

Standing Idly by during the Revolution

How the Security Forces Critically Affect the Success or Failure of Non-Violent Campaigns

Violent uprisings last about two and a half times as long as non-violent campaigns on average. Brutal repression of a non-violent campaign can end the conflict quickly. Widespread defection among the security forces also leads to a relatively quick end to a non-violent campaign. If the security forces defect, the chances of success for a non-violent campaign increase substantially. Defection can take the form of desertion or shirking (standing idly by) and not following orders to repress. Non-violent tactics are much more likely to lead to defection than violent tactics.

Brief Points

- The security forces of a regime play a critical role in determining the duration of non-violent campaigns.
- Defection by security forces has a substantial effect on the success of non-violent rebellions and no effect on violent revolts.
- Individual soldiers and police have great discretion in how to respond to organized protest. The tactic of nonviolence affects these choices.
- Standing idly by is a much more common response to a non-violent campaign than a violent one.

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Violent and Non-Violent Campaign Duration

Non-violent campaigns do not last long in contrast to violent revolts. While the average non-violent campaign lasts about 2 years and 3 months, the average violent uprising persists for nearly 6 years and 5 months. Figure 1 shows a box plot comparing the duration of violent and non-violent campaigns. The difference between the two strategies is marked. The distributions barely overlap.

Non-violent movements are more than twice as likely to succeed as violent campaigns (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011). Successful violent campaigns also tend to last about four times longer than successful non-violent campaigns. In fact, non-violent protests that have led to regime change lasted on average only 1 year and 4 months. Figure 2 shows the Kaplan-Meier survival plots for successful and unsuccessful violent and non-violent campaigns. For non-democratic regimes, the shortest campaigns are those that are non-violent and unsuccessful. These tend to be the cases in which the military crushes the non-violent movement.

Security Forces and the Duration of Campaigns

The security forces of a regime play a critical role in determining the duration of non-violent campaigns. United against an unarmed movement, the security forces can crush the opposition in short order. The nature of non-violence, however, can also induce disunity in the ranks of the security forces. Orders to ruthlessly repress a non-violent movement can result in dissention and disunity among the security forces.

Whether the decision to repress starts with a civilian dictator, the top of the military hierarchy, or somewhere further down the chain of command, in the end, individual members of the security apparatus on the ground must decide how to interpret orders and whether or not

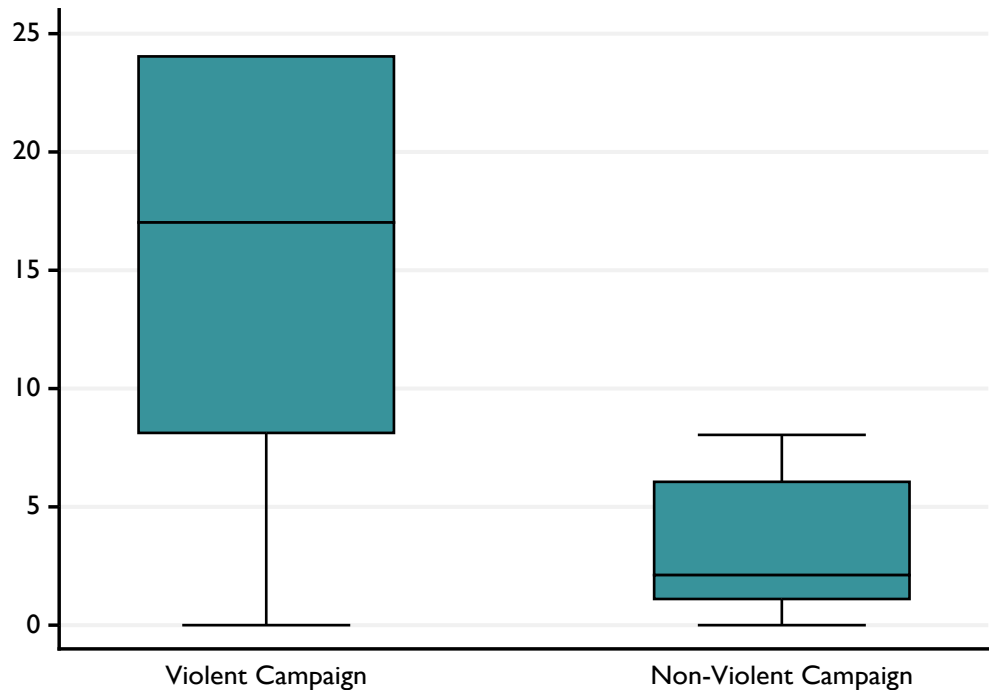


Figure 1

to carry them out. If sufficient numbers fail to comply with orders to repress, the movement is likely to grow. Indeed, Chenoweth and Stephan (2011) find that non-violent campaigns that induce security force defection are 46 times more likely to succeed than those that do not. In contrast, for violent campaigns, military defection does not affect the chances of success.

Street-Level Autocrats

The soldier and policeman on the street serve many roles, but one of the most central is to support the regime. To do their jobs, these agents of the state invariably possess decision-making discretion. How they exercise their discretion crucially influences how the state works (Brehm and Gates 1997). A soldier has similar decision-making latitude in response to protesters (Feaver 1999). He may counter mass protest with varying degrees of violence, ranging from bloody massacres; to forceful arrest; to sitting idle and doing little to stop the

protests; to deserting and siding with the protest movement (Dahl et al. 2016).

The security apparatus is not a monolithic actor, and within it there will always be some individuals that are completely loyal to the incumbent. These individuals will follow any order, however harsh, to repress a popular uprising. Another group will be willing to go against such orders. If civil society is able to “convince” enough members of the security forces to either defect or stand idly by, the incumbent will no longer be able to stay in power. Whether the protesters are successful in this hinges on the degree to which their struggle is perceived to be legitimate, the likelihood of the movement being successful, the potential benefits of defecting, and the potential punishment for not following orders.

Non-violent tactics play a critical role in granting a movement’s legitimacy. Indeed, the likelihood of defection rises considerably when the state employs violence against a non-violent movement (Dahl et al 2016).

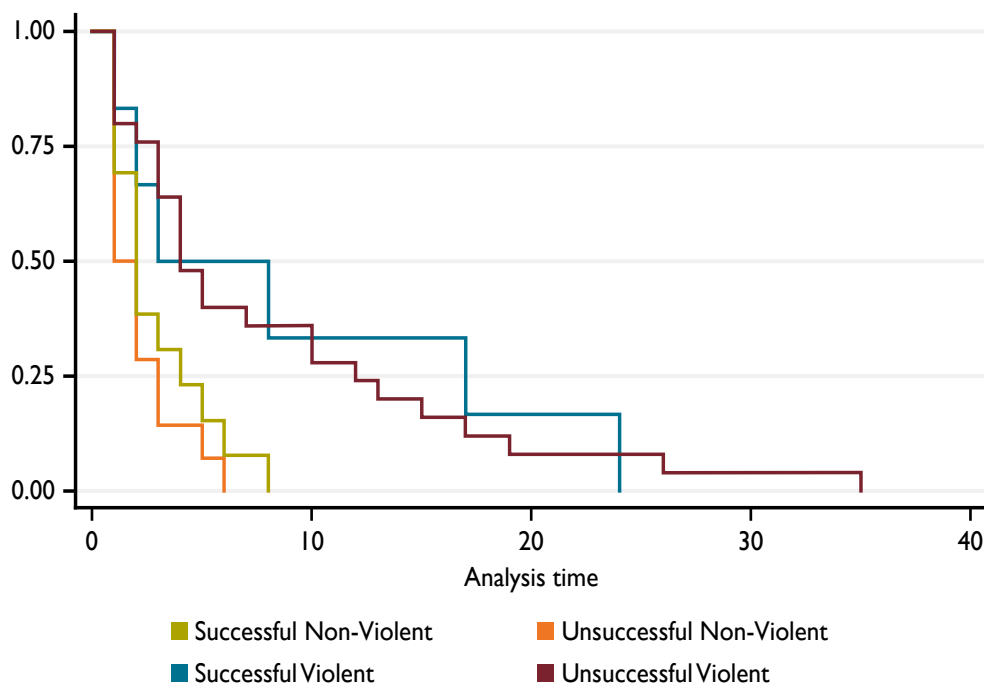


Figure 2: Kaplan-Meier survival estimates

A soldier that deserts risks being punished if caught. Standing idly by and not actively repressing those engaged in non-violent protest offers a means of non-compliance less likely to be detected. This form of shirking one's duties offers a less risky alternative to defection. Nonetheless, if enough soldiers shirk in such a manner (standing idly by), the chances of the non-violent campaign's success will increase. Dahl et al. (2016) find that those who shirk are strongly motivated by the non-violent tactics lending legitimacy to the movement, and will shirk regardless of their perceptions about the likelihood of the campaign's success. Widespread desertion by security forces often serves to assure that the non-violent campaign is successful.

A Case of Defection

Large-scale protests spread in Romania in December of 1989. Protests started in the city of Timișoara, but while the Romanian media made no reference to the riots, news spread by word of mouth across

the country. Nicolae Ceaușescu decided to address the nation on December 21 to signal his strength, and the party convened a support demonstration of 100,000 people.

This speech was broadcast live through state media, but the plan failed magnificently. Rather than supporting Ceaușescu, the crowd turned against him – on live TV. In the hours following his failed speech, massive numbers of ordinary people took to the streets. In addition, a split within the security apparatus appeared. The armed forces sided with the protesters, and advocated for former crown prince Ion Iliescu. Ceaușescu had been effectively deserted by his military forces; he was ousted, and on December 25, Ceaușescu was sentenced to death and executed. In the Romanian case, the military defected from the incumbent and sided with the opposition, and this prompted a regime change.

A Case of Standing Idly By

In the East German city of Leipzig in September 1989, protesters began holding "Monday demonstrations". In just a few weeks, by October 2nd, the protests included 10,000 people. The East German police reacted violently and many protesters were arrested and beaten. The demonstrators, however, were not deterred. On October 9 a new demonstration was staged, this time attracting 70,000 people. The police had been ordered to suppress the demonstrations, and to use all necessary force to maintain law and order. Many police officers, however, chose to simply disobey their orders, lingering on the sidelines of the demonstrations and for the most part staying out of sight. As a consequence, the "Monday demonstrations" kept growing, and in the end the East German regime was toppled.

In contrast to the Romanian case, the East German police did not shift their allegiance, they simply decided not to follow orders – they shirked. In contrast to defection, principled shirking is harder for the incumbent to detect, and therefore less likely to be punished and consequently less costly for the individual police officer. The consequence of security apparatus engaging in principled shirking in lieu of large-scale mass mobilization, however, can be just as damaging to the regime as defection.

Repression – Protest Dynamics

Large-scale non-violent campaigns succeed as a result of inducing defection among the rank and file of the security forces. Deserting and joining the rebellion, however, is risky unless many defect at the same time. A single deserter would be severely punished. Idly standing by and not following orders is a less risky form of defection. The behavior of every member of the security force is extremely difficult to monitor, especially when the form of defection is a form of shirking. This lack of oversight grants considerable

decision-making discretion to the soldier and police officer on the street.

Soldiers and the police do, however, monitor one another. Idly standing by and not actively working to repress the non-violent movement serves as a rather low cost signal of non-compliance to fellow members of the security forces. Widespread shirking can in turn lead to widespread desertion. A few shirking soldiers will not affect the success of a non-violent campaign, but if enough stand idly by or desert, success is likely to follow.

Violent campaigns in contrast are much less likely to lead to shirking. If someone is shooting at you, it's in your interest to fight back. Non-violent movements, due to their very nature, make idly standing by an attractive option in the face of a "legitimate" rebellion.

Non-violent tactics are much more likely to induce defection than violent tactics. Non-violence is particularly effective in encouraging shirking. In turn, getting the security forces to defect is critical to the success of a non-violent campaign. ■

Notes

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THE PROJECT

The project 'Effective Non-Violence? Resistance Strategies and Political Outcomes', supported by the Research Council of Norway, examines conditions that foster the use of non-violent as opposed to violent tactics, focusing on specific actors and organizations, constituencies, and the state, and collecting new data on claims and tactics in territorial and governmental disputes.

PRIO

The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) is a non-profit peace research institute (established in 1959) whose overarching purpose is to conduct research on the conditions for peaceful relations between states, groups and people. The institute is independent, international and interdisciplinary, and explores issues related to all facets of peace and conflict.