Global Nonviolent Action Database
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Nonviolent Action Defined

"Nonviolent action" is one of the names people sometimes give to the conflict behavior reported in this database. Other names are "people power," "civil resistance," "satyagraha," "nonviolent resistance," "direct action," "pacifica militancia," "positive action," and more.

We mean a technique of struggle that goes beyond institutionalized conflict procedures like law courts and voting, procedures common in many countries. We study the methods of protest, noncooperation, and intervention that typically heighten a conflict – and the use of these methods without the threat or use of injurious force to others.

Our definition is not located in the discourse of morality and ethics, although some people may choose to use nonviolent action for ethical reasons. Instead, we focus descriptively on what people do when they use this specific "technique of struggle."

This definition is roughly in alignment with that of the leading researcher in the field, Gene Sharp, who writes: "Nonviolent action refers to those methods of protest, resistance, and intervention without physical violence in which the members of the nonviolent group do, or refuse to do, certain things. They may commit acts of omission – refuse to perform acts which they usually perform, are expected by custom to perform, or are required by law or regulation to perform; or acts of commission – perform acts which they usually do not perform, are not expected by custom to perform, or are forbidden by law or regulation from performing; or a combination of both." (1980) *Social Power and Political Freedom*, Boston: Porter Sargent Publishers, p. 218.

Sociologist Kurt Schock writes in his book *Unarmed Insurrections: People Power Movements in Nondemocracies*, that nonviolent action "involves an active process of bringing political, economic, social, emotional, or moral pressure to bear in the wielding of power in contentious interactions between collective actors. Nonviolent action is noninstitutional, that is, it operates outside the bounds of institutionalized political channels, and is indeterminate, that is, the procedures for determining the outcome of the conflict are not specified in advance. . . . Rather than being viewed as half of a rigid violent-nonviolent dichotomy, nonviolent action may be better understood as a set of methods with special features that are different from those of both violent and institutional politics." (2005) Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 6. The intention of this database is to assist researchers and activists to better understand the special features of nonviolent struggle that make it different from both violent and institutional politics.

This database sometimes calls upon researchers to examine cases in which violence is also committed by campaigners, raising the question of what defines "violence." Borrowing from political scientist Mulford Sibley, we use the phrase "injurious force." This excludes what some writers call "structural violence" (poverty, discrimination, and other systemic violations of human rights). Because the focus of our study is open and direct conflict, our interest is in violence as the immediate application of injurious force to others, which in principle can be psychological as well as physical.

In this database we further mean "injurious force" *as applied to human beings and objects endowed by human personality*. The destruction of bureaucratic records or a military weapon we do not call violence, whereas the destruction of a painter's work of art would ordinarily be considered violence. If, however, the painter joined a campaign and sacrificed her own painting as a tactic, we would join Gene Sharp in considering her "destruction of own property" as a method of nonviolent action.

-George Lakey 18/08/2011

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