Definition of ‘civil resistance’


What exactly is ‘civil resistance’? This definition, revised in January and June 2009, indicates how it is used in this book. This is simply one attempt at a definition. It draws on a wide variety of sources, including published work by Peter Ackerman, April Carter, Michael Randle, Jacques Semelin, and Gene Sharp.

**Civil resistance** is a type of political action that relies on the use of non-violent methods. It is largely synonymous with certain other terms, including ‘non-violent action’, ‘non-violent resistance’ and ‘people power’. It involves a range of widespread and sustained activities that challenge a particular power, force, policy or regime – hence the term ‘resistance’. The adjective ‘civil’ in this context denotes that which pertains to a citizen or society, implying that a movement’s goals are ‘civil’ in the sense of being widely shared in a society; and it denotes that the action concerned is non-military or non-violent in character.

Civil resistance, precursors of which can be found throughout history, has been used in many types of struggle in modern times: for example, against colonialism, foreign occupations, military coups d’état, dictatorial regimes, electoral malpractice, corruption, and racial, religious and gender discrimination. It has been used not only against tyrannical rule, but also against democratically elected governments, over such issues as maintenance of key elements of the constitutional order, preservation of regional autonomy within a country, defence of minority rights, environmental protection, and opposition to involvement in certain military interventions and wars.

Civil resistance operates through several mechanisms of change. These are not limited to attempts to appeal to the adversary. They can involve pressure and coercion – by increasing the costs to the adversary of pursuing particular policies, weakening the adversary’s capacity to pursue a particular policy, or even undermining completely the adversary’s sources of legitimacy and power, whether domestic or international. An aim of many campaigns is to bring about dissention and defections in the adversary’s regime and in its basis of support. Forms of action can be very varied, and have included demonstrations, vigils and petitions; strikes, go-slow and boycotts; and sit-ins, occupations, and the creation of parallel institutions of government. Campaigns of civil resistance involve strategy – i.e. projecting and directing the movements and elements of a campaign.

There is no assumption that the adversary power against which civil resistance is aimed necessarily avoids resort to violence: civil resistance has been used in some cases in which the adversary has been predisposed to use violence. Nor is there an assumption that there cannot be various forms of understanding or cooperation between civil resisters and certain governments or other entities with a capacity to use force. Often the reasons for a movement’s avoidance of violence are related to the context rather than to any absolute ethical principle: they may spring from a society’s traditions of political action, from its experience of war and violence, from legal considerations, from a desire to expose the adversary’s violence as unprovoked, or from calculations that civil resistance would be more likely than violent means to achieve success in the particular situation that is faced.

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