peaceful settings are aimed at *regime reform*, but in repressive settings the aim often is *regime change*. This can make activists, whether operating individually or collectively, a target of a repressive regime. Using the definition cited above (see argument No. 6), this study suggests a new model, one that recognizes individual as well as organizational activism and sometimes mass public support, embracing regime change as a goal as well as regime reform, but without the expectations cited from the literature. The model recognizes the importance of strategic choices by participants in a resistance (e.g., when to join, what to do, when to do it). “In strategic rather than structural models, individual actions can make a difference” (Jasper 2012, 33). Future research using this new model in other repressive settings may help identify a broader range of activists than without it.
Theoretical Implications

Structure and Resistance

This study argues that structure in the sense of political “opportunity” is not necessary for the kind of nonviolent resistance that took place in these three countries. But neither was activism alone the only factor in the changes that occurred. International donors used their leverage at times to pressure the regimes for change, most notably in aid freezes in Kenya. International human rights organizations often were effective in winning quick release of well-known activists from detention through negative publicity and direct contact with regime officials on behalf of the detainees. The poor economy in the 1980s across much of Africa and the upsurge in Western international support for human rights after the end of the Cold War were all part of the backdrop against which the activists operated. Further, it was military intervention, not simply nonviolent resistance, that brought an end to a military regime in Sierra Leone. In Liberia, President Charles Taylor resigned under international indictment and with a rival rebel force approaching the capital.

Each of the regime changes in these three countries came only after mounting domestic nonviolent resistance. That resistance documented human rights and other abuses by the regimes, shredded claims of regime legitimacy and rule of law, and exposed corruption. It set the stage in Liberia and Sierra Leone for military interventions. By contrast, widespread civilian welcoming of the previous military junta in Sierra Leone offered the international community little incentive to oppose it until domestic resistance against it grew several years later. In sum, the nonviolent resistance alone did not cause the regime changes to democratic rule that eventually took place in all three countries; this study argues, without such resistance change would not likely have come when it did.

From the close-up vantage point of 170 in-depth interviews by the author, with past activists among others, this study offers a broader, more nuanced view of social movements than many studies. Unlike archival research from afar, it reveals the day-to-day fears, hopes, courage, tactics, and strategic choices of those who stood up for human rights, democratic rule, dignity, and a better life. The theoretical arguments developed from this qualitative research are grounded in actual events and they are “faithful to the evidence” (Neuman 2004, 30). But theoretical arguments alone do not reveal the emotions, the life of a social movement and its participants. Studies that argue social movements are more than calculated, mechanical responses to structural conditions in society are correct. The problem is that even in such works,
the analyses tend to leave out the story of the ordinary people who challenge authority, especially in repressive settings. The current study presents the voices of the challengers as well as a theoretical analysis of the evidence.

Emotions like courage, a need for respect and dignity, a gut feeling that things could and should be better, and a determination to do something – even some small thing – to make life better, played an important role in the nonviolent resistance that took place in all three countries. Structural explanations work to a certain extent in describing the conditions against which resistance takes place, and against which emotions play a part in resistance. If these background issues were highly favorable to daily life there would have been much less reason for a resistance. But structural explanations by themselves cannot explain why someone decides to challenge a repressive regime. Neither can emotions.

Jasper (2003) argues for the importance of emotions in social movements. Goodwin and Jasper (2004, 79) ask, “when does an increase in repression, or the use of certain types of repression, lead to greater mobilization, and when to less.” The way they phrase the question is important: they not only recognize that repression may actually increase resistance, they assume that beyond a certain point repression leads to less resistance.

Pearlman (2013, 392) argues that emotions such as a sense of “dignity … anger, joy, pride, and shame have emboldening effects.” They make people more likely to join a “political resistance,” despite the dangers. But emotions of “fear, sadness, and shame give rise to dispiriting effects. They increase individuals’ tendencies to make pessimistic assessments, discount prospects of change, privilege information about danger, have a low sense of control, and avert risk.” She applies this argument to the Arab uprisings of 2011 in Tunisia, Egypt, and Algeria. Pearlman concludes that the massive retaliation by the Algerian regime and remembrance of the past war there against France provoked fear on the part of the resistance which helped block a revolution there. She further argues that positive emotions helped spur the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt. But it may be even more complicated than that division: some protestors facing repressive regimes may simply feel they have nothing left to lose. For example, in 1977, the Abuelas (grandmothers) of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina managed to turn their despair over the loss of their children (and in many cases, their grandchildren) into nonviolent resistance with a long series of demonstrations against the brutal regime, demanding to know what happened to them.

This study considers the relationship of resistance and repression by examining activism that involved courage, principle, or ambition – or some combination of the three. It is beyond the scope of this study to try to analyze the individual motives of activists interviewed, but the words of many interviewed are compelling in the context of highly repressive settings. This
study suggests that a synthesis explanation, considering rational choice, social movement explanations, including the often overlooked concept of emotions and from psychology the concept of moral rationality and altruism as part of what motivates people to resist repression.

In their works on why people joined the mass demonstrations against the Communist regimes of Eastern Europe in 1989 (the year the Berlin Wall fell), Karklins and Petersen (1993), Lohmann (1994), and Kuran (1991) offer differing rational choice explanations of why people engage in resistance. Karklins and Petersen argue that protestors calculated their safety based on the size of the demonstration and the regime’s response: larger demonstrations assured people there was less risk to protest. But there is a tautological aspect to this: more people join the protest when crowds are larger; when crowds are larger more people join the protest (612). Their rational choice argument with calculations on both sides gives much credence to the ability of demonstrators and the regime to plan things out logically. But in countries with repressive regimes, demonstrators may be motivated more by emotion than calculation; the country’s strongman may be subject to emotional reactions themselves, as well to challenges to the regime’s power.

The current study also addresses a gap between the literature on nonviolent resistance and the social movement literature. Social movement literature focuses mostly on the dynamics of a movement, whereas the nonviolence literature concentrates more on tactics. But the division is not analytically useful. This study helps bridge this gap, combining elements of both to explain the resistance that took place by examining both dynamics and tactics. How social movements actually start has also received scant attention. Most studies examine growth and operation of movements but seldom does one trace back to the initial steps as this study does.

Related to this, the study helps us look closer at resistance not just from the point of view of activists but shows how authoritarian leaders see resistance. Authoritarian regimes do not neatly focus only on large organizations opposing them, they are also very much aware of the smaller groups and individuals in a resistance. In the current study, authoritarian regime leaders in all three countries strove to present themselves as legitimate rulers who upheld the rule of law. But they bent the law, warped its application, and used the law as a tool of repression. Still they struggled to convince donors and diplomats that the opposition was the force that was violating the laws. In such cases, an independent newspaper can rip the veil off such pretense and draw international attention to a regime’s sham claims of
legitimacy, sometimes opening the way for new international pressures or even military intervention, as happened in Sierra Leone and Liberia.

For Africa, where “the struggle to cross the frontier from personal rule to rule-based governance is still far from over” (Diamond and Plattner 2010, xii) recognition of a broader array of participants in nonviolent social movements offers new appreciation for the capacity of ordinary people to challenge even the most entrenched of repressive rulers. This recognition is clearer when Western-based social movement models are replaced by a more flexible, universal one that embraces responses to conditions in repressive settings as well. This broader recognition in turn may lead some donors and diplomats to reconsider their ways of encouraging greater respect for human rights and democracy by providing aid and training to a wider range of civil society activists working toward these goals. As one longtime scholar of African politics notes in response to the arguments of this study, “The missed realities of social movements that you talk about are actually intrinsically important to the political and social fabric of developing countries, as a necessary intermediate step in building a more truly ‘universal’ theory of social movements that builds on the experience of all world regions.” Harbeson also asks whether social movements were actually stronger than most observers recognized during the repressive Moi years, for example. The answer this study arrived at is yes. The chapters on Kenya show how domestic resistance, contrary to most assessments, was more effective in bringing about multiparty elections than international donor pressures.

Motives of Activists

In his study of resistance by Malaysian farmers to oppressive working conditions, Scott (1985, 291) makes an interesting observation with regard to how much of the resistance was principled actions against conditions and how much of it was self-interest. “The English poacher in the eighteenth century may have been resisting gentry’s claim to property in wild game, but he was just as surely interested in rabbit stew.” Like Scott’s study, this one does not try to separate out those activists who were acting for a greater good from those who saw potential personal gain in the resistance. Clearly some activists in the three countries in this study who took part in the resistance had hopes of personal gain, either in terms of political power or simply for an economy that would provide more jobs. Some former activists took positions in the new governments, sometimes disappointing fellow...
former activists and others with their performance; sometimes not. It is also beyond the scope of this study to examine the degree of democracy that emerged after the regime changes noted in each of the three countries.10

A few activists openly acknowledged they had used the push for human rights as way to weaken a regime and replace it with one more amenable to their profession. Certainly if the repression stopped or was at least reduced, they hoped their chances would improve to work more freely as lawyers, journalists, or students, for example. But to consider that a lawyer risked his or her life to gain a few more clients makes little sense. The costs too far outweighed the benefits. The regimes at various times practiced detention, torture, and murder to defeat those in the nonviolent resistance. Whatever their motives, activists took similar risks in resisting repressive regimes in Kenya, Sierra Leone, and Liberia. The regimes weren’t looking at motives but at their actions. And as noted, the regimes didn’t care if someone was in an organization or acting on their own as part of an informally linked resistance movement. Resistance marked them as enemies of the state.

The author agrees with Scott that trying to distinguish how much of the resistance was self-interest and how much was not is a debate that yields little additional light in a study of social movement activism under repressive conditions. The interviews fairly consistently yielded an overall impression that most participants were genuinely upset at the lack of human rights and democracy in their countries, resentful at the abuses, and willing to takes risks to be part of an effort to make things better for everyone.

Finally, in the best sense of scholarly research, this study builds on the pioneering work of social movement theorists in the spirit of Charles Tilly’s challenge to scholars. In his many works on social movements, Tilly never stopped looking for new ways to explore what he called “contentious performances” of people organizing to make claims. In his last book (2008), Tilly challenged scholars “to bring their own evidence and procedures to bear” on the topic.11 The current study is presented in the spirit of respect for previous works and a willingness to further understand the amazing determination of people to resist repression nonviolently.

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10 The author analyzed some of the changes in Kenya 2002-12 in an article in the Journal of Human Rights (Press 2012).
11 The author met Tilly in October, 2007, in his office at the University of Columbia just a few months before his death. His office was stacked high with books, on desks and bookshelves. Referring to books in general, he said: “I like to read them and write them,” signing and handing the author a copy of his 2004 work, Social Movements, 1768-2004. When I explained the concepts presented in this current study, he called them “very interesting.”