

# HOW CIVIC MOBILIZATIONS GROW IN AUTHORITARIAN CONTEXTS

Research Report



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	3
Executive Summary.....	4
Introduction.....	7
Factor 1: Entrenched oppositions and new movements.....	10
Factor 2: Framing and regime legitimacy.....	13
Other factors: Diaspora and international organizations.....	17
Other factors: Internet and social media technologies.....	19
Other factors: The dynamics of repression and negotiation.....	21
Implications for practitioners.....	23
Notes.....	26
Sources cited.....	27
Annex 1: Detailed methodology.....	28
Annex 2: Tips for practitioners on medium-n comparative research.....	32
Annexes Notes.....	34

## AUTHORS

Laura Adams  
Natalia Forrat  
Zack Medow

Other materials related to this project can be found on [the project website](#).

## HOW CIVIC MOBILIZATIONS GROW IN AUTHORITARIAN CONTEXTS

The project was made possible through the generous support of the United States government. Our donors do not influence the organization's research priorities, report findings, or policy recommendations. The positions of this publication do not represent the positions of the United States government.

Opposition supporters confront riot police during a rally in Nur-Sultan on June 9, 2019 - the day of Kazakhstan's presidential elections. (VYACHESLAV OSELEDKO/AFP via Getty Images)

# Acknowledgements

---

**We thank members of the advisory group formed to support this project**, especially those members and outside reviewers who provided key feedback at different points of the project: Bret Barrowman, Derek Beach, Adam Casey, Irit Houvras, Maria Lotito, Lee Morgenbesser, Jonathan Pinckney, Nate Schenckan, Kevin Slaten, Dan Slater, Sarya Sok, and Linda Stern.

We also want to thank the researchers on our in-depth case studies. The ones who did not wish to remain anonymous are Hai Hong Nguyen and Elsabet Samuel Tadesse.

This project would not have been possible without the help of the reviewers below, as well as many reviewers who asked to remain anonymous, in validating our case briefs and in some cases, contributing analytical content that informed this report (indicated with an asterisk):

Quscondy Abdushafi\*  
Yoseph Badwaza  
Sofie Bedford  
Jennifer Brass  
Brett Carter  
Manfred Elfstrom  
Salome Garcia  
Niklas Hultin  
John Janzen  
Armi Jonas  
Moustafa Khalil  
Diana Kudaibergenova\*  
Natalie Letsa  
Thabo Masuku  
Lee Morgenbesser  
Abderahim Moussa  
Sofya Orlosky  
Rekai Rusinga\*  
Jon Schubert  
Hossein Torkashvand

# Executive Summary

**This report analyzes what helps and harms civic mobilizations in countries governed by hard authoritarian regimes.** Previous research has shown that social movements are much more likely to achieve their goals if they reach a certain participation threshold. What, however, enables the growth of social movements toward that threshold in the face of authoritarian repression? While the existing literature addresses success factors for movements with maximalist demands (those calling for regime change, for example) and the factors leading to stable democratization, this research fills a gap in understanding what happens in the phase of mobilization growth, whatever the movement's goals may be and whether or not they are achieved.

In this study, we examined 21 recent episodes of attempted mobilization in authoritarian contexts to draw out factors associated with mobilization growth (a *cross-case comparison*), denoting the 16 that scaled up as “positive” and 5 that did not as “negative.” We then conducted in-depth analysis of four “positive” episodes to demonstrate the mechanisms of a movement's successful growth (*within-case process tracing*). We defined a “successful episode” as one where the mobilization was joined by significantly more people than is typically seen in that country.

In this report, we examine the main factors that were related to successful mass mobilization in episodes we studied. While each case has a unique combination of circumstances that explain the mobilization growth, we observed several common factors across cases. These findings form the basis of this report and our recommendations for practitioners.

Leaders of successful movements often come from outside established opposition groups. In our cases, they included entrepreneurs, artists, environmentalists, and members of youth movements.

## Common factors in cases of mobilization growth

**Factor 1: New leadership.** Leaders of successful movements often come from outside established opposition groups. In our cases, they included entrepreneurs, artists, environmentalists, and members of youth movements. Prodemocracy activists are not usually the ones to initiate or lead broad-based movements, but their support can improve the chances that a nascent mobilization will grow, as they have technical expertise and experience dealing with the regime. However, they are hindered both because they are typically known to the government which can quickly repress them, and because they are sometimes perceived as an “old guard” seeking personal gain and disconnected from grassroots concerns. In the cases in our study where the mobilization was led by members of an entrenched and fractured opposition, they were successful when they were able to unify or join forces with new social movements.

**Factor 2: Renewed framing.** While many authoritarian regimes use violence and propaganda to ensure compliance, they also care about constructing a narrative that legitimizes their rule. Usually, regime leaders do so by connecting their leadership to societal values, such as fairness or security, and group identities, including ethnic, religious, or class ones. When a movement credibly calls into question whether the government has lived up to its ideals, *and* presents an alternative vision of the future that speaks to the same societal values the regime invokes, it is more likely to grow.

## Framing

An interpretation of a social or political issue that connects it to a set of values and group identities.

## Other factors

Several other factors have important implications for movement growth.

- **Support from outside the country.** While rarely the driving force, diaspora groups and international organizations can play an important role in supporting movement growth. In authoritarian contexts where support for democratic change is extremely challenging to organize and express, connections abroad are more important than they would be in less repressive contexts.
- **The internet and social media.** Before internet and mobile phone services were widely available, it was more challenging for activists living in repressive contexts to coordinate collective action and widely communicate an alternate vision for their country. Social media has made these efforts much easier to carry out. The ability to quickly circulate information—via video in particular—has been a powerful trigger to initiate and increase collective action in highly repressive contexts. This is especially true in contexts where the government has not kept up with digital surveillance and communications-control measures. Youth are often, though not always, more adept at using these technologies innovatively for mobilization than their elders.
- **The timing of state repression.** Preemptive or severe repression early on is often effective at preventing a movement from gaining momentum, while repression after a movement has grown often leads to further expressions of popular discontent.

## Recommendations for practitioners and donors

1. Practitioners and donors tend to work with lawyers, journalists, human rights activists, policy researchers, and election monitors. Social movements in authoritarian contexts need the support of professionals with the skills that this kind of assistance builds and sustains. Assistance that helps these established, in-country professionals sustain their work even when there is no window for change allows them to support an emergent civic mobilization in ways that new activists cannot.
2. Use organizational prestige and convening power to create opportunities for groups who could play an important role in a future civic mobilization to connect with prodemocracy partners and each other. These include professional organizations, entrepreneurs, environmental

movements, and student groups, among others. For donors, this may require more internal coordination across different departments and grant mechanisms.

3. Support partners so they may engage in peer-to-peer or offshore training, and scholarship on nonviolent, nonconfrontational, and innovative tactics.
4. Support partners' use of communication tools that are not easily monitored or blocked by the government. Fund the engagement of outside information and communications technology (ICT) security experts who know how to stay one step ahead of the regime. Adapt your own policies and procedures to meet the needs of local partners.
5. Learn about and build connections to diaspora groups and their activities—with an awareness that the politics of a diaspora can be difficult for outsiders to navigate.
6. Plan for a pool of funding to respond rapidly to situations where a movement has emerged, and where state repression was not immediate or did not result in the cessation of the movement. The response should provide both technical and psychosocial support to partners who can safely receive funding. Support activities may also take place abroad.

## Recommendations for movements and activists

1. Customize messaging for different audiences when developing communications strategies. Movements and activists may need to be flexible about the language of rights to help prodemocracy frameworks more directly address local concerns and counter a regime's claim to uphold common values.
2. Diversify networks. Use professional and personal relationships to connect your movement or organization with professional groups, entrepreneurs, environmental movements, student groups, and others who may play an important role in a future civic mobilization. Assess the diversity of the groups you are in regular communication with about issues in your country, and address gaps by working to establish new relationships. For some groups, there may be less sensitive issues that you can raise to form a connection and share expertise. Maintain friendly ties with influential acquaintances who don't share your views now but may change their minds if the tide starts to turn.

3. Find trustworthy ICT experts to give advice on digital security, or deputize a wise amateur to be your help desk, and follow up by building organizational habits that support safer communication among your network members. Use creative financing, perhaps through diaspora networks, to support access to systems like satellite telephones.
4. Seek out opportunities for peer-to-peer learning from other civic movements abroad. Their experiences may have relevance for your own communication or strategy even if their cultural or historical context differs significantly. Ask donors or other supporters to help you make these connections and to provide opportunities to convene with other groups abroad.
5. Consult international best practices for nonviolent movement building and share them widely within your networks. Having a shared tactical repertoire and analytical framework for understanding the dynamics between your movement and the regime can increase the efficacy of your actions. Also, consider engaging international experts on nonviolent action who may be able to assist with training, strategizing, and coordination.

Table 1: Mobilization episodes in this study

Country	Episode start	Episode name
<b>Positive cases (scaled up); in-depth case studies in blue</b>		
Burundi	2015	Presidential term limit protests
Cambodia	2013	Constitutional crisis
Cameroon	2016	Anglophone strikes
Chad	2016	Electoral protests
Congo-Brazzaville	2015	Constitutional amendment protest
Cuba	2021	J11/San Isidro movement
Eswatini/Swaziland	2018	Economic and prodemocracy protests
Gambia	2016	Antigovernment-president protests
Iran	2017	Economic protests
Kazakhstan	2019	Electoral protests
Russia	2017	Navalny anticorruption campaign
Zimbabwe	2016	#thisflag movement
Belarus	2020	Electoral protests
Ethiopia	2015	Oromo protests
Sudan	2018	Sudanese revolution
Vietnam	2016	Formosa ecological disaster
<b>Negative cases (did not scale up)</b>		
Angola	2017	Electoral protests
Azerbaijan	2016	Dynastic presidentialism protests
China	2018	Jasic labor protest
Djibouti	2020	Fouad Youssouf Ali protests
Egypt	2016	Red Sea islands protests

# Introduction

---

Protests are increasingly common, even in authoritarian contexts.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes protests and other forms of civil resistance are triggered by a sudden crisis, such as the 2016 environmental disaster in Vietnam. More often, civil resistance is a routine part of political life even in authoritarian environments: unions strike, civic organizations deliver petitions, lawyers file cases, opposition parties call their supporters out to the streets. It's extremely difficult for researchers to identify resistance in the hardest authoritarian states that feature a highly controlled information space. But in authoritarian states that are more open, and that have a tradition of labor unions or opposition political parties, strikes and demonstrations happen frequently. In countries like Venezuela and Gabon, cycles of protest and repression were nearly constant in the 2010s, for example. In rare cases such as those of Sudan and Ethiopia, a resistance movement succeeds in changing the government.

Previous research has shown that contentious mobilization in authoritarian contexts rarely achieves its goals, including democratization, unless it reaches a certain participation threshold.<sup>2</sup> This study explains how civic mobilizations in authoritarian contexts grow toward the participation threshold that might lead to success. The social movement literature has investigated the processes of movement growth, but it often focused primarily on democratic or semidemocratic contexts.<sup>3</sup> In authoritarian contexts, while researchers have examined the factors associated with nonviolent movement success, such as mobilization size,<sup>4</sup> the mechanisms of mobilization growth have received less attention. Some valuable insights about the process of mobilization have come from studies focused on single

countries.<sup>5</sup> To the best of our knowledge, no studies examined which factors are most important for mobilization growth across authoritarian contexts.

To fill this gap in our understanding, this study focuses on the factors and mechanisms of mobilization growth in authoritarian contexts across 21 recent mobilization episodes. We compare cases of attempted mobilization that took place between 2013 and 2021 to see why some mobilization attempts resulted in growth and others did not. We also examined four of the cases in much greater depth in order to understand how the factors we identified caused the mobilization to grow (see Annex 1 for a detailed methodology).

Our main outcome of interest is whether mobilization growth in a particular episode has an “upward scale shift,” drawing on the concept developed by Sidney Tarrow to indicate that something new is happening in a given space of contentious action.<sup>6</sup> For our study, the criterion for an upward scale shift is an increase in the number of mobilization participants *relative* to the level of participation that had been customary in the country's recent history. This criterion of a “relative,” rather than an absolute number of participants, allows us to meaningfully compare countries with different levels of political contention and repression and different population characteristics (e.g. degree of urbanization). It also alleviates the problem of poor-quality data on participation numbers: while estimates of the number of mobilization participants often vary significantly, especially in repressive contexts, observers usually agree on whether the mobilization scale was beyond the ordinary.

## CASE SELECTION

---

We started by identifying all possible episodes we might compare. We identified protest events in *hard authoritarian countries* (defined as a score of 30 or less in Freedom House's *Freedom in the World* index)<sup>7</sup> that took place recently, in the post-Arab Spring era. We chose to focus on this era because during this time, many authoritarian regimes became more

attuned to the problems of mass mobilization. They ramped up repression in anticipation of a potential Arab Spring of their own, changing the protest dynamics and making it more challenging to compare cases across this historical divide. If an episode start date was before our initial cutoff of 2014 but was not related to the Arab Spring (as was the case in

Cambodia 2013–14), we included the episode. However, we excluded potential cases in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia that took place in 2014 and 2015 that were the tail end of events related to the Arab Spring.

To identify the potential cases, we triangulated several sources:

1. the *Freedom in the World* reports and the notes from expert discussions;<sup>8</sup>
2. the Major Episodes of Political Violence (MEPV) dataset;<sup>9</sup>
3. the Mass Mobilization Protest Data (MMPD);<sup>10</sup>
4. media reports, mostly in the English language, available online.

Using MEPV, we excluded country-years in which either ethnic war or civil war in a given country took place, since a sustainable nonviolent movement would hardly be possible in such circumstances. Using *Freedom in the World*, MMPD, and media reports, we identified the episodes of nonviolent mobilization for further examination.

In order to qualify as a case, we had to find evidence that the protest events were not one-time reactions to a trigger, but rather were linked to an attempt to nonviolently mobilize the broader population.<sup>11</sup> Because we were trying to identify the initial moment at which the mobilization began to grow, we had to eliminate cases where high levels of mobilization were already present at the beginning of our selected period—such as in Venezuela and Gabon. We also excluded several cases

(Eritrea, Equatorial Guinea, Oman, and Tajikistan) due to lack of information about activists’ intent to grow the mobilization. However, these cases in reality may not be very different from other brief episodes, such as the San Isidro/J11 Movement in Cuba, about which we had enough information to evaluate whether there was an intention on the part of activists to try to mobilize the population more broadly.

We then used the various data sources listed above to distinguish *successful mobilizations* from unsuccessful ones by comparing that episode to other episodes in that country over the previous decade. If the mobilization episode was similar to or smaller than previous episodes, it was analyzed as a negative case (n=5). If the mobilization “scaled up” relative to what was typical in that country, both in terms of size and duration, it was a positive case (n=16).

For each of the 21 episodes, we put together a 3-7 page structured case brief using available academic and media sources in English (all case briefs are available [here](#)). Next, we worked with country experts to validate our data on each case and systematically compared each factor across the cases to see if it related to whether or not the mobilization scaled up. In addition to the comparative analysis, we conducted in-depth process tracing studies (available [here](#)) to learn *how* specific factors contributed to the mobilization scaling up in four of our positive cases. The combination of both kinds of evidence helped us identify the patterns that increased the chances of scale-up and led to our conclusions about what factors likely caused this mobilization to grow more than previous ones.

Table 2: Distribution of the main factors derived from the comparative analysis of positive cases

Combination of factors		Country and year of the mobilization episode	Number of episodes
New actors leading mobilization	Framing based on the earlier regime appeal		
Yes	Yes	Belarus 2020, Cuba 2021, Ethiopia 2015, Russia 2017, Sudan 2018, Vietnam 2016, Zimbabwe 2016	7
No	Yes	Cambodia 2013, Iran 2017, Burundi 2015,	3
Yes	No	Kazakhstan 2019, Chad 2016	2
No	No	Cameroon 2016, Congo-Brazzaville 2015, Eswatini 2018, Gambia 2016	4
<b>Total</b>			<b>16</b>



## PATTERNS OF MOBILIZATION GROWTH

---

The strongest pattern we saw in the data across cases was that a mobilization was more likely to scale up if a combination of two factors was present:

1. The movement was led by “newer actors” rather than “the usual suspects” of the political and civic opposition, and
2. The leaders of the mobilization were able to frame their grievances within the rhetoric the regime had earlier used to appeal to the population for their support.

Other factors related to the internet and external support certainly helped some movements grow, but the combination of leadership and framing were more decisive factors. In 7 of our 16 positive cases, we saw the intersection of these two factors. In only 4 of our 16 positive cases, neither of these factors was present and other factors explain why the mobilization scaled up.

The mechanism connecting the two factors to the mobilization’s scale-up is rooted in commonalities in the histories of these regimes. Most of the regimes in our set of cases are characterized by a dominant political party or another elite group who won a political victory at the point of transition from the previous regime. Losers in that struggle (such as opposition political parties), or dissidents who never accepted the bargain that the authoritarian regime was selling (such as human rights organizations) become entrenched over time, if they are not eliminated through exile, imprisonment, or assassination. When these entrenched oppositions attempt to mobilize the population against the regime, such mobilizations may fail to scale up because the old opposition agenda remains out of touch with grassroots concerns. Such groups are often made up of an older generation that may find it difficult to adapt to new and different conditions, such as a world in which social media use is near-ubiquitous. Furthermore, the

old opposition politicians and civil society organizations that receive funding from abroad are often viewed by the population as seeking personal gain.

New actors are less hindered by these obstacles, and also less likely to be immediately repressed. They tend to be more innovative in their framing and tactics, and more adept at building on past repertoires of local action, learning from global movements, and tapping into current popular sentiment. These innovations seem to be especially successful in terms of mass mobilization if the movement finds a way to challenge the regime based on its own ideological and governance commitments—as most authoritarian regimes appealed to the population at least in their early days. Questioning whether the regime lived up to its promises, rather than suggesting a different set of values, increases the chances of the mobilization to attract more followers.

When new actors and framings speak to the same values and identities to which the regime used to appeal, they increase the chances of that movement’s success by helping attract more followers. However, these key factors in a movement’s success are not directly conducive to democratization. Existing research on subsequent movement stages shows that the new coalitions often have a “negative” character; that is, they are *against* the regime rather than *for* specific values. Such coalitions usually do not last long beyond regime removal, and more traditional party and civil society structures underpinned by a shared democratic culture may be more important for securing progress towards democratization.<sup>12</sup> Regime change and democratization are not the goals of some of the movements in this study, while “negative” coalitions can sometimes achieve some gains that result in meaningful improvements in people’s lives.

# Factor 1: Entrenched oppositions and new movements

Most of the enduring authoritarian regimes in the world experienced a political transition more than two decades before the time period of this study: independence, a revolution, the end of a civil war, a coup, a change in monarch, or the consolidation of power by one political party. At the time of each transition, losers in the political bargain may have included ideological opponents, prodemocracy activists, and political parties representing a different faction (e.g., ethnic, socioeconomic, religious) in that society. In a few cases, the regime quickly eliminated the opposition, usually by killing or imprisoning opponents who did not go abroad, or by coopting them. In most of the cases in our set, however, political opposition parties, ethnic or religious organizations, and human rights organizations were allowed to exist, but with severely limited opportunities to exercise freedom of speech and assembly. It is this assembly of organizations that we call the *entrenched opposition*. In our data, only Burundi can be said not to have an entrenched opposition, because the political transition there was too recent.

As Table 3 shows, mobilizations led primarily by entrenched or fractured opposition groups did not scale up (except in Iran, where economic protests appear to have been led not by an opposition but by government trade unions). In the cases where the mobilization was led by members of an entrenched opposition, they were successful when they were able to unify, or join forces with new social movements. Movements that were led by new actors or groups not regarded by the regime as having political ambitions were also more likely to be successful.

When new actors are in the lead, they are not guaranteed to be successful in expanding the mobilization, but in our cases there is a strong pattern. In China’s protests over conditions at the Jasic factory—the only negative case among the movements led by new actors—the Maoist youth activists in the lead were preemptively repressed. The range of “new actors” in our positive cases spans different professional identities and organizational forms, ranging from entrepreneurs to artists, to professional associations, to social media influencers, to environmental activists.

Table 3: Leaders of mobilizations  
(cases that did not scale up are blue)

Country	New actors
Belarus	Entrepreneurs and media figures running for president
China	Leftist student/worker activists
Cuba	Artists and social media influencers
Ethiopia	Youth/university students
Kazakhstan	Youth, artists, environmental activists
Russia	Anticorruption organization (Navalny)
Sudan	Professional organizations and community youth leaders
Vietnam	Environmental activists, Catholic priests
Zimbabwe	Pastor and his online followers
New coalition among established opposition	
Burundi	Political parties, civil society
Cambodia	Political parties, labor unions
Cameroon	Lawyers’ association and teachers’ unions, youth movement
Chad	Combination of established opposition and unions, women’s NGOs, youth movement
Congo-Brazzaville	Opposition parties, defectors from regime
Eswatini	Civil society/interest groups (students, pensioners, professional groups)
Gambia	Opposition parties
Disunified and/or entrenched opposition	
Angola	Opposition party
Azerbaijan	New youth and entrepreneur organizations, old opposition, not in coalition
Djibouti	Political and human rights opposition
Egypt	Opposition parties, youth nationalist movement
Iran	Trade unions (part of the government)

## IMPORTANT CHARACTERISTICS OF ENTRENCHED OPPOSITIONS AND NEW ACTORS

---

There are additional characteristics that these entrenched oppositions have in common that relate to scaling up. The most important feature for our analysis has to do with *how they frame the issues of contention* with the regime. The entrenched opposition's framing does not seem to change much over time, and they often appear to be fighting the same battles they lost during the political transition. This reinforces the popular perception of these organizations, especially opposition political parties, as only interested in gaining power for themselves rather than coming up with solutions for the problems faced by the larger population.

The other characteristics are the *organizational structure and networks* of the entrenched opposition, and *innovation in strategy and tactics*. The leadership of entrenched organizations tends to be monopolized by the older generation, and “youth wings” of these organizations tend not to have any real influence over strategy and tactics.

Entrenched opposition organizations (except for those based on ethnicity) also tend to be concentrated in capital cities with few networks they can use to mobilize support in provincial cities and rural areas. In the case of human rights and prodemocracy organizations, this lack of ties is often perceived as elitism, and their dependence on foreign funding makes it easy for the regime to paint them as “foreign agents” and not authentic civic actors.

Entrenched opposition leaders are also known to the regime and easy to target for repression during the initial phase of mobilization. If the leaders lack a support base outside the entrenched opposition, their arrest or disappearance is less likely to trigger a broader mobilization. This isolation from other potential movement actors also means that entrenched oppositions may miss opportunities to connect with the concerns of potential social movement actors.

## EXAMPLES OF ENTRENCHED OPPOSITION AND NEW ACTORS AT WORK

---

Movements in Angola and Azerbaijan provide examples of such missed opportunities to connect with wider popular concerns. In both countries, economic protests were followed in the same year by political protests triggered by an election (Angola), and a referendum extending the president's powers (Azerbaijan). The main opposition political parties mobilized their members and prodemocracy organizations mobilized theirs, but none attempted to tap in to the economic issues that had mobilized ordinary people earlier in the year. Instead, they framed their arguments in terms of illegality and corruption. In Azerbaijan, a youth movement tried new organizational tactics, and a new political movement attempted to mobilize the technocratic middle classes, but their leaders were quickly arrested and their supporters decided that their innovative tactics were too dangerous. In Angola, the incumbent president stepped aside for his chosen successor, and the opposition pursued the matter of electoral fairness in the courts.<sup>13</sup> In both cases, the leaders drew on the same networks and framings as they had in previous unsuccessful attempts at political change.

The 2019 protest movement in Kazakhstan, although a positive case, is a close analogue to the negative cases of Angola and Azerbaijan.<sup>14</sup> In Kazakhstan, the president stepped aside and called for an election that the ruling party's chosen candidate easily won. Youth, environmentalists, academics, and artists developed innovative protest tactics and avoided being associated with the opposition political party. It appeared that entrenched prodemocracy organizations network then followed the lead of the young activists. The new social movement mobilized people in a number of provincial cities, and its messaging and small-scale, cheeky protest actions went viral online. However, the movement did *not* tap into the framing of previous protests around economic issues and the government's failure to provide essential social services, which may have limited its upward scale shift.

There are other cases of upward scale shift for movements that lacked either networks outside the capital, innovation in strategy and tactics, or distancing from the entrenched opposition. But these are cases where the freedom of

association or political competition at the time was relatively lively, such as in Cambodia, Congo-Brazzaville, Eswatini, and the Gambia.

Sudan is a positive case of mobilization where all the network and tactical elements associated with new actors leading a movement come into play. The movement was led by professional associations and community youth leaders who had extensive networks throughout the country and while they led the revolution, were not perceived as seeking power for themselves. While the government attempted to paint the

elite groups leading the movement as foreign agents, these groups had adopted the framings used in economic protests and had put themselves on the line in those protests—mitigating the effect the government’s messages had on popular perceptions. There was dispersed leadership, and local youth leaders were allowed to make their own tactical decisions. Furthermore, the elite leadership innovated in their tactics, often very rapidly in response to the situation on the ground and built a culture of democratic practices within the movement, including adopting successful tactics from the “occupy” movements of other countries in the recent past.

## **THE ROLE OF THE ENTRENCHED OPPOSITION IN SCALING UP**

---

Organizations that are part of an entrenched opposition still have an important role to play in growing civic mobilizations in authoritarian contexts, but it is not a leading role. In a number of our cases, we found evidence that civil society and human rights organizations in particular played a productive role in supporting new movement actors and building

coalitions among diverse social groups and organizations. In some of the more dramatic cases of mobilization growth among ordinary people, these organizations stayed in the background but used their technical expertise in journalism, law, election monitoring, movement building, and repression avoidance tactics to sustain the movement led by others. Also, people who work in the nonprofit sector often play a role as individual activists apart from their professional identity.

### **Activist perspective**

The #thisflag movement was started by a viral video made by Zimbabwean pastor-turned-activist Evan Mawarire, who used the symbolism of the Zimbabwean flag to communicate his frustration over how the government had destroyed people’s livelihoods and betrayed their hopes for a better future. In an interview for this project, he said that some established civil society organizations (CSOs) were involved in the #thisflag movement, but that the movement did not accept direct funding from outside because it would make it easier for the regime to attempt to discredit them. They did accept in-kind support in the form of capacity building and trainings on nonviolent confrontation, how elections work, and preparedness for being arrested and persecuted over time, among others. Mawarire said the Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights (ZLHR) played a critical role in supporting the movement, and him personally when a ZLHR-assigned lawyer may have saved his life by preventing Mawarire from being taken from prison to an undisclosed location. Mawarire also credits Kubatana, an organization that curates and disseminates information and amplifies the work of CSOs online, for remotely supporting the mobilization by amplifying the messages of the movement (interview by Rekai Rusinga, validator for the Zimbabwe case brief, June 9, 2022).<sup>15</sup>

For example, in Vietnam’s Formosa protests, which took place after the government withheld information and compensation following an industrial accident, people who worked at nongovernmental organizations used social media to share information on tactics to avoid direct confrontation with the police during protests. The information encouraged new activists and helped them avoid situations where street violence could be used as an excuse for a crackdown. In Belarus, during the run-up to the 2020 election, members of the entrenched opposition shared their experience with the new candidates and joined their support teams. Activists also used the materials and experience of established election- and human rights-monitoring organizations to train volunteers and report violations. In Sudan’s revolution, a broad coalition of entrenched civic and political organizations came together under the leadership of professional unions and a youth movement. And in many of our cases, human rights groups and lawyers monitored and publicized human rights violations, detentions, and trials, in some cases saving activists’ lives.

## Factor 2: Framing and regime legitimacy

---

The second important factor that contributed to mobilization scale-up across cases was the kind of *framing* that protesters used. By framing, we mean an interpretation of a social or political issue that connects it to a set of values and group identities (e.g., a claim that an issue is about “national security” rather than about “human rights”). We

found that *a framing that does not simply oppose the regime’s rhetoric, but engages and rethinks it* helps to attract a larger number of participants to a mobilization. Such framings help to undermine the regime’s legitimacy and to challenge it on its own terrain by addressing the same demands and values authorities themselves invoke in attempts to maintain popular support.

### IMPORTANCE OF FRAMING IN AUTHORITARIAN CONTEXTS

---

In hard authoritarian contexts, framing may be even more important for attracting participants to a contentious mobilization than in other contexts. In autocracies, protesters often face the risk of police crackdowns that involve physical violence, the risk of imprisonment, and other severe consequences. To join an antiregime mobilization, people need a strong enough reason to agree to face these risks. There is almost always a moral component in people’s motives, which connects the mobilization to social values and identities. When individual sacrifice seems less important than these higher collective goals, it motivates people to take the risk of speaking out.

Framing is also important for the regime. Although many authoritarian regimes use violence to ensure compliance, they also care about constructing a narrative supporting the notion that their rule is right and moral, usually by connecting it to societal values and group identities. They invest in propaganda machines, engage with religious institutions, and shape school curriculum to ensure that the framing justifying their legitimacy takes root in society. If they are successful, they enjoy higher support among the population and do not have to rely only on coercion. For the opposition to be successful in challenging the regime, it needs to undermine its narrative of why its rule is just and fair.

### THE BEST WAY TO CHALLENGE THE REGIME’S FRAMING

---

There are different ways to challenge the regime’s framing. We found that movements challenging a regime are more effective when they *engage and rethink the regime’s framing*. In other words, successful oppositional framing tends to appeal to at least some of the same social values and identities as the regime’s framing, as opposed to oppositional framings that are rooted in different values. For example, if the regime’s legitimacy is rooted in large part on successful appeals to nationalist sentiment, an opposition that rejects rather than reframes nationalism is unlikely to garner enough support to be successful in challenging it. An opposition that embraces nationalism but reinterprets it will probably attract more people, including those who did not sympathize with them before.

We found that framings that *engage and rethink* the regime’s framing attracts more participants through two different

mechanisms. First, such framings tend to have a *wide general appeal* in society, as they are based on cultural values already accepted by the population. A movement that promotes widely accepted cultural values can attract even largely apolitical citizens who may be suspicious of radical change. This mechanism is especially important in noncompetitive political environments where politics are dominated by a single center of power, such as in Belarus, Russia, or Vietnam.

Second, a framing that *engages the regime’s stated agenda* provides a common cause for different groups who usually do not see themselves as a single political force. This is especially important in political environments where there is more competition and the opposition tends to be divided, often along ethnic, religious, or regional lines. A framing that is based on a different agenda (for example, human rights

or economic liberalization) may or may not be attractive to each of the potential allies depending on their priorities or ideological stance. Claiming that the regime fails to live up to its own promises and values is an easier message for diverse groups to get behind, and moreover, can be safer when it doesn't imply a call for regime change, as in the Vietnam case. In Vietnam, the trigger (an environmental disaster) and the framing of the protest (the government's failure to protect people's livelihoods) helped to bridge the urban-rural divide: urban environmental activists protested

alongside fishermen led by Catholic priests. In Ethiopia, where there was a call for regime change, the Oromo youth movement's shift from a secessionist framing of their demands, to supporting the original federalist framing in the constitution, helped create an alliance between the Oromo and Amhara ethnic groups. The focus on the regime and its claims in these cases is something disparate opposition groups can agree on, temporarily diminishing the importance of their differences and allowing coalitions that may not be possible otherwise.

## **EXAMPLES OF HOW THE OPPOSITION CAN ENGAGE AND RETHINK THE REGIME'S FRAMING**

---

The 2020 Belarus mobilization around multiple candidates for the presidency is one example of a successful engagement and rethinking of the regime's framing, which significantly contributed to the mobilization scaling up. Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime appealed to the value of economic security and political stability, often invoking Soviet nostalgia and collectivist values. In foreign policy, he skillfully balanced between Russia and Europe, positioning Belarus between the two poles as a country pursuing its own authentic interests. In contrast to this framing, older opposition groups have emphasized Belarusian ethnic nationalism and Western-style democratization as important for the country's future—but these visions did not resonate with the wider population.

The new opposition candidates in the 2020 presidential election, especially Viktor Babaryka, took a different approach. They put forward a vision of the future that was based on values similar to those embedded in Lukashenka's framing. In Babaryka's framing, Belarus should be focused on developing its own competitive advantage on the global market, and use it to ensure economic security and prosperity for all of Belarus's people. Moreover, Babaryka argued that Belarus should preserve its cultural heritage while also remaining open to other countries, with which it should maintain mutually beneficial relations. This framing replaced a Soviet aesthetic with a 21st century one, but continued to build on the ideals of collective solidarity and equality. It resonated with strong public demand for economic security and political stability, as well as with a general support for a form of Belarusian authenticity that does not come at the expense of rejecting connections with the outside world. This framing was an important factor in

increasing the mobilization size: many activists who joined the opposition to Lukashenka in 2020 cited their support for Viktor Babaryka's values and agenda as the most important reason for their decision to join the movement.

The 2015–18 Ethiopia mobilization is another example of how engaging and rethinking the regime's framing contributed to a mobilization scaling up. The Oromo ethnic group, which was the main force behind the mobilization, has been resisting the Tigray-dominated government for decades. However, the old opposition primarily focused on a secessionist agenda. The violent tactics of the Oromo Liberation Front and the disconnect of their agenda from the everyday needs of the Oromo people led to a decline of its popularity. The regime, meanwhile, worked to legitimize its rule within a federalist framework, in which all ethnic groups supposedly had equal rights. These concepts were taught in civics classes in primary and secondary schools, and, in a twist of irony, produced a new generation of Oromos who shook up the old resistance agenda. Instead of demanding secession from Ethiopia, this new generation began demanding truly equal rights and representation for Oromos within the federalist framework. They spoke about lack of education and economic opportunities—topics that addressed people's everyday needs more than the previous generation's calls for secession—and pointed out that equal rights as proclaimed under federalist framework were not in place. The turn to the federalist framing also created space for other ethnic groups to join the protest demanding equal rights, allowing a coalition that would have been impossible under the earlier secessionist agenda. As a result, the mobilization grew to the point when the prime minister of the country was forced to resign.

Another vivid example of engaging and rethinking comes from Zimbabwe. In 2016, popular resistance to Robert Mugabe’s regime saw an unprecedented upward scale shift after a video made by Pastor Evan Mawarire went viral. In this video, Mawarire talks about the same issues of corruption, poverty, and injustice that the opposition to Mugabe’s regime has been raising before. He, however, adopted a different framing by referencing the country’s flag, which ordinarily would be associated with the ruling party’s

rhetoric. He contrasted the regime’s patriotic rhetoric with the actual feelings of a citizen who has been excluded from political participation in the country he loves, and who was robbed of the opportunities that would have allowed him to become the person he wanted to be. By appropriating the regime’s symbol, he suggested an alternative version of patriotism that represented the interests of Zimbabwean people, undermining the regime’s version of patriotism.

## DIFFERENT WAYS OF ENGAGING WITH REGIME FRAMING

---

Across our 21 cases, patterns and similarities in how protesters engaged with the regime’s framing vary depending on the characteristics of the political environment. Specifically, it is important whether the political environment in the country is noncompetitive and largely dominated by one center of authority (usually, the state), or if it has multiple parties with their own constituencies who consistently compete for power.

In countries with a *noncompetitive political environment* dominated by a central state, the regime often assumes the role of the collective leader responsible for the security and well-being of the population, which is expected to respect its authority in return. In such situations, a successful mobilization framing undermining the regime’s legitimacy usually involves statements about the regime’s failure of to live up to these basic guarantees—in other words, about a *violation of the social contract*. For example, in Vietnam, the mobilization triggered by an ecological disaster emphasized the failure of the government to protect the livelihood of the coastal communities devastated by a spill polluting their fishing grounds. In Belarus, presidential candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya emphasized the regime’s lies about the country’s economic successes and Lukashenka’s insistence that the harms of the COVID-19 pandemic were minimal, contrasting these false pictures with the reality that Belarusians faced. In Cuba, where thousands took to the streets for two days of economic protests in 2021, one framing popular among the protesters was expressed in the rap song “Patria y Vida,” which highlighted the failure of the Cuban revolutionary regime to provide families with basic necessities. Notably, neither of these framings challenged the idea that the state should be playing the role of the leader, as such arrangements were widely accepted. Instead, they pointed out that the authorities had failed to fulfil their roles as leaders.

In countries with *competitive political environments*, there is often some formal or informal power-sharing agreement between competing parties. This may take the form of a constitution that specifies procedures for the transfer of power, including term limits, or another agreement that sets parameters for power sharing, such as the 2000 Arusha Agreement in Burundi that ended the civil war in the country. A regime’s initial legitimacy in such environments is often based on these agreements: the other parties accept the regime’s rule expecting that they will have their fair share of power. When this expectation is violated, however, it delegitimizes the regime. In such competitive environments, a mobilization around *the violation of a power-sharing agreement* tends to resonate with the segments of the population that are left out of the power bargain, and unite the opposition in the country. In Ethiopia, Oromo youth called for true equality of different ethnic groups within the federation. Other examples involved a direct violation of term limits and the framing that focused on that, including movements in Burundi, Congo-Brazzaville, Chad, and Sudan.

In several of our cases the opposition did not envision a framing based in a regime’s past appeal, yet the mobilization grew anyway. Some of these cases are examples of how term-limit violation in combination with corruption, widespread poverty, and other autocratic sins may be a good enough mobilization framing, especially in competitive political environments where there are opposition parties with genuine bases of support that persist in challenging the regime party’s dominance. In cases such as Chad, Congo-Brazzaville, and Gambia, the framing used by activists was usually very simple: “Enough! Get out!” and did not involve much rethinking of regime’s rhetoric. Such framing, however, has a chance to work only in societies where power sharing between different groups is an important value. Some

autocrats violated this value to such a degree that even their own constituencies and former allies turned against them, as they did in Gambia and Sudan.

A framing that connects a movement's political agenda to economic grievances of the population benefits mobilization scale-up in most political environments. Activists can appeal to more segments of the population when they craft a framing that directly references specific economic grievances and connects them either to the failure of the state to fulfil the social contract (Cuba, Vietnam, Russia, Eswatini), or social inequalities and the mistreatment of certain categories of people that affects them economically (Ethiopia, Cambodia).

Sometimes, the regime's framing is such that it is difficult to rethink it into a more democratic version of itself. For

example, in Sudan, the government drew on a selective and exclusionary interpretation of Islam to justify civil wars, social stratification, and their exclusive hold on power. In this case, however, it was useful to *at least partially engage the regime's framing to point out its inconsistencies*. The Sudanese opposition and civil society accused the Islamist's National Congress Party of being the "merchants of religion," rather than authentically pious leaders. Rather than rejecting the religious framing, the opposition questioned whether the regime's actions reflected the true Islamic values, thus undermining the regime's legitimacy among regime supporters without undermining the deeper values it was based on. This partial rethinking of the regime's framing resulted in several prominent younger members of the Islamist Party defecting to the opposition.

## **HOW FRAMING CAN HINDER A MOBILIZATION'S SCALING UP**

---

Some of our negative cases show how framings that do not undermine the basis of regime legitimacy hinder a campaign's growth. In Azerbaijan, the opposition attempted to mobilize against a 2016 constitutional referendum to expand presidential power and term limits. This kind of "power grab" trigger can lead to a sizable mobilization in countries with competitive political environments. In Azerbaijan, though, regime legitimacy was based on nationalism and security, especially in the context of the conflict with Armenia. Azerbaijan has a noncompetitive environment with one dominant center of political authority. In such an environment, violation of term limits is rarely viewed by the population as a worthy reason for protest, as long as the regime continues performing in the security realm. The mobilization in Azerbaijan did not scale up for multiple reasons, including repression, but a framing that did not incorporate economic and corruption concerns that had been expressed at earlier protests likely contributed to its lack of popular appeal.

Angola is another example where the opposition could have done more with their framing. The 2017 mobilization in Angola was prompted by an unfair election. It did not involve a violation of term limits; rather, the ruling party replaced the

incumbent president with a new one. (In Angola, the head of the national list of the political party that wins general elections becomes the president.) The election process, however, involved multiple procedural violations and did not ensure a level playing field for all parties. During the same year, economic protests about salary arrears were on the rise, but they remained disconnected from the political protests. Had the opposition clearly connected the electoral unfairness to the economic grievances and coordinated with the economic protests organizationally, the mobilization would have had more chances to scale up.

Kazakhstan was a case that scaled up, but it contains some missed opportunities as well. The electoral mobilization led by youth, artists, and environmental activists was unprecedented compared to earlier levels of protest, but it arguably could have grown even bigger had the activists connected the movement's framing to the issues raised by earlier protests about economic grievances and the government's failure to provide public safety and essential social services. Especially in centralized autocracies, these kinds of connections between political and economic grievances are important in movement growth: they help citizens to overcome the sense that others passively support the regime even as it does a poor job of taking care of them.



## Other factors:

# Diaspora and international organizations

---

Several factors other than new actors and framing affected the scale-up and the general dynamics of the mobilization episodes we studied. One such factor was support of the movement by diaspora and international organizations.

In several cases, including Ethiopia, Gambia, and Sudan, diaspora support was extremely important for the movement's growth. In other cases, diaspora support was less essential but helpful in communicating what was happening to international audiences, or in sending monetary support through mobile banking apps and online funding campaigns. Diasporas of different countries varied in the level of their political engagement, consolidation, and organization prior to mobilization episodes we studied. For Ethiopia or Gambia, diasporas had established strong, consolidated organizations for years before the mobilization episode in question, and these organizations were able to participate actively in the movement. In other cases, such as those of Belarus or Kazakhstan, the movement itself served as a stimulus for diasporas to become better organized.

However, for countries like China, Cuba, and Iran, where the entrenched opposition resides abroad, diaspora activities may *inhibit* mobilizations from scaling up. The support the diaspora offers may be seen as undesirable by new social movements because of perceived associations with “the West,” or because their stance is considered too radical. In the Vietnam case, activists said they avoided association with some diaspora organizations because it could hurt their legitimacy inside the country.

The activities diasporas engaged in to help these mobilizations fall into two broad categories: those that help the activists inside the country; and those that target international audiences, including foreign governments and international organizations. To help activists inside the country, diaspora members leveraged the advantages of both their location in countries where freedom of expression is generally protected, and their comparatively high economic status. From a safe place abroad, they ran communication channels, including pages on social media, internet media outlets, and satellite television channels that were beamed into the country—as were the cases with Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Iran. The information diasporas spread allowed the movement

actors inside the country to coordinate more effectively and minimize repression. In Belarus, for example, the Telegram channel NEXTA, run from Poland, became the coordination center of protests for a few weeks.

Direct material help is another channel of support that diasporas provide to in-country activists. It usually took a form of money sent to activists and their families either on a regular basis or as emergency assistance. In Belarus, after the crackdown on protests, the diaspora quickly launched initiatives that helped people who lost jobs because of their support for the anti-Lukashenka movement. The diaspora also assisted people targeted by the regime in their efforts to relocate outside the country. A member of the Russian diaspora, Boris Zimin, has been supporting Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny for years, allowing him to better focus on anticorruption activism. In Sudan and Ethiopia, diasporas provided material support to in-country activists, including safe communication devices such as satellite phones.

Another form of diaspora engagement is sharing expertise. For example, the Vietnamese and Egyptian diasporas helped activists inside those countries put together lawsuits challenging the government. Diaspora members helped Cuban musicians to record the song that later became an unofficial anthem of the protests there. Russian economists living abroad helped Navalny's presidential campaign by consulting with him on his economic program. A young Ethiopian diaspora member, Jawar Mohammed, became the face of the Oromo protests both inside and outside of the country: he leveraged his knowledge of political science and human rights to clearly articulate the movement's federalist agenda and communicate it to audiences both inside and outside of Ethiopia.

Communication with external audiences is another broad category of activity diasporas engaged in. In most of our cases, including those that did not scale up, diasporas staged solidarity protests in the countries where they lived. Diaspora-run satellite television and social media channels allowed in-country activists to circumvent government censorship and transmit their messages to international audiences. These protests and communication strategies helped to maintain the visibility of the issue over time,

## HOW CIVIC MOBILIZATIONS GROW IN AUTHORITARIAN CONTEXTS

helping diasporas to lobby governments, international bodies, human rights organizations, and even universities to make statements, impose sanctions, and cut ties to authoritarian governments that had committed various rights violations. For example, years of efforts by the Ethiopian diaspora resulted in the US Congress passing a resolution supporting human rights and inclusive governance in Ethiopia in 2018. Diaspora scholars from China contributed to Cornell University cutting ties with a program at Renmin University in China over the Jasic protests. Other cases where we saw substantial diaspora advocacy efforts include those of Belarus, Congo-Brazzaville, Eswatini, and Sudan. Generally, statements from foreign governments, and from international bodies and nongovernmental organizations such as Freedom House, Amnesty International, the International Labor Organization, and Human Rights Watch helped to create and maintain pressure on authoritarian regimes to limit the repression of activists inside the country.

The boundary between diasporas and in-country activists is often blurry. In many cases, the activists must flee the country when their freedom or life is in danger and join the diaspora. In some cases, we also observed the opposite: diaspora members traveling to their country of origin to support the movement, as they did in Congo-Brazzaville and Sudan. Generally, a close connection between the diaspora and in-country activists is beneficial for the movement as their resources are complementary: diasporas have more money and freedom of expression; in-country activists are usually seen as more authentic and connected to the population, but they face a much higher risk of repression. Combining the advantages of both, as the activists did in Ethiopia and Sudan, can have a significant effect on movement growth. At the same time, diasporas that have weak connections to activists inside the country have little to no influence on the events there. This is the case in many of the formerly communist countries in our study where members of the diaspora are only recently developing a sense of their potential for collective action.



Residents of Bishoftu crossed their wrists above their heads as a symbol for the Oromo anti-government protesting movement during the Oromo new year holiday Irreechaa in Bishoftu on October 2, 2016. (ZACHARIAS ABUBEKER/AFP via Getty Images)

## Other factors:

# Internet and social media technologies

---

As numerous examples have shown, internet technologies such as social media, video sharing, and messaging apps have transformed the way that social movements in authoritarian countries mobilize ordinary citizens. Access to the internet beyond an urban elite is a necessary precursor to this dynamic. Control over information and restrictions on the ability of citizens to gather and share information outside of official channels are hallmarks of hard authoritarian regimes, making broad-based civil resistance difficult. Due to constraints on free expression, both leaders and citizens in authoritarian regimes have historically lacked information about public opinion. This limited the government’s understanding of emerging tensions and prevented citizens from perceiving the extent to which they share common problems. However, the way that information is shared in the 21st century means that the possibilities have expanded for citizens to communicate, coordinate, and create a new vision for their society. Now, authoritarian regimes face a tradeoff between economic development and absolute control over information. Attempts to shut down the internet in order to control social movements also anger the regime’s base and hurt the economic interests of the elites.

Videos circulated using social media and messaging apps triggered several movements in our study (Cuba, Djibouti, Russia, Zimbabwe). Social media was also the main factor in several movements being able to scale up (Belarus, Kazakhstan, Vietnam). In Cuba, the ability of citizens to access the internet through their mobile phones expanded from less than 20 percent of the population in 2011 to more than 70 percent 10 years later. In a country like Cuba where the government swiftly imprisons activists and strictly controls the media, the ability to quickly share videos of the initial actions on July 11, 2021, was a necessary precondition for the largest nationwide protest in decades. Similarly, in Belarus and Kazakhstan, organizing flash mobs and sharing videos of the events on social media became an effective tactic to spread a message both inside and outside the country, while avoiding preemptive repression from the state. In Vietnam and Zimbabwe, Facebook accounts and groups became virtual civic spaces for the development of subcultures, critiques of state actions, dissemination of information and tactics, and the formation of new visions for the country’s future.

In addition to internet technologies, other forms of technology allow activists to circumvent government censorship, social media blockage, or total internet shutdowns, such as the kind that happens frequently in Iran. The development and widespread use of mobile messaging apps such as Telegram, Viber, and WhatsApp in the 2014–21 time period meant that activists had valuable tools when the internet was blocked, as governments are usually reluctant to also shut down mobile phone networks. In Belarus, chat groups for particular neighborhoods or schools were transformed into powerful tools to motivate people to attend protests, while a Telegram channel operated from Poland, NEXTA, became one of the most important sources of news about the protests both inside and outside the country. Access to virtual private network (VPN) services was also important in several cases where organizing had begun on a social media site that was subsequently blocked. VPN access also meant that activists could continue to post content that the outside world could access.

### Activist perspective

Zimbabwean pastor Evan Mawarire said that he hesitated for about six hours before posting his “This Flag” video, never having done anything like that in his life. He said that growing up under Robert Mugabe meant living in a state of fear in which people were taught to leave politics alone. Indeed, the video triggered a backlash. In his second video, he sought to manage public perceptions that he was a lone voice dangerously confronting the Mugabe government; he called on people to take and post pictures of themselves draped in the country’s flag. He says after a few weeks of seeing the impact of the second video, he decided to go on to post one video per day in May 2016. Estimates suggest that at the height of the #thisflag movement, there were between 500,000 and 600,000 people actively engaging on #thisflag social media and in person (interview by Reikai Rusinga, validator for the Zimbabwe case brief, June 9, 2022).

## HOW CIVIC MOBILIZATIONS GROW IN AUTHORITARIAN CONTEXTS

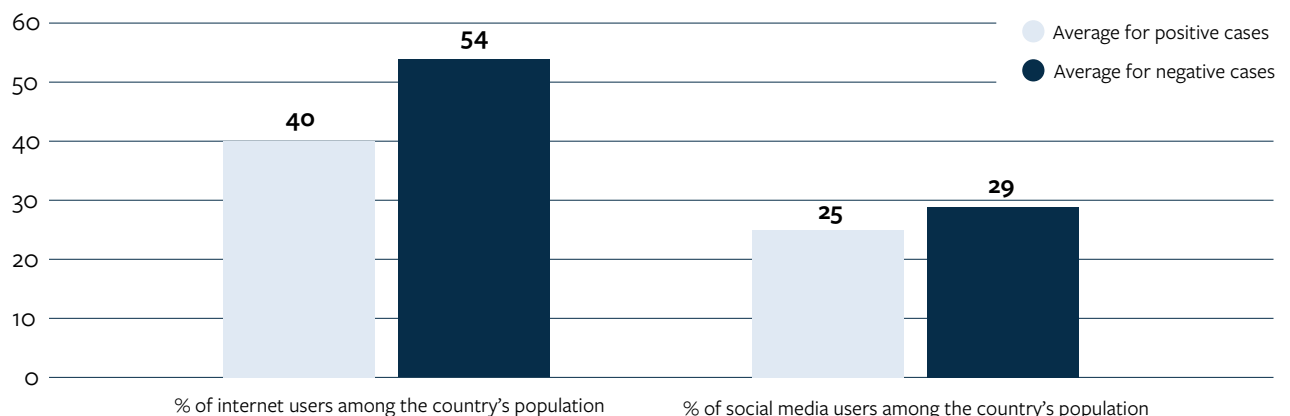
Broad access to the internet may be a precursor to mobilizations, but it is an enabling factor rather than a causal one. Looking at the quantitative data across our 21 positive and negative cases, there is no clear pattern in the relationship between internet use and scale-up. The data show that mobilization episodes in countries like Burundi and Ethiopia, where internet and social media use was very low, were able to scale up, and in countries like Azerbaijan, China, and Djibouti with a large percentage of the population using the internet, mobilizations could fail to scale up. In fact, as Figure 1 shows, on average internet and social media use are higher in countries where mobilizations failed to take off. This makes sense because in many of the countries with the highest internet use, the government is also very savvy in restricting, censoring, and monitoring social media. In Zimbabwe, where internet penetration and social media use were relatively low, a video posted to Facebook mobilized people who went on to mobilize others through in-person social and organizational networks. In most cases, networks of activists meeting face-to-face are a more decisive factor than internet access in movements scaling up, though the internet certainly facilitates communication and coordination across networks.

China's Jasic protests provide an interesting example of a scaled up movement that took place both on the internet and face-to-face within workplaces. Hundreds of Chinese university students wrote open letters on social media in support of the workers at the Jasic factory, and activists on the factory floor effectively used online videos and branding—in particular, the slogan “solidarity is power,” and a black-and-white picture of the workers—to communicate what they were trying to accomplish. The government then

censored the campaign on social media, scrubbed posts about police detentions of Jasic workers, shut down chat groups circulating information about student activists, and instructed internet platforms not to report on the sentencing of activists. Nevertheless, Jasic campaign materials made it past the “Great Firewall” and appeared on platforms like Twitter and YouTube, allowing foreign media to closely follow the events.

In authoritarian contexts, social media plays a role that people in democracies may take for granted: providing a public square for people to shape a new vision of what is possible for their society. In Sudan, the anti-Bashir “Tasgut bas” (“fall, that’s all!”) social media campaign encouraged individuals to share short personal stories on Facebook explaining their discontent and why they believe the regime must fall. #Tasgutbas posts ranged from stories about bread lines to personal humiliation and brutalization suffered at the hands of the regime. The sharing of those stories by people from different walks of life allowed people to understand the magnitude of suffering in the country, to frame that suffering as the product of the regime, and to explore new ways social groups could collaborate to promote change. In Belarus, independent media that citizens accessed via the internet provided opportunities for citizens to discuss information, express their political views, and observe the opinions of others, resulting in new ideas about Belarus's future that were in opposition to the regime's actions. This mediated public sphere also tied subcultural groups to the broader cause: the Roman Catholic Church in Belarus supported the mobilization in part because new media had intensified the discussion of political matters in the Catholic community, amplifying voices that took a more radical stance.

Figure 1. Internet use in countries with mobilization episodes that did and did not scale up



## Other factors:

# The dynamics of repression and negotiation

---

We might have expected most of the mobilizations in this study to have been stopped before they could scale up. Repression is a universal autocratic tool, after all. In hard authoritarian contexts, street protests are risky because activists can be arrested or even killed at public demonstrations. We know that civic mobilization of any sort in these countries will usually trigger some sort of repression against activists, sometimes preemptively. But repression is not always effective, and it can be costly for the regime to implement. In this section, we examine sequences of events and the role that state repression and negotiation plays in civic mobilizations. In short, we found that *the timing of repression matters*.

There is no doubt that in several of our cases, repression was effective at preventing an attempted mobilization from scaling up. When analyzing our five negative cases, the factor that is most clearly associated with a failure to scale up is *repression early on in the episode*. When the state is able to preemptively repress a mobilization (for example, by arresting activists before they arrive at a protest, or repressing a campaign while organizers are still in the planning phase), this often ends the mobilization episode. In Azerbaijan, China, Cuba, and Egypt, activists were arrested while still planning actions. In all these cases except for Cuba, this preemptive repression was associated with a failure of the mobilization to scale up (though in Egypt, activists continued their struggle in the courts for the next two years). In Cuba, the mobilization scaled up largely spontaneously, but using narratives that were previously crafted by the arrested leaders. Without the leadership, however, it only lasted two days. Immediate and extreme repression was probably also a factor in several other isolated events that we considered including in this study but that did not qualify as cases because there was not enough information to know whether activists tried to organize further mobilization (including in Eritrea and Tajikistan).

In contrast to instances where regime authorities crush a movement before it begins in earnest, extreme repression can be quite costly for the regime when deployed *after a mobilization has already spread*. While new activists in the #thisflag movement in Zimbabwe were shocked and disheartened by its leader's arrest and exile, the mobilization

was not stopped because its momentum was continued by more formal opposition movements who posed a serious threat to the ruling party. Furthermore, in some cases, extreme repression triggers moral outrage that increases the size of the mobilization. The death, exile, or long prison sentence of an activist who already had popular support spurred on movements in Belarus, Cameroon, Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Gambia. In Cameroon and Sudan, extreme repression was expected and had already been endured by the well-organized movements for years.

While regime repression can often stamp out a nascent movement, activists' ability to anticipate and avoid an impending crackdown is important in fostering mobilization growth. Thus, it is useful to look at whether or not the government or the activists could have reasonably predicted the emergence of a movement, and what happened as a consequence. The window of opportunity for mobilization in several of our cases aligned with an unfair election or referendum period, or similar power grab by the incumbent. In these cases, the state and the opposition could more or less anticipate the timing of a cycle of mobilization and repression (though not in cases such as Belarus, Cambodia, and the Gambia, where a *newly united opposition's* electoral success caught the incumbents off guard). In the cases where the trigger is a particular state decision or policy change, the state might anticipate resistance but not know how strong it might be. This was the case in Ethiopia and Cameroon, where power-sharing agreements were slowly eroded over time and the triggers for these episodes were events proverbially serving as "the straw that broke the camel's back." In Cuba, Djibouti, Russia, and Zimbabwe, however, the mobilization trigger was likely unanticipated by the state: videos circulated on social media showed the broader public that they were not alone in their grievances, exposed "open secrets" about the regime, and gave courage to ordinary people to join the protest.

Street protests and violent repression aren't the only state-society dynamics in these cases. In a majority of our cases, activists tried to work within the system by bringing court cases, registering or running candidates or political parties, forming unions, or petitioning the monarch or a government body. In Belarus and Cambodia, opposition candidates contested clearly rigged election results, and

## HOW CIVIC MOBILIZATIONS GROW IN AUTHORITARIAN CONTEXTS

subsequent government repression did not prevent many months of ongoing mobilization that resulted in government concessions in the Cambodia case, and intensification of everyday repression in Belarus. In only a few cases did the government make concessions or negotiate with activists. In China, further mobilization was deterred by a combination of repression and the promise of concessions, while in Cameroon and Sudan, negotiations took place after the mobilization had already scaled up and the failure of the negotiations resulted in further resistance.

In several cases where activists tried to work within the system or otherwise negotiate, and the state responded with further repression, the inability of the state to respect its

own laws was useful in furthering the mobilization. In places where civic and political organizations are heavily regulated (Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia), working within the system meant attempting to register parties and candidates only to be denied on procedural grounds. In countries like Eswatini where there is a tradition of state institutions being responsive to petitions, attacks on those delivering petitions fueled public anger. In these cases, the attempts to work within the system took place when the mobilization had already begun to scale up and the state's actions seem to have increased public perceptions of government hypocrisy and aided movement organizers' framing efforts. Procedural repression when the public is paying attention is particularly problematic because it demonstrates that the system is rigged.



Vietnamese protesters demonstrate against Taiwanese conglomerate Formosa during a rally in downtown Hanoi on May 1, 2016. (HOANG DINH NAM/AFP via Getty Images)

# Implications for practitioners

We started this research to answer a question that was on the minds of democracy assistance practitioners: what kinds of investments should we make to support prodemocracy actors in hard authoritarian regimes? We went into this work knowing that opportunities for mobilization in these regimes are rare, and when they do arise, they are often due to historically contingent factors over which activists and international actors have no control: natural disasters or pandemics, mistakes made by autocrats or members of their inner circles, and so on. We set out to discover what factors lay the groundwork that allows prodemocracy activists to take advantage of mobilization opportunities, and whether we could demonstrate whether certain kinds of democracy programs can deliver long-term payoffs even in the world's most closed environments.

Democracy assistance in the United States tends to provide support in hard authoritarian contexts to lawyers, journalists, human rights activists, and in some cases civic organizations that train others in skills such as election monitoring and policy research and advocacy. Our research shows that social movements in authoritarian contexts need the support of professionals with the skills that this kind of assistance builds and sustains. Donors, human rights activists, and civil society organizations all know that receiving material assistance from foreign donors is risky. But, assistance that helps these established, in-country professionals sustain their work allows them to support a civic mobilization in ways that new activists cannot. As other recent research has shown, foreign assistance to social movement actors themselves can be damaging in terms of public perceptions and is often unwanted. Therefore, it is also important for those receiving outside assistance to establish structures and practices that ensure they will be able *to listen to and coordinate with* other activists, organizations, and social groups who may be reluctant to associate themselves with people targeted by the regime over their ties to foreign donors.

We do not claim to provide a formula for activists and donors to follow in authoritarian contexts, and our recommendations may not apply in contexts with more expansive and vibrant civic spaces. However, this study demonstrates that there are ways to lay the groundwork to support civic mobilization in anticipation of an opportunity

arising, and that there are ways that democracy assistance practitioners can be smarter about how outsider support incentivizes in-country activists and organizations we work with to build the skills they can use to support a broad social movement when it emerges. This point is key: *prodemocracy activists are not usually the ones to initiate or lead a broad-based social movement in these contexts, but if they are able to respond in a way that supports a cause that people are beginning to rally around, they can improve the chances that the mobilization will grow.*

## Movements and CSOs during the “Kazakh Spring” (2019)

While all of the actors within the Kazakh Spring stand under the banner of democratization, the youth movement Oyan, Qazaqstan, is distinct. There is a deep generational and political gap between the Kazakh Spring actors and the old opposition, and Oyan, Qazaqstan, activists openly criticized the established opposition for systematic failures in the past. However, two recurrent themes also connected the newer Kazakh Spring protesters with the old civil society groups: demands to release political prisoners and for independent election observation. Over time, the connection between the civil society NGOs and different Kazakh Spring actors grew deeper, also due to interactions regarding legal advice when protesters got arrested or were tried in court (Diana T. Kudaibergenova, Kazakhstan case brief validator).

In less repressive contexts, some quasi-oppositional organizations exist (labor unions, professional associations, pensioners organizations). These have been important not for their technical skills, but for their ability to mobilize a base of supporters and contribute to a critical mass of support for the movement among ordinary people. These organizations are often allies of the regime and share the values that brought them to power, but can turn against the regime when it lets them down. Democracy and rights defenders in these regimes may feel committed to a democratic worldview that is at odds with these other actors and social groups, which can move between a combative

and cooperative posture with the regime depending on the issue. But, it is important that in working together, they can “speak the language” both of international human rights and of the issues that resonate with people in their own country. Finding ways to incentivize other social actors to convene at least occasionally with our prodemocracy partners, and helping our partners find a variety of contextually appropriate ways to build a network across different groups, are activities that can contribute to successful civic mobilization in the future.

In their 2022 presentation at the DRG Center’s annual conference, Dr. Erica Chenoweth outlined what nonviolent social movement actors need from donors such as USAID: convenings to build connections across groups, trainings to develop knowledge and skills in nonviolent organizing, moral support from activists in other countries who have been in their situation, and ways to communicate with each other in ways that are difficult to disrupt or surveil. Funding can be useful in terms of emergency assistance, but what they need more is time and opportunity to connect with one another. For more on these recommendations, see p. 81 of [https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/ICNC\\_Monograph\\_External\\_Support\\_Poisoned\\_Chalice\\_or\\_Holy\\_Grail.pdf](https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/ICNC_Monograph_External_Support_Poisoned_Chalice_or_Holy_Grail.pdf)

Finally, practitioners know that authoritarian elections can provide important windows of opportunity for reframing issues that the public cares about. In these contexts, traditional voter education and election monitoring will have a larger impact on democratic outcomes when complemented by strategic communications, digital security, and grassroots network building by nonpolitical actors. Existing actors with mobilization potential may include professional associations, Facebook groups, social media influencers, community development organizations, and ethnic or religious associations, among others. An innovative reframing of the regime’s agenda may also be coming from unexpected places such as the business community or nationalists. Prodemocracy activists and organizations may not want to be directly associated with these groups but can nevertheless amplify successful frames originating there in their own messages. In places where the regime is less technologically sophisticated, nimble support for means of communication and organization that are beyond the regime’s control may be an important way that philanthropists can influence mobilization in authoritarian contexts.

## **Recommendations for practitioners and donors:**

1. Practitioners and donors tend to work with lawyers, journalists, human rights activists, policy researchers, and election monitors. Social movements in authoritarian contexts need the support of professionals with the skills that this kind of assistance builds and sustains. Assistance that helps these established, in-country professionals sustain their work even when there is no window for change allows them to support an emergent civic mobilization in ways that new activists cannot.
2. Use organizational prestige and convening power to create opportunities for other groups in society (professional organizations, entrepreneurs, environmental movements, student groups, etc.) who may play an important role in a future civic mobilization to communicate and connect with pro-democracy partners. For donors, this may require more internal coordination across different departments and grant mechanisms.
3. Support partners to engage in peer-to-peer or offshore training and scholarship on non-violent, nonconfrontational, and innovative tactics.
4. Support partners in using means of communication that are not easily monitored or blocked by the government. Fund the engagement of outside ICT security experts who know how to stay one step ahead of the regime. Adapt your own policies and procedures to meet the needs of the local partners.
5. Learn about and build connections to diaspora groups and their activities, being aware that the politics of a diaspora can be difficult for an outsider to navigate.
6. Plan for a pool of funding to respond rapidly to situations where a movement has emerged, and where state repression was not immediate or did not result in the cessation of the movement. The response should provide both technical and psychosocial support to partners who can safely receive funding. Support activities may also take place abroad.



## Recommendations for movements and activists:

1. Customize messaging for different audiences when developing communications strategies. Movements and activists may need to be flexible about the language of rights to help prodemocracy frameworks more directly address local concerns and counter a regime's claim to uphold common values.
2. Diversify networks. Use professional and personal relationships to connect your movement or organization with professional groups, entrepreneurs, environmental movements, student groups, and others who may play an important role in a future civic mobilization. Assess the diversity of the groups you are in regular communication with about issues in your country, and address gaps by working to establish new relationships. For some groups, there may be less sensitive issues that you can raise to form a connection and share expertise. Maintain friendly ties with influential acquaintances who don't share your views now but may change their minds if the tide starts to turn.
3. Find trustworthy ICT experts to give advice on digital security, or deputize a wise amateur to be your help desk, and follow up by building organizational habits that support safer communication among your network members. Use creative financing, perhaps through diaspora networks, to support access to systems like satellite telephones.
4. Seek out opportunities for peer-to-peer learning from other civic movements abroad. Their experiences may have relevance for your own communication or strategy even if their cultural or historical context differs significantly. Ask donors or other supporters to help you make these connections and to provide opportunities to convene with other groups abroad.
5. Consult international best practices for nonviolent movement building and share them widely within your networks. Having a shared tactical repertoire and analytical framework for understanding the dynamics between your movement and the regime can increase the efficacy of your actions. Also, consider engaging international experts on nonviolent action who may be able to assist with training, strategizing, and coordination.

# Notes

---

- 1 Ortiz et al., *World Protests*; Chenoweth, *Civil Resistance*.
- 2 Chenoweth and Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works*. In addition to mass participation, researchers also found that movement success is affected by having a network rather than hierarchical structure, and by the use of a variety of tactics and quickly adapting them to new circumstances: Schock, *Unarmed Insurrections*; Beer, *Civil Resistance Tactics in the 21st Century*. The presence of politically autonomous communal elites as well as defections within the state apparatus have also been found to influence the outcome: Slater, "Revolutions, Crackdowns, and Quiescence: Communal Elites and Democratic Mobilization in Southeast Asia"; Nepstad, *Nonviolent Revolutions*.
- 3 Della Porta, *Can Democracy Be Saved*.
- 4 Pinckney, *From Dissent to Democracy*; Nepstad, *Nonviolent Revolutions*; Chenoweth and Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works*.
- 5 Greene, *Moscow in Movement*; Pearlman, "Moral Identity and Protest Cascades in Syria."
- 6 Tarrow, *The New Transnational Activism*.
- 7 We considered a country "hard authoritarian" if its *Freedom in the World* score was at 30 or below at any point of time between 2014 and 2020.
- 8 Every year, *Freedom in the World* organizes expert discussions of country ratings, which generate detailed notes preserved at Freedom House.
- 9 We used these notes to obtain additional information on possible mobilization episodes.
- 9 Marshall, "Major Episodes of Political Violence, 1946-2018."
- 10 Clark and Regan, "Mass Mobilization Protest Data."
- 11 By "nonviolently" we mean that the movement and its leaders do not think of violence as one of the strategies to achieve their goals. Occasional, non-strategic violence can take place even inside the movements that we define as nonviolent.
- 12 Beissinger, *The Revolutionary City*; Pinckney, *From Dissent to Democracy*.
- 13 This example illustrates the importance of evaluating an upward scale shift in relative terms for that context; in many cases in our set, opposition parties are banned and cannot seek redress for unfair elections through the legal system.
- 14 While our analysis of causal factors was based on our in-depth case studies on Belarus, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Vietnam, we did have access to a forthcoming book manuscript on the Kazakhstan case that provided us with evidence and analysis that supports this argument. See Kudaibergenova, *The Kazakh Spring: How Dictatorships Fall*.
- 15 Reikai Rusinga was the validator for our Zimbabwe case brief and as part of his validation process, he conducted an interview with movement leader Evan Mawarire.

## Sources cited

---

- Beer, Michael. *Civil Resistance Tactics in the 21st Century*. International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, 2021.
- Beissinger, Mark R. *The Revolutionary City: Urbanization and the Global Transformation of Rebellion*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2022.
- Chenoweth, Erica. *Civil Resistance: What Everyone Needs to Know*. What Everyone Needs To Know. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2021.
- Chenoweth, Erica, and Maria J. Stephan. *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*. Columbia Studies in Terrorism and Irregular Warfare. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.
- Clark, David, and Patrick Regan. "Mass Mobilization Protest Data." Harvard Dataverse, January 9, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/HTTWYL>.
- Della Porta, Donatella. *Can Democracy Be Saved: Participation, Deliberation and Social Movements*. Hoboken: Wiley, 2013. <http://public.ebookcentral.proquest.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=1315637>.
- Greene, Samuel A. *Moscow in Movement: Power and Opposition in Putin's Russia*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2014.
- Kudaibergenova, Diana T. *The Kazakh Spring: How Dictatorships Fall*. University of Toronto Press, 2023.
- Marshall, Monty G. "Major Episodes of Political Violence, 1946-2018." Center for Systemic Peace, 2018. <http://www.systemicpeace.org/inscrdata.html>.
- Nepstad, Sharon Erickson. *Nonviolent Revolutions: Civil Resistance in the Late 20th Century*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Ortiz, Isabel, Sara Burke, Mohamed Berrada, and Hernan Saenz Cortes. *World Protests: A Study of Key Protest Issues in the 21st Century*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-88513-7>.
- Pearlman, Wendy. "Moral Identity and Protest Cascades in Syria." *British Journal of Political Science* 48, no. 4 (October 2018): 877–901. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123416000235>.
- Pinckney, Jonathan C. *From Dissent to Democracy: The Promise and Perils of Civil Resistance Transitions*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.
- Schock, Kurt. *Unarmed Insurrections: People Power Movements in Nondemocracies*. Social Movements, Protest, and Contention, v. 22. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.
- Slater, Dan. "Revolutions, Crackdowns, and Quiescence: Communal Elites and Democratic Mobilization in Southeast Asia." *American Journal of Sociology* 115, no. 1 (2009): 203–54.
- Tarrow, Sidney G. *The New Transnational Activism*. Cambridge Studies in Contentious Politics. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- ICNC. "The Role of External Support in Nonviolent Campaigns: Poisoned Chalice or Holy Grail?" Accessed October 10, 2022. <https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/external-support-for-nonviolent-campaigns/>.
- Tucker, Joshua A., and Nathaniel Persily, eds. "Social Media and Democracy." In *Social Media and Democracy: The State of the Field, Prospects for Reform*, i–i. SSRN Anxieties of Democracy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/social-media-and-democracy/social-media-and-democracy/29E8721497D280ACEE5ACE838A7919A>.
- Ластовский, Алексей. "От Молитвы к Протесту: Католическая Церковь в Беларуси." *Неприкосновенный Запас*, no. 04 (138) (2021). <https://www.nlobooks.ru/upload/iblock/969/9%D0%9B%D0%B0%D1%81%D1%82%D0%BE%D0%B2%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8%D0%B9.df?fbclid=IwAR1Av2YBLBUvunJCDICcxekML2gNjMjvUj6i4Ci87fzk0V2CdW677leGwE>.

# Annex 1: Detailed methodology

The cases we investigated (1) took place in hard authoritarian regimes, (2) were episodes in which we observed an attempt to build a sustained, nonviolent mobilization around an issue of contention with the political regime, and that (3) took place between 2014 and 2021. We chose this time period for two reasons: first, because recent events would be easier to investigate in-depth and with less recall bias;<sup>1</sup> and second, after the Arab Spring, many authoritarian governments across the world adopted new restrictive policies as a reaction to the uprisings, creating a different context for mobilization than existed in the early 2000s. We compiled a list of countries that were hard authoritarian, catalogued any kind of contentious mobilization, and eliminated cases of armed struggles or pro-regime mobilization, which presumably have very different causal mechanisms. Then, we looked more closely at the mobilization episodes and chose those that satisfied our criteria of attempts to build a sustained mobilization.

## Approach to causality and study limitations

Studying mobilizations in authoritarian regimes means that we have probably missed some negative cases due to the absence of accessible information. If a mobilization is missing here, it means only that we did not have enough information to determine that there was an attempt to build a sustained mobilization. This is a possible reason why we only have 5 negative cases and 16 positive ones. The low number of negative cases diminishes the possibility to use cross-case counterfactuals to demonstrate causality—that is, to prove that A causes B by showing that whenever A is present, B is also present, and whenever A is absent, B is also absent, as is done in some more formal comparative methods such as Mill’s methods or Comparative Qualitative Analysis (QCA).

We compensate for this limitation by increasing our use of process tracing—a method that demonstrates causality not via association (A goes together with B), but by uncovering the mechanism, or, following the process of *how* A causes B and demonstrating that process using empirical data. The value of our analysis lies in discerning patterns of mobilization growth across positive cases. We also compare positive and negative cases, but this comparison usually provides weaker evidence for our hypotheses than process tracing since we have so few negative cases.

## Selection of countries

To operationalize “hard authoritarian,” we limited our list of countries to those that scored 30 or below on the 100-point *Freedom in the World* scale<sup>2</sup> at least one year between 2014 and 2021. Excluding territories with contested status, such as Tibet, the West Bank, or Eastern Donbas, there were 47 countries that satisfied this criterion. To limit our analysis to largely nonviolent mobilizations, we used the Major Episodes of Political Violence dataset<sup>3</sup> to exclude 10 countries, such as Somalia, Myanmar, and Central African Republic, from our consideration. These countries had an ongoing violent civil or ethnic conflict that obscured the causal factors for any related nonviolent mobilization.

To identify the presence of contentious mobilization, we triangulated quantitative and qualitative data sources. First, we looked at the quantitative data from the Mass Mobilization Protest data set<sup>4</sup> and identified country-years during which the protest frequency or size increased. Second, we analyzed the *Freedom in the World* reports for the 47 countries in each of the relevant years, including nonpublic transcripts from the regional rating review meetings to catch any incidents that did not make it into the final country report. We are confident that this process captured almost the entire universe of cases that met our criteria. Finally, we reviewed media reporting available in English, and, in relevant cases, Russian or Belarusian, about the events captured by either the quantitative data or expert opinions to verify the presence of contentious mobilization. After this process, we excluded 9 of the 47 countries because we could find no evidence that mobilizations took place during this time period.

## Identification and selection of mobilization episodes

Among the episodes of largely nonviolent contentious mobilization in the remaining 38 hard authoritarian countries, we used the data sources mentioned above to discern whether these were isolated protest events, or if the activists who led the mobilization *intended* to sustain it, regardless of whether they managed to do so or not. For the purposes of this study, we needed evidence that someone was attempting to grow a mobilization, as opposed to spontaneously reacting to an event. After excluding the episodes where we

could find no evidence that the mobilization was intended to be sustained, three more countries (Eritrea, Oman, and Tajikistan) left the set of cases. However, in the Cuba 2021 episode where the 2-day mobilization resembled the seemingly spontaneous events in these excluded cases, we were able to find information about a broader movement that led up to and influenced the protest, so we included it. The lack of information about activists’ intentions means that we may have mistakenly excluded some cases where there was an intention to sustain the mobilization that we were not able to detect. Such exclusion, however, is unlikely to undermine our main argument since the probability of missing a negative case that is both led by new actors and uses a framing that rethinks the regime’s rhetoric is very small.

There are a few other ways our methodology limited us: the case selection procedure we followed made it difficult to use the comparison of positive and negative cases for establishing causality because we leaned toward selecting positive cases over negative ones when there were multiple possible episodes in the same country. We decided to choose the episode that was the largest in numbers to make it easier to get information for potential process tracing. Available information about smaller protest episodes in restrictive contexts tends to be very limited, which makes process tracing impossible. Selecting more visible episodes in these countries, however, meant that we excluded several independent negative cases that took place in countries with positive cases, leaving us with fewer negative cases. For some

comparative methods, favoring positive cases weakens the power of evidence, similar to selecting on the dependent variable in quantitative studies. For this reason, we are not using comparison of positive and negative cases in the report to draw conclusions about causality. Instead, we identify patterns across the positive cases and rely primarily on process tracing to make causality claims.

An additional challenge of our “one episode per country” rule was that in some countries (Gabon and Venezuela), the base level of mobilization was so high and constant that it was impossible to identify the moments of mobilization growth or separate mobilization episodes from each other. Hence, we excluded them from the analysis since we wanted to focus on mechanisms leading to a particular episode of mobilization scaling up. Iran was also a challenge in this respect, but after additional investigation, we were able to select a series of protests that met our criteria and could also be bounded in time as a single episode.

We also adjusted our time frame in several cases based on the circumstances of specific mobilization episodes. In Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, the mobilizations reported in our data sources were the tail end of an episode that started during the Arab Spring. Since no other mobilization was reported in these countries, they were excluded from the analysis. In the case of Cambodia, a mobilization episode that started in 2013 carried on into 2014, so we included it since it was not related to the Arab Spring. Table 5 summarizes the selection process from the initial set of 47 countries to the final set of 21.

Table 5. Selection of countries and mobilization episodes

Initial set of countries with FIW score <=30 (N=47)			
<b>Excluded:</b> Violent conflict (n=10)	<b>Excluded:</b> No mobilization (n=9)	<b>Excluded:</b> Other exclusion criteria (n=7) <sup>5</sup>	<b>Final set of countries for the analysis</b> (n=21)
Afghanistan, Central African Republic, Congo (Kinshasa), Iraq, Libya, Myanmar, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria, Yemen	Brunei, Equatorial Guinea, Laos, North Korea, Qatar, Rwanda, Turkmenistan, United Arab Emirates, Uzbekistan	Bahrain, Eritrea, Gabon, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Venezuela	Angola, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Burundi, Cambodia, Cameroon, Chad, China, Congo (Brazzaville), Cuba, Djibouti, Egypt, Eswatini/Swaziland, Ethiopia, Gambia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Russia, Sudan, Vietnam, Zimbabwe

Because we were dependent on media reports in case selection, all the mobilization episodes we included in the analysis involved street protests or strikes, which are more likely to end up in the news than less-disruptive tactics. No doubt we missed civic actions that used nonconfrontational tactics such as bringing court cases or conducting advocacy, but it is also likely that such actions were not intended by their initiators to scale up and would not have qualified as a case. While street protests or labor strikes were sentinel indicators drawing our attention to a case, in defining the temporal boundaries of an episode we also included prior or subsequent stay-at-home strikes, voter registration or signature drives, delivery of petitions, and other forms of less confrontational action that were related to the same issue or conducted by the same social movement actors. We set the end of the episode as the date after which there was a cessation of reported activity, often due to a crackdown, a radical transformation of the issue of contention, such as a political transition, or a transition of the episode to a primarily violent conflict.

### Definition of “upward scale shift” and the identification of positive cases

Our research question focuses on why mobilizations do or do not scale up, and by scaling up we mean *attract more participants than what has been typical for this country in similar circumstances over the last two decades*. Using a relative criterion for the *upward scale shift* rather than an absolute number of participants allows us to accommodate countries of different population sizes and urbanization patterns, as well as those with different base level of political competitiveness. Even countries with similar *Freedom in the World* scores may differ significantly in their base level of political competitiveness and tolerance for civic organizations. Evaluating the upward scale shift in relative terms separately for each country allows us to avoid judging noncompetitive political environments with the standards for competitive ones and vice versa.

Positive cases were ones where we observed a marked increase of the number of participants during the mobilization episode. Identifying cases was challenging in countries with relatively high levels of civic and political activity where political opposition parties regularly mobilize their supporters to protest the outcome of a rigged election or unions frequently strike to protest wage arrears. For example, the presidential electoral campaign in Belarus in 2020

attracted many more voters and campaign volunteers than similar campaigns in the past, thus, we coded it as positive. On the other hand, a presidential campaign in Angola and the subsequent postelection protests were similar in numbers to earlier campaigns, thus, this case was coded as negative. We validated our judgement of whether the episode was “business as usual” and therefore a negative case through a quantitative comparison of mobilization size and duration of episodes in our set, and with the input of the external case brief reviewers (see below).

### Sources of detailed information about the mobilization episodes

As a qualitative study, we went through multiple rounds of inductive and deductive processes in our data collection and analysis. The systematic set of data used in our comparative analysis consists of **case briefs** organized around the key themes and factors that emerged inductively during the research we did to determine the above criteria for episode boundaries and the classification of positive and negative cases. In writing the case briefs, we drew on academic publications, media reports, expert interviews, and field research. The information was mostly taken from English-language media coverage and analysis, though two of the authors were also able to read sources in Russian and Belarusian. We refined the analytical framework during the course of researching these briefs and reevaluated some of our initial classification of cases.

However, as nonexperts on most of the cases, we undertook an additional round of validation with country experts in order to refine our case briefs. Our country experts included scholars, journalists, activists, and staff working on democracy programs who received a small honorarium for reviewing our draft briefs and providing their feedback. All our case briefs were validated by at least one expert, and we incorporated their comments into the final version of the case briefs. In a few cases, our validators undertook additional research, interviewing key participants in the events in question, for which we are very grateful.

For four of our cases (Belarus, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Vietnam), we commissioned in-depth case studies written by local and international researchers, activists and country specialists. Belarus, Ethiopia, and Vietnam were selected in an early phase of the research to maximize diversity: the three in-depth cases represented different regions, mobilization triggers, and types of authoritarianism. Additionally, we anticipated

that it would be possible to identify qualified researchers on these cases and that it would be relatively safe for them to interview activists within or outside the country (though in the Vietnam case, and more generally due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this was still a challenge). The local researchers used interviews and focus groups with social movement actors and sources in local languages to produce detailed reports about the mobilization episodes that specifically addressed the themes and factors developed in the comparative case study analysis. If the hypothesized causal factors were found in all of these cases, it would greatly increase confidence in our prior assumptions. We also improved several of our prior assumptions based on the case studies, and that is reflected in the comparative analysis where we use the case studies to explore causal claims in greater depth.

Sudan was selected later as an additional case to examine specific hypotheses about the role of democracy support programs. In writing and validating the Sudan case brief, we were able to identify some very specific causal factors related to democracy support programs and we and our research partner had access to interview people directly involved with those efforts. The executive summaries of all the in-depth case studies, as well as the full reports for Belarus and Sudan, can be found on the [webpage](#) for this project.

## Annex 2: Tips for practitioners on medium-n comparative research

---

Democracy programs offer a great opportunity for applied comparative research, but in practice this kind of research has been challenging and sometimes disappointing in its results. This section explores the promise of comparative case study research based on democracy programs, presents cautions and recommendations based on previous attempts to conduct such research, and offers a brief overview of the steps practitioners should take when commissioning or conducting a study such as this one on civic mobilizations in authoritarian contexts.

In the practitioner world, context is very important and democracy programs should always be tailored to their context. However, it is also true that theories of change and programmatic approaches for particular problems are often similar across contexts, giving donors and organizations that do many such programs a rich opportunity to do applied research. These opportunities to compare interventions across contexts are often missed due to the following factors:

- how our organizations are structured (regionally)
- our day-to-day focus on the particulars of a given context
- an understanding of “case studies” but not of “comparative analysis”
- the pragmatic challenges of doing applied research when programmatic outcomes and local partner needs are the top priority, and
- a lack of funding, time, and skills to qualitatively study a large number of cases or to do a high quality comparative analysis of a small number of cases.

Over the last decade there have been several attempts to do comparative case study research of democracy programs but most of them have foundered on this last point, taking on too few cases with too little rigor in their selection. Selection often takes place opportunistically, depending on which programs we can safely access at the beginning or end of an intervention. On top of this pragmatic sampling strategy, we often lack good prior hypotheses based on social science theory that would allow us to systematically compare these haphazard cases. Finally, the data collection

is often done by practitioners who may not have the skills to analyze qualitative data, or the research is not funded at a level that allows for a larger or more skilled research team. As a result, we are often left with no clear patterns to analyze and the study and the findings are compiled from three or five independent case studies rather than constituting a *comparative* analysis.

While we may never be able to mitigate the practical problems of doing applied research on active democracy programs, the following recommendations may be useful in guiding truly *comparative* case study research done or contracted by donors and implementers in the democracy field. Remember that *the goal of practitioner-oriented qualitative research is to detect patterns and to have enough confidence in the analysis of these patterns to be able to make recommendations to practitioners*. Confidence is increased by seeing the same pattern in multiple cases in spite of other differences. Being able to detect these patterns at all requires having a robust sample of cases to compare, and by iteratively collecting data, refining hypotheses, examining them in the light of new data, and refining analysis accordingly.

### Step-by-step recommendations:

1. Create and maintain a secure database of all programs. The base should track the main dimensions of potential comparison such as contextual factors, types of interventions, and expected results, as well as other important information such as start/end dates and points of contact. A database will make it easier to select cases and mitigate selection biases due to information availability, recency, and other factors. If your organization already has a tracker, make sure it is encoding variables of interest to a potential research project.
2. If you use a small sample size (three to six cases—we do not recommend fewer than three), be very rigorous about the selection of cases and to invest effort early on into the identification of both cases and the useful dimensions of comparison. Cases must actually speak to the same hypotheses. Too opportunistic an approach will select just a few cases that end up having few similarities in either intervention or outcome to detect



important patterns. It is better to stop the research or make your goal to do *single case studies* than to invest in “comparative” research that is not likely to produce useable findings.

- a. Small-n comparative researchers select cases that either have very similar interventions with different outcomes, with a goal of explaining what works or of examining how the same intervention interacts with different contexts to produce different outcomes; or, they select cases that have very different interventions that lead to the same outcome, with a goal of explaining how there can be multiple paths to the same outcome or how context affects choice of intervention type.
  - b. In order to select cases well, researchers must know both what dimensions are important to compare, asking: what’s the new theory, or existing hypotheses, about what works and why? And, they must have enough details of the cases to know how to categorize them, which implies that the research process needs to start well before the actual case study research begins.
3. If you are able to expand the sample size beyond six or so cases, the case selection still matters but there is more room to build your theory and hypotheses inductively as similarities and differences emerge over the course of the research.
- a. With a larger sample size, defining “what is a case?” is an essential first step. It is important to try to include all cases that meet the criteria, though you may find that the criteria will need to change if they capture too many or too few cases. Sticking with consistent criteria for inclusion as a case also helps avoid picking just cases with outcomes you like or with which you are more familiar because they were more successful. Try to pay equal attention to successful and unsuccessful outcomes and not use outcome as part of your definition of what a case is. If you exclude a case because it is harder to study (as we had to do with cases where there was almost no information available in English), your sample will be biased and you may miss out on cases that would provide important caveats to your recommendations.

- b. Once you have defined your set of cases and identified a preliminary set of dimensions of comparison, it is helpful to develop a structure to systematically compare the cases. This could be done in Excel or a database program, but we chose to develop case briefs in Word, one document for each case, that contained the same information on the important dimensions of comparison. The format of the brief changed as our research progressed and we identified further dimensions of comparison that might be important, but having the same set of information on each case enabled us to see patterns and discrepancies more easily. This was further facilitated by coding each dimension of comparison as variables in a qualitative analysis software program (we used MaxQDA) so that we could pull up all of the information about, for example, the role of diasporas, and see it all together to do our comparative analysis of that factor.
- c. In a comparative study of particular programs done by the same organization, this systematization of case information may be enough. However, in our research it was difficult to get information about the complex historical events that constituted our cases and we went through an additional step of case validation with experts, which often added greatly to the information we had, corrected mistakes or assumptions that we had made about what happened, and enhanced our analysis with their own observations.
- d. We found that 20+ cases was challenging but ultimately manageable with enough budget and time (we had over \$350,000 and two years to complete the comparative analysis and in-depth case studies). The primary investigators were eventually able to keep track of all the relevant details of all 21 cases as we worked on our analysis, but this was a very large number of cases for a qualitative study. If you have the opportunity to study more than 20 cases of a program intervention, we would recommend exploring an initial quantitative analysis to then identify which cases should be studied in greater depth and used in a comparative case study.

## Annexes Notes

---

1. However, we found that very recent events were harder to investigate because of ongoing crackdowns and fewer secondary sources. For example, even though we had excellent access to study the Cuba 2021 protests, it was still very difficult to get information that addressed our hypotheses.
2. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world>
3. <http://www.systemicpeace.org/inscrdata.html>
4. <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/HTTWYL>
5. Uprisings in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia during this period of time were linked to the earlier events of the Arab Spring, which did not fit our selection criterion of being a post-Arab Spring mobilization. In somewhat similar manner, Venezuela and Gabon were already at a high point of mobilization, which put the moment of upward scale shifts outside of our timeframe. In the cases of Eritrea, Oman, and Tajikistan, we did not have enough information to identify an attempt to build a sustained mobilization even though there were data about limited street protests.



## Board of Trustees

\* Denotes members of the Executive Board

### President

Michael J. Abramowitz

### Chair

The Honorable Jane Harman\*

### Vice Chair

Goli Ameri\*

Peter Bass\*

### Treasurer

Robert Keane\*

### Trustees

Carol C. Adelman\*

Sewell Chan

Michael Chertoff

Carole Corcoran

Rodger Desai

Martin Etchevers

Mathea Falco

Francis Fukuyama

Jonathan Ginns

Mark Goodman

Dionisio Gutierrez

David L. Fogel

Nina Jacobson

Thomas Kahn

Rachel Kleinfeld\*

Jim Kolbe\*

Howard Konar

Cater Lee\*

Faith Morningstar

Lynn Novick

Sushma Palmer

Vivek Paul

Maurice A. Perkins

Andrew Prozes\*

Collin Roche

Ian Simmons\*

Thomas Staudt\*

Reed V. Tuckson

Robert H. Tuttle

Joseph Votel

Norman Willox\*

We are proud to partner with individual philanthropists, foundations, corporations, NGOs, and governments who share our values and tireless pursuit of democracy and freedom. Join us in this critical work. For more information about supporting Freedom House, please visit [FreedomHouse.org/donate](https://www.freedomhouse.org/donate).



Freedom House is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that works to create a world where all are free. We inform the world about threats to freedom, mobilize global action, and support democracy's defenders.

1850 M Street NW, 11th Floor  
Washington, DC 20036

[FreedomHouse.org](https://www.freedomhouse.org)  
[@FreedomHouse](https://www.facebook.com/FreedomHouseDC)  
[info@freedomhouse.org](mailto:info@freedomhouse.org)  
202.296.5101