



Global Nonviolent Action Database

Published on *Global Nonviolent Action Database* (<https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu>)

Uses of the Database

Strategists, activist organizers, scholars, and teachers will find many uses for the database, as well as citizens wanting to expand their horizons. Even before release to the public, for example, a teacher who knew the database team was using our cases to assist middle school pupils to develop plays. Any school that teaches about the environment, civil rights, or other issues may find the curriculum enlivened by sending students to the database. History students might enjoy doing the detective work of finding the hidden stories in their local area that could be developed into cases. The database also offers an invitation to geographical learning.

Journalists and bloggers will find easy access for contextualizing stories of contemporary protests they are reporting. Up until now many observers write about breaking news with a tone of surprise; coverage of the Egyptian events of early 2011 included wonderment and an assumption of protester spontaneity that showed ignorance of the developing craft of nonviolent struggle. Even a short time with the database reveals a multiplicity of connections among cases, through a shared “wave,” shared methods, shared influences, and shared time periods.

Activist organizers and strategists can use the database to expand the repertoire of options for nonviolent campaigns. By exploring the use of 198+ methods of action, campaigners may become more creative and proactive than they otherwise might be. They may also calculate more carefully in relation to resources and goals, and craft a more winnable campaign than they otherwise would do.

The database may make it easier to assess the right time to introduce an unusually powerful method of action. Prematurely calling a general strike is something to worry about, but what *is* too early? A particular method may be highly controversial and get harsh criticism even from allies (picketing the White House by the U.S. Woman’s Party’s during World War I, for example) but in fact be strategically placed for greatest success. An organizer can use the database to become more aware of strategic choices and make better calls for their own campaigns.

Both strategists and scholars will be interested in the abundance of patterns among the cases, to be noted and explored. One reason these cases are presented in a database rather than in book form is to make it easier to explore connections: patterns are more visible and easily accessible. As the database grows, connections will become even more noticeable.

Dozens of questions can be explored using the database, for example: When a campaign can be framed as either “change” or “defense,” is it more likely to succeed in attracting a broad range of allies if it is framed as defense? When a campaign is experiencing especially heavy repression, what are the benefits/liabilities of inviting third party nonviolent intervention, as compared with violent intervention as in the case of Libya in 2011? What are the possible impacts of using a wide variety of nonviolent methods engaging a cross-section of the population, compared with a more focused strategy using few methods?

Scholars will have questions that may not have immediate relevance to activists but are interesting in their own right. For example, under what conditions does a “wave” happen? In the two decades before the 1960 wave of civil rights sit-ins by black students in the U.S., there had been previous sit-in campaigns that did *not* launch a wave.

The cases in the database represent an extremely wide range of cultures and ethical backgrounds, but that does not mean that cultural norms and mores play no part in campaigner choices of methods. Philosophers and anthropologists might investigate the intersection of ethical systems and the use of particular methods, since some campaigns seem to make culturally-based decisions on whether or not to use nonviolent methods that might, on strategic grounds, seem obviously useful.

Swarthmore peace studies colleague Lee A. Smithey (with Lester R. Kurtz, George Mason University) presented a paper to the International Studies Association based partly on cases from this database in which they observed differential impacts of governmental violence against nonviolent protest. They explored a pattern they call “the paradox of repression” in which state violence, instead of shutting down the protesters, actually stimulated the growth of the campaign.

It has long been noted that the prelude to many armed struggles against colonial and other oppressive regimes has included nonviolent protests. Typically, the nonviolent campaign seeking change was met by harshly violent reprisals, and the campaigners turned to violence. Surprisingly, another pattern that emerges from the database is that of people starting nonviolent campaigns after trying violence without success. In El Salvador in 1944 a military rebellion failed to unseat the dictator, for example, so students initiated a nonviolent insurrection that forced regime change.

After World War II the Soviet Union occupied Latvia and a guerrilla resistance began; it was called off by 1952 as a failure, followed by nonviolent experiments that flowered in 1989 with a nonviolent victory for independence. In Aceh the GAM struggled for independence from Indonesia for many years using violence, with no success; the people launched a nonviolent campaign in 1999 that brought a high degree of autonomy to Aceh. Half a world away, Chileans’ violent resistance in the 1970s to the rule of dictator Pinochet failed; in a strategic shift, Chileans then brought him down with nonviolent struggle in 1983.

Under very different circumstances, the NATO bombing of Serbia failed to bring down dictator Milosevic and set back the nonviolent struggle to overthrow him; only when the bombing stopped could the student-led struggle re-mobilize to oust the dictator. In that part of Europe a century and a half before, the people of Hungary tried to gain independence from the Austrian Empire through a violent insurrection in 1848. It failed. They then succeeded through a nonviolent struggle.

In a recent sign of growing strategic sophistication, activists in Oman launched a campaign for democracy in 2010 with a mass demonstration in which governmental repression was met by the demonstrators with counter-violence. The campaign suspended itself, regrouped, and then resumed freshly with more nonviolent discipline, going on to succeed in achieving its reform goals.

This is only a small sample of the many ways the database can be used to extend knowledge and stimulate new thinking. The reader will think of more ways to use it.

- *George Lakey 13/08/11*

A project of Swarthmore College, including Peace and Conflict Studies, the Peace Collection, and the Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility.

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