

VOLUME 6

**D-HUB**

# MOVEMENT BUILDING



**ANTI-AUTHORITARIAN**

**TOOLKIT**

Greatest hits to defend  
and renew democracies

**D-HUB**

**VOLUME 6**

# **MOVEMENT BUILDING**

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**D-HUB THANKS THE MEMBERS OF ITS COMMUNITY FOR THEIR FEEDBACK AND COMMENTS, WHICH HELPED IMPROVE THIS VOLUME.**

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Twenty-first-century authoritarian leaders follow a clear playbook. It's not a formula or a recipe but a dynamic set of strategies and tactics deployed across different contexts.

In response, we've started to crack open their playbook and crafted something of our own: an ANTI-AUTHORITARIAN TOOLKIT. Developed with insight from hundreds of frontline democracy defenders, scholars, and strategists, this 10-volume series is packed with the most effective plays to counter elected authoritarianism and safeguard our democracies.

This Toolkit is not a silver bullet. It's a catalyst designed to ignite your vision and creativity as you confront the challenges ahead. Its plays are archetypal but open to innovation and adaptation to the local context of those who use them.

We hope you use it and share it. Maybe the next big play, we'll learn from you.

**Ricken Patel**

**CO-CHAIR, D-HUB**

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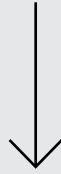
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# INTRODUCTION



**HOW DO WE BUILD  
MOVEMENTS  
THAT GO BEYOND  
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**by Nika Kovač**

**EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, D-HUB**

Authoritarian regimes are betting on fatigue. They know how to outlast spontaneous protests, divide coalitions, and make people give up. That's why we must go beyond reaction—and start building movements that last.

This volume of the **ANTI-AUTHORITARIAN TOOLKIT** focuses on Movement Building. In today's context, democratic movements are essential. Unlike parties, movements can hold a unique mix of legitimacy and flexibility. They can speak from the ground up, across differences, and move faster than rigid political structures.

In polarized contexts, where parties often reproduce division, movements can do something rare—and powerful: redefine polarization around values, not just partisan identities. They can draw new lines—between those who believe in justice, rights, freedom, truth, and those who threaten these.

In the following pages, you'll find plays used by some of the most resilient democratic movements around the world. From designing strategic roadmaps to turning values into daily practices, from building powerful collective

identities to creating spaces of joy and co-creation.

Each of these plays is a reminder: people don't join movements just because they're right. They join because they matter. Because they find hope, direction, and community. That's what scares authoritarians the most—not a single march, but a movement people want to belong to.

This volume was developed in collaboration with the CANVAS (Center for Applied Nonviolent Action and Strategies), an organization that has advocated for the use of nonviolent resistance in the promotion of human rights and democracy since 2005, working alongside pro-democracy activists in more than 50 countries. Their experience, insights, and commitment shaped the plays you are about to read.

As you read, think of these plays not as rules but as ingredients. Remix them. Make them your own. Movements are not made in theory—they're made by doing. And when they're rooted in dignity, care, and courage, they become unstoppable.

With love,  
Nika Kovač

# HOW THIS PUBLICATION WORKS

Democracy defenders are busy and practical people. That is why we designed this publication to be concise and engaging.

This volume includes **ONE GRAND STRATEGY** and **FIVE PLAYS**.

## GRAND STRATEGY

A Grand Strategy is a guiding framework that aligns all actions and tactics with the long-term goals of safeguarding democracy. The foundation of the grand strategy provides coherence and effectiveness to individual plays.

## PLAY

An action that can be adapted to different moments and contexts. It may be a strategy, tactic, or tool. The key criteria for its inclusion are its deployment, effectiveness, and relevance in the fight for democracy.

FOR EACH, YOU WILL FIND THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION →

# THE PLAY

Describes the strategy, tactic or move



## WHY IT WORKS

Explains the core reasons the tactic is effective and impactful



## HOW IT WORKS

A more detailed depiction of the play, with basic steps of implementation



## TIPS

Recommendations and aspects to avoid



## WHO'S DONE IT WELL

Examples of how the play has been deployed in real life



## LEARN MORE

Links to resources

The concluding section, **“WE CAN HELP YOU,”** provides contact details for those needing help confronting elected authoritarian politics.

## **FEATURED GRAND STRATEGY**

# **LOOK FOR COMMON GROUND**

**BUILDING UNITY AROUND WHAT  
BRINGS US TOGETHER**

**Authoritarian regimes thrive on division. They need enemies, real or imaginary. That's how they draw the line that divides people so as to use polarization as a tool to rule. However, movements operate within social constraints that are far more complex than simple party polarization. And that gives room to do something different. They retain a distinctive ability: they can redraw political lines around lived experience rather than inherited partisan identities.**

**In order to grow and to win, democratic movements must organize beyond traditional axes like left and right. This does not mean ignoring ideological commitments nor bypassing institutions. It means refusing to let old labels and partisan categories define the battlefield. Successful movements connect political ideas to how people experience power in their daily lives: at work, in their neighborhoods, in their families, and in their interactions with public institutions.**

Movements can articulate a unifying moral horizon that travels across ideological, geographic, and generational divides. We refer to that horizon as “human dignity.” But even if the precise word does not resonate in your context, a functional equivalent almost certainly exists. The point is not the label. The point is the function. In different contexts, it may be expressed using other words such as justice, freedom, fairness, respect, or care.

A unifying value-based horizon works when it operates as a bridge concept and connects particular grievances to a broader vision of society. Movements rarely start universal, they start specific. Against corruption. For labor rights. For housing. For being seen. Moreover, over time, these struggles can expand, become more universal, and gather diverse experiences under a shared frame.

The unifying concept must be anchored in real experiences and realistic proposals. It should be open enough to include different social groups, yet grounded enough to avoid becoming abstract or hollow, so that

**it can stretch across divisions and engage people who do not identify with traditional camps but recognize the humiliation, precarity, or being forgotten.**

**It is about translating shared principles into tangible improvements in people's lives. Not distant ideas, but real stories, genuine hopes, and shared symbols. Emotional truths that connect values to lived realities and collective practices people can recognize and inhabit. A future people can picture, desire, and defend.**

**When movements make their idea of human dignity visible in language, vision, rituals, and ways of belonging, they unlock something powerful. They stop being reactive forces and start becoming places to inhabit: spaces where people not only resist, but rebuild trust, regenerate social ties, and experience collective agency.**

**In an age of fragmentation and fatigue, what lies beyond left and right is not the absence of politics, but the construction of a broader common ground. That is how movements stop reacting and start leading. That is how they grow.**

**1**

**BUILD  
A VISION OF  
TOMORROW**

Shaping a future people can see,  
feel, and join

# THE PLAY

Authoritarian regimes often provide something deeply valuable: certainty. In polarized climates, what defeats democratic movements isn't always repression. It's confusion. It's fragmentation. It's the absence of a clear alternative people can recognize and choose.

Too often, movements mistake opposition for vision. They resist without imagining, and dream without grounding those dreams in people's lives. To appeal and grow, movements must offer a horizon that resonates emotionally.

Movements do not always begin with a grand horizon. They often begin with clear and tangible demands: "stop corruption", "raise wages", "fix this system". These demands can be detailed and grounded in serious plans. This is not a weakness, it is in fact a strength.

**But this vision shouldn't be expressed as a long list of technical details or a dense policy paper. It should be a picture people can keep in their minds and hearts. Something that can be summarized in a phrase rooted in the movement's values.**

**A good vision does three things at once. It rises above partisan fights. It connects to everyday needs. It gives direction to action. Because what moves people isn't only outrage. It's the belief that something better is possible ... and achievable.**



# WHY IT WORKS

- **HOPE CUTS THROUGH THE NOISE.** Especially in polarized climates flooded with anger and fear, a vision gives people a reason to believe, while providing emotional relief.
- **VISION CAN REDEFINE THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE.** Movements that offer a new horizon can shift the axis of division and can build unlikely majorities.
- **A STRONG IDEA MOVES PEOPLE.** A clear and hopeful vision can attract people across the spectrum, including those who once backed authoritarian leaders.
- **MEANING SUSTAINS COMMITMENT.** People stay involved not only when they feel they're building something, but when they feel seen, valued, and part of something bigger than themselves.



# HOW IT WORKS

## 1 CATCH THE SPARK AND FEED THE FIRE

Movements don't begin on a whiteboard. They usually start with an act: a moment, a story, a stand that hits a nerve. You can't control when it happens, or how far it will travel. And that first act rarely contains a clear vision of the future. What it does is open a possibility.

That is where strategy enters. All the same, the first task is to recognize that opening and step into it. When the spark comes, it needs fuel. A strong, simple, hopeful vision gives direction to what would otherwise remain scattered and reactive. It helps transform unfocused anger into shared purpose, and turns a moment into momentum.

## 2 UNDERSTAND PEOPLE'S FEARS AND DESIRES, NOT JUST CONSIDER YOUR DREAMS

To give real shape to your vision, start by understanding what keeps people up at night. Pay close attention to the concerns of excluded or disillusioned groups. Identify the regime failures that deepen those fears and could spark new hopes. This is not about abandoning your direction. It is about acknowledging where people actually are so you can lead them somewhere new.

### **3** **GROUND YOUR VALUES IN PEOPLE'S REALITY**

Movements don't just echo what people feel. They lead with purpose. They are a thermostat, not a thermometer. To strike the right chord, your core values must be translated into clear ideas and tangible commitments that connect with everyday life. The vision must be yours, but it must stand up in the real world. Credibility is tested when a dream survives contact with reality.

### **4** **BUILD MOMENTUM WITH THE WILLING, OTHERS WILL FOLLOW**

Movements can move without asking for permission. Don't wait for everyone to agree before you act. Don't waste time chasing perfect coalitions. Traditional organizations, civil society groups, grassroots leaders, and alternative parties can play an important role. Yet, they do not always move at the same speed. Some may be cautious, doubtful, or tied to internal constraints. Being open to the willing means starting with those who are ready to act now. What you need first are people with the courage to move and the capacity to contribute. Creating momentum may convince others; waiting for full consensus in endless meetings rarely does.

### **5** **MAKE THE MOVEMENT A PLACE TO BELONG**

The first step to building a broad, inclusive movement is making it easy for people to join and meaningful for them to stay. Reach past supporters, or even better, redefine "the base" by expanding who feels invited, using trusted voices and messages that resonate widely. But don't stop there. Create spaces, online and offline, where people feel seen, heard, and part of something bigger. Belonging does not come from slogans. It comes from having a role in the story.

## 6

**MAKE THE VISION VISIBLE**

People believe in words. Even so, they believe more when words are backed by conduct. Align your words, your messengers, and your actions. Take your ideas to real settings: a neighborhood, a city, a school, a workplace. Let the vision show up in real life. When values and lived experience connect, trust grows.

## 7

**KEEP THE VISION ALIVE**

A vision is not a fixed plan. It is a living horizon. Stay open to what people teach you along the way. Let your goals evolve without losing your core values. Challenges will come up. When they do, it is the shared horizon that holds people together. Keep repeating it. Keep demonstrating it. Keep building it. A movement adapts to the present in pursuance of strengthening its vision over time and defending the future.



# TIPS

## **A** SCALE THE VISION THROUGH DISTRIBUTION

A living vision must travel fast and far, which means giving up tight control. Use distributed organizing: empower local groups, trusted messengers, and community networks to take the vision, adapt it, and spread it in ways that make sense in their context. Set clear principles and priorities, and make sure to avoid micromanaging implementation. Don't centralize, synchronize. Create simple tools, shared language, and a clear core message. The goal is coherence, not uniformity. Impact grows when ownership is shared.

## **B** TURN SUPPORTERS INTO PARTICIPANTS

Ideas don't just persuade, they can be inclusive. A powerful vision needs clear entry points, not just strong messaging. Make it easy for people to join and meaningful for them to stay. Design every interaction as an invitation: posters, events, videos, chats. Define effective actions people can take, even small ones. Give them roles, not just role models. Let people recognize themselves in the movement. Belonging doesn't happen by accident. It is built through inclusion, not performance.

## C EMBRACE COMPLEXITY, KEEP THE MESSAGE SIMPLE

Do not confuse complexity of substance with complexity of communication. A movement can have detailed proposals, long term plans, and technical expertise. Still, its horizon must be expressed in clear, understandable language. The work can be complex. The message cannot. If people need a briefing document to understand what you stand for, you have already lost them.



# WHO'S DONE IT WELL



MOVIMIENTO  
SEMILLA

## SEED MOVEMENT

### Building a credible political alternative

#### GUATEMALA

*Movimiento Semilla* (“Seed Movement”) emerged from Guatemala’s 2015 anti-corruption uprising. In a country long ruled by a conservative political class and an entrenched alliance known as the “pact of corrupts” network of political, economic, and judicial elites widely accused of shielding one another from accountability, many Guatemalans believed the system was structurally closed. Indigenous communities, who make up around 45% of the population, had long been sidelined from national decision-making. Politics felt captured and immovable.

While others treated the resignation of President Otto Pérez Molina as the end of a protest cycle, Semilla’s founders made a strategic choice: turn indignation into a governing alternative people could recognize and join.

Semilla entered the 2019 electoral cycle with a “vision of tomorrow” that was a direct counter-model to elite capture: a functioning, transparent state that serves citizens rather than protecting corrupt networks. Its program was organized around clear national goals, including the creation of a National Anti-Corruption System and confronting chronic malnutrition, one of the highest rates in Latin America.

By 2023, the project evolved into a broader governing platform structured around “*10 semillas para recuperar el futuro*” (“ten seeds to recover the future”). The agenda combined institutional reform and public integrity with real commitments to strengthen education, health, and access to basic services. The message remained simple and emotionally resonant: recover democracy so the state works for ordinary people.

Crucially, Semilla sought to embody the future it proposed. Led by a fresher, younger, disruptive generation, the party institutionalized internal democracy, financial transparency, and participatory assemblies. It intentionally opened space for youth, women, and Indigenous communities, not merely as voters, but as organizers and agenda-setters.

In 2023, against expectations, Bernardo Arévalo and Semilla won the presidency and secured 23 seats in Congress. The backlash revealed the depth of authoritarian resistance. Corrupt judicial authorities moved to suspend the party’s legal status shortly after the election, and later ordered its cancellation, as efforts to constrain the electoral mandate. Supporters mobilized again, defending not only a candidate but the

democratic alternative they had invested in for years.

Rather than abandoning the project after the party’s suspension and cancellation orders, Semilla leaders and activists pivoted. In 2025, they launched *Raíces* (“Roots”) as a new political formation aimed at carrying forward the movement’s

**“We didn’t just talk about change, we lived it. We were the same people who marched in 2015, and we kept living like the citizens we wanted to represent. That’s how we stayed true to our vision: by showing that it is part of our everyday lives.”**

principles while strengthening territorial organization and deepening ties with Indigenous authorities and grassroots networks—actors who had played a decisive role in defending the 2023 results.



## JULY UPRISING

### **Building a democratic horizon**

#### **BANGLADESH**

Authoritarian regimes often endure by projecting inevitability. In Bangladesh, after 15 years of increasingly centralized rule under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, many citizens felt political competition had narrowed and outcomes were predetermined. The regime offered certainty. The alternative felt unclear.

The July 2024 protests disrupted that certainty. What began as student demonstrations against a public-sector job quota system quickly evolved into something larger. Movement voices widened the setting: this was not only about employment fairness, but about restoring democratic agency. The demand shifted from fixing a rule to reclaiming the right to shape the political system itself.

That reframing provided a horizon. Instead of positioning themselves as anti-government alone, protesters articulated a future grounded in competitive elections, institutional accountability, and constitutional safeguards against executive dominance. The message remained simple—make democracy work—but it pointed toward structural reform rather than temporary concession.

State repression, including the killing of protesters, intensified mobilization and broadened participation. Lawyers, educators, professionals, and urban citizens joined around a shared vision of renewal. The protests became less about a single grievance and more about collective agency.

In August 2024, sustained unrest culminated in Hasina's departure and the installation of an interim government led by Muhammad Yunus. The immediate challenge was clear: removal alone would not guarantee change. Without a defined future, victory could fragment.

As the movement matured, some of its youth leaders chose to institutionalize participation. In early 2025, they founded the National Citizen Party (NCP), a youth-led political formation emerging directly from the uprising. Though the NCP did not perform as strongly as hoped in the February 2026 elections, it secured six parliamentary seats, marking a transition from protest to formal representation and creating entry points for citizens to shape post-uprising politics.

Meanwhile, reform commissions under the interim administration translated the uprising's aspirations into the July National Charter, adopted in October 2025. The Charter outlined constitutional, electoral, and governance reforms designed to strengthen institutional checks, protect political rights, and reduce executive concentration of power. Protest energy and vision was converted into a reform roadmap.

**"We will create a new democratic Bangladesh through our promise of security of life, social justice and a new political landscape."**

In February 2026, voters approved the July Charter in a constitutional referendum held alongside the first post-uprising elections. The democratic reset envisioned in campus protests was institutionalized through popular mandate.

YOU CAN ACCESS THE  
"LEARN MORE" RESOURCES  
BY CLICKING ON THEM



# LEARN MORE

## D-HUB RESOURCES



D-Hub. 2025. "How Movements Keep Democracy Alive." *AATK Podcast Series*



D-Hub. 2026. "A Fragile Opening." *The Fight for Democracy Chronicles, Volume 7.*

## OTHER RESOURCES



CANVAS. 2007. "A Guide to Effective Nonviolent Struggle."



CANVAS. 2024. "Protection and Resilience Strategies."



Freedom House. 2023. "Guatemala: When Hope and Reality Collide."



Journal of Democracy. 2023. "A Shock to Guatemala's System."



Popovic, Srdja. 2015. "Blueprint for Revolution."

2

# BRAND YOUR MOVEMENT

Use identity to build belonging  
and power

# THE PLAY

Branding your movement is more than just having a distinctive visual identity. It is part of how a movement tells its story. A brand is a strategic tool that concentrates meaning, signals direction, and makes a political project recognizable. It does not just reflect a narrative. It helps structure it.

A strong brand is a bridge between your values and public expression. When well crafted, it creates continuity across actions, leaders, and moments, allowing the story to outlive individual faces and crises. It gives scattered efforts a common language and image, so people can recognize each other as part of the same project.

In politics, where attention seems scarce, a recognizable and repeatable brand means more than visibility. It helps your message reach broader and more diverse audiences. It tells them who “we” are, what we stand for, and where we are going. This clarity builds familiarity and gives people a way to express themselves.

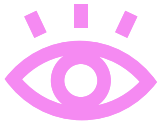
Carrying a symbol, wearing a T-shirt, or sharing a sticker is not just a way of spreading the message. It is also a way of signaling belonging and making collective identity visible. If the public embraces it and makes it their own, a simple logo can help dismantle the authoritarian strategy of “fear and obedience”.

A brand is not just about being seen. It is about shaping how the movement is understood, remembered, and carried forward.



# WHY IT WORKS

- **SYMBOLS SIMPLIFY COMPLEXITY.** A strong brand concentrates values, goals, and identity into a symbol people can instantly recognize and remember.
- **IDENTITY OUTLIVES INDIVIDUALS.** A recognizable brand keeps the movement coherent and visible even when leaders change or disappear.
- **EMOTIONS DRIVE CONNECTION.** A brand taps into belonging, pride, and hope, making the movement feel personal, not abstract.
- **MESSAGES TRAVEL FASTER WHEN PEOPLE CARRY THEM.** When supporters wear, share, or remix a brand, the message multiplies across networks.
- **VISIBILITY BUILDS LEGITIMACY.** What's seen often is seen as real. A brand that shows up everywhere signals conviction and a shared purpose.



# HOW IT WORKS

## 1

### PICK A SYMBOL PEOPLE CAN OWN

The choice of a symbol is not only aesthetic, but also political. Choose names and symbols that are easy to recognize, to reproduce, and to remember. A good symbol should reduce complexity and give people a reference point. It should feel both trustworthy and bold, something people want to wear, share, and stand behind. A clear, simple symbol can become a banner that helps scattered supporters see themselves as part of something bigger.

## 2

### MAKE IT INCLUSIVE

A strong brand invites in and does not filter out. An exclusive brand is one that signals it belongs only to a subculture, a generation, a class, or a political niche. It may feel clever or radical, but if the people your movement hopes to bring together cannot see themselves in it, they will not carry it.

Your brand should feel open and able to channel diversity through a common frame. People from different backgrounds must be able to see themselves in it. A strong shared identity can still leave room for targeted messages, styles, or references that help different groups connect to the same broader project. Unlike commercial marketing, which thrives on niche appeal, movement brands thrive on broad, inclusive symbolism.

### 3 BUILD THE BRAND TO BE USED

A brand only becomes powerful when people can use it. Design it in such a way that it is easy to replicate, adapt, and remix without losing its core meaning. Avoid overly complex logos, rigid graphic rules or aesthetics that require professional skills to replicate.

Leave room for local adaptation while keeping a recognizable core. People connect more when they can shape the brand, not just consume it. When communities can print it, redraw it, reinterpret it, and share it in their own contexts, the brand becomes a living part of the movement.

### 4 LAUNCH THROUGH A DEFINING MOMENT

First impressions matter. But a launch is not only about visibility, it is about definition. The way a brand enters the public space helps define what the movement stands for and how it will act. A launch can take different forms: a public assembly, a symbolic gesture, a collective action, a clear stand in a moment of crisis. What matters is that the first appearance of the brand is tied to something meaningful and real. Not vanity, but substance.

### 5 REPEAT UNTIL IT ECHOES

A strong brand is not powerful because it appeared once. It becomes powerful through repetition. When people see the same symbol across walls, social media, events, and conversations, it starts to feel normal and current.

That is why it's so important to make it easy to reproduce: stickers, posters, digital assets, chants. The goal is not aesthetic perfection but visibility and consistency. The more the brand shows up in everyday spaces, the more familiar it becomes.

Repetition builds familiarity. Familiarity builds recognition. Recognition builds legitimacy.



# TIPS

## A DEFINE YOUR BRAND BEFORE OTHERS DO

If you don't define your movement, others will. Opponents, media, and online actors will fill that gap, assigning labels and frames that may distort your purpose and identity. A clear brand reduces ambiguity and limits misrepresentation. It creates clarity before confusion takes over.

Branding is about setting the terms of recognition. Choosing your name and symbols defines your tone and reduces the space for hostile narratives.

## B EXPLORE, THEN ADAPT

Don't copy other movements' brands. Study them. Analyze what made them recognizable, shareable, or powerful. Then adapt what fits your values, your goals, and your context. Looking at references from other countries, sectors, or even non-political campaigns can expand your imagination and help you test possibilities before committing to a design.

Moreover, AI design tools can also help you experiment quickly with names, symbols, and visual styles. Use them to explore directions, compare options, and spark ideas. But remember: meaning comes from strategy. The final brand must reflect your political project and identity, not just aesthetic appeal.



# WHO'S DONE IT WELL



**AAM AADMI PARTY**

## **A broom to sweep out traditional politics**

INDIA

When the *Aam Aadmi Party* (AAP, "Common Man's Party") emerged in 2012 from the anti-corruption mobilizations surrounding the India Against Corruption movement, it faced a central challenge: how to turn protest energy into a recognizable political "we." In a crowded system dominated by established parties, AAP needed a symbol that could carry its promise beyond speeches and individual leaders.

The party chose the broom (*jhadu*) as its election symbol: a simple, everyday object that condensed its message into something instantly legible. The broom signaled a "clean sweep" of corruption while invoking the dignity of ordinary labour. It translated a complex reform agenda into a visual shorthand that voters across all backgrounds could recognize immediately.

The launch reinforced the meaning. Rather than unveiling the symbol in a conventional political setting, the broom was introduced in a sanitation workers' neighborhood in Delhi, where

leaders staged a symbolic sweeping. The message was clear: politics should serve ordinary citizens, not the entrenched elites. The brand entered public life tied to substance and moral positioning, not spectacle.

AAP built a brand to be used. Supporters were encouraged to bring brooms to rallies, transforming the symbol into a participatory tool rather than a leadership logo. Because the broom was simple and easy to reproduce, it spread organically through posters, door-to-door outreach, and campaign visuals. In India's ballot system, where symbols help voters identify parties, the broom provided immediate recognition.

In 2013, barely a year after its founding, AAP won 28 of 70 seats in the Delhi Assembly. In 2015, it secured a landslide victory with 67 seats, retained power in 2020 with 62, and later formed the government in Punjab in 2022. Across electoral cycles, the broom remained constant, linking protest origins to governance and giving the party continuity beyond individual leaders.

**“The broom has nothing to do with the traditional symbols of power and authority used by other parties, such as the hand (Congress) or the lotus (BJP). It served as an effective metaphor for the party's mission as it emphasized a break from the past and a focus on grassroots change, a shift from patronage politics to people's power.”**

The broom became more than a logo. It became a marker of belonging. In a political landscape often shaped by personalities and patronage, it allowed supporters to publicly identify with a project centered on honesty and accountability.



# ОТПОР!

ОТПОР

## Branding revolution as a lifestyle

SERBIA

When students at the University of Belgrade founded *Otpor* (“Resistance”) in 1998, they understood that confronting Slobodan Milošević required more than protest. In a political environment saturated with fear and repression, the movement needed an identity that could unify dispersed opposition and make resistance visible.

Designer “Duda” Petrović created Otpor’s now-iconic clenched fist. Drawing on a longstanding symbol of resistance, the movement used it to visually challenge the regime’s aura of force and inevitability. The design was bold, high-contrast, and simple enough to spray-paint in seconds. Otpor chose a symbol that reduced complexity into a graphic anyone could reproduce.

The fist was built to travel. It appeared stenciled across dozens of Serbian towns, on walls, posters, and stickers. Its simplicity allowed supporters to replicate it without permission or technical skill. The brand was not centrally controlled; it was distributed. Anyone with paint could carry it.

Otpor treated the brand not just as a logo but as a lifestyle. Supporters wore the symbol on T-shirts, caps, and badges, turning resistance into something visible in everyday life. Arrests, intended by authorities to intimidate, were reframed as proof of commitment. For many activists, being detained strengthened belonging rather than weakening it. The symbol signaled courage and shared identity.

Slogans reinforced the visual frame. “*Gotov je!*” (“He’s finished!”) appeared alongside the fist, transforming Milošević from an object of fear into an object of inevitability and ridicule. Another campaign, “It’s Time,” shifted the emotional register from anger to momentum. Repetition of the fist and its messages across public space created familiarity; and familiarity reduced fear.

Crucially, Otpor had no single charismatic leader. The symbol carried the movement. This made repression harder. Arresting individuals did not dismantle identity. The brand functioned as decentralized leadership, allowing the movement to scale up without depending on any one figure.

By 2000, Otpor had mobilized tens of thousands of members and played a central role in youth engagement during the election that led to Milošević’s defeat. The fist outlived the regime itself. Through the later creation of CANVAS (the Centre for Applied Nonviolent Action and Strategies), Otpor co-founders transmitted lessons in branding and nonviolent organizing to movements abroad. Decades later, the fist continues to reappear in Serbian protests, demonstrating how a well-constructed political identity can be reactivated across generations.

**“We had to beat Milošević at brand warfare. He sold fear. We sold hope – and made it cooler to resist than to comply.”**



## THE SARDINES

### Countering far-right surge

#### ITALY

In November 2019, as far-right Matteo Salvini prepared a campaign rally in Bologna ahead of the Emilia-Romagna regional election, four young organizers proposed a counter-strategy. If Salvini aimed to fill an indoor arena with 5,500 supporters, they would gather more people in the city's main square, standing tightly packed, "like sardines." The goal was not only numerical competition, but visual contrast.

The first event, titled "6000 Sardines Against Salvini," exceeded expectations. Around 20,000 people filled Piazza Maggiore. The physical density embodied the metaphor: citizens pressed together in peaceful opposition to divisive rhetoric. In a political environment shaped by Salvini's rallies and media dominance, the Sardines introduced a competing image: crowded squares without party flags, leaders, or hostility.

The symbol emerged organically from that framing. A simple, hand-drawn sardine, often sketched on cardboard or paper, became the movement's visual identity. An effortless design that anyone could draw in seconds. There were no strict graphic rules, no centralized production, and no proprietary control. The brand was built for replication.

This simplicity mattered. The sardine allowed people to participate without affiliating with a party. It signaled collective presence rather than ideological alignment. By avoiding traditional political logos or partisan colors, the movement positioned itself as civic rather than electoral. The symbol

functioned as a bridge, enabling citizens uncomfortable with party politics to express opposition to Salvini's style of discourse.

Repetition amplified recognition. Sardine drawings appeared across social media, posters, and city squares throughout Italy. Demonstrations followed in multiple regions, maintaining the same visual language and format: tightly packed, leader-light assemblies centered around the symbol. At its peak, 200,000 people gathered at Rome's Piazza San Giovanni. The consistency of the brand—crowds without party banners, sardines on handmade signs—created continuity across cities.

Crucially, the Sardines resisted personalization. No single figure embodied the movement. The symbol carried the identity. This limited the opportunities for opponents to frame the mobilization as partisan manipulation and made repression or co-optation more difficult.

While the movement eventually lost momentum during the COVID-19 pandemic, its short lifespan demonstrated how branding can counter populist spectacle.

By choosing a symbol that was simple, inclusive, fun, and easy to reproduce, and launching it through a high-visibility defining moment, the Sardines transformed a metaphor into a shared civic identity that temporarily reshaped Italy's political atmosphere.

**"We chose the sardine because it was small, peaceful, and stronger together. Its simplicity broke away from the usual intellectual elitism, and that's why people who had never felt part of politics finally showed up."**



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**3**

**BUILD  
THE ENGINE,  
NOT JUST  
THE FLAME**

Shaping a roadmap for strategic  
and tactical success

# THE PLAY

**Movements that succeed don't just react, they take the initiative. They go on the offensive. And to do that, they plan: where to go, how to get there, and what they'll need along the way. A solid plan multiplies impact and keeps actions focused, even under pressure. Without this pulse, it's easy to get stuck in symbolic protest without progress.**

**The biggest mistake movements make is failing to plan for the endgame. It's hard to see how to win the war, so they settle for winning small battles and wait to see what happens next. Especially when confronting elected authoritarians, that approach is doomed to fail. You need to think it all the way through.**

**Strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory. Tactics without strategy is noise before defeat. Tactical calculations will change as context shifts. Nothing ever unfolds exactly as planned. That is why the destination must remain clear, even if the route evolves. Along that route, stick to the strategy.**

Energy can ignite a movement, but if it remains only a flame, it will burn out. Strategy gives direction and must go hand in hand with the construction of infrastructure. That infrastructure includes trained people, communication channels, coordination protocols, and support structures. This is the engine that gives power to the direction.



# WHY IT WORKS

- **STRATEGY GIVES DIRECTION TO ENERGY.** Without it, movements risk burnout, confusion, or endless reaction instead of sustained pressure.
- **GOALS CREATE RESILIENCE.** When people see incremental progress, they stay engaged and committed through setbacks and shifting conditions.
- **A SHARED ROADMAP ALIGNS EFFORT.** It reduces internal friction and fragmentation, keeping energy focused on leverage points rather than distractions.
- **PLANNING STRENGTHENS CREDIBILITY.** When movements act with visible purpose, they signal seriousness to supporters, undecided groups, and even institutions.
- **CAPACITY BUILDS POWER.** When movements build teams, processes, and systems, they can endure pressure, repression, and fatigue.



# HOW IT WORKS

## 1 PLAN YOUR JOURNEY

Movements usually erupt from a spark. That spark sets the tone and creates early structure, but only strategy can scale it. Without a roadmap, you risk action without traction. Strategy isn't about rigidity, it's about giving your energy direction.

Start with a simple theory of change: what must shift, who must shift it, and how pressure will make that shift possible. Define what success looks like, and then plan backwards. Map the path from early actions to the final balance of power. Organize planning in phases: a launch to signal intent, an expansion to grow numbers, and a climax to claim a win. For each phase, define targets, set timelines, and build the infrastructure you will need to sustain action.

Of course, these phases are not strictly linear. Movements often move forward, stall, regroup, and accelerate again. What matters is not strict sequence, but intentional progression.

## 2 MAP THE ALLIES, OPPONENTS, AND PILLARS OF POWER

Power isn't abstract; it is held by real actors. To build a win, you must plan how to shift the actors that matter most, even those that seem untouchable. This clarity helps you focus your efforts, anticipate resistance, and design pressure that changes the balance of power.

Start with the basics: who's already with you? Who might join? Who stands in your way? Then go further: which actors are neutral but movable? Which insiders are uncomfortable? Which parts of the authoritarian support base could be peeled away?

Good strategy requires a clear understanding of who holds power, how they hold it, and what keeps them aligned with the status quo. So also ask yourself these hard questions: who ultimately needs to shift for change to happen? Which pillars of support must weaken, split, or realign?

Your map doesn't need to be a perfect or overly technical exercise. Even a simple, shared understanding of supporters, allies, persuadable actors, and opponents, including institutions, influencers, media, political leaders, security forces, and economic elites, can help you act more strategically. The goal is not to produce a flawless diagram, but to understand who is on your side, who could be brought closer, and which pillars may crack under pressure.

### 3 TURN VISIBILITY INTO INFRASTRUCTURE

Public actions matter, especially early ones. Visibility is not the main goal though, capacity is. Whether your movement starts small or suddenly goes big, treat every visible moment as a test of your structure. What works? What breaks? Who steps up? Where are the gaps?

Instead of chasing scale for its own sake, use each public action to build coordination, clarify roles, and strengthen internal systems. A public action should not only signal that you exist, it should also reveal whether your engine can carry more weight.

Movements often grow fast and then collapse because they confuse momentum with power. Power requires direction, coordination, and endurance. The point is not to wait until everything is perfectly built before acting. Sometimes, you move with what you have, and that's fine. However, it's even better if each action leaves your movement stronger, more connected, and better prepared for what comes next.

## 4

### RECRUIT WITH INTENTION

Recruitment is not just about growing numbers, it is about strengthening your capacity. You already know which communities are most aligned with your cause and who might be open to shifting. Go to them with tailored strategies. Use one-on-one conversations, public events, and trusted messengers.

Every new recruit brings networks, skills, and motivation. The question is not only how many people join, but how they are integrated. The best recruiters are often the newly recruited, but only if they are given structure, support, and clear roles.

When reaching out, don't just ask for help: make joining feel meaningful. Build small teams, assign responsibilities, create feedback loops, and make sure new people know where they fit in the engine.

## 5

### MOBILIZE WITH A CRESCENDO RHYTHM

Mobilization is not about constant intensity, it is about calibrated escalation. Start with actions that are accessible and credible, easy to join and hard to ignore. These actions should test capacity, build confidence, and showcase coordination.

Not every movement gets many chances to go big, and when those moments do come, you should be ready to seize them. Escalation should serve a purpose. Instead of piling up actions, focus on accumulating leverage. Each step should increase pressure while strengthening your internal systems.

Escalation works when it is intentional. Every wave should either broaden participation, deepen commitment, or increase the cost of maintaining the status quo. This crescendo sustains energy, turns momentum into structured pressure, and steadily moves you closer to the outcome your strategy set out to achieve.

# 6

## ADAPT WITHOUT LOSING DIRECTION

No plan survives contact if reality is left unchanged. As your movement grows and context shifts, strategy must stay alive to guide tactics. The ability to adjust tactics while preserving direction is what keeps movements effective over time.

Keep revisiting your goals, updating your map of power, and recalibrating pressure without losing your core purpose. Flexibility and disciplined adaptation are major strengths that enable movements to absorb backlash, recover from setbacks, and refine without drifting.

Winning is not accidental. It is the result of continuous assessment, strategic adjustment, and steady alignment between purpose, plan, and action.



# TIPS

## A LEARN FROM THE MOVEMENTS THAT CAME BEFORE

You don't have to start from scratch. Studying others shortens your learning curve. Every movement leaves lessons, tools, and mistakes to learn from. Study them. What worked in Brazil, Hong Kong, Poland, or Serbia was not magic, it was strategy. Learn how they built capacity, how they handled repression, and how they structured their internal organization. Analyze also their failures, their miscalculations, and how they corrected course when things went wrong. Then adapt all these to fit your context.

## B DON'T FEAR LEADERSHIP

Don't be afraid of leadership emerging. Encourage decentralized leadership that allows people to step up across regions, platforms, and moments. However, don't fall into the trap of false horizontality: when no one leads, confusion takes over. Strong movements need public voices that can represent shared demands at key moments.

At the same time, avoid turning leadership into personalization. A movement cannot depend on a single face, personality, or spokesperson. Leadership should amplify collective power, not replace it. The engine must remain bigger than any one person. When identity becomes individualized, the movement becomes fragile.



# WHO'S DONE IT WELL



## POLAND'S DEMOCRATIC ACTORS

### Building the ecosystem to outlast authoritarian drift

#### POLAND

When the Law and Justice party (PiS) returned to power in 2015 and began reshaping the courts, public media, and state institutions, Poland's democratic actors understood that no single wave of protest would be enough to reverse the authoritarian shift. The challenge was structural. The response had to come from multiple fronts, even if those efforts were not centrally planned.

Early mobilizations, including the large demonstrations organized by the Committee for the Defence of Democracy (KOD), kept institutional changes visible and contested. But over time, many civic actors came to see that visibility alone would not be enough. Protest had to be accompanied by capacity.

Across the country, watchdog organizations, legal associations, grassroots groups, and independent media expanded documentation of institutional overreach and invested in civic education. Initiatives such as “Constitution Days” and local solidarity networks sustained democratic language outside major urban centers. Rather than chasing constant escalation, many groups focused on endurance, maintaining presence even when headlines faded.

A critical shift occurred within civil society itself. Organizations that had often competed for limited funding began cooperating more systematically. There was an emergence of cross-sector networks and stronger coordination between grassroots activists and established NGOs. Instead of duplicating efforts, different actors leaned into complementary roles: street mobilization, legal defense, monitoring, community outreach, and international advocacy. The movement gradually resembled less of a single campaign and more of an ecosystem.

Moments of crisis were folded into that broader structure. The 2020 near-total abortion ban, and the resistance it provoked, was one of them. The Women’s Strike protests energized a younger generation and broadened participation, bringing new constituencies into Poland’s democratic

opposition. This was not the result of a single long-term plan, but the protests did become a powerful catalyst, bringing new energy, new actors, and renewed urgency into a broader democratic ecosystem already under strain. Rather than remaining episodic, those networks fed into ongoing civic engagement and local organizing. Recruitment became less reactive and more intentional, integrating new participants into sustained activity.

Over time, attention increasingly turned toward the electoral terrain. Civil society groups encouraged turnout, monitored the integrity of the process, and supported efforts to reduce fragmentation among democratic forces. The goal was not to create partisan alignment, but to defend democratic institutions and increase the civic leverage needed to shift the balance of power.

In October 2023, turnout reached 74.3%, the highest since 1989. PiS lost its governing majority. That outcome was not the product of a single strategy or actor, but of years of democratic persistence and cooperation: civic education, public pressure, and sustained defense of the rule of law. Poland's democratic forces did not rely on a single climactic moment. They built an engine capable of sustaining pressure until the balance shifted.

**“The rule of law cannot defend itself. Institutions and our democracy require active, sustained defense.”**



## UMBRELLA MOVEMENT

### The infrastructure before the storm

#### CHINA

When Beijing ruled in August 2014 that candidates for Hong Kong's Chief Executive would be pre-screened by a pro-Beijing nomination committee, hopes for genuine universal suffrage collapsed. Anger spread quickly. Yet the movement's impact owed much to the fact that some key networks, organizing practices, and spaces for coordination were already in place.

The pro-democracy coalition was not a single organization, but a layered network. The group Occupy Central with Love and Peace had spent over a year discussing civil disobedience, holding public deliberation days and organizing an unofficial referendum in June 2014 that drew nearly 800,000 participants. Student groups, including the Hong Kong Federation of Students and Scholarism, mobilized class boycotts across universities and secondary schools. These efforts did not amount to a single master plan, but they did help build shared language, civic confidence, and the capacity to act together.

As tensions rose in late September, different forms of organizing converged. Student leaders led a class boycott and gathered outside government headquarters. When a group entered Civic Square and police responded with arrests and later tear gas, public outrage transformed a student-led action into a citywide occupation. Protesters filled major roads in Admiralty, Mong Kok, and Causeway Bay. The umbrella, raised to shield against pepper spray, became the movement's symbol.

For 79 days, the occupation sites functioned as improvised civic spaces. Volunteers organized supply chains, first aid, study areas, and communication channels. Decision-making was fragmented and sometimes contested, even though infrastructure existed: messaging networks, nonviolent discipline norms, and logistical coordination across districts. The movement did not achieve its immediate political demands. By December, police cleared the sites.

**“The Umbrella Movement is not the end. It is only the beginning.”**

Yet the most important outcome was less visible. The 2014 movement trained a generation in coordination under pressure. It strengthened ties between students, lawyers, medics, digital organizers, and neighborhood groups. It normalized rapid mobilization and horizontal communication. When protests returned in 2019 against the extradition bill, they did so with deeper tactical knowledge, decentralized coordination, and greater resilience. Many organizers explicitly referenced lessons learned from 2014: avoid fixed occupation sites, diversify tactics, protect anonymity, sustain fluid escalation.

The Umbrella Movement did not win in 2014. But it built an engine. It transformed campus debates into citywide networks and left behind infrastructure that reshaped the next wave of resistance.



## INDIVISIBLE

### **From protest to a nationwide civic infrastructure**

USA

After Donald Trump's election in 2016, protests erupted across the United States. For all that, a group of former congressional staffers saw a strategic risk: spontaneous outrage alone would not constrain an administration willing to test democratic limits. What was needed was infrastructure, an organizing engine capable of sustaining pressure over time.

Their response was the *Indivisible Guide*, a practical handbook explaining how citizens could influence members of Congress through coordinated local action. Drawing lessons from the Tea Party's earlier pressure campaigns, the guide encouraged activists to organize locally, confront elected officials at town halls, and maintain persistent district-level pressure. Instead of building a centralized organization, the movement encouraged volunteers to create autonomous local groups using shared tactics.

The idea spread quickly and went beyond protest. Within months, hundreds of Indivisible Groups formed across the country. In 2026, there were more than 2,500 local, volunteer-led Indivisible Groups in urban, suburban, and rural communities across every state in the country. The decentralized model became the movement's strategic advantage: local groups could act independently while remaining connected through shared tools, training, and coordination.

Early campaigns demonstrated the model's power. Indivisible Groups organized town hall confrontations, district protests, and sustained advocacy targeting specific legislators. But the deeper objective was not any single policy fight. It was capacity, recruiting volunteers, training organizers, and building communication channels capable of sustaining mobilization over years.

As the network matured, the movement increasingly focused on coalition-building. Indivisible had helped convene a broad alliance of more than 120 partner organizations, including labor unions, civil rights groups, faith networks, veterans' organizations, and LGBTQ advocates. This coalition architecture allowed diverse actors to coordinate around shared democratic goals while maintaining their independence.

That infrastructure proved decisive during the "No Kings" mobilization in 2025. Framed around opposition to authoritarian leadership and corruption, the campaign called for nationwide demonstrations defending democratic institutions and the principle that no leader stands above the law. Because thousands of local organizing hubs already existed, the movement could mobilize rapidly across the country.

The result was one of the largest coordinated protest waves in modern U.S. history. More than 2,700 demonstrations took place nationwide, drawing an estimated seven million participants. The protests were decentralized but strategically aligned, demonstrating the scale of civic resistance and the power of distributed organizing.

Equally important was what made the mobilization possible: years of patient movement-building. Local groups already had volunteer teams, communication systems, and coalition relationships in place. When the moment arrived, the movement needed not to improvise. The engine had already been built.

**"What made the difference was not a single march in Washington. It was thousands of local groups organizing where they lived."**



# LEARN MORE

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**4**

# **EMBED THE MOVEMENT IN EVERYDAY LIFE**

Turning values into daily practices  
that foster base growth

# THE PLAY

**Movements do not grow only through protests or peak moments. They also grow when their values become part of daily life. Movements expand their base and permanence when they move beyond extraordinary events and into simple routines, creating a bridge of connection and belonging that formal politics often fails to provide.**

**Embedding a movement in everyday life means bringing its symbols, language, and practices into the spaces people move through on a daily basis. When movements show up in how people talk, move, care, and dress, and in how they post, share, and interact online, they stop being considered as “activists” and start becoming perceived as normal.**

**This can happen both offline and online: streets, workplaces, group chats, social media feeds, and cultural environments. From shared playlists to pins on backpacks, from slogans on T-shirts to memes, from profile pictures to stencils on walls, from chants at football matches to stickers on the bus.**

**Everyday presence expands identity, builds familiarity, and creates distributed networks of recognition. More importantly, it creates a sense of belonging: the feeling that you are part of something larger, that others share your values, and that you are not alone. This is how a movement becomes part of people's lives.**

**In places where protests are banned or dangerous, this allows values to be expressed in public space without requiring large-scale mobilization. And even where protests are possible, this cultural layer makes mobilization easier, faster, and broader.**



# WHY IT WORKS

- **CULTURE LASTS LONGER THAN HEADLINES.** If symbols, habits, and rituals remain in daily life, the movement can survive beyond peaks of attention.
- **EVERYDAY PRESENCE BUILDS EMOTIONAL SAFETY.** When a movement becomes part of ordinary life, it starts to feel normal. This lowers the social and psychological barriers to engagement.
- **REPETITION CREATES RECOGNITION.** What people see regularly becomes credible. Repetition creates trust and the sense that “many others are already here.”
- **A SENSE OF BELONGING CREATES RESILIENT NETWORKS.** When connections grow out of schools, neighborhoods, or workplaces, they are harder to isolate, discredit, or dismantle.



# HOW IT WORKS

## 1

### ENTER EVERYDAY SPACES ON THEIR TERMS

Movements establish presence more quickly when they operate inside spaces people already use and trust. Instead of creating separate arenas for participation, embed your presence in everyday environments: parks, workplaces, public transport, cultural events, and online communities. But don't assume you will be welcomed everywhere. Move with care, understand the norms of each space, assess the risks, and adapt your tone accordingly. What works in a university may not work in a neighborhood shop or at a sports event.

## 2

### TURN MOMENTUM INTO HABITS

Sustained culture doesn't come from one-off actions. It comes from repetition. Momentum may fade, while habits accumulate. Create simple, regular practices people can join and recognize easily: a shared color on certain days, a gesture, a specific emoji, or a recurring weekly ritual.

Habits create memory, and regular practices also lower the cost of participation. Not everyone will attend a rally, but many will wear a color, share a symbol, or repeat a phrase. These practices should be easy to replicate without central coordination if you provide simple visual guides, downloadable materials, or short explanations to reproduce them locally without asking for permission.

### 3 **TURN CULTURE INTO A DISTRIBUTION CHANNEL**

Don't rely only on speeches, pamphlets, or formal organization. Use culture as a way to extend your reach beyond explicit political spaces. Let your values travel through music, slang, food, gestures, memes, and fashion. This requires intentional collaboration with artists, content creators, community leaders, and influencers who can reinterpret your values in their own language and format.

When movement symbols appear in concerts, sports events, television, online trends, or everyday conversations, they reach people who would never attend a meeting or read a manifesto. Culture can carry your message into audiences that traditional organizing cannot easily access.

### 4 **TURN EVERYDAY NETWORKS INTO INFRASTRUCTURE**

Culture isn't just a way to express or distribute ideas. It's also a way to help people find each other, build trust, and stay connected. A movement grows stronger when everyday life becomes infrastructure, when ordinary relationships and shared spaces can be activated for coordination, care, and collective action.

Let shared symbols become points of coordination and turn relationships into small networks to face common struggles: neighborhood WhatsApp groups, street-based mutual aid, informal circles at stores, kiosks, or plazas. What begins as recognition can become connection, and what becomes connection can turn into support, coordination, and collective capacity. These micro-networks help people endure hard times and stay connected when public organizing becomes too risky or too costly.

## 5

**DON'T JUST EXPAND, MULTIPLY**

Growth is not just about reaching more people. It is also about reproducing structures and voices that keep people engaged. When something gains attention quickly, the risk is turning participants into spectators. Sustainable growth comes from multiplication.

Instead of relying only on big moments, replicate small formats that can be replicated locally: small group meetings, community rituals, do-it-yourself toolkits, neighborhood actions, peer circles. Multiplication means multiplying voices, so that more people are expressing, carrying, and spreading the movement in their own spaces. What matters is not the size of a single event, but how many of these can pop up, how many people can carry them forward, and how easily they can be repeated elsewhere.



# TIPS

## **A** MAKE JOY A MULTIPLIER

Shared joy makes movements more attractive. Songs, laughter, memes, and funny rituals generate emotional stamina that draws people in. Joy reduces fatigue and makes sustained engagement possible over time. Joy doesn't deny fear or rage, it can run alongside them, making these more bearable. It also widens the community: people who may hesitate to join confrontational spaces are more likely to engage in environments that feel energizing. When joy becomes part of the experience of a movement, people return not just for the message, but for the community it creates.

## **B** DON'T CONFUSE VISIBILITY WITH STRENGTH

Sometimes the strongest infrastructure is not the most visible. Small but trusted WhatsApp groups, local organizing circles, or mutual aid networks can create continuity beyond public moments. Public visibility attracts attention, but durable networks sustain action.

Don't always aim for the spotlight. Invest in relationships and coordination structures that can hold under pressure. These networks are not only useful for mobilizing, but also for helping people get through difficult moments: finding a place to sleep, getting legal support late at night, sharing urgent information, or making sure someone is not left alone in a risky situation.

When the moment for mass action arrives, these everyday bonds become your fastest, safest, and most reliable channels of mobilization.



# WHO'S DONE IT WELL



## THE GREEN TIDE

### Planting feminism in everyday life

#### ARGENTINA

In Argentina, the fight for legal abortion was not only a legislative battle, it was a cultural transformation. While it may not be a struggle against authoritarian rule, it stands as a powerful example of how movements can embed themselves in everyday life. To win, the feminist movement deliberately moved beyond protest and into culture, turning its symbols, language, and rituals into daily practices that expanded the base and normalized the cause.

Long before the law passed, the green scarf—the campaign's defining symbol—had already claimed the streets. It was everywhere: on backpacks in high schools, on wrists in universities, tied to balconies, baby strollers, and shop windows. The green scarf was more than a protest

prop. Wearing it became a daily habit and a visible signal of belonging, making support for abortion rights recognizable across public spaces.

The movement also reshaped everyday language.

Gender-inclusive expressions such as “*todes*,” instead of the generic masculine “*todos*,” to refer to *all*, began appearing in classrooms, social media, and even congressional debates. What started as a linguistic innovation quickly became a cultural marker of feminist identity and a visible challenge to traditional norms. Language itself became part of the movement’s cultural infrastructure.

Crucially, the campaign did not remain confined to activist circles. Feminist voices entered talk shows, gossip programs, music festivals, and also football commentary. The movement’s message spread through humor, art, and everyday conversations, reaching audiences that traditional political messaging can merely touch. Just like the idea of putting broccoli in the rice, activists introduced the cause into spaces where people were already paying attention, without asking for permission.

This cultural strategy was reinforced through repeatable rituals. Mass “*pañuelazos*,” where thousands raised green scarves in public squares, became recognizable moments of collective identity. The format was simple, visible, and easy to replicate, allowing schools, universities, and neighborhood groups across the country to organize their own versions without centralized coordination.

At the same time, the movement built dense networks beneath the cultural wave. Horizontal assemblies, workshops, and local organizing circles allowed activists to exchange experiences, coordinate actions, and support one another. These everyday networks created durable relationships that carried the movement even when legislative progress stalled.

**"The green scarf was created by a women's movement in Rosario, but when it became widespread and made it onto television, we couldn't believe it. The symbol had entered mainstream media. When women in working-class neighbourhoods saw it on TV, it changed the way we could talk about it."**

When Argentina's Congress initially rejected legalization in 2018, the movement did not retreat. Instead, activists expanded their strategy by influencing candidate lists ahead of the 2019 elections, pushing parties to nominate candidates who supported legalization and turning electoral politics into the next arena of pressure.

By the time abortion was legalized in December 2020, the decisive shift had already occurred. The green scarf had transformed a once-taboo demand into a widely recognized social cause. The political victory followed a deeper cultural one: the movement had already embedded itself in the routines, language, and identity of everyday life.



## THE PEOPLE'S GROUP

### Three Fingers: a gesture of resistance

#### THAILAND

In 2020, a youth-led movement erupted in Thailand with three bold demands: the dissolution of parliament, an end to intimidation of the people, and the drafting of a new constitution, including reform of the monarchy. Large protests returned to the streets, but the movement's strength did not come from demonstrations alone. It came from a symbol that quickly embedded itself in everyday life.

The symbol was simple: the three-finger salute, borrowed from the film *The Hunger Games*. The gesture had first appeared during protests after the 2014 military coup, when it was quickly recognized as a sign of defiance. The authorities reacted nervously, detaining

people who raised the salute in public and even pressuring cinemas to cancel screenings of the film. Nevertheless, the symbol survived underground, waiting for another moment.

When protests reignited in 2020, the three fingers returned with a new kind of power. The gesture spread far beyond rallies. It appeared in profile pictures, fashion, graffiti, emojis, and memes. Students raised it in classrooms.

Commuters flashed it on public transport. What began as a protest gesture became a recognizable signal of belonging that had become embedded in daily life.

The movement also turned the gesture into a repeatable ritual. At 6 p.m., when the national anthem played across Thailand's public spaces, protesters quietly raised the three-finger salute. The act was silent, brief, and easily replicated. Anyone could do it, anywhere, without coordination or resources. A simple gesture became a daily reminder that resistance still existed.

Its cultural power came from its openness. The salute was not tied to any party or ideology. It carried no complex manifesto. For a generation frustrated with traditional politics and Cold War-era symbolism, the three fingers became a form of cultural shorthand: a way to express dissent instantly and publicly.

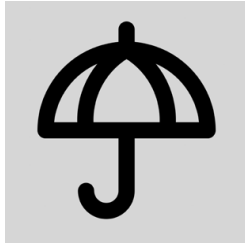
Even as authorities intensified repression, arresting activists, charging protesters under harsh *lèse-majesté* laws, and dismantling demonstrations, the symbol continued to circulate. Some movement leaders went into exile. Others remained in Thailand and faced long prison sentences. Yet the gesture persisted in daily life, quietly reproduced across the country.

That persistence was its strength. A gesture that could be repeated by anyone became impossible to fully suppress.

"We wanted something less contentious and more creative to express resistance. The old symbols—like the raised fist—were too tied to Cold War leftism. We needed something new. Something people of a younger generation could actually relate to."

The regime could ban protests, censor the media, and imprison organizers. But it could not erase a symbol that had already spread through culture.

The three-finger salute became more than a protest sign. It became a shared language of recognition: an everyday signal that resistance still existed. In crowded streets, classrooms, and online spaces, the message remained simple and unmistakable: “we see each other, we are still here.”



## UMBRELLA MOVEMENT

### Ordinary objects, extraordinary resistance

CHINA

Some of the most powerful movement practices are not designed; they emerge from ordinary life. In September 2014, when Hong Kong riot police fired tear gas and pepper spray at pro-democracy demonstrators, protesters raised the only thing they had at hand: their umbrellas. What began as an improvised shield quickly spread across the city, transforming an everyday object into an act of participation.

In Hong Kong, umbrellas are part of ordinary life. People carry them routinely because of the city’s unpredictable weather. That familiarity made them powerful tools of quiet resistance. Carrying an umbrella required no organization or coordination. Anyone could do it. What had been a simple object became a subtle signal of belonging to a pro-democracy movement.

The gesture quickly moved beyond protest sites. Yellow umbrellas appeared in workplaces, universities, public transport, and neighborhoods across the city. Their presence communicated something important: the movement was not limited to organized activists but was made up of ordinary people living ordinary lives.

“Only when the messages are everywhere would people know we are still here.”

Everyday urban spaces also became channels for participation. Across the city, Lennon Walls appeared—public surfaces covered in colorful Post-it notes carrying messages of hope, frustration, and solidarity. Inspired by Prague’s original Lennon Wall, these installations multiplied rapidly in subway stations, pedestrian bridges, and neighborhood walkways. Anyone could stop, read messages, or add their own note, turning ordinary spaces into sites of recognition and connection.

The movement’s visual culture expanded organically. Artists and citizens remixed the umbrella into murals, posters, sculptures, and online memes. A wooden installation known as the “Umbrella Man,” depicting a protester holding an umbrella, became one of the movement’s most recognizable images. Yellow umbrellas and ribbons formed a shared visual language that spread through streets and social media alike.

When protests returned in 2019 over the extradition bill, the umbrella reappeared alongside construction helmets and black clothing worn in silent solidarity. These ordinary objects allowed people to signal support even if they could not join demonstrations directly.

Authorities recognized the power of this everyday diffusion. Courier companies reportedly restricted shipments of protest-related items such as black clothing, helmets, masks, and umbrellas entering Hong Kong. The reaction revealed a deeper challenge: when resistance becomes embedded in daily life, it becomes harder to contain.



# LEARN MORE

## D-HUB RESOURCES



D-Hub. 2025. "How Movements Keep Democracy Alive." AATK Podcast Series

## OTHER RESOURCES



Asuntos del Sur. "La innovación política desde los feminismos."



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**5**

# **MAKE IT COOL**

Creating a movement  
people want to be part of

# THE PLAY

Authoritarian regimes try to make the opposition look illegitimate and dangerous. That's why a key challenge for democratic movements is not just to be right, but to be irresistible. To reach broader audiences, movements need to make the future feel more attractive than the status quo, and to do that, they must radiate pride, creativity, and joy.

Being "cool" doesn't mean being empty or frivolous. It means sparking the feeling of "I want to be part of that." Symbols matter, rituals matter, imagination matters. In practice, this can look like music and humor in the streets, banners people want to photograph and share, and memes and pop culture references that travel fast on platforms like TikTok.

Traditional tactics like rallies, occupations, or boycotts shouldn't be abandoned, but they do need some refreshing. Mix them up to create emotionally compelling events people don't want

to miss. Build the place where things are happening, where showing up becomes a source of pride and absence starts to create a sense of FOMO.

Making it cool means creating spaces people can cheer for, where they feel free to express themselves, and are invited to shape what comes next. Above all, it means signaling direction: the movement is moving forward, while the status quo starts to look outdated, rigid, and stuck in the past.



# WHY IT WORKS

- **STYLE CAN BREAK STIGMA.** When a movement looks fresh, proud, and joyful, it becomes easier to join and harder to dismiss.
- **CREATIVITY MULTIPLIES VISIBILITY.** When actions are visually striking or emotionally playful, they travel further, capturing attention beyond political circles.
- **BELONGING SUSTAINS ENGAGEMENT.** Movements that feel like home, not just like duty, turn occasional participants into loyal communities.
- **JOY CHANGES THE MOOD.** Authoritarianism thrives on fear and cynicism. Joy disrupts that climate, lowers the regime's defenses, and opens spaces for hope.
- **CULTURAL APPEAL RESHAPES POLITICAL PERCEPTION.** When a movement feels forward-looking and socially desirable, it can make the existing order appear outdated, rigid, and stuck.



# HOW IT WORKS

## 1 EVOLVE THROUGH ENERGY AND SURPRISE

Movements grow when they keep interrupting expectations. Surprise works because it breaks the emotional routine people usually associate with politics: standard protests, predictable slogans, familiar faces. Instead of repeating well-known formats, design actions that deliberately shift the frame: change the setting, alter the tone, introduce unexpected messengers in ways people don't anticipate. When an action feels different from what people expect, it signals that something new is happening. That shift can turn the movement from being seen as worn-out opposition into being perceived as a force capable of changing the agenda. Energy, in this sense, is not volume or spectacle. It is the visible sign that the movement is alive and moving forward.

## 2 LOWER BARRIERS THROUGH EXPERIENCE

People don't just join ideas; they join spaces, especially when those spaces feel vibrant and signal that something new is happening. Political commitment grows in environments where participation feels socially rewarding and emotionally inviting. In that sense, music, art, food, and playful elements can lower social barriers and reduce

fear, thus helping create spaces that feel welcoming and open. When people associate a movement with positive social experiences, they are more likely to return, bring others, and stay involved over time.

### **3** REMIX FAMILIAR FORMATS TO SPARK FRESH MEANING

Movements don't need to create entirely new tactics. They need to recode existing ones. Classic formats like marches, sit-ins, or speeches already carry meaning. If repeated mechanically, they reinforce routine and fatigue. But if redesigned intentionally, with striking banners, music, color, and choreography, they can disrupt expectations. Take traditional actions and alter their aesthetics, tone, or structure to change the emotional experience: introduce humor where anger is expected, art where confrontation is assumed, unexpected speakers where hierarchy is the standard. When familiar and typical forms are reimagined with intention, they can look like evolution rather than repetition.

### **4** MAKE PARTICIPATION FEEL LIKE CO-CREATION

People engage more deeply when they help shape what they are part of. Participation becomes durable when people move from consumers of action to producers of it. Don't just ask for attendance, invite contribution. Let people design chants, paint banners, remix the brand, host events, or propose ideas. The movement becomes stronger when people see their fingerprints on it, because ownership increases commitment and long-term engagement. Co-creation turns supporters into co-owners and decentralizes creativity, allowing the movement to communicate through multiple voices at once.

## 5 TAP INTO CULTURAL FIGURES AND SCENES

Show up where culture already lives. Artists, musicians, skaters, gamers, meme-makers, and dancers aren't side characters. They are amplifiers with credibility and trust that political actors often lack. Connect with scenes that already hold identity, style, and communities. Yet, instead of using them as loudspeakers, collaborate with them as interpreters. Let them translate your values into their own language and formats. When cultural figures adapt the message organically, it travels further as it feels less imposed. A movement that builds real partnerships with cultural scenes expands beyond political audiences. That's how new publics become engaged.



# TIPS

## **A** MAKE NONVIOLENCE DISCIPLINE PART OF THE STYLE

Authoritarian leaders often frame opposition movements as violent, chaotic, or dangerous threats to the established order. That's why your strategy must visibly embed nonviolent discipline at its core and make any escalation by the regime look disproportionate. In that sense, humor, art, and joy aren't ornaments, they are your shield. They are strategic assets that reduce the credibility of repression narratives and make crackdowns appear excessive.

Nonviolent discipline must be part of your style, not just a principle you declare. The bolder the tactic, the more visibly nonviolent it needs to be. Visual coherence, clear behavioral norms, and internal coordination that reinforce the nonviolent character of your actions can protect both participants and your legitimacy.

## **B** DON'T BUILD A COOL KIDS' CLUB

Being cool doesn't mean being exclusive. If your spaces feel like they are only for already-politicized people, your movement risks shrinking. Make sure the vibe is welcoming across class, age, and background. Beauty can be universal. Style can be shared. Design rituals and language that carry your message without signaling cultural status or moral superiority. Cool is powerful when it includes. When it excludes, it limits growth and narrows your base.



# WHO'S DONE IT WELL



## STUDENT MOVEMENT

### Rebranding resistance with music and joy

#### SERBIA

In late 2024, a tragic accident at the newly renovated train station in Novi Sad triggered public outrage across Serbia. The project had been promoted by President Aleksandar Vučić's government, and when the canopy collapse killed 16 people it quickly became a symbol of corruption, negligence, and political impunity. Students responded with symbolic road blockades lasting fifteen minutes, one minute for each life lost.

What began as mourning soon spread into a broader anti-corruption movement. After several protesters were attacked by pro-government supporters, campus blockades multiplied and a decentralized student-led movement began to take shape.

The movement stood out not only for its demands, but for its energy. Instead of reproducing the grim tone often associated with protest, students brought music, humor, banners, chants, and marching bands into the streets. As they marched across cities and towns, local communities welcomed them with food, shelter, and applause. Villages became reception points. “Student” became a proud identity again, something to host, cheer for, and join. Protest was recast as a space of creativity, dignity, and collective pride, helping the movement feel socially attractive rather than marginal. Even the slogan that spread through the marches —*Pumpaj!* (‘Keep pumping’)— captured that mix of momentum, humor, and youthful defiance.

Creativity also amplified reach. Protesters danced and sang during marches. Memes and TikToks mocked regime propaganda and spread rapidly online. This playful defiance reshaped the emotional climate of protest: instead of appearing threatening, the movement radiated confidence and solidarity, making repression look increasingly disproportionate. By spring 2025, student-led mobilization had helped produce some of the biggest anti-government protests Serbia had seen in years.

The students’ demands also evolved. At first, they focused on truth and accountability: releasing documents related to the station reconstruction, justice for those responsible, and protection for attacked protesters. Over time, as the government’s response remained partial, the movement widened into a broader democratic challenge. By May 2025, students were openly demanding snap parliamentary elections.

They did not win everything, but they did secure smaller victories that showed pressure was working. Prime Minister Miloš Vučević resigned, the mayor of Novi Sad stepped down, and the government made partial concessions while protests continued. Even before achieving full political change, the students had already done

“I think we have produced the most interesting banners in the world, I’ve never seen anything this creative. Also, we used a lot of music during our marches. Banners, music, memes... Even though our movement has a short history I think that’s what makes it stand out.”

something powerful: they changed the culture of protest in Serbia. Resistance no longer felt only like sacrifice. It became the place where people wanted to be.



## MY VOICE, MY CHOICE

### Pop culture to build social infrastructure

#### EUROPE

In 2024, a bold idea started circulating across Europe: collect enough support to force an EU-level response on abortion access. But instead of launching just another petition, the feminist networks behind My Voice, My Choice (MVMC) did something different: they transformed signature-gathering into a cool and engaging movement, making offline and online participation feel socially rewarding, creative, true, and fun.

Instead of relying on formal endorsements and polished press events, MVMC built a “cool-to-join” ecosystem. Local volunteers ran street stalls and pop-up actions that felt approachable rather than preachy, while a masterful digital campaign offered frictionless entry points, visuals, and shareable formats that supporters could instantly use without asking for permission.

Online, MVMC became unstoppable. At one point, its Instagram content reached over 500 million views in a single month. It ran its own social media channels flooding the internet with content filled with humor, joy, and rage: dozens of posts every day, nonstop. From princess memes to cute cats, from Barbie to

The Powerpuff Girls, they talked not just about abortion access, but about justice, values, democracy, Palestine, and human rights, in the same terms as ordinary people. No polish, no editing.

Thus, MVMC's message occupied Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn, Tumblr, Threads, Pinterest, Reddit, and Bluesky with content that wasn't uniform, but was coherent because it was grounded in core values, not aesthetics. MVMC was cool because it was authentic, unapologetically, addressing at all times the issues that were on everyone's mind.

Celebrities were also part of the mix. Mark Ruffalo supported the initiative during the Oscars ceremony, while figures such as Billie Eilish, Olivia Rodrigo, Ariana Grande, and others liked or shared MVMC content, helping the campaign travel further across digital culture. A wide range of influencers also collaborated with the campaign, giving it visibility through trusted online voices and helping translate its message into formats that felt native to different audiences and platforms.

The message wasn't diluted for reach; it was amplified through a transparent, bold, and authentic style. Thus, people were proud to belong and happy to be part of it. That's what made it powerful. That pride helped them collect 1.2 million signatures for their cause. But more than that, they created a cultural and political moment that reached over 65 million people.

That collective energy translated into real institutional impact. The initiative was approved by the European Parliament by a wide margin, including votes from conservative representatives. A few months later, it was approved by the EU Commission. What started as a feminist-driven mobilization succeeded in creating the biggest feminist network in Europe, and reshaping a polarized demand into a broadly supported issue across European politics.

**“Movements can't just be serious and exhausting: we need celebration, fun, and shared moments of happiness. We tried to create spaces where people could feel part of something bigger, but also enjoy being together.”**



# LEARN MORE

## D-HUB RESOURCES



D-Hub. 2025. "How Movements Keep Democracy Alive." *AATK Podcast Series*

## OTHER RESOURCES



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# WE CAN HELP YOU.

At the Democracy Hub, we understand the emotional and strategic challenges of confronting modern authoritarianism—uncertainty, confusion, pressure, and relentless attacks on democratic values.

But you are not alone.

D-Hub is a vibrant community dedicated to defending and renewing democracy. We have the knowledge, tools, and experience to help you fight back effectively.

Our mission is to increase the effectiveness of those fighting authoritarianism. We emphasize collaborative peer-to-peer learning, comprehensive training, coaching, strategic support, and fostering networks of solidarity and exchange. We aim to ensure that democracy advocates worldwide are equipped with the vital relationships, deep knowledge, and essential skills they need to fulfill their mission.

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Reach out to us. Together, we can defend democracy.

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