

Author

Janet Cherry

The brief reflection below draws on my experience as an activist in the South African liberation movement in the 1980s, and subsequently as a trainer in strategic nonviolence in other struggles over the past decade.

While most of the examples given are from experience of activism against the apartheid regime, it is written in the hope that it will be useful to activists in other contexts.

The nature of authoritarian regimes

Our experience as activists in the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa was of building a mass movement in the context of a repressive and authoritarian regime. The apartheid state was brutal but also to some extent restrained: it was a racially exclusive democracy, operating with the rule of law. The laws were changed from time to time, of course, to contain the rising resistance through security legislation and States of Emergency; and the courts did not prevent torture and deaths in custody. The cost of resistance was sometimes very high. And yet, there was also some space in which to operate, to build grassroots organisations, which evolved into a mass nonviolent movement; to develop strategies and test out a variety of tactics, and ultimately to create a counter-hegemony to the apartheid state. We called this ‘peoples’ power’ in South Africa. But it is not very different to many of the pro-democracy and popular power movements which have emerged in repressive regimes around the world over the last four decades.

One of the helpful tools I learned subsequently from other countries was to conduct a ‘pre-emptive cost-benefit analysis’ of any proposed tactic. Working under repressive regimes usually – but not always – involves adopting tactics which are at low cost to your movement, but are of high cost to your opponent. Sometimes the movement takes risks and puts its members, literally, in the firing line; but if this is done, it should be done with very careful thought given to the ethical risks, as well as to whether the benefits of such action will outweigh the costs.

Strategies and tactics

Getting the masses involved

Building resistance in the context of repressive regimes, where movements or opposition parties are banned, illegal or seriously constrained, is always tricky at the beginning. High profile leaders can easily be ‘taken out’ or ‘put on ice’ by the regime. One effective method used in South Africa after the bannings of the 1960s and 1970s was the building of very localised grassroots organisations. These organisations – civic and residents associations, women’s groups, student, youth or church groups – built slowly around very local issues of immediate concern to their constituency. They contested and won small victories, using organisational principles from the Philippines “Organising People for Power” manual.

By the time these organisations coalesced into a mass movement under the umbrella of the United Democratic Front (UDF) in 1983, they were able to mobilise hundreds of thousands of people in mass action. Some of the most successful early examples were the work stay aways, where organised workers came together with residents associations and ‘shut down’ the local economy for a day or more. This demonstrated the growing legitimacy of the movement and was nearly impossible to police. If all the residents of a township just stayed at home, they could not be arrested for doing so.

Being creative: low risk economic withdrawal

Similarly, consumer boycotts proved extremely difficult to police or repress. The consumer boycott of 1985 was one example of a successful withdrawal from the local economy. In apartheid South Africa, the local economy was in the hands of white businessmen, but depended on black consumers. As boycott leader Mkhuseleli Jack famously said, “With our buying power, we will bring down this government”. As middle-aged women controlled the household budget, they could simply withdraw from the formal economy, and not ‘buy in town’. This depended on coordination with local black businessmen, forming alternative sources of supply of essentials for the period of the boycott. The boycott forced the local (white) Chamber of Commerce to negotiate with the UDF leaders and in turn put pressure on the local and national government around certain demands.

Consumer boycotts took many forms in the anti-apartheid movement. In South Africa, there were targeted boycotts of specific products in support of worker strikes: the Fattis and Monis (pasta) boycott of 1979, the Red Meat Boycott of 1980, and the Wilson Rowntree boycott of 1981 are three examples – all supporting the new independent black trade unions. Another form of economic withdrawal was the ‘Black Weekend’ where township residents stopped buying goods for three days, combined with a strike action – withdrawing both labour and consumer power from the ‘white’ economy; as well as a ‘Black Christmas’ where black consumers did not shop before Christmas, putting massive pressure on the retail sector.

Creating low risk local structures

Coordination of such campaigns was done through local committees of residents in each residential area or section of the black townships. The most sophisticated of these structures established a committee in each street. Street representatives reported to an area committee, which in turn reported to a semi-clandestine forum. There were also mass organisations of students, youth and women, as well as trade unions, which coordinated such campaigns through the UDF network.

Creating layers of leadership

The apartheid regime dealt with mass resistance by declaring States of Emergency, and using emergency powers to detain activists without trial. This was sometimes called ‘preventative detention’ and activists were ‘put on ice’ by the regime. The response was to ensure that there were layers of leadership – and that the mass movement was not ‘top heavy’. Decentralisation of leadership (local committees or coordinating forums) and grassroots structures (street committees, reporting to area committees) were ways of maintaining momentum of long-running campaigns through the State of Emergency. The campaigns described (consumer boycotts, campaigns against the Black Local Authorities (BLA), and many others including schools boycotts and Peoples Education campaigns) were all run in this manner.

Shaming the security forces

Working in the context of a regime that is systematically repressive, and routinely uses torture, beatings and detention without trial, it is essential to have human rights activist groups or activists either in alliance or within your organisations who monitor, document and take action to expose and shame the security forces. This delegitimises them among the citizens of the country, as well as internationally.

This was done very successfully in Egypt, through the website/blog Torture in Egypt (see www.tortureinegypt.net), in the years preceding the Arab Spring and the events of February 2011. About six years ago, the severe beating of women activists in the street by Zimbabwe police was filmed by a church human rights group and widely distributed internationally, discrediting Mugabe’s security forces. Long before the advent of the internet, and easy access to video, in South Africa, songs, poetry and even humour were used to document and expose the actions of the security police:

In Detention, by Christopher van Wyk

He fell from the ninth floor

He hanged himself

He slipped on a piece of soap while washing

He hanged himself

He slipped on a piece of soap while washing

He fell from the ninth floor

He hanged himself while washing

He slipped from the ninth floor

He hung from the ninth floor

He slipped on the ninth floor while washing

He fell from a piece of soap while slipping

He hung from the ninth floor

He washed from the ninth floor while slipping

He hung from a piece of soap while washing.

Undermining the security forces

In countries where there is a conscripted army, there is an opportunity for undermining the morale of the security forces, as many young people do not want to go to the army. Where the military is highly politicised and is upholding a repressive regime, there is even more opportunity for creating divisions within the security forces and undermining their legitimacy. In South Africa, where only white men were conscripted, it was important to make it clear to these young men that they were being used by the apartheid regime to uphold an illegitimate system. The strategy in this case was to form a 'single issue campaign' around the demand for an end to race-based conscription: the End Conscription Campaign (ECC). In this campaign, we drew on the example of the US Anti-Vietnam War movement, drawing parallels between Angola and Vietnam, and as the conflict escalated inside South Africa, by questioning why one section of the youth were being used to suppress their peers within the townships.

When the stakes get higher....using funerals for mobilisation and backfire

Serbian activists who mobilised successfully against President Milosevic in 2000 share their experiences of building the movement through creating space through public demonstrations and street occupations. In such actions, young women were deliberately at the front of the demonstrations, directly confronting the security force members – who were usually young men. In the event of these young women being beaten or otherwise injured by security forces, they would maximise the media coverage of such incidents, demonstrating that the security forces' brutality in using violence against peaceful and harmless young women. The actions of the security forces 'backfired' against them – in this case the costs to the security forces were much higher than

to the activists who were injured, as they were discredited in the eyes of the public.

In South Africa, similarly, there were instances where race and gender were used by activists to put the security forces in a dilemma. Middle-aged, middle-class white women – the respectable citizens of the Black Sash, a women's human rights organisation – were in the front line of a funeral for 'unrest victims' in the townships of Port Elizabeth, at the height of the township uprising in mid 1986. Women from the townships, organised by the Port Elizabeth Womens Organisations, took control of this funeral in order to break the cycle of violence, where militant male youth confronted brutal security forces every weekend. Security force use of excessive force to disperse the demonstrations would result in deaths of more protestors, which in turn resulted in anger, attacks on the police and yet another funeral. In the case of the 'Womens Funeral' there was a deliberate effort to not only demonstrate that women could protect their sons and their communities, and change the pattern of violence; in addition, the presence of respectable white women made the security forces reluctant to use lethal force in dispersing the demonstration. They did disperse the funeral procession (which was a demonstration) using teargas – but nobody was killed.

“Making the townships ungovernable”

What is now widely known in South Africa as 'ungovernability' involved the withdrawing of support for institutions which were considered part of the Apartheid regime. The prime example was the campaign against the Tricameral Parliament and BLA's established in 1983 as 'reforms' of the apartheid system. The campaign was strategised and led by the UDF, but involved a wide range of tactics devised and implemented at local level. These included a national election boycott; local boycotts of councillors' businesses, ostracism of councillors, and disruption of councillors' campaign meetings through switching off lights and making noise – after which many of the councillors publicly resigned.

Making apartheid unworkable: withholding consent

After the councillors were elected (or appointed when the elections were not contested or disrupted), there were campaigns involving the withholding of cooperation from these illegitimate municipal authorities – including non payment of rents and service charges, and refusal of access to municipal electricity repair vehicles (unless they negotiated access through the UDF committees and civic leadership). This deprived the BLAs of revenue and rendered them unable to fulfil their function of providing services to the township residents, thus further denying them any legitimacy in the eyes of the majority of residents.

Creating space for local compromises

Where regimes are capable of carefully targeted oppression, utilising control of the media and sophisticated propaganda to discredit the movement, activists need to use equally sophisticated means of creating space to build their legitimacy and discredit the regime. One way in which UDF activists did this was to 'divide the ruling class' through liaising with particular groups within the white ruling group. The negotiation with the Port Elizabeth Chamber of Commerce (PECC) is one such example of this. The leader of the consumer boycott, Mkhushi Jack, was released from detention under pressure from the PECC leaders, who need someone to negotiate with.

In the small town of Port Alfred, at the height of the township uprising, the Port Alfred Residents and Womens Associations had in fact taken control of the township. However, there was a dangerous rapist at large, against whom the police were not taking action. The township women, who were mainly employed as domestic workers for the white residents of the town, then withdrew their labour, creating huge inconvenience for the white women. The township women then appealed to the white employers; these women then intervened with the local police, insisting that the man accused of rape be arrested.

Delegitimising the opponent and creating counter-hegemony

The result of the combined campaigns against the BLAs was the resignation of most of the councils in the Eastern Cape and in other well-organised townships across the country. Without local authorities in the black townships, the municipalities struggled to govern effectively. In some cases, they turned to the movement – engaging the leaders of the civic organisations as the acknowledged representatives of the black residents of the city. In Port Elizabeth, this led first to the civic leaders negotiating the implementation of electricity connections to township houses; later it led to the first non-racial local Council in South Africa.

Taking control of public spaces

Towards the end of this struggle, the movement in Port Elizabeth decided to reclaim the city centre, marching from the townships to the centre of the city, occupying the Market Square outside the City Hall, and renaming it after a local martyr. This symbolic action, which was completely nonviolent, emphasised the simple demand of ‘One City, One Municipality’ and the end of the apartheid division of the city.

Unbanning the movement

The Apartheid regime had used legislation to ban organisations from 1950, when the Communist Party of South Africa was banned. Being a banned organisation meant that membership of, and activities of, the organisation were illegal, and hence criminalised. The main liberation movements, the ANC and Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), were banned in 1960. Hence came the need to revive the liberation movement in a different guise, being careful not to be criminalised at the beginning of the mass mobilisation. Once the mass movement gained momentum, it became possible to challenge the banned status of the liberation movement. Starting from the huge funerals of 1985, we began publicly to display the flags of the banned liberation movement, the ANC, as well as that of the Communist Party. Even where documents or formal publications of the banned movement would lead to arrest, activists used song and speech to convey messages and build the identity of the movement.

As the struggle progressed, the organisations we formed – the UDF and the ECC among them – were banned, and key leaders of these organisations were banned or restricted as well. During the state of emergency in 1986, a quarter of the ECC activists were detained, and the organisation was banned in 1988. Richard Steele noted that “they were initially shocked and depressed by the oppression. When they recovered, they decided to step back and cultivate their roots.” After years of severe oppression, those activists who had been banned or restricted began to defy their banning orders, and in 1989 declared the ECC ‘unbanned’. By late 1989, the regime had lost the will to implement restrictions, as well as petty apartheid laws. As Richard Steele notes, ECC activists “used their down period to resuscitate themselves.”

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