# Walking Together and Alone:

# How Peaceful Protests Fail and Can Yet Succeed in Remaking Our World

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*Preliminary and incomplete*
*Please do not circulate*

# Contents

# Preface

> We have a power, a power that cannot be found in Molotov cocktails, but we do have a power.
> Power that cannot be found in bullets and in guns, but we do have a power.
> It is a power as old as the insights of Jesus of Nazareth and as modern as the techniques of Mohandas K. Gandhi.
>
> – Dr. Martin Luther King[1]

We both grew up in a very optimistic moment in human history. The scenes of joy as peaceful protesters dismantled the Berlin Wall and Nelson Mandela walked out of prison coincided with the opening up of India and its economy to the world.[2] It was a moment when many activists believed that the great upheavals of the twentieth century had one great saving grace: that the world finally had an answer to the age-old problem of how to implement peaceful and just political change. If we could but learn from and spread the word about the techniques of the great masters of nonviolent civil disobedience—among them, Mohandas K. Gandhi and Martin Luther King—the *arc of the moral universe* might indeed *bend towards justice*. The prospects were seen by key practitioners as "limitless."[3]

Things have not turned out quite that way. Despite the presence of a thriving, globally-networked, activist community both willing and able to share best practices through such vehicles as the International Center for Non-Violent Conflict and the Gandhi-King Global Initiative, much of the public debate about how best to implement nonviolent protests to achieve political change remains relatively unchanged since the heyday of the 1960s. From pro-democracy protests around the world, whether in earlier waves such as the Arab Spring or more recently in Belarus and Hong Kong, to anti-corruption demonstrations in Brazil and India, to the Occupy Movement, to the Women's Marches and Black Lives Matter Protests

of 2020, much of the focus of discussion in major news outlets remains squarely focused on numbers and spectacle—how many turned out, who had the most creative signs, etc.[4] As we describe below, while these factors can be important, they are only part of the story. And indeed, despite large crowds and colorful spectacle characterizing many of these contemporary protests, too often their ultimate success at achieving their policy aims are much more limited.

This book was born out of two deep frustrations that we share. The first deep frustration lies in the question of *why we blew it*? Why did the optimism at the end of the twentieth century give way to the deep political polarization, resurgence of fear, hate, violence and populism of the early twenty-first? Why is it that, despite the great promise and the hard-won lessons of the twentieth century on how to do nonviolence, the nonviolent approach is continually questioned, the gains of nonviolent protests often hard to measure, the optimal strategy often not carefully assessed, and the proponents of nonviolence often seen as naive. "Would it work with Hitler?" is a common retort of those seeking to cast shade on nonviolent methods. Beyond a common moral intuition, shared by many cultures, that nonviolent means are better than violence, there has not been enough study of the precise economic and political conditions under which non-violence would be desirable even for a hard-nosed pragmatist for whom the ends justify any type of action.

The second deep frustration we share stems from the take-away lessons that many seem to derive from the historical record on nonviolence. For instance, our central example, that of India's independence movement, was remarkable in many ways. From the perspective of modern social science, it becomes arguably even more so. It is often taken as a given today that India's politics is shaped heavily by caste and religious divides and the potential for violence, often with criminally-culpable political leaders heavily involved. Yet, India's independence movement was a true mass movement that was remarkably inclusive, encompassing both rich and poor, high and low castes and drawing support across large swathes of an incredibly diverse subcontinent. Even more remarkably, it was able to remain largely nonviolent for much of its history, and helped lay a durable foundation for the world's largest democracy. However, the puzzle of how this was achieved has not thusfar been well-answered.

Beyond this, many important accounts, including popular, like Richard Attenborough's famous movie *Gandhi*, and as we discuss below, practi-

tioner and scholarly as well, have portrayed India's movement as a narrative of success building upon success, led by a visionary hero, Gandhi, culminating with Independence. There has thusfar been very little attempt to confront such powerful narratives with analysis based upon systematic data.

A natural outcome of elevating historic figures to the level of heroes is that ironically, it can make people feel that they themselves lack that ability, as Gandhi put it, to "be the change that [they] wish to see in the world". "First get yourself a Gandhi" is not a prescription for empowerment and action. Instead, we use data to help us draw new, and we believe more actionable lessons, both from the successful innovations introduced by Gandhi and others, and their failures.

We teach comparative politics, political development economics and business strategy at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and the Stanford Graduate School of Business, respectively. Our past research has led us to seek answers into how to remedy inequalities in political representation and economic development, to highlight the importance of political geography in shaping risks and opportunities for businesses and other organizations, to examine how economic, financial and organizational innovations can support ethnic tolerance, peace and economic development, the challenge of sustaining trust in large groups and the role of heroic leaders in shaping political mobilization.[5] Much of our past theoretical and quantitative research has found resonance in this book and we draw on this work and those of others in the chapters that follow to shed new light on how nonviolence can work.

Having both grown up in India, we have often found India's past and present an inspiration for understanding these broader phenomena. Indeed, this book is the culmination of more than twelve years of research that has taken our research team to the birthplace of Gandhi on the shores of the Arabian Sea at Porbandar, the havelis of the financiers of the Congress in the desert towns of Shekhawati, to the Bose archives in Calcutta, the National Archives and the Nehru Memorial Library in Delhi, to the Indian Office Library in London and collections throughout the United States. We have gathered novel archival data from secret intelligence reports and other sources on seditious acts, and individual level data on the participation of more than fifteen hundred individual members of the Indian National Congress. We have wedded novel data on the trade and employment of Indians across more than several hundred categories at the

district level to a novel dataset on protests, both violent and non-violent, in the three great satyagrahas of the Independence movement.

This book is part new historic narrative, part novel quantitative social science and part handbook for nonviolent action. Our aim is to be accessible to any interested in both a new quantitative understanding of Indian history and other key moments in the development of nonviolence, and in using the techniques of nonviolent civil disobedience as a means to create a more just world. We provide supplemental tables and material of more interest to specialists and scholars on our websites. We hope that you will join us in the next few chapters, as we re-tread the footsteps of the great nonviolent movements of the past and examine what can be learned to help redeem those hard-won lessons for our own time.

– Rikhil Bhavnani, Madison, Wisconsin &
Saumitra Jha, Stanford, California

# Part I

# Walking Together and Alone

Jodi tor dak shune keu na ashe
tobe ekla cholo re

If no one responds to your call, then keep going on your way
alone.

– Rabindranath Tagore, *Ekla cholo*, one of Gandhi's favourite poems.

# Chapter 1

# Introduction

The year 2020, despite a highly contagious pandemic that has forced lockdowns around the world, has been a year of protests. In India, extensive protests broke out at legislation that many believed could disenfranchise hundreds of thousands.[6] People in Algeria, Belarus, Bolivia and Hong Kong protested for free elections and constitutional change. The deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor sparked extensive protests to support the Black Lives Matter Movement and against systemic racism and police brutality in the United States and around the world. There were at least 2000 protests in the United States in July 2020, alone, more than a 42% increase over a year earlier.[7] The number of protests worldwide has been increasing over the past decade, with over 70,000 protests—with millions of participants—around the world in the first ten months of 2020.[8] South Asia stands out for both the number of peaceful and violent protests (Figure 1.1.)

Yet, the scorecard of success has been mixed, at best. Despite the fact that Black Lives Matter protests, spread across at least 2440 locations stayed peaceful in nineteen times out of twenty, media attention sought out the 5% where riots and looting occurred. Protests drew counter-protests, in some cases aimed at provoking violence.[9] The Trump administration drew on these reports to justify the use of military force on the streets of American cities.

In Hong Kong, media images of peaceful protesters parting to allow an ambulance to pass through unhindered were replaced by reports of violence, curfews and were used to justify the mainland government's decision to end Hong Kong's judicial and legislative autonomy, 27 years ahead
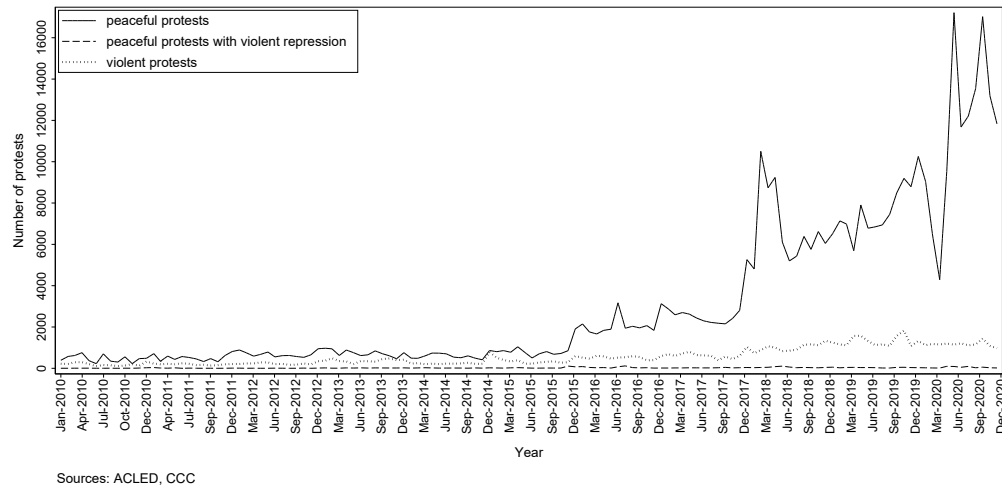
Figure 1.1: **Peaceful and violent protests**
Source: ACLED 2021, CCC 2021.

of schedule.

In India, students perceived as leaders of the protests of the Spring found themselves charged with anti- sedition laws, some of which date to British laws enacted in 1919 to reassert its authority in its restive colony. In too many of these cases, the hope of the participants that their movements would join the annals of the great movements of the past as examples in which people power would engender lasting change has so far not been met.

Why has the technology of nonviolent protest not attained its great promise in the twenty-first century? When does it work and what are its limitations? What can a combination of game theory, mechanism design, business strategy and the quantitative analysis of past movements tell us about how to better leverage these techniques to create a more just world? What can we learn in particular from novel quantitative evidence of one of its most unlikely successes—the Indian Independence Movement—and those that came after?

In this book, we walk in the footsteps of the pioneers of the nonvi-olent approach to provide a reinterpretation of the histories of the great

movements of the twentieth century from a game theoretic perspective, bringing to bear a host of new quantitative analyses to understand the challenges they faced, when they were successful at overcoming them and why.

We develop a simple conceptual framework for understanding the strategies available to both the leaders and the followers of political movements, the media and outside audiences, as well as the regimes that they seek to influence, and how these decisions interact. We use this framework to highlight the presence of three key tensions that exist in many political movements.

These tensions include: those between the *allure of violence* and the *seeming pedestrianism of nonviolence*, between the need for *numbers* and the need for *focus*, and between organizations that depend on *grassroots* mobilization versus *hierarchies and leadership*.

In light of the framework and new quantitative evidence, we then re-trace and re-examine the decisions of the participants of the Indian Independence Movement in each of their three great nonviolent drives for change—the Non-Cooperation Movement of the 1920s, the Civil Disobedience Movement of the 1930s and the Quit India Movement of the 1940s—and how they succeeded or failed in addressing these tensions. At each step, we also discuss both grand strategy and the effectiveness of local tactics. We next compare the Indian experience with the movements that came after, including the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, the Arab Spring and recent protests around the world. Finally, we draw on what we have learned to suggest ideas for better implement nonviolent protests today.

The first key tension is that between the *allure of violence* and the *seeming pedestrianism of nonviolence*. Violent demonstrations, even by one or two individuals, can create clickbait, make headlines and capture media attention.[10] Two people, protesting nonviolently, holding up signs, may seem boring and ineffective in contrast. Beyond the general warm and fuzzy sense that violence is bad and peaceful protests are better, why would a hard-nosed pragmatist still choose the latter when one is already skirting illegality by challenging unjust laws or policies? And even if they do, would any of their fellow-movement members listen, when violence can provide catharsis and the opportunity for loot, while turning the other cheek does not?

The key tension between violence and nonviolence has played out in

different ways across history, from the original women's march to Versailles in 1789 to the debates between Mohandas Gandhi and Subhash Chandra Bose in the 1930s and Martin Luther King and Malcolm X in the 1960s. Of course the debate about whether looting, property destruction, and stone throwing are legitimate means of protest continues to have echoes in the street protests in Algiers, Delhi, Hong Kong, Seattle and elsewhere today. We will draw on the conceptual framework to discuss the conditions under which nonviolent protests can be more successful and when they are more likely to fail.

In contrast to those that advocate for nonviolence as a limitless technology, we will argue that a requirement for nonviolence to be effective is that it needs to have, or to earn, a politically influential audience in order to succeed. We describe the conditions under which nonviolence is likely to be both durable and more effective as an approach, and use both the theory and the historical record to describe methods to garner such an audience. These include the use of strategic location and timing, the use of marches as a dynamic but also potentially climactic approach to attract media attention, and the humanization—rather than the common approach of dehumanization—of one's ideological and political opponents.[11]

Even with a potential audience, a second tension exists between *numbers* and *focus*. Mobilizing large numbers and fostering an inclusive movement are often seen as an objective in and of itself, and many organizers of demonstrations are focused on turning people out as the key metric of their success.[12] However, there is a tradeoff between the gains from mobilizing large numbers, in the form of a *show of strength* that may have increased impact and audience response, and the lack of focus that arise from such *come one, come all*-type demonstrations.

Demonstrations that accept all-comers are naturally also more likely to lack commonly-agreed upon objectives. A refrain of history, repeated in the Indian independence movement, is how mobilized groups that lack such shared understandings can fail to agree on what constitutes success, making it hard to reach a peaceful bargain. This can turn to violence, even among themselves. These challenges are even tougher when groups are divided by race, ethnicity, religion or other pre-existing divisions. We will show how the leaders of the Indian independence movement were able to exploit the opportunity presented by the Great Depression to use a platform against *economic injustice*, rather than other ethnic or racial appeals, to resolve the tension to create a relatively inclusive mass movement even

in an ethnically-divided society like the one they confronted.

The third, related tension exists between *grassroots movements* and *hierarchical leadership*. Many contemporary protest movements pride themselves in taking a quasi-Burning Man approach. Indeed, as we will discuss, nonviolent movements tend by their nature to be less hierarchical: by renouncing violence, nonviolent leaders operate only through the consent of others in the movement. Having flat hierarchies, with no one clear person in charge, and spontaneous order among their members can stimulate great creativity and much enthusiasm, exemplified in the scenes of the Occupy Movement, Black Lives Matter, and in Cairo's Tahrir Square.[13] Such movements are also less vulnerable to decapitation through the arrests of key leaders.[14] And they can grow extremely fast. This can be a particularly important feature in more repressive autocratic environments where individuals who were previously afraid to publicly express their preferences feel increasingly free to jump on the bandwagon.[15]

However, as fast as they grow, these movements can also wither rapidly. With increasing size, such movements are again more likely to lack common objectives, a common strategy and indeed a common disciplined commitment to nonviolence given the *allure of violence*. These challenges can be accentuated in the face of intense provocation.[16] The lack of organizational hierarchies and discipline can reduce their ability to endure, limiting their ability to affect change in environments where decisionmakers can simply wait till things die down. Without common objectives, such movements can also lose the endgame, securing symbolic concessions but not lasting change. Further, even if charismatic leaders do emerge in these movements, they may have their own private agendas and exploit a mobilized group to settle their own scores.[17]

This third tension leads to two challenges that are accentuated for nonviolent movements. First, how can nonviolent movements mobilize the large numbers they may need to spotlight an issue while still maintaining organizational discipline? This has been a great puzzle for many practitioners.[18] Second, how can movements encourage leaders to emerge while reducing a movements' vulnerability to decapitation by others and co-option by the leaders themselves?

We will discuss how the successful movements of the past were able to solve these challenges through a range of strategies, some simple, others more subtle. For example, members of the Indian movement were required to engage in a number of time-intensive tasks, like spinning home-

spun cloth for an hour a day, which were costly for rich and poor alike and helped whittle down the set of participants to those committed to the nonviolent approach. More delicately-balanced was the use of new organizational reforms that encouraged grassroots democratic participation even while hierarchical leadership remained centralized. In the Indian case, we will provide evidence that the movement employed a *jujitsu*-type move, encouraging their would-be leaders to court arrest for nonviolent acts of civil disobedience and using the jails of their opponents—in this case, the British colonial government—as a credential for leadership. In fact, ultimately, by providing such an open path to leadership, Gandhi ironically made himself replaceable, weakening his own importance and control even while it made the movement more robust, helping pave the way to a democratic India.

In this book, we present a new conceptual framework for understanding the three tensions that assail protest movements, and the conditions under which different approaches may be successful. We provide a novel re-interpretation of the Indian Independence Movement and other key movements in history, and we provide strategic recommendations for current practice. In doing so, our book builds upon and contributes to a number of important literatures.

First, we contribute to a large—mainly practitioner-oriented, but also academic—literature on nonviolence.[19] The practitioner literature has been very valuable in presenting different logics of nonviolence,[20] and has enumerated a number of different tactics.[21] However these questions have not, to the best of our knowledge, been approached from the perspective of mechanism design, using the conceptual framework of an economist. The mechanism design perspective challenges us to dig deeper into the question of what is optimal strategy in different contexts, and in particular when would nonviolence be desirable even for a hard-nosed pragmatist for whom the ends justify any type of action. In so doing, we draw upon an important literature in economics on how information flows, economic shocks and knowledge of people's preferences can influence the dynamics of protests.[22]

We also build upon and contribute to a small but growing set of important quantitative academic studies that examine the effectiveness of protests,[23] as well as a very rich literature on social movements more generally. We complement studies that compare the mobilization of social organizations in protests based upon the role of differential political oppor-

tunities and grievance, of social embeddedness, of organizational ecology, inter-movement competition and other factors.[24] Recent works also document cross-national patterns of non-violent versus violent mobilization, including examining their patterns of use and the relative effectiveness.[25] A striking finding from this literature is that non-violent mobilizations tend on average to be more effective than violent protests in achieving their aims.[26] However, as we will show, a key challenge for this literature is that of selection: nonviolent movements, particularly as they grow, and particularly as they span multiple ethnic groups, often fail and turn violent. By only looking only at the nonviolent movements that remained nonviolent we may be mis-attributing the roots of their success. In fact, much less is known about how nonviolent movements succeed in remaining nonviolent. The quest for understanding the roots of nonviolent discipline is a key element of our book.

The fact that large, ethnically-diverse nonviolent movements often turn violent and fail makes the success of the Indian Independence Movement even more striking. That Movement was able to mobilize a large, remarkably diverse, mass movement that nonetheless largely remained nonviolent through critical moments in its history. We devote much attention on shedding new light on its lessons, contributing to a rich existing intellectual tradition in history. We do this by combining original archival research and assembling novel data, which includes, to the best of our knowledge, the first comprehensive assembly of archival intelligence data on the extent of non-violent and violent insurrection in the war-time Quit India rebellion. The major strands of existing accounts of the Movement emphasize the metropole's reasons for granting India independence,[27] provide thick description of the micro-politics of the movement in India,[28] or adopt a Marxist interpretation of the Indian independence movement as reflective of a peasant movement exploited by elites.[29] There has however been much less effort to test these interpretations in light of the data.

We instead propose and test a novel interpretation, based upon on a resolution of the three tensions above. We evaluate to the extent to which key innovations in the organization of non-violent civil disobedience combined with the opportunity afforded by Depression-era economic dislocations can explain not only one of the pivotal historical episodes in the political and economic destinies of one-fifth of the world's population, but also why and how there was a peaceful mass mobilization in favor

of democratic self-determination that has since served as a central example to freedom struggles around the world.

In the next two chapters, we present a simple conceptual framework that makes clear the three tensions faced by protest movements. We examine the conditions under which different strategies that lead to movements that favor a specific configuration of the three is more or less likely to succeed. We then compare the broad patterns with cross-movement data drawn from across the world.

In Part II of the book, we use the conceptual framework to guide a new narrative of the Indian Independence Movement, drawing on novel data from each of four phases of the struggle. We devote a chapter to each of these phases—before Gandhi, the Non-Cooperation movement of 1920–22, the Civil Disobedience movement of 1930–32, and the Quit India movement of 1942–43. By following in the footsteps of the leaders of the Movement, we describe how they navigate the three tensions, and why, it was only when they were able to resolve them in a particular way that they were able to succeed. In contrast to a number of dominant narratives, we argue that it was only during the Civil Disobedience movement of 1930-32, that the movement was truly successful in its policy aims. The other failed movements, are however, equally enlightening for the lessons that they can teach us.

In the 1920s, we describe how the leaders of the Indian Independence Movement chose to resolve the tensions by choosing nonviolence over violence, focus over numbers and to create a hybrid organizational structure that combined elements of hierarchical leadership with bottom-up grassroots organization. Intensive screening yielded a cadre of committed leaders that allowed Gandhi to maintain discipline, and even to stop the movement in its tracks on command. However, it was a strategy that also made the movement hard to grow. This challenge was accentuated in the early 1920s, a period where many Indians simply lacked the incentives to join the Movement. Instead, a failed attempt at jointly mobilizing Hindus and Muslims without addressing the lack of common incentives degenerated instead into the first widespread outbreak of Hindu-Muslim rioting in Indian history.

In the 1930s, however, the Movement's strategy combining nonviolence, focus and its hybrid leadership structure bore better dividends. The Movement was able to exploit the Great Depression to pivot to an inclusive platform of economic justice—focusing on an end to regressive taxes

such as that on salt, as well as on land reform—that resonated with many facing the economic dislocations of that time. This helped the Congress to forge a large-scale, inclusive and disciplined movement that was able to win the Indian people their first broad democratic franchise ever, and set India on a clear trajectory towards its freedom. We show that constituencies that were moderately negatively impacted by the economic shock of the Great Depression—those that adjusted to the lack of demand from British markets—found the Congress's platform more attractive, providing more votes that helped it secure important victories in the 1936-37 elections.

In the next chapter we outline how, while the successful mobilization in the Great Depression had forged a mass movement, the successful acquisition of power brought the movement new challenges. New entrants joined the Congress but with lessened commitment to its nonviolent principles. These new entrants reasserted the tensions between the allure of violence and nonviolence, numbers and focus and challenged the hybrid structure balancing grassroots and hierarchical leadership. These tensions are exemplified by the contentious election of Subhash Chandra Bose to the Congress presidency. We describe how it was only Gandhi's influence over the senior nonviolent leaders screened from the past, that allowed him to ease Bose out of the leadership of the Congress. However, the internal divisions within the Congress would set the scene for the last of the great *satyagrahas*—the 'Quit India' movement of 1942.

The Quit India movement is the least well-documented and well-known of the three great *satyagrahas*. We argue and provide evidence that, contrary to a number of dominant narratives, it was an abject failure. We draw upon evidence based upon frequent secret intelligence reports submitted to the Viceroy from each province of British India via encrypted telegram throughout the main period of the movement. We combine this data with incident reports compiled by fugitive Congress participants themselves, and data from a remarkable list we found of more than 1500 Congress leaders that the British considered the most capable of organizing the movement and whom they intended to arrest in the event of a mass nonviolent movement.

We show that the British decapitation of the movement through coordinated arrests led, not as they hoped, to the demobilization of the movement, but rather the removal of those most committed to keeping the movement nonviolent. We draw on measures of the presence and absence

of the hierarchical leadership of the Congress, and show that in their absence, those that participated were more likely to succumb to the allure of violence, and violently were they suppressed.

In the final chapters of Part II, we conclude our retelling of India's Independence Movement by discussing how resolving the three tensions in the way the Congress chose, did ultimately, have one key benefit. Choosing to adopt a nonviolent strategy, a platform that focused on economic justice, and an organization that balanced grassroots democratic participation with hierarchical leadership, the movement was well-positioned to benefit from a democratic system that, like a nonviolent movement, depends on the consent of many rather than coercion. This, we argue, helped to consolidate, at least for several generations, one of the world's most surprising democracies. We contrast the strategies of the Congress movement with that of the Muslim League that would rule Pakistan. Countenancing violence, a platform based upon ethnic identity and much more closed hierarchical structure, we argue that the coalition that assumed control over Pakistan was not congruent with either democracy or land reforms. Indeed, democracy in Pakistan would not last long and landed elites continue to dominate Pakistani politics. We conclude by quantifying the legacies of the Indian Independence movement in explaining a range of patterns in contemporary India, from voting patterns to religious tolerance.

In Part III of the book, we follow in the footsteps of other great movements around the world. We follow the path of the Reverend James Lawson as he brought nonviolent techniques to the United States. We compare the Indian experience with the lessons of the US Civil Rights movement, from the viewpoint of our theoretical framework and in light of novel empirical evidence of one of the great confrontations of the movement at the Samuel Pettis Bridge. We next turn to more recent movements, including the Arab Spring, and reassess the lessons from Tahrir Square, in particular. We discuss how the match—and mis-match—between the ways that protest groups have resolved the three tensions given the environments that they faced can explain their relative success and failures.

We conclude by looking to the future of nonviolent protest in light of the past. We suggest strategies and tactics that those that seek better politics and policies can use given the different environments that they face. The hope is that by so doing, we can help leverage the hard-won lessons of the past to help affect reforms that benefit society, and do so in peace.