

IN DEPTH

# Civil resistance: collective, peaceful and transformative power

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**Throughout history, peoples, social sectors, and majority populations have faced the multiple impact of various forms of violence.** These have been manifested in powers which, at each point in history, have been perceived as absolute and invincible and, in any case, asymmetrical for those who are subjected to them. Their provenance has been diverse: monarchic, oligarchic, colonial, invasive, dictatorial, military or armed, state and/or private, national or transnational economic power, among others. In any of these situations, such powers have been dominant, exclusive, abusive, and threatening. They have frequently capitalised on political and/or economic interests, have imposed repression and exploitation and, along the way, snuffed out many lives or placed them at high risk. Moreover, they have disregarded the ethnic status of peoples and, in general, the humanity of all the sectors mentioned above, and have also devastated such essentials of life as culture, territory, and the autonomy of different groups.

Additionally, at different points in history and in a variety of places, these abused sectors have, by means of peaceful methods, managed to stop, transform, or attenuate the impact of such violence. How can such an unimaginable achievement be explained? How did they do this? The answer can be summed up in two words and is repeated in its analogous names: civil resistance, and/or “nonviolent resistance”, “civilised resistance”, “unarmed rebellions”, “war without weapons”, and others.

This civil resistance, its meanings and characteristics, the challenges it faces, and present and future alternatives, represents the core concern of the reflections that follow. Emphasis is also given to the fact that it is essential today as a strategy of

resilience, overcoming and disrupting violence in situations where it is inflicted by state actors and such non-state actors as organised crime.

### **What makes civil resistance a recurrent mechanism through history?**

The practice of civil resistance involves aspects of considerable interest, as reflected in the ways this kind of resistance, its potentialities, and its scope are understood. Accordingly, it has come to the attention of several disciplines in the social sciences, a range of artistic expressions, and peacebuilders wherever they may be, and with greater emphasis since the 1990s.

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One interesting aspect is the recurrence of civil resistance throughout history. This being the case, it is worth asking what the following groups have in common: the Egyptian craftsmen of Waset who in 1166 BCE, during the reign of Ramses III, decided to stop working on the royal tombs in order to be paid their wages; the Roman plebeians who, in 494 BCE, withdrew to the Aventine Hill until the nobles recognised their political rights; the Yaqui tribe of Mexico who, in 2010, embarked on a nonviolent struggle against businessmen and the state of Sonora and their “Independence Aqueduct” megaproject, which disregarded their rights over their river and territory; the winners of the Right Livelihood Award, the Asociación de Trabajadores Campesinos del Carare (ATCC - Association of Peasant Workers of the Carare) which, in 1987 and in the midst of crossfire, organised to declare to all those involved in the country’s armed conflict that, thenceforth, peasants would not lose their lives because of this conflict, and that they were not enemies but they did not want to be caught up in their armed clashes; and the Black communities of the Consejo Comunitario Mayor de la Asociación Campesina

Integral del Atrato (COCOMACIA – Greater Community Council of the Integral Peasants' Association of the Atrato River), in the Middle Atrato wetlands of Chocó, Colombia, which organised in 1982 to prevent the state from conceding their territory to private logging companies, and to achieve recognition of their ethnic condition and their rights.

The answer to this question is the same in all cases: an inspiring, intelligent, collective opposition, and a dignifying challenge to orders established by various kinds of violence and their actors, and a strategy based on nonviolent methods and deployment of peaceful transformative power.

In the twentieth century, campaigns of civil resistance were more common than is generally imagined, and their achievements were greater than those of armed resistance. Nevertheless, this does not mean that attempts at civil resistance always achieve the goals they have set and that they are successful. In general, the most effective civil resistance campaigns are partially successful, and some of them accept that one possible result can be the frustration of not achieving any of their aims because they are crushed and defeated. There are several reasons for this. The powers faced by nonviolent resistance are enormous and, consequently, the asymmetries in the power relations are also huge. Moreover, conflicts are dynamic, as are the contexts in which the various forms of resistance appear and are conducted. Finally, several circumstances can change. The experience of the Black COCOMACIA communities in Colombia was that, in the first five years of the 1980s, they managed to get the state to revoke its concession of their land to the logging companies, and also to recognise their existence as a people, as well as their special relationship with the land in the middle Atrato wetlands of Chocó. Yet, it was only considerably later, in 1993, that the Law 70 In Recognition of the Right of Black Colombians to Collectively Own and Occupy Their Ancestral Lands was passed. Something similar happened with the Guarijío people in Mexico who achieved recognition as an Indigenous people and of their territory in the mid-1970s but later, in 2011, when they started their campaign of resistance against the Los Pilares dam, they did not achieve much.

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### **The meanings of civil resistance**

Civil resistance has several meanings. Generally speaking, it has been understood as collective opposition and nonviolent struggle. From the standpoint of peace studies, it is seen as a mechanism for the management and positive transformation of conflicts, with attention to the peaceful methods it employs, its potential for bringing about change, and constructive social and/or political transformations, depending on its nature. Also notable is the fact that this form of resistance reveals the power of collective action and the scope of nonviolent methods. Furthermore, it brings some balance to the asymmetrical power relations between those who are resisting and the actors who are being resisted, and it very often represents the gateway to such peacebuilding mechanisms as mediation and negotiation. Likewise, these aspects constitute pacifist empowerment as they develop peace-making potentialities and skills among those who generate and drive this resistance.

### **What characteristics give scope to civil resistance and endure over time?**

Experiences of civil resistance recorded and documented, especially since the 1990s, have led to a significant accumulation of knowledge about the characteristics of this type of resistance. These are related with their origins, the actors who set the bounds and get them moving, the interests at the core of the exercise of resistance, their potential, their methods, and conditions for their effectiveness. These features of civil resistance are described below:

- **Its processual nature.** Civil resistance is a process and, in this sense, it develops over time, in stages that are not always sequential, and amid various vicissitudes. This characteristic is very important and distinguishes it from other expressions of collective action, for example short-lived mass mobilisations that fizzle out once partial goals are achieved, or intense, fleeting social eruptions. The fact that this resistance is a process offers a window of opportunity for strengthening unity, carrying out education for resistance within the resisting groups, and refining methods and strategies. In their long, tenacious resistance, the Indigenous people of Cauca, Colombia, first stood their ground against the state when claiming recognition of their status as a people and of their rights, and later added a new component to their struggle when they included their opposition to the country's armed conflict and all its actors. At this point, as part of their strategy and on the basis of community meetings, they collectively produced a resistance manual, after which they went from village to village, from house to house, educating people about the measures and strategies contained in the manual. In a third stage, they extended their strategy of resistance to national and international megaprojects and extractive enterprises.
- **It is collective action.** This is undoubtedly one of its main features and that which holds much of its potential in terms of what it might achieve. This becomes broad-based participation in the exercise or campaign of civil resistance, cohesion, and joint action that hold out the possibility for attaining the goals of the resistance which, as noted above, are usually partial.
- **It is rooted in the social base.** This powerful component of civil resistance means that it can be appropriated by those who resist since it originates among people who share a common condition because they bear the burden of domination, exclusion, exploitation, repression, and more. For this very reason, it also favours cohesion, persistence, and strength among those who lead or participate in this exercise of resistance.

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- **The use of nonviolent methods to resist.** The choice of these methods, regardless of whether they are rooted in pragmatic positions or ethical or religious principles, is very intelligent as it offers advantages in the exercise of resistance. First, it entails lower costs for those who are resisting, especially in terms of human losses, while it also makes it easier for other social sectors to support the campaign of resistance once it is underway. Second, it legitimates the exercise of resistance because of its peaceful nature, while also delegitimising the violent, repressive responses of states and other actors being resisted.
- **The power of the causes giving rise to the resistance.** The causes that lead to the processes and campaigns of civil resistance are an essential factor in their exercise and achievements. They constitute the force that calls for resistance, the factor that favours and maintains its unity, and the engine that drives it. This is reflected in both long-term experiences and those that have achieved consolidation in shorter periods of time, as is the case, in Colombia, of the following processes of resistance: the Colectivo de Objetores de Conciencia (Conscientious Objectors' Collective), the Asociación de Mujeres Tejedoras de Vida del Putumayo (Alliance of Women “Weavers of Life” of the province of Putomayo), the Red de Mujeres por la Paz (REMPAZ – Network of Women for Peace) in Montes de María, and the Movimiento de Víctimas (MOVICE – National Movement of Victims of State Crimes).
- **Organisation and planning.** This aspect is closely linked with the effectiveness of the exercise of civil resistance. It entails the development of organisational skills by those who are resisting: anticipating possible actions and reactions of the adversary, and planning and conducting resistance activities, leaving as little as possible to chance. This has become apparent in the experiences of civil resistance of the Indigenous people of Cauca, Colombia, and of the Yaqui tribe in

Mexico.

- **Creativity, flexibility, capacity to readjust, and persistence of those who are resisting.** This is a characteristic of those who plan and energise campaigns of resistance and is related with their efficacy. Creativity is related with strategies of protection, visibility, diffusion, non-collaboration, non-cooperation, intervention, and others. In contexts of extreme levels of violence, some experiences, for example the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó at the time of its appearance in 1996, resorted to such simple creative strategies as using whistles to warn of the presence of armed actors in the zone, going out in groups to harvest food crops, and doing a head count at the beginning and end of the day. Flexibility and capacity to readjust can help to overcome obstacles and vicissitudes by introducing necessary changes in the strategies of resistance. Finally, persistence is inherent to any exercise of resistance and much more so in those that succeed.

Each experience of civil resistance is unique and unrepeatable. As such, they have their own features that are related with the contexts in which they originate, the sectors of the population that produce them, the causes in which they are rooted, and the conditions that favour or hinder their achievements. Nevertheless, the aspects mentioned in this section are essential to this form of resistance and common to all of them, albeit with different developments and achievements. Moreover, seen as a whole, they represent the potential of this nonviolent resistance to achieve its goals.

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**The challenges of civil resistance**

There are no perfect experiences of civil resistance but only perfectible ones. Transitions from experiences of resistance using violence because of extreme needs of defence to civil or nonviolent resistance have sometimes been recorded, which is what happened with the Yaqui in Mexico and the Indigenous people of the Cauca region in Colombia. In other cases, in highly polarised societies, people who engage in nonviolent resistance can be opposed by other civil society groups which take the opposite position. Furthermore, each experience faces the challenges presented by the types of violence and their actors at each and every historic moment. This means that they cannot be considered in a lineal fashion, and neither can the conflicts that generate them. Some of these challenges are detailed below:

- The changing dynamics of the expression of violence that render ineffective strategies that have been used to some effect by experiences of civil resistance. Some processes of civil resistance develop methods and strategies that achieve significant levels of effectiveness in one stage of carrying out the resistance but, later, the logic and dynamics of the violence change, which means that the strategies employed by this resistance in the past are no longer effective in the present. This is perhaps the greatest challenge faced when engaging in resistance, and it is what happened in the experience of the ATCC peasant workers, whose very intelligent resistance against all actors in the armed conflict paved the way to an exercise of mediation with these actors. They had a method of mediating and, with it, their achievements were significant. However, after the process of demobilisation negotiated between the Uribe government and the United Self-Defence Forces, when many of the latter demobilised, strongholds of this armed group, now operating differently, appeared in the ATCC area of influence. They were small armed groups that did not depend on commanders and traditional structures. In these circumstances, it was not easy for the ATCC peasants to establish contact with the armed groups or to identify their leaders in order to engage in dialogue with these actors and peacefully resolve various conflicts.

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- Another challenge for civil resistance is the coordination of different forms of violence in various activities, for example, the link between drug traffickers working with those engaged in internal armed conflict, or between drug traffickers and complicit corrupt politicians. In these cases, the power of the actors being resisted and the asymmetry between this power and that of those who are resisting become even greater.
- A further challenge for civil resistance is presented by governments taking extreme right or extreme left ideological positions in purportedly democratic regimes because they see the exercise of resistance as a threat that must be put down by force. This reality entails greater costs for those who are resisting, especially in terms of irremediable human losses, aggravation of a context of polarisation that stigmatises resistance, creation of terror, encouragement of private groups that become involved in repressing those who resist, and the impunity of those who violate human rights in this situation.
- Increased poverty and extreme poverty pose greater challenges to civil resistance. This form of structural violence has the potential to generate other kinds of violence, favouring, for example, connections with armed and organised delinquent groups and internal armed conflicts, as well as those engaged in drug trafficking and small-scale trafficking. The spiral of violence therefore increases, the actors who generate violence grow stronger, and violent resolution of conflicts is favoured. These are adverse circumstances for engaging in civil resistance, even when the resistance results from opposition to structural violence expressed in poverty.

- National and international extractive economic projects, which are driven by corruption and frequently have armed groups working for them, become more powerful thus making any achievement of civil resistance against such enterprises even more difficult. This is a reality that has been faced in experiences of civil resistance by Indigenous tribes in Sonora, Mexico, and the Consejo Cívico de Organizaciones Populares e Indígenas de Honduras (COPINH - Council of Popular and Indigenous Organisations of Honduras).
- Corruption spreads its tentacles into every branch of the different levels of public power, a reality that prevents those exercising civil resistance from effectively seeking redress in legal or administrative measures. Since those concerned have been co-opted, such attempts will not prosper.

### **Alternatives for the present and future**

Notwithstanding the challenges faced by the processes of civil resistance, it will continue to be the most accessible, intelligent, and suitable mechanism for peoples, dominated majorities, and excluded minorities. Turning to this form of resistance is the best or only alternative available for opposing the various forms of violence by peaceful means with the aims of protecting basic needs and transforming the reality.

Drawing on the learning accrued from earlier experiences, or lessons learned from similar processes, strengthens the processes of resistance. It will make it possible to detect actions taken to confront the great challenges of the past and, at the same time, offers elements for adapting to the challenges of the present.

**“The experiences of civil resistance are the heritage of peace and, as such, should be recognised, supported, and reinforced by all relevant peacebuilding actors”**

Discipline, training, creativity, and planning undoubtedly constitute important tools for honing the exercise of civil resistance and favouring progress in its methods and strategies.

The combination of civil resistance methods with others applied in peacebuilding endeavours, especially mediation and negotiation, continues to be very important.

Alliances with other experiences of civil resistance could come to be more significant in the face of current challenges. They enable joint, critical analysis of reality, while also nourishing repertoires of methods and strategies. Furthermore, this favours coordination in the project of attaining the elusive, longed-for aim of having a greater impact at the national level.

Education for peace should give emphasis to training in civil resistance, its meanings, and the windows of opportunity it offers in terms of consolidating democracies, peaceful conflict resolution, and peacebuilding.

The experiences of civil resistance are the heritage of peace and, as such, should be recognised, supported, and reinforced by all relevant peacebuilding actors.

*[Article translated from the original in Spanish]*

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## Photography

Bogota, Colombia - December 01, 2017: A tribe from the north of Colombia. CXHAB WALA KIWE. Indigenous people of northern Cauca. By Nowaczyk (Shutterstock).