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Dilemma: what it is (and isn't)

In 2009, the people of Iran went on their rooftops to shout 'Allah Akbar' (God is great) as a protest against the regime. In response, the government had two choices, neither very attractive: let the protest continue unhindered (and possibly grow), or arrest people and try to justify forbidding people shouting that 'God is Great', something commonly done by devout Muslims. This protest is an example of a dilemma action.

A dilemma action leaves the opponent with no obvious 'best response' - each possible choice has significant negative aspects. Even the opponent's most attractive response will have a mix of advantages and disadvantages that are not directly comparable, as assessed at the time or in hindsight. Many nonviolent actions are reactions to what authorities or multinational companies do: activists respond to agendas set by others. In a dilemma action, activists are proactive.

Most nonviolent actions do not impose a dilemma. Take a conventional expression of social concern, such as an antiwar rally on Hiroshima Day in a liberal democracy; authorities may tolerate or even facilitate the event because it poses little threat to vested interests, whereas banning it would only arouse unnecessary antagonism. Some forms of civil disobedience, such as ploughshares actions involving damaging military equipment, also pose no dilemma, because authorities know exactly what to do: arrest the activists, who willingly surrender to police. Nevertheless, we think it is more useful to think of dilemma actions as a matter of degree rather than present or absent. Dilemma actions provide one approach for increasing the effectiveness of nonviolent action strategies. Knowing more about the dynamics of dilemma actions can enable activists to design their actions to pose difficult dilemmas to opponents, leading opponents to make unpopular decisions, or waste their efforts preparing for several possible responses.

Creating a dilemma

In addition to the core feature of a dilemma action, five factors can frequently be found in actual dilemma actions that add to the difficulty of opponents making choices:

- The action has a constructive, positive element, such as delivering humanitarian aid, or expressing religious commitment, as in Iran in 2009.
- Activists use surprise or unpredictability, for instance by inventing a new method, or turning up in a totally unexpected place.
- Opponents' prime choices are in different domains (political, social, personal), which means that the choices are difficult to compare. For example, when a police officer has to choose whether or not to arrest a friend at a demonstration, there is a conflict between the economic (keep the job), and interpersonal (keep the friend) domains.
- Dilemma actions can be timed to appeal to mass media coverage.
- A dilemma action can appeal to widely held beliefs within society. The apparent religious commitment among the rooftop protesters in Iran is a good example.

These factors contribute to making the dilemma more difficult to "solve", but are not essential in constructing it. Governments and their agents - such as police and prison officials - are often those who are forced to deal with dilemmas. However, this is not a core feature of a dilemma action, since it can be directed towards private companies, for example banks or corporations.

The opponent's response

Usually the best option for the opponents is to stop the action without anybody noticing - the activists' strategy should then be to make it as public as possible. Something that makes a dilemma difficult is when the opponent has to compare consequences from different domains; it can be difficult to compare the benefit of an approving reaction from supporters, with negative feedback from a different audience. In the Freedom Flotilla case study, Israeli authorities were faced with both domestic and international audiences. They chose to prioritise the domestic image, where they were perceived as upholding a blockade that would protect Israel from a terrorist attack. It was difficult to compare the benefits of upholding this domestic image with the negative effects of the outrage generated when international audiences perceived the military response as an unprovoked assault on humanitarian aid workers in international waters.

For activists, dilemma actions can seem attractive because they offer the prospect of success no matter what the opponent does. However, creating dilemmas for the opponent is not necessary for nonviolent actions to be successful and like all other strategies it should be used with care.

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