VOLUME 10

D-HUB

# THE DEMOCRATIC PLAYBOOK




## ANTI-AUTHORITARIAN TOOLKIT

Greatest hits to defend and renew democracies

D-HUB

VOLUME 10

# THE DEMOCRATIC PLAYBOOK

Top plays mastered by democracy defenders

**CURATION OF PLAYS:** Ricken Patel, Nika Kovač, Agustín Frizzera and Umanzor López-Baltodano

**EDITION:** Agustín Frizzera and Umanzor López-Baltodano

**DESIGN AND COVER:** Luana Pillmann | Foresti Design Studio

D-HUB EXTENDS ITS DEEPEST THANKS TO THE MEMBERS OF OUR COMMUNITY WHO GENEROUSLY SHARED THEIR TIME, EXPERIENCE, AND INSIGHTS THROUGH FOCUS GROUPS, INTERVIEWS, REVIEWS, AND CONVERSATIONS. THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS HELPED SHAPE, CHALLENGE, AND STRENGTHEN THIS VOLUME AT EVERY STAGE.

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Like many of us, I've focused on the fight for democracy because I realized that everything I cared about depended on it. For the past five years, my fellow Co-Chair Salil Shetty and I have tried, alongside Nika and the D-Hub team and hundreds of you, to get a handle on why authoritarian populists are winning elections and how to fight back and turn this threat into an opportunity for democracy.

This playbook is the result of that search. It's been developed by thousands of voices at the frontlines, based on what worked and what failed, and what seemed to work again and again if done right and applied with sophistication to specific contexts.

It's also the tip of the iceberg. Each of the plays mentioned here relates to a longer publication that goes into more depth and breadth, each one covering an entire field that democrats need to master in order to win.

The hour is late. Many of our greatest and strongest democracies are at risk in the coming years. If they should fall, it could usher in a darker world for our kids. But if we succeed in the strategies in this playbook, our democracies can emerge from this crucible stronger than they've ever been.

Nothing here is a silver bullet, a cookie-cutter solution or fixed in stone. But please don't dismiss anything lightly. There's a good chance it holds some value for you, and we hope it will help spark your vision and creativity for your fight. Maybe the next great play we'll learn from you.

With hope,

Ricken Patel

CO-CHAIR, D-HUB

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# INTRODUCTION



## HOW CAN DEMOCRACY WIN TODAY?

by Nika Kovač

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, D-HUB

Elected authoritarians are threatening many of the world's democracies. They fuel division, scapegoat minorities, and claim to speak for "the real people" against corrupt elites. But behind the slogans, they deepen inequality and undermine the quality of life for ordinary people. Their playbook is dangerous and yet effective. Plus, they are not acting on their own: across borders, they collaborate, share strategies, and reinforce one another.

As democracy defenders, we need a playbook too. So we decided to bring together the greatest hits of democratic strategies and tactics. It's for political parties, movements, civil society, and the wider democratic ecosystem. Elections matter deeply, but authoritarianism is not defeated by ballots alone. It is challenged in communities, institutions, culture, and in people's daily experiences.

To win, democracy must feel like a popular movement for something, not just a reaction against someone else. It must reach people not only through reason, but through emotion; not only through speeches, but through stories; not only in emergency moments, but in ordinary times. And above all, democratic governments must deliver. Because when they fail to improve people's lives, they open the door to authoritarian alternatives.

This **DEMOCRATIC PLAYBOOK** is our answer to this moment. It draws on the entire *Anti-Authoritarian Toolkit* series, bringing together a selection of proven plays. Even though these plays work differently across political, cultural, and institutional settings, they all offer insights that can travel, adapt, and succeed elsewhere.

The challenge is immense. That's exactly why this Playbook exists. Retreat has never been an option. Defending democracy requires courage, creativity, and collective action. If we succeed, we won't just defend the democracies we have. We will help shape the next wave of global democratization.

Democracy is a shared project that we must constantly rebuild. Today, we are playing defense. But defense is not enough. Beyond putting a stop to authoritarianism, democracy must also reinvent itself, setting new expectations, renewing trust, and expanding what people believe is possible.

Our time is now. That's why **D-HUB** exists: to connect democracy defenders, share what works, learn from what doesn't, and turn ideas into action for a world of freedom and dignity for all.

With love,
Nika

# HOW THIS PUBLICATION WORKS

Democracy defenders are busy and practical people. That is why this publication was designed to be concise, engaging, and immediately usable. This is a tool for action, not a comprehensive thesis on anti-authoritarianism. We want this Playbook to be read and used, not observed from a distance.

This means making choices. We simplified complex debates, favored clarity over completeness, and focused on what works rather than every possible exception. These are not oversights, but conscious decisions in service of usefulness.

This volume is structured around **ONE GRAND STRATEGY** and **NINE PLAYS.**

## GRAND STRATEGY

A Grand Strategy is a guiding framework that aligns actions and tactics toward the long-term goal of safeguarding democracy under pressure. It provides coherence and direction to the individual plays.

## PLAY

A Play is 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 real-world use, 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 detailed depiction of the play, with the basic steps of implementation.

## TIPS

Practical recommendations to improve execution.

## DON'T FUCK IT UP

Common mistakes that undermined efforts in real-world contexts.

## WHO'S DONE IT WELL

Examples of how the play has been deployed in real life, as told by the people who led them firsthand. Quotes are anonymized to protect their safety.

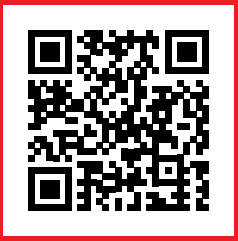
## LEARN MORE

Curated resources to deepen understanding or support implementation.

# MORE PLAYS. MORE CASES. MORE TOOLS.

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ANTIAUTHORITARIAN.COM



# DISCLAIMER

Democratic defense moves across electoral, civic, and cultural arenas. This Playbook aims to be useful across different roles in the democratic ecosystem. Some readers may compete in elections; others may not. Some operate through parties; others through movements, NGOs, or cultural work. Most plays are useful across the ecosystem and can be used across these roles, but rarely in the same way.

The same is also true for contexts. You may be operating in a democracy under pressure or under an elected authoritarian government. Not all plays fit all moments. Some are meant to contest power; others to resist, expose, or survive a regime. Each play must be read from the viewpoint of political conditions, constraints, and risks on the ground.

We recognize our own biases. We do not claim neutrality. This Playbook is not a substitute for local knowledge or leadership; it is a tool meant to support local fights.

If you need help adapting these plays to your own context, the concluding section, "We Can Help You," includes information about strategic support, training, and accompaniment. We can do it together.

## FEATURED GRAND STRATEGY

# DEMOCRATIC POPULISM

### PUTTING THE PEOPLE BACK AT THE CENTER

# THE PLAY

Democracy will survive if people feel it belongs to them. When democracy feels abstract, authoritarianism starts to feel concrete.

Authoritarian populists succeed when they tap into something real: people's desire for a better life. They thrive when they are perceived as more responsive, more decisive, and more connected to everyday life. That appeal often reaches not only the angry or the misled, but also the decent citizens who want more for their families and lives.

Presenting themselves as the only ones willing to confront real problems such as crime, insecurity, migration, and inflation is how they do it. Many people, especially those who only pay attention to politics from time to time, tend to trust them because they appear more credible on the issues that shape everyday life.

Grounded in an "us vs. them" narrative, authoritarian populists frame their political opponents as distant, hypocritical, or captured by the elites. At the same time,

they scapegoat small population groups such as illegal migrants, trans people, or religious minorities, while often shielding and backing those who actually abuse concentrations of power and wealth.

Democratic populism is the strategic lens that aligns all the plays in this Playbook around a simple goal: making democracy feel relevant, responsive, and still worth defending. It starts from a diagnosis that authoritarian populists often exploit: ordinary people have been denied dignity, voice, and control while a corrupt few bend the rules in their favor.

But unlike them, democratic populism avoids blaming minorities or vulnerable groups for systemic failures. By placing a popular agenda at the center, it seeks to build broad majorities around concrete issues that make a real difference in people's lives. It's the issues, stupid – especially the ones that can bring people together rather than pull them apart.

In that sense, democratic populism is radically open: it is built to include, not

to expel. As such, it aims to unite people around bold, down-to-earth solutions: better wages, affordable housing, public safety, and controlled migration. No decent person is excluded, and the door always remains open to those willing to be part of it.

"The people" are workers, students, parents, neighbors, anyone bound by shared values and common struggles. The forces undermining their hopes and dreams are corruption, injustice, and the abuse of power. "Them" is defined as narrowly as possible: not "the rich" in general, but oligarchs who use wealth and influence to rig the system.

From there, democratic populism brings people together around shared values and everyday concerns. It shapes how every other play in this Playbook is framed, prioritized, and combined. It leaves room for almost everyone to belong, while still challenging those–whether radical activists or powerful establishment interests–who stand in the way of tangible change.

Ultimately, democratic populism reclaims the most powerful force in politics: hope.



# WHY IT WORKS

- **LISTENING FIRST STRENGTHENS TRUST.** Understanding how voters think, speak, and experience everyday problems makes it possible to connect across divides.
- **CHALLENGING THE CORRUPT TURNS ANGER INTO UNITY.** Pointing to abusive elites turns outrage into a unifying force, rather than one that artificially divides society.
- **SPEAKING PLAINLY MAKES DEMOCRACY RELATABLE.** Clear and emotional language helps people feel that politics is about their lives, not about distant elites or abstract debates.
- **SHARED VALUES DISARM EXCLUSIONARY NARRATIVES.** Grounding politics in shared values weakens attempts to monopolize identity, belonging, or patriotism for exclusionary ends.
- **WINNING ON WHAT IMPROVES PEOPLE'S LIVES BUILDS CREDIBILITY.** Focusing on solutions that improve daily realities shows that democracy can deliver and rebuild trust.



# HOW IT WORKS

## 1 LISTEN DEEPLY TO CHANNEL THE POPULAR VOICE

Get outside your echo chambers. They may feel comfortable because they reinforce how you already think, but in times like these, staying closely connected to people with diverse political perspectives has become more important than ever before. Use tools like polling, social listening, and qualitative research, but don't stop there. Spend time where people actually live, work, and talk. Understand how issues are discussed, which concerns matter most, and which solutions truly resonate.

Identify the moral clarity within each issue, even in divisive debates, to understand where to stand and how to engage without abandoning democratic values. You may find, for example, that many people who want lower immigration levels still believe immigrant families should be treated with dignity. Listening carefully does not mean abandoning your values or waiting to be told what and how to think. It means testing your assumptions and preconceptions, deepening your understanding, and learning to separate legitimate concerns from manipulative framing.

## 2 KNOW YOUR ENEMY

Listening is not only about the people you want to represent, but also about understanding those who oppose you. Democratic populism requires knowing the adversary in depth: how they frame problems, where they draw emotional power from, and which narratives make them credible to ordinary voters.

Use opponent or ecosystem mapping to break down their story: which issues they tend to highlight, who they usually blame, which emotions they activate, and what solutions they promise. Analyze the fears, resentments, and hopes they tap into. All this will help you craft sharper contrasts, anticipate attacks, and expose false solutions without caricature or contempt toward voters. Most importantly, it will also help you identify where authoritarian populists are right, and your side may have been wrong. Learning that painful lesson early may save your democracy later.

## 3 FRAME "THE PEOPLE", BUILD A SHARED "WE"

Frame your movement or campaign in the broad "We": workers, students, parents, neighbors, farmers, nurses, shopkeepers. Root this shared identity not in birthplace, religion, gender, ethnicity, class, party, or ideology, but in what all people share: their values, their history, their lived experience, and their sense of country, community, and humanity.

Democratic populism isn't about stitching together 50% + 1 through fragmented, hyper-targeted messages. It's about building a common story that people can recognize themselves in. Rather than speaking to society in isolated segments, define "the people" as everyone who contributes to society and deserves dignity, voice, and fairness.

## 4 SPEAK LIKE A NORMAL HUMAN BEING

People can smell bullshit, so being authentic in how you speak and present yourself is key. Speak clearly and directly. No jargon. No complex abstractions. Use clear, everyday, straightforward language: just in the way you would speak to a friend or to your mom. Use familiar metaphors and words that actually appeal to people. Keep your sentences short and natural. If it does not make sense in everyday conversation, it will not land in politics.

Speaking like a normal human being also means telling uncomfortable truths. Credibility grows when you openly acknowledge where democracy has failed: corruption, inefficiency, elitism, and the inability to deliver. Don't talk around these issues. Say what went wrong, and explain what you will do differently. Honesty also means defending what still works and naming the arsonists who would gladly burn down the society people spent generations building.

Plain language paired with honest self-critique is what makes trust possible again.

## 5 BOLD, POPULAR SOLUTIONS

In a polarized world, broad support is how democracy wins. Whether you are campaigning, governing, or organizing, address the issues that matter most with concrete proposals rooted in what people want to actually experience: better wages, public safety, affordable housing, civic freedoms, community-based care, managed migration, and protection from elite abuse. Bold solutions work when they respond to people's everyday concerns, not to abstract ideology.

Democratic populism prioritizes popular issues because tangible improvements can unite majorities. Yet, being "popular" does not mean abandoning principles. Focusing on shared

concerns does not require giving up minority rights. Defend those rights differently: through moral clarity and shared values, not moralism or abstraction. The goal is not to win every battle, but to anchor hard principles in every issue.

And when the opportunity comes along, deliver. Politics is not just about saying the right words; it is also about making people believe that things can actually get better. That belief lasts when democratic forces, once in power, can show real improvements in people's lives.

## 6 ROOT IT IN CULTURE

Politics cannot win on its own. Durable majorities are not built only through parties or elections, but through the organizations, communities, independent media, and cultural spaces where people spend their lives. That is where people make sense of the world, form opinions, and decide who to trust. Translate your core messages into shared symbols, language, rituals, music, humor, and aesthetics that reflect people's lives and values.

Build narratives that not only persuade in the moment, but fit into the songs people sing, the symbols they carry, and the words they use every day. Politics follows culture. It sticks when it is woven into daily expressions, shaping identity and giving people a sense of ownership. When narratives are rooted in culture, they stop depending on leaders and start living through people.

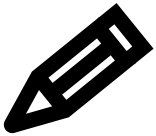
## 7 EXPOSE THE REAL DIVIDE

No scapegoats. Focus on the real sources of harm: not vague enemies, but the specific actors willing to rig, hollow out, or burn down ordinary life for power, profit, or ideology. Sometimes they are corrupt elites or oligarchs. Sometimes they are extremists, ideologues, or those who profit from division and chaos.

Show how these few work against the common good: by capturing institutions, distorting markets, poisoning public debate, normalizing abuse of power, and hijacking government for their own agenda. While most people are trying to live decently, work hard, and keep society functioning, these actors exploit those efforts and benefit from them without giving anything back.

Make that divide visible. Expose those willing to set fire to the house we still have to live in. Be precise about who benefits, how they operate, and at whose expense.

And always target behavior and actions, never someone's identity. The goal is not to write people off, but to win them over.



# TIPS

## A DEMOCRATIC POPULISM IS FOR MOVEMENTS, NOT JUST PARTIES

Democratic populism is not just an electoral strategy for parties or candidates. It is a way for movements, NGOs, and civic actors to make democratic values feel relevant to everyday life. Instead of defending rights and public goods as niche causes, root them in the concerns people already share. When rights become part of a broader popular project, they stop feeling like someone else's agenda. They become something people want to defend themselves.

## B WRAP YOURSELF IN THE FLAG AND IN TRADITION

Reclaim identity, belonging, and patriotism as democratic terrain. Wrap yourself in the flag and refuse to let others define what this means. Celebrate sovereignty, shared values, and cultural pride without exclusion or hate. Make national symbols, heroes, and stories part of your own political language. True patriotism defends the integrity, freedom, and dignity of the nation and its people. When democrats abandon national identity, authoritarians rush in to define it for everyone else.

## C SEPARATE YOUR INNER EVANGELICAL FROM YOUR INNER DEMOCRAT

Trying to change people's values is a legitimate part of democratic politics. But not every disagreement needs to become the center of your political strategy. Authoritarians thrive when democratic coalitions split over cultural divides. Don't help them succeed. Ask a different question: Does centering this issue help defend democracy, or does it weaken the majority needed to protect it? Fight every battle if you must. Don't turn every battle into your main campaign.

## D ECONOMIC POPULISM, CULTURAL MODERATION

Democratic populism always depends on context. But across countries and political traditions, two approaches consistently help build broad majorities. First, economic populism: focus on improving jobs, strengthening public services, and lowering the cost of living. These are the issues that shape people's daily lives most directly. Second, cultural moderation: reject the excesses of both the left and the right, and bring common-sense decency to cultural debates.



# DON'T FUCK IT UP

## IMITATION IS A LOSING STRATEGY

The original always beats the copy. When democrats imitate authoritarians—or anyone else—they lose credibility, confuse their base, and legitimize the very politics they are trying to defeat. Authenticity is one of the few advantages democratic leaders cannot afford to lose. If your leaders cannot connect with people as they are, find leaders who can.

Imitating authoritarian dirty tricks can be just as damaging. Don't become exactly what you're fighting against. Upholding transparency, truthfulness, and respect for rights matters even when opponents lie, cheat, or intimidate. Defending democratic principles creates moral and political clarity and exposes authoritarian hypocrisy. When you refuse to play by their rules, you protect your identity and show people why your project deserves their trust.

# WHO'S DONE IT WELL



## LULA DA SILVA

### Big tent to defeat Bolsonaro

BRAZIL

In the 2022 elections, Lula da Silva built a broad pro-democracy coalition that went far beyond the traditional left. His candidacy brought together environmentalists, unions, feminists, evangelicals, centrist economists, former political rivals, and center-right figures like his running mate Geraldo Alckmin. The coalition's message focused on restoring democracy, rebuilding social policies dismantled by Bolsonaro, and defending institutions under attack. Lula framed the alliance as a moral necessity to defeat social injustice and doubled down on economic populism by raising the minimum wage, expanding cash transfer programs, and investing in public services. He also signaled cultural moderation, for ex-

> "We wanted to join democrats of all political positions, classes, races and religious beliefs to defeat the totalitarian threat, the hatred, violence and discrimination hanging over our country."

ample by deferring the abortion issue to the Congress, as over 70% of Brazilians are against access to abortion. This approach allowed him to activate his base while broadening appeal across ideological lines, ultimately securing a decisive victory.



## PÉTER MAGYAR

### Democratic populism breaks Orbán's spell

HUNGARY

Péter Magyar's Tisza Party defeated Viktor Orbán's Fidesz in Hungary's 2026 elections, transforming an insider's break from the ruling system into a major democratic-populist breakthrough. A former figure from the Fidesz ecosystem, Magyar built not another coalition of discredited opposition parties, but a big tent of voters: old opposition supporters, former Fidesz voters, non-voters, young people, and rural citizens. He campaigned relentlessly outside Budapest, visiting hundreds of towns and villages and turning in-person rallies into proof that change could reach the whole country.

> "One of our main aims is to reunite the nation, to stop the propaganda, to stop the hate speech, and to speak about the reality, the conditions, the state of play of our country."

His message stayed disciplined: failing hospitals, schools, transport, inflation, cost of living, and corruption, while refusing Fidesz's traps on polarizing culture-war issues. He also reclaimed patriotism through Hungarian flags, folk songs, and national

symbols, making democracy feel national rather than niche. Online, he used livestreams, vertical videos, confrontational posts, memes, and fan-made organic content to flood the zone back with momentum instead of fear.

Whether this project translates into inclusive and plural democratic governance remains open, but Magyar was able to break Orbán's spell and give Hungary a chance to rebuild its democracy.



## RAHUL GANDHI

### A march for unity and dignity

INDIA

In 2022, Rahul Gandhi launched the *Bharat Jodo Yatra* (Unite India March), a 4,000-kilometer march across India framed as a response to rising hate, division, and inequality. Instead of focusing on party politics, Gandhi walked alongside farmers, students, workers, and activists —listening, not lecturing. The tone was patriotic but inclusive; the message emotional but strategic: "Unite India." His populist narrative centered on dignity, economic justice, and love over hate, away from aggressive culture war stances. Gandhi's journey helped humanize the Congress party, reconnected it with everyday struggles, and modeled an alternative to the BJP's brand of authoritarian populism.

> "This election is a fight between two ideologies! On one side there is the Congress, which has always united India, and on the other side there are those who have always tried to divide people."

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"Human Politics." Vol. 9, *Leadership*

"Be Consistent." Vol. 9, *Leadership*

"Build a Universal Message." Vol. 4, *Narrative*

"Big Tent Coalitions." Vol. 5, *Opposition Coordination*

"Social Listening and Sentiment Analysis." Vol. 2, *Digital Comms*

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## RELATED ELECTION BRIEFS

2025. “Stories of Hope.”

2025. “The Zohran Lightning (US).”

2025. “A Surprise Comeback! (Romania).”

2024. “Never Give Up (India).”

# 1

# AN INCLUSIVE NARRATIVE

Crafting a shared story
of identity and belonging

# THE PLAY

Marshall Ganz famously taught that every great political vision contains a "story of me, story of us, and story of now." The "us" defines the strength of a political project. The more people who can see themselves in that story, the more power the political project has to shape a country.

Authoritarians understand this well. Their stories may be divisive, but they feel simple, familiar, and welcoming to many voters. They make people feel seen, usually by saying out loud what many feel deep down. Patriotism, faith, "the people vs. the elites," or even scapegoating immigrants can all become powerful stories that people recognize and repeat.

By contrast, democrats–both in politics and civil society–too often narrow the "us." We tend to moralize, over-explain, bury people in facts, or pick fights with values, identities, or ways of life that large

parts of society still cherish. That is not only a doomed strategy; it also makes democracy feel colder, smaller, and less human than it should.

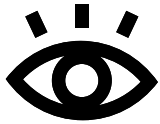
So, tell an inclusive story, one rooted less in grievance than in the ties that bind people together: shared values, common struggles, and a future worth building. That story should not live in abstractions, but in the everyday lives of real people facing fear, uncertainty, and the need to hold on to hope.

That story can be told in many voices, styles, and formats. But it needs one shared rhythm–one drumbeat–that helps people recognize not only who they are, but also what they stand for together.



# WHY IT WORKS

- **A BROADER "US" IS BUILT.** An inclusive narrative ties people to the values and struggles that have shaped a nation over time and carries that story into the present.
- **SHARED VALUES CUT THROUGH DIVIDES.** When anchored in values, a common story resonates across groups and creates shared emotional ground.
- **RECOGNITION PRECEDES ACTION.** When people feel seen and included in a shared story, emotion stops being passive and becomes a driver of collective action.
- **BELONGING IS A POLITICAL FORCE.** A shared narrative gives people identity and purpose, helping them feel part of something larger than themselves: a bigger "we."
- **DEMOCRACY BECOMES VISIBLE.** By speaking to people's emotions, democracy feels concrete and relatable, not distant or abstract, but present in everyday life.



# HOW IT WORKS

## 1 START WITH SHARED VALUES, NOT POLITICAL POSITIONS

Begin by identifying the shared values—dignity, fairness, love, safety—that resonate across divides and are relevant to the time and political context you are in. These values become the emotional anchors of your story, the basis of a broader "we," and the drumbeat that allows many different voices to tell the same story without losing coherence, as in Brazil, where democracy was framed first as dignity and unity before any policy or political debate.

Shared values are not public policy talking points; they are the moral core that shapes your story every time you tell it, including when you speak about policy.

## 2 NARROW THE "THEM" AND DRAW THE CONTRAST

A story of "us" that is inclusive also needs a clear "them." Define "the people" universally, yet show where authoritarians stand outside that shared circle of values. Expose the betrayal: authoritarians claim to represent the people, and yet their actions (corruption, exclusion, abuse) betray the very values they invoke. Try to make the "them" as narrow as possible —for example, your fight isn't against rich people or even billionaires; it's against "corrupt oligarchs."

## 3 MAKE DEMOCRACY PERSONAL AND TANGIBLE

Connect the political struggle for values to real, concrete goals: better wages, safer streets, affordable housing, civic freedoms, community-based care. Show how your proposals shape people's everyday lives. Highlight heroes like the nurse, the student, or the shopkeeper, and make the effects of democracy in their lives visible, just as Indigenous communities did in Guatemala by framing democracy through daily needs rather than party politics.

Real stories turn abstract ideals into shared reality and help people recognize themselves inside the democratic story. They remind people that democracy already exists in the things that protect, sustain, and improve their everyday lives.

## 4 USE HUMOR, IRONY, AND JOY AS A NARRATIVE ARMOR

Fear and anger are authoritarian fuel. Humor, irony, and joy can puncture that fear, as many youth-led movements have shown, as in Thailand. To counter fear-based narratives, they used satire, memes, cultural references, and lightness to make democracy culturally contagious and resistant to intimidation. Laughter is a serious thing. Joy itself can be an act of defiance if it exposes hypocrisy and spreads courage.

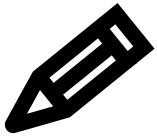
## 5 ALIGN DIVERSE MESSENGERS AROUND THE SAME DRUMBEAT

Artists, journalists, activists, influencers, small business leaders, volunteers, and everyday people can all tell parts of your story in their own voices. Each connects differently. Some move hearts, others inform or mobilize, and many make the story feel real and close to home. The key is not uniformity, but a story that lets different voices speak without losing the rhythm that holds them together.

As demonstrated, again, by Brazil's broad coalition, speaking in many voices while holding a single moral frame is possible. It is not vital that everyone is saying the same thing, but that everyone is reinforcing the same story.

## 6 MAKE THE DEMOCRACY FIGHT PART OF CULTURE

Stories stick when they live in everyday culture. Create symbols, rituals, music, memes, art, and events that make your story feel like a shared heritage. Use images, traditions, and cultural references that reflect where people have been, where they are at, and where they are going, reminding them of their place in a shared journey and the steps still ahead. Over time, these cultural expressions make democracy part of daily life: something familiar, lived, and easy to recognize. Something people live and experience, not just vote for.



# TIPS

## A PRIORITIZE HONESTY AND SIMPLICITY

Present stories as they are: honest, raw, and reflective of real life. Avoid over-polishing or heavy scripting. Sincerity and authenticity are key to building trust. Honesty means showing both challenges and successes, using clear and simple language that resonates across groups.

The strongest narratives often emerge organically, when real people feel their experiences matter and recognize themselves in the story. That is what no script can manufacture.

## B TURN EMOTION INTO CALLS FOR ACTION

Stories should do more than move people. They should move them to act. Democratic narratives work best when they connect emotion to purpose. Different moments call for different emotions. Anger or fear can grab attention and break indifference. Empathy and curiosity open space for connection. Hope turns that energy into commitment.

Every story should point somewhere actionable: voting, volunteering, organizing, or amplifying the message. Clear next steps transform emotion into agency and turn storytelling into collective action that people can actually join.



# DON'T FUCK IT UP

## BE CAREFUL WITH THE "CLEVER BUT INEFFECTIVE" SYNDROME

Not all laughter helps democracy. Using humor comes with a challenge: you don't just want people to laugh; you want the kind of laughter that sparks awareness and prompts critical reflection. A joke that doesn't directly target the regime's weaknesses may be clever, but it won't weaken the perception of authoritarian power. Effective humor should make authoritarian figures feel exposed or embarrassed, creating doubt among their moderate supporters and giving courage to everyone else. That's when laughter becomes a true act of resistance.

Do

# WHO'S DONE IT WELL




## FUTURE FORWARD & MOVE FORWARD PARTIES

### Universal values to unite generations

THAILAND

Rather than speaking in the language of abstract liberal reform, Thailand's pro-democracy Future Forward—and later Move Forward—party built a simple moral story about who the country should belong to. Their message linked democracy to everyday dignity: good politics, good living, good future. Through the "3Ds" (demilitarize, demonopolize, decentralize), they translated structural reform into something ordinary people could feel: less military control, fewer monopolies, more local power, and a fairer economy beyond Bangkok. That made democracy sound less like an elite institutional argument and more like a promise that Thailand could work better for everyone.

Just as importantly, they kept the "them" narrow. The enemy was not tradition, older voters, or the nation itself, but the military-backed and monopoly-protected order that blocked opportunity and voice. That framing helped Move Forward carry the energy of youth protest into a wider electorate tired

of patronage and old divisions. That narrative had real force. In 2023, Move Forward won the highest number of seats in Thailand's general election, turning reform into the country's most compelling political story. But the establishment still blocked its path to power, and the court later dissolved the party. However, the movement quickly regrouped under the People's Party, which continues to be the biggest challenger to establishment rule in Thailand.

> "The MFP's campaign broke away from the fear-based narratives traditionally used by other political parties. Rather than focusing on threats posed by opposition forces, the MFP emphasized the potential for positive change. Empowering local communities, promoting social equality, and transforming Thailand."



## LULA DA SILVA

### Together for Brazil

BRAZIL

In Brazil's deeply polarized 2022 election, Lula did not campaign only as the leader of the left. He offered a broader story about the country itself: there were not "two Brazils," but one people pulled apart by hatred, fear, and institutional erosion. In reviving the old language of "peace and love," he framed the election less as an ideological revenge than as a chance to restore coexistence, dignity, and democratic calm. That story was reinforced

> "There are not two Brazils. We are a single country, a single people, a great nation."

by the coalition around him: former rival Geraldo Alckmin as running mate, outreach to business leaders, and even a public letter to evangelicals promising respect for religious freedom.

That inclusive narrative was also made tangible in the campaign's language and imagery. Slogans like "Brazil of Hope" and "Together for Brazil" reinforced a story of optimism, shared recovery, and national belonging, while the campaign's visual language blended party identity with the colors of the Brazilian flag to widen the sense of inclusion. Lula was presented as both affectionate and presidential, close to ordinary people but capable of restoring calm, jobs, and democratic normalcy. After winning the runoff with 50.9% to Bolsonaro's 49.1%, Lula said, "I will govern for 215 million Brazilians, and not just for those who voted for me." That is what made the narrative powerful: it did not just promise to defeat Bolsonaro, but to make democracy feel large enough for Brazil again.

## ELBOWS UP!

### Turning belonging into a democratic force

CANADA

When trade tensions and confrontational rhetoric from Donald Trump escalated in early 2025, Canadians across the political spectrum rallied around an unexpected call: *Elbows Up, Canada!* Drawn from hockey culture, the slogan captured a shared instinct: defensive, proud, and unmistakably Canadian,

without tipping into fear or exclusion. This effervescent grassroots response turned into a movement and quickly crossed into popular culture, mainly driven by its inclusive nature. High-profile figures like Mike Myers amplified the message through widely shared moments that fused humor, patriotism, and moral clarity. Rallies, memes, and family-friendly events reframed sovereignty as dignity and belonging rather than aggression, offering a broad and inclusive "we" that people could step into without partisan labels.

By narrowing the "them" to the external forces trying to bully Canada, the movement lowered the barriers to entry: every Canadian was invited in. This re-energized civic pride and made *Elbows Up!* more than symbolic; it helped shape the political arena. That emotional groundwork carried into the general election, where Mark Carney pulled off a surprising turnaround against Pierre Poilievre, whose style of politics reminded many Canadians of Trump. *Elbows Up!* did not become a party machine, but it helped define the moral frame of the moment: unity over humiliation, dignity over domination.

> **"This is a moment for Canadians to come together, stand tall, and make our voices heard. We're gathering to send a clear message: Canada is strong, independent, and not for sale."**

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

# LEARN MORE

## RELATED AATK PLAYS

"Human Politics." Vol. 9, *Leadership*.

"Build a Universal Message." Vol. 4, *Narrative*.

"Tell the Story of the People." Vol. 4, *Narrative*.

"Call to Action." Vol. 4, *Narrative*.

"Fight Back Using Humor." Vol. 4, *Narrative*.

"AI for Content Production." Vol. 2, *Digital Comms*.

"Build a Vision of Tomorrow." Vol. 6, *Movement Building*.

→ AATK PLAYS AVAILABLE AT ANTIAUTHORITARIAN.COM

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## RELATED ELECTION BRIEFS

2026. "The Establishment Strikes Back (Thailand)."

2024. "Stories of Hope."

2025. "A Surprise Comeback! (Romania)."

2025. "Big Beautiful Turnarounds (Canada)."

# 2

# DOMINATE ON DIGITAL

Building the digital ecosystem to spread political content

# THE PLAY

People spend many hours online. The digital space is today's main political battlefield. What people see, share, and repeat online shapes what feels normal, acceptable, or inevitable. Winning this space is not about posting more or arguing better. It is about building ecosystems that capture attention, shape opinion, and move people to act.

Authoritarians understand this well. This is why, in order to dominate attention and spread their message, they use humor, rage, spectacle, and a deep understanding of platforms and algorithms. Their content doesn't feel like politics; it feels more like culture. By contrast, we often arrive late, voicing facts in a space that rewards emotion and belonging. We tend to interrupt the feed instead of becoming part of it.

Therefore, it becomes mandatory to create and distribute political content that feels native to where it appears, blending information with entertainment, urgency with playfulness, and values with identity.

But content alone is not enough: digital politics is not about broadcasting messages; it is about building ecosystems.

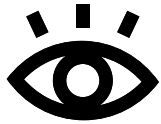
Building influencer networks, activating fandom logic, and mastering formats like vertical video are not isolated tactics. Together, they build a digital ecosystem where political messages move through trusted voices, familiar formats, and the communities where people already spend their time. That is how political ideas travel –just like pop culture does.

When that happens, political ideas stop feeling like ads and start feeling like common sense.



# WHY IT WORKS

- **NATIVE CONTENT EARNS ATTENTION.** Content that feels natural to the platform in format, tone, and rhythm is less likely to be ignored or dismissed as political messaging.
- **CULTURAL CUES UNLOCK ATTENTION.** Using humor, slang, and pop culture makes political content feel familiar, emotionally engaging, and worth sharing.
- **TRUSTED MESSENGERS DRIVE BELIEF.** When friends, creators, or community figures we like share political content, it feels safer and more natural to engage with it.
- **COMMUNITY CREATES COMMITMENT.** Digital communities give people a role, an identity, and a sense of belonging, turning audiences into carriers of the message.
- **REPETITION STRENGTHENS MESSAGES.** Seeing the same message in different voices boosts retention, especially when it appears across different formats and accounts.



# HOW IT WORKS

## 1 LISTEN BEFORE YOU SPEAK

Start with social listening. Follow hashtags, track memes, scroll comment sections. Pay attention to the music, shows, slang, and pop culture references people use to express what matters to them. Don't guess: observe and take note.

Track not only what people say, but how they say it: which emotions they express, what language they repeat, what jokes land, and what content gets shared. As we've seen in Indonesia, where real-time social listening online during debates shaped responses, the most effective messages come from understanding the language, tone, and codes that people are already using.

## 2 SERVE BROCCOLI IN THE RICE

Deliver serious ideas through formats people already consume and enjoy. Embed the broccoli in the rice: gather creators, remixers, and fans who can blend political ideas with content people already love. This means placing political messages inside familiar digital habits, not asking people to step out of them.

For example, basketball fans gather around highlight clips of a big dunk or a last-second shot: that's the rice. A post that briefly connects that moment to a player speaking out against racism is the broccoli. The political message works because it appears within a space people already enjoy, not as an interruption but as a natural extension.

## 3 DISTRIBUTE THROUGH TRUSTED MESSENGERS

Build a network of influencers, creators, and community figures who already have credibility with your target audience. Let the message move through the voices people trust, not official accounts. Map who shapes opinion in each space and equip them to carry the message further than you ever could. This can mean giving them talking points, assets they can adapt, early access to key messages, or simply enough trust and context to make it their own. The goal is not just to reach more people, but to let the message travel through a wider network that can keep the message moving across different audiences, formats, and digital spaces. In France, for instance, this approach helped turn reach into turnout and proved decisive in the 2024 elections.

## 4 BUILD HIGH-INTENSITY COMMUNITIES

Don't just post: organize. High-intensity communities go beyond followers. They create a sense of belonging. Use shared symbols, language, and missions to forge identity and commitment. Tap into fandom energy to make people proud to be part of something. Give people things to do, not just things to watch. No action is too small: sharing a post, replying to a comment, inviting a friend, remixing a meme, defending the group, showing up to an event, or helping others feel visible or part of it.

As seen in Brazil, these communities aren't passive consumers of your messages; they become active participants in the cause. That participation gives people a sense of worth, role, and ownership. Over time, they stop being an audience and become your greatest advocates: spreading the message, defending it, adapting it, and keeping it alive across platforms. The stronger the sense of belonging, the stronger the movement.

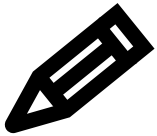
## 5 SCALE UP WITH SMART TOOLS

AI and digital tools let small teams punch above their weight. They can efficiently support tasks like creating multiple versions of the same content, adapting it to different platforms, editing videos, generating visuals, and simplifying complex information. They can also help teams schedule content, coordinate communities, and manage distribution more efficiently.

These tools won't replace a comms team, but they can amplify it. By automating repetitive work, they free up time and energy for what matters most: creativity. Use them for speed, adaptation, and experimentation —not for replacing judgment, political instinct, or your own voice. Creativity leads the way; tools help scale what already works.

## 6 MAKE IT SHAREABLE

Frame democratic values not as lectures or homework, but as content people actually want to share. Let humor, storytelling, and cultural cues spark attention. Blend urgency with joy, information with entertainment. If democracy can't be felt, it can't be defended. Turn your message into something people are comfortable reposting, quoting, or remixing. Not out of duty, but because it reflects how they want to be seen. Ask yourself: Would someone send this to a friend, post it to their story, or drop it in a group chat without embarrassment? If not, it probably won't travel. This is how WhatsApp-based organizing in India turned everyday content into political identity, chat by chat. The best political content travels like pop culture: it is memorable, emotional, and made to be passed on.



# TIPS

## A TARGET SMART, GET BEYOND THE CHOIR

Your goal shouldn't be just reach: it should be reach across different bubbles. Think in terms of ecosystems, not megaphones. Use social listening and sentiment analysis to spot persuadable audiences that can shift their own views. Then, amplify through diverse influencers: not just political voices, but people in sports, entertainment, spirituality, or gossip, as well as local leaders, niche creators, or community figures whose influence matters most in their own communities. You don't need influencers to be famous, just trusted and influential within a specific audience.

## B FLOOD THE ZONE WITH CONTENT

There is no such thing as too much communication. Share messages frequently across every available channel. Don't assume it is enough if people have heard you once; most will need to hear it many times, in many formats, before it sticks. Repetition builds familiarity, and familiarity builds trust.

Remember two things. First, a good digital campaign also speaks in the authentic language of each platform: what works on TikTok won't work the same way on Instagram or WhatsApp. Second, not every post needs to be polished; speed often beats perfection. Timely, authentic responses resonate more and create more engagement than overproduced content that lands after the wave has already passed.



# DON'T FUCK IT UP

## MAKE AI WORK FOR YOU, NOT INSTEAD OF YOU

AI can help you scale, but only if humans stay in charge. Let AI generate drafts, explore formats, and speed up production, but let a comms team refine the tone, remove bias, and make sure the content says what you actually mean. This combination ensures that your message stays aligned with your values, and that political content remains inclusive, credible, and emotionally real. AI is your tool, not your voice.

Do

# WHO'S DONE IT WELL



## INFLUENCERS AGAINST THE FAR RIGHT

### A network to turn likes into votes

FRANCE

In the second round of the 2024 French legislative elections, a network of over 400 digital creators was organized on WhatsApp to stop the far right from taking power after it had won the first round.

Each day, the influencers received clear inputs, but each developed their own content—videos, posts, and memes—focused on boosting turnout among disengaged young voters. Instead of overwhelming influencers with political jargon, organizers emphasized trust, creativity, and peer-to-peer coordination.

> "Our group was primarily composed of a diverse group of influencers united by a shared goal: to engage in political discourse, even if it was outside their usual content."

Then, influencers created content that felt personal and shareable, including viral campaigns like “Dear Parents” and “Conversations with Far-Right Supporters.” The result: the network reached more than 50 million people in just a few weeks and played a big role in boosting overall turnout to 66% and youth turnout to 56%, helping push the far right into third place.

## LULAVERSO & BOLSOFLIX

### Building love and loathing

BRAZIL

In Brazil’s 2022 elections, two digital universes—Lulaverso and Bolsoflix—mobilized voters through emotional identity. Lulaverso created a fandom around Lula, using humor, gossip, and pop culture to present him as charismatic, fun, and deeply human. It targeted voters who admired Lula but weren’t yet politically engaged—especially younger audiences who hadn’t lived through his previous presidency.

Bolsoflix, on the other hand, operated as a “hatedom”: it amplified Bolsonaro’s most controversial moments to fuel anger and rejection. Instead of soft persuasion, it leaned into outrage —channeling negative sentiment into political distancing. Both campaigns used influencer networks, WhatsApp groups, and meme-driven formats to create viral momentum and embed political messages into daily digital life.

Initiatives like these help mobilize voters. On election day, more than 118 million Brazilians voted—500,000 more than in the first round—and abstention fell to its lowest level since 2006. In that high-turnout environment, Lula went on to win with 50.9% of the vote to Bolsonaro's 49.1%.

> "Lulaverso allowed us to connect emotionally with those who saw Lula as more than just a politician. We humanized him, made him approachable (...) With Bolsoflix, we avoided using excessive or abstract fear. We focused on showing Bolsonaro's tangible failures, but mixed them with humor and satire."



## ANIES BASWEDAN'S 2024 CAMPAIGN

### Listening to reach beyond the base

INDONESIA

With just two months left in Indonesia's 2024 presidential race, Anies Baswedan's campaign made a late but decisive shift: to integrate social listening and sentiment analysis into its digital strategy. A new team rapidly scraped social media posts, videos, and comments, filtering by engagement and mapping conversations to identify where narratives were forming and which influencers were shaping them. Using language models to classify sentiment, the campaign tracked public reactions to its own messages and those of opponents in near real time.

This insight transformed how the campaign communicated. Rather than broadcasting fixed messages, the team adapted content to what audiences were already responding to —reinforcing narratives that gained traction and recalibrating when backlash emerged. During the first presidential debate, live analysis revealed which moments resonated most, allowing the rapid production of memes and short videos that amplified positive reactions and countered criticism.

Although Anies ultimately lost the election, this strategy helped him remain competitive in the campaign's final stretch, sharpen his debate performance, and expand his reach beyond his core supporters.

**"By using social listening and sentiment analysis, we pinpointed groups that could be influenced in specific moments (...) This allowed us to engage meaningfully with the right people at the right time."**

# LEARN MORE

## RELATED AATK PLAYS

"Put Broccoli on the Rice." Vol. 2, *Digital Comms*.

"Network of Influencers." Vol. 2, *Digital Comms*.

"Fandoms and Hatedoms." Vol. 2, *Digital Comms*.

"Social Listening and Sentiment Analysis." Vol. 2, *Digital Comms*.

"WhatsApp Groups." Vol. 2, *Digital Comms*.

"AI for Content Production." Vol. 2, *Digital Comms*.

→ AATK PLAYS AVAILABLE AT ANTIAUTHORITARIAN.COM

## RELATED ELECTION BRIEFS

2025. "The Zohran Lightning (US)."

2024. "Defusing the far-right bomb (France)."

2024. "The Triumph of the Outsider (Argentina)."

# 3

# CIVIC POWER FOR POLITICAL IMPACT

Coordinating civil society to shape democratic alternatives

# THE PLAY

Civil society is one of the bedrocks of democratic life. When the civic ecosystem is weak, disconnected, or pushed out of the political arena, authoritarians gain ground more easily. Civic actors can engage the political struggle without becoming partisan or subordinated to party politics.

If grassroots groups, movements, independent media, unions, faith communities, and ordinary citizens come together and coordinate, they can play a political role of their own: shaping agendas, raising demands, mobilizing constituencies, and forcing political responses around specific issues.

Broad, big-tent civil society coalitions that operate outside party structures can challenge authoritarian narratives by pushing for solutions that address people's real concerns: cost of living, corruption, public safety, affordable housing, civic freedoms, and community-based care.

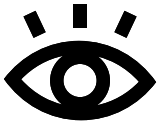
Their independence is their strength. It allows them to criticize, propose, and mobilize without being dismissed as partisan. They should stay connected to institutional politics, but not dependent on it. This distance gives them the credibility to push bolder demands and open new political paths.

At a time when political parties are in crisis in many democracies, a big-tent civic coalition can become a lasting democratic force, capable of sustaining pressure and helping democratic alternatives grow in the political arena.



# WHY IT WORKS

- **AUTHORITARIANS ARE KEPT ON THE DEFENSIVE.** Civic-political movements can shift the fight, forcing authoritarians to respond instead of setting the agenda.
- **SUPPRESSION OR DISCREDITING BECOMES HARDER.** A broad civic front spreads risk and makes repression more politically costly.
- **POWER IS SCALED.** Distributed civic structures allow local teams to act quickly, adapt to context, and replicate tactics, turning small networks into forces with national reach.
- **POPULAR CONCERNS ARE RESPONDED TO.** Grounding the movement in everyday issues like cost of living, corruption, or public safety speaks to people's daily realities and builds trust.
- **INSTITUTIONAL AND CIVIC ACTION ARE BRIDGED.** Linking civic movements with democratic institutions connects formal politics with the energy of everyday citizens.



# HOW IT WORKS

## 1 START WITH A UNIFYING PURPOSE

Agree on a shared democratic mission that transcends partisan divides, rooted in universal values like dignity, fairness, and safety. Build demands around this purpose, backing them with clear, winnable objectives that are connected to everyday concerns, such as cost of living, corruption, or safer streets. Make it clear that this mission is about sustaining and renewing a shared way of life over time, as seen in Brazil's Pact for Democracy.

## 2 ORGANIZE AROUND SHARED GOALS, NOT TOTAL UNITY

Acknowledge that members of a big-tent coalition will tend to disagree on many issues. Focus energy on the goals everyone can commit to, such as defending elections, protecting freedoms, fighting corruption, and advancing tangible causes that improve people's lives. Don't try to align every ideology. Keeping goals shared and concrete makes collaboration easier and momentum stronger. This same logic allowed a wide range of civic actors in Poland to coordinate action without forcing full consensus.

## 3 BUILD A TRULY BIG TENT

As they did in recent Senegalese elections, recruit a wide range of civic actors: grassroots movements, unions, cultural organizations, professional associations, faith networks, volunteers, and everyday people. Create channels of dialogue with political parties that can carry the movement's demands into institutions. Maintain independence so the movement retains its credibility, but build strong enough ties to influence policy and even elections.

## 4 BET ON DISTRIBUTED ORGANIZING

Instead of building a single centralized structure, it is often more effective to build a networked model where different groups act autonomously toward a shared purpose. A small coordination hub can provide common tools, messaging guides, visuals, and calls to action, so everyone can adapt them to their own context and audience. Not every part of the coalition needs to sound or look the same: unions, youth groups, faith communities, cultural networks, and local organizers can all carry the same mission in ways that fit their own role and history.

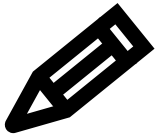
This model only works when the many groups involved take real ownership and carry the work in their own spaces, day after day. This might not be easy to achieve. But when it happens, it allows movements to scale quickly, fuel creativity, and keep civic energy alive around key moments.

## 5 FIND THE WORDS THAT UNITE

Craft a simple, consistent narrative that speaks directly to people's most pressing concerns and reinforces shared values. Equip all messengers, activists, community leaders, and influencers with adaptable talking points so the message can resonate in rural towns, urban centers, and across ideological lines without losing coherence. In Senegal, civic forces distilled their demands into a simple, all-encompassing message: "Elections now!" It became a clear rallying cry that people across sectors could unite around.

## 6 COORDINATE PRESSURE ACROSS MULTIPLE FRONTS

Civic power can be expressed in the streets, online, and in the media. It can also engage with formal politics. Opening channels of dialogue with political parties and institutional actors can help turn civic demands into reforms, shape public debate, and, at times, even influence elections. This multi-track approach, which includes but does not depend entirely on formal politics, limits authoritarian control over the political agenda while it minimizes the damage they can cause. Poland and Senegal both showed how synchronized street pressure, legal action, and political engagement can force change.



# TIPS

## A DELIGHT IN DIVERSITY

Welcome different expressions of the same cause. Use creative formats, music, satire and murals to keep the message inclusive and engaging. Embrace local 'flavors' and adapt to regional contexts. Leave room for disagreement while reinforcing solidarity around shared goals. And don't get frustrated if people use different words than you —diverse voices make the movement stronger.

## B MANY LEADERS MAKE A MOVEMENT

A civic coalition does not grow around a single face. It grows when many people step forward and take the task on. Spread leadership across organizations, territories, and individuals, so the movement is carried by unions, neighborhood groups, cultural networks, activists, and independent citizens at the same time. This kind of plural leadership makes repression harder and keeps the movement alive even when some actors are attacked or sidelined.

## C EMBRACE MOVEMENT MESSINESS

In a decentralized model, overlap and chaos are part of the deal. Don't try to eliminate them, learn to work with them. That takes a low-ego, high-trust mindset. Different actors need room to lead in their own contexts. A central hub that holds the center can help the movement stay scalable, adaptable, and resilient, not by controlling what happens, but by making it easier for others to act in their own name.



# DON'T FUCK IT UP

## PARTNER WITH POLITICIANS, DON'T WORK FOR THEM

Democratic politicians must understand that civil society is not there to endorse, applaud, or stay quiet. Criticism is not disloyalty and collaboration does not mean control. At the same time, civic actors need to deal with politics as a legitimate part of democratic struggle, not something to avoid or outsource.

When both sides engage openly, without subordination or mistrust, the relationship becomes a source of democratic strength. Civic actors bring pressure, legitimacy, and ideas; political actors can turn them into decisions, reforms, and change.

Do

# WHO'S DONE IT WELL

PACTO PELA DEMOCRACIA

## PACT FOR DEMOCRACY

### A plural civic shield

BRAZIL

Launched in 2018, *Pacto pela Democracia* ("Pact for Democracy") united over 200 Brazilian civil society organizations to counter democratic backsliding. Its strength came from strategic diversity: legal watchdogs, youth networks, unions, and policy groups each contributed within a decentralized, trust-based model coordinated by a small secretariat acting as connector rather than controller. Members were bound by shared democratic values, defending constitutional order, pluralism, human rights, and civic participation, rather than full consensus, keeping cooperation flexible yet purposeful.

During the 2022 elections, Pacto's Civic Vigil campaign monitored threats to the vote, coordinated legal defenses against judicial intimidation, and ran media-literacy initiatives to combat disinformation. It also mobilized international attention through scenario planning and joint messaging. This approach—anticipatory, plural, and persistent—proved that civic

> "A coalition does not need full consensus to perform network actions. Lack of unanimity on specific actions should not be a motive for disagreement or resentment."

coalitions can defend democracy while preserving independence. After Bolsonaro's defeat, Pacto stayed active, monitoring legislative risks and advocating institutional reforms to strengthen democratic integrity. It continues to model what a values-based civic front can look like: resilient, plural, and ready.

## POLAND'S CIVIC FRONT

### Civil and political unity in action

POLAND

In 2023, Poland's pro-democracy forces defeated nearly a decade of Law and Justice (PiS) rule through a civil-political alliance. Civic groups defended rights, built democratic infrastructure, and convened opposition parties under shared reform pledges like the *Civic Pact on Public Media*. Alongside these efforts, initiatives such as *Free Courts* mobilized thousands to defend judicial independence and pressure EU institutions to act —turning the fight for the courts into a national cause and a moral rallying point for democracy.

Civil society led mass protests, GOTV drives, and moral framing while mediating party tensions. The Civic Front was essential to achieving record turnout and mobilizing women, young people, and rural voters. After the electoral win, they stayed active as watchdogs and reform advocates, showing that a civic front can be both an election game-changer and a lasting democratic force.

> "But most importantly, for the first time in history, there was also full coordination of the get-out-the-vote campaigns across civil society with exchange of information about who is to target which group."







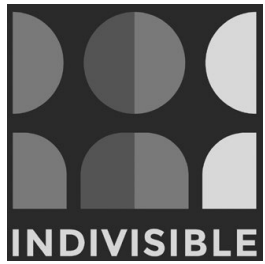
## SENEGAL CIVIL SOCIETY COALITION

### A unified front to defend the vote

SENEGAL

After President Macky Sall abruptly postponed the 2024 election, major civil society platforms—including *Aar Sunu Élection* and *Forces Vives* 2024—formed a powerful civil-political movement. Nearly 200 unions, youth groups, religious leaders, academics, artists, and parties rallied under a single non-partisan call: "Elections Now!" Their most effective strategy was sustained, coordinated pressure combining peaceful but massive street protests, legal challenges before the Constitutional Council, and targeted international advocacy that raised the political cost of repression and violations of the rule of law. The Constitutional Council ultimately signaled clearly that the election must take place, validating the coalition's stance and forcing Sall to act and hold the election. The March 2024 vote brought record turnout, the victory of opposition candidate Bassirou Diomaye Faye, and a peaceful transition that reaffirmed Senegal's democratic tradition.

> "The effort to ensure elections was a national one, involving civil society organizations, youth and women's groups, trade unions, and other entities. This unprecedented collective action created a powerful momentum that pressured the institutions and powers in the right direction."




## INDIVISIBLE

### From local pressure to national civic power

UNITED STATES

Founded after Donald Trump's 2016 election, *Indivisible* emerged as a practical answer to democratic backsliding: a viral guide explaining how ordinary citizens could apply sustained political pressure on elected officials. It later evolved into a national hub enabling thousands of autonomous local groups, translating civic outrage into organized constituent power—through town halls, district actions, and coalition pressure—aimed squarely at Congress. Its strength came from a distributed model: national coordination paired with local leadership, and a big tent organized around shared democratic goals rather than ideological unity.

At the beginning of Trump's second term, Indivisible's infrastructure enabled *No Kings*, a flagship mass mobilization against authoritarian practices and executive overreach. Strategically timed

**INDIVISIBLE BY THE NUMBERS:**

- 2,500 groups organizing throughout the US
- Presence in 99% of congressional districts
- 2 million+ actions taken by Indivisible groups last year

**THE IMPACT OF NO KINGS:**

- 120+ partner organizations
- 2,000+ distributed local organizers and organizing coalitions
- October 18th, 2025: 2,700 protests, 7 million participants

around moments of symbolic concentration, the campaign united more than a hundred partner organizations and thousands of local organizers around a simple, values-based frame —inclusive patriotism and opposition to corruption and authoritarianism. With no policy platform but a clear collective "No," narrative confrontation did the work. Millions joined coordinated and overwhelmingly nonviolent protests that combined humor, patriotism, and moral clarity to force political reaction and absorb repression collectively. The result was the largest coordinated protest in U.S. history, fostering mass defiance of Trump and helping raise the pressure on the Democratic Party to fight back.

# LEARN MORE

## RELATED AATK PLAYS

"Build a People-Powered Coalition." Vol. 7, *Institutions and Civic Space*.

"Distributed Organizing." Vol. 3, *GOTV*.

"Transpartisan Issue Coalition." Vol. 3, *GOTV*.

"Build the Engine, not Just the Flame." Vol. 6, *Movement Building*.

"Make it Cool." Vol. 6, *Movement Building*.

→ AATK PLAYS AVAILABLE AT ANTIAUTHORITARIAN.COM

# LEARN MORE

## RELATED ELECTION BRIEFS



2026. “A Tiger Takes on Colombia.”



2026. “An Uncertain Change (Nepal).”



2025. “Big Challenge Ahead (Brazil).”



2024. “Poland Beats Backsliding.”



2024. “Democracy on the Edge (Senegal).”



2024. “Defusing the far-right bomb (France).”

# 4

# EXPOSE THE BETRAYAL

Revealing authoritarian corruption to break the spell

# THE PLAY

Elected authoritarians often rise by promising to clean up institutions captured by corrupt elites. They pose as moral crusaders who will "eliminate the political caste" or "drain the swamp." But once in office, they often reward loyalists, divert public resources, and shield their own networks from scrutiny.

When life feels stable and the economy delivers, corruption rarely breaks the spell. But when wages fall, services collapse, job insecurity increases, or safety declines, the gap between promises and what people experience becomes visible. Then, a well-framed corruption scandal can shift the narrative from "heroes cleaning up the system" to "they betrayed us."

Puncture the illusion of authoritarians being "underdogs fighting a deep state." Not by moralizing corruption, but by exposing hypocrisy and broken promises. The betrayal narrative starts with undeniable evidence, and it will become

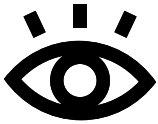
even more  powerful when people can see who paid the price: stolen funds linked to broken hospitals, collapsed bridges, or schools never built.

To cut deeper, use relatable voices: former insiders or disappointed supporters who make the story feel real. The goal is not just to reveal a moral scandal, but to show that what they promised and who they actually govern for no longer match. The story should spread beyond politics, into songs, memes, and everyday conversation, until the authoritarian leader is no longer remembered as a reformer but as a traitor.



# WHY IT WORKS

- **CORRUPTION CAN BE A DEAL-BREAKER.** Across cultures and ideologies, outrage grows when corruption collides with falling incomes, failing services, or growing insecurity.
- **THEIR BRAND TAKES A HIT.** Elected authoritarians campaign on moral superiority. Showing how they broke their own promises strikes at the heart of their appeal.
- **EVIDENCE PIERCES PROPAGANDA.** Solid proof, especially when it is visual, can break through disinformation walls when the story resonates as authentic.
- **THEY BECOME EXPOSED AS THE NEW ELITE.** Instead of outsiders fighting the system, they are exposed as the same elite they swore to replace, using power for themselves.
- **BETRAYAL FUELS OUTRAGE, AND OUTRAGE FUELS ACTION.** When betrayal is tied to tangible harm, it can turn anger into collective mobilization.



# HOW IT WORKS

## 1 DROP THE BOMB, NOT THE HINTS

Avoid vague accusations like “the regime is corrupt”. These often make loyal supporters defensive and give authoritarians time to prepare counterattacks. Instead, wait until you have a clear, symbolic emblem of betrayal: an extravagant mansion, as in Navalny’s exposure of Putin’s Palace, a luxury watch collection, a rigged procurement deal, or diverted disaster aid. The symbol should be concrete, visual, and emotionally charged. A single image people cannot dismiss or unsee.

## 2 TIME IT FOR MAXIMUM IMPACT

Remember that corruption framed as betrayal resonates most when people already feel the economy is failing and life is getting harder. It also works when expectations outpace results. Coordinate major disclosures in those moments when public attention and political stakes are already high, such as an election campaign, an international summit, a key legislative vote, or a public health emergency, as in the Pharmally scandal in the Philippines. Authoritarians rely on narrative control, so releasing evidence when politics is already in the spotlight can shift the balance of the conversation.

## 3 ANCHOR IN ROCK-SOLID, IRREFUTABLE EVIDENCE

Authoritarians survive by denying, distracting, and distorting. That's why your evidence must be airtight: official contracts, leaked recordings, insider testimonies, satellite images, forensic audits. Partner with investigative journalists, civic watchdogs, and honest institutional actors like auditors or prosecutors to verify the facts. Whenever possible, make those facts visual and tangible: photos of hidden luxury, drone footage of secret estates, receipts linking stolen money to unfinished public projects.

## 4 LINK BETRAYAL TO REAL-LIFE HARM

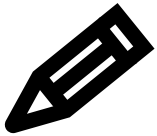
Technical details rarely spark outrage. Translate abstract crimes into tangible losses: "They stole your local hospital," "Your child's school was never built," "This station collapsed because funds were pocketed," as in the Novi Sad railway station tragedy in Serbia. Use survivor testimonies, everyday language, and symbolic references to bring the damage home. When corruption is connected to people's own lives, it stops being an abstract issue and starts feeling personal.

## 5 ELEVATE RELATABLE VOICES

Former supporters, disillusioned insiders, and everyday people who once trusted the authoritarian make betrayal personal. Their disappointment shows that breaking with the leader is not a betrayal of the cause, but a true defense of it. These voices resonate far beyond political opponents and carry weight with undecided citizens. And remember: visibility makes them targets. Protect them from backlash so their stories can't be silenced.

## 6 TURN OUTRAGE INTO SUSTAINED ACTION

A scandal without follow-up fades fast. Pair each revelation with specific, achievable calls to action such as protests, petitions, legal complaints, voter registration drives, or watchdog monitoring. As in Guatemala in 2015, where outrage turned into sustained civic mobilization and eventually a political alternative, the goal is never just to spark anger, but to keep the betrayal alive in public memory and pressure both institutions and people to act boldly.



# TIPS

## A BE SURGICAL, NOT SCREECHY

Outrage is valid, but too much noise can sound partisan or even theatrical. Aim for clarity, not volume. Let the evidence speak for itself. Stay focused on the betrayal narrative: they promised to be different, but they lied, abused power, and took from the people. You're exposing systemic rot, not attacking success or wealth.

## B CORRUPTION AS BETRAYAL IS (ONLY) ONE ENTRY POINT

This play is powerful, but not self-sufficient. It works best when paired with a broader pro-democracy message rooted in inclusion, fairness, and a credible way forward. Corruption grabs attention, but values win hearts. Use the scandal to open a deeper conversation, connect broken trust in the authoritarian with what people deserve instead and what is worth building.



# DON'T FUCK IT UP

## PROTECT THE MESSENGERS BEFORE THE BACKLASH

The most dangerous moment often comes right after a major revelation. Whistleblowers get discredited, journalists are smeared, auditors are sidelined. In some contexts, those who expose the betrayal also face serious threats to their safety, and even to their lives. Anticipate this. Build legal defense funds, secure communications, safe relocation options, and international solidarity networks in advance, before going public. The more visible and connected your truth-tellers are, the harder they are to silence, and the more retaliation backfires.

Do

# WHO'S DONE IT WELL



## ALEXEI NAVALNY

### The palace that broke the spell

RUSSIA

In 2021, Alexei Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation exposed "Putin's Palace," a $1.3 billion Black Sea mansion allegedly built through a web of corrupt deals. Drone footage, lavish interiors, and insider testimony shattered Putin's image as a modest nationalist, revealing gold-trimmed luxury while Russians faced hardship. The film hit 100M YouTube views in a week and sparked nationwide protests, with chants of "Putin is a thief" echoing across over 100 cities. Learning from Navalny also means recognizing the brutal price he paid: it was precisely because he so effectively exposed Putin's corruption and betrayal (the core dynamic this play highlights) that the regime escalated its repression against him, culminating in his imprisonment and ultimately his death.

> "The palace was not just a building, but a symbol of twenty years of Putin's rule. A symbol of what he considers acceptable, of what he considers his own."



## THE PHARMALLY EXPOSURE

### Turning corruption into a credibility crisis

PHILIPPINES

In 2021, revelations by the Senate Blue Ribbon Committee, investigative outlets like Rappler and the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ), and opposition figures uncovered a massive corruption scheme involving the misuse of COVID-19 procurement funds to favor connected suppliers under President Rodrigo Duterte's administration. Known as the Pharmally scandal, it showed that billions of *pesos* in medical supply contracts were awarded to a little-known firm linked to Duterte's allies, while hospitals lacked basic protective equipment and citizens struggled through lockdowns.

The scandal struck at the core of Duterte's image as a tough, anti-corruption populist. As public outrage over the revelations grew, his approval rating fell from roughly 90 percent in late 2020 to about 70 percent by 2021, the sharpest decline of his presidency. The exposure transformed the moral landscape of Philippine politics, undermining Duterte's anti-elite narrative and proving that accountability could still bite even a seemingly untouchable leader.

> "How can these people sleep at night? When many Filipinos are suffering; their mind is on making money."



## BLOODY HANDS

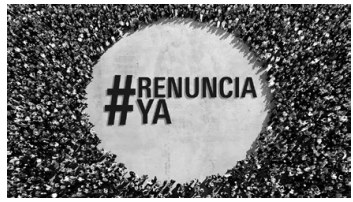
### Linking corruption to a tragedy

SERBIA

In November 2024, the canopy of Novi Sad's main railway station collapsed, killing sixteen people and triggering nationwide outrage. Independent journalists, including N1, and watchdog groups accused the government of awarding opaque construction contracts to politically connected firms and cutting corners on safety oversight. Subsequent media reports revealed that parts of the project were tied to non-transparent deals with foreign contractors, deepening public anger over corruption and impunity. Civic groups, engineers, and student organizations from faculties in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš and Kragujevac amplified these findings via social media, framing the disaster as proof that "corruption kills."

Students led the first protests; soon, tens of thousands marched in more than 400 cities, holding vigils, tractor blockades, and banners reading "Blood on your hands." The movement forced resignations and reopened investigations, showing how by exposing the link between corruption and human loss, the legitimacy of an authoritarian government can be stripped away. That moral clarity shook the regime. By early 2025, the prime minister resigned, ministers were ousted, and stalled investigations reopened —proving that when corruption is tied to human loss, public outrage can force authoritarian retreat.

> "They built a monument to corruption and it crushed our people. That's why we marched."




## #ResignNow

### Turning a corruption case into a national betrayal

GUATEMALA

In 2015, Guatemala's CICIG and anti-impunity prosecutors exposed *La Línea* ("The Line"), a customs-fraud network embedded within the state. The evidence was damning—including thousands of wiretaps and emails—and it reached the highest levels of government. But what turned the scandal into a political earthquake was not the investigation alone. It was *#RenunciaYa* ("Resign Now"), the civic movement that translated a complex fraud scheme into a simple, devastating story of betrayal: while ordinary Guatemalans paid taxes and endured weak public services, the elite in power—who had promised order and stability—were stealing from the country.

Through peaceful mass protests across the country, and the moral clarity of the message "I paid, they stole," *#RenunciaYa* made corruption feel personal and impossible to ignore. The movement turned legal evidence into public pressure and helped frame Pérez Molina's government not as flawed or inefficient but as a network of crooks and traitors. That combination of hard proof from investigators, plus a broad civic narrative of betrayal, forced President Pérez Molina and Vice President Roxana Baldetti to resign and face arrest.

> "The struggle was just beginning. We were young, connected, and angry -the generation that turned indignation into the possibility of a government committed to dignity and democracy."

In the years that followed, that anti-corruption energy also helped give rise to *Movimiento Semilla*, turning indignation into a political force that won the presidency in 2023 on a platform of democracy and anti-corruption.

# LEARN MORE

## RELATED AATK PLAYS

"Expose the Betrayal." Vol. 4, *Narrative*.

"Make Anti-Corruption your Spear."
Vol. 7, *Institutions and Civic Space*.

"Shield Investigative Journalism."
Vol. 7, *Institutions and Civic Space*.

"Cultivate Civil Resistance and Whistleblowing."
Vol. 7, *Institutions and Civic Space*.

→ AATK PLAYS AVAILABLE AT ANTIAUTHORITARIAN.COM

## RELATED ELECTION BRIEFS

2026. "An Uncertain Change (Nepal)."

2026. "A Fragile Opening (Bangladesh)."

2025. "Clash of Dynasties (Philippines)."

2025. "A Surprise Comeback! (Romania)."

# 5

# SMART OPPOSITION COORDINATION

Uniting to defend democracy

# THE PLAY

Authoritarians thrive when the opposition is fragmented. Competing egos, redundant candidacies, moral posturing, and split votes turn elections into zero-sum games among democrats, while authoritarians win by default. Under these conditions, division is not pluralism. It feels more like surrender.

When the alternative is another authoritarian victory, democratic forces must choose cooperation over competition, even if it is hard to do so. This does not always mean running on a joint platform or under a single brand. It can take the form of quiet pacts, tactical withdrawals, or coordinated messaging.

This is less about artificial unity than strategic coordination. Democratic parties can run separately while still sharing information, agreeing on priorities, avoiding unnecessary competition in key districts, and focusing their efforts where they matter most to counter and combat the authoritarian threat.

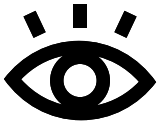
Coordination is both an art and a science. It is also quite hard. It can create resentment, internal conflict, and public unease. But the cost of not doing it is far higher: authoritarian victories that dismantle the very conditions for future democratic competition.

When democracy is under threat, real leadership means knowing when to lead and when not to stand in the way.



# WHY IT WORKS

- **IT'S A NUMBERS GAME.** Particularly in first-past-the-post electoral systems, authoritarians often win elections with a minority of the popular vote. In these cases, opposition coordination is a life-or-death issue for democracy.
- **THERE IS MORE THAN ONE WAY TO COORDINATE.** Primaries, pacts, or tactical withdrawals allow opposition forces to adapt to different political systems and moments without forcing artificial unity.
- **TARGETED COORDINATION STOPS THE BLEEDING.** By deciding where to compete and where to step aside, democratic forces concentrate their strength where it matters most.
- **SYNCHRONICITY AMPLIFIES PRESSURE.** When different opposition actors hit the same fault line, the blow lands harder and leaves less room for the regime to deflect or divide.



# HOW IT WORKS

## 1 ACT TOGETHER, EVEN IF YOU STAY DISTINCT

Coordination does not necessarily require merging forces or hiding differences. It requires democratic responsibility under pressure: aligning timing, strategy, and purpose instead of defaulting to tribal reflexes, mutual distrust, or political self-preservation. Differences can coexist as long as coordination is clearly defined and strategically paced. The choice is often quite simple: work together imperfectly or lose separately. Smart opposition work starts by bringing all the relevant actors to the table and synchronizing efforts around shared goals, not shared ideologies.

## 2 FRAME COORDINATION AS DEMOCRATIC RESPONSIBILITY

Don't let authoritarians frame coordination as a backroom deal or a sign of weakness. Name it first for what it is: a responsible political choice when democracy is under threat. Voters may not celebrate it, but they can respect it when rivals acknowledge what's at stake and act accordingly.

In France's 2024 elections, public withdrawals were framed as acts of democratic responsibility, not tactical retreat. Explaining those decisions openly—preventing vote splitting, protecting institutions, and safeguarding fair elections—helped build legitimacy and trust under pressure.

## 3 DESIGN TO DEFEAT VOTE SPLITTING

Consider using structured tools such as opposition primaries, tactical withdrawals, or vote pacts to prevent the democratic vote from fracturing. For instance, Hungary's nationwide primaries and France's coordinated withdrawals show how different tools can serve the same goal: neutralizing vote splitting in high-stakes races. Make sure to share polling data, map competitive districts, and decide who is best positioned to run and who should step aside. The goal is not to eliminate competition, but to make it strategic: compete where it really matters and cooperate where it counts.

## 4 HARMONIZE THE MESSAGES

Embrace the pluralism of diverse voices and turn it into an advantage. Even without a joint platform, coherence in messaging signals readiness to govern. In 2023, Poland's opposition parties ran distinct campaigns, yet aligned narratives around democratic restoration and institutional repair. They agreed on basic red lines, coordinated spokespeople, and anticipated controversies before they erupted in public. Together, they presented voters with credible democratic alternatives.

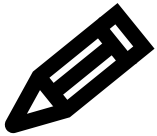
## 5 TRACK AND ADJUST TOGETHER

Pool resources to track shifts in the race and adjust roles accordingly. Good polling and data analysis require capacity and funding, so sharing costs, combining research efforts, or relying on trusted local networks can make this more viable. Schedule regular check-ins to review data, share intelligence, and address tensions early, before they spill into public rifts. Timely adjustments help avoid late-stage surprises.

## 6 PREPARE FOR THE DAY AFTER

This is where coordination usually falls apart, including in the past cases presented here. Hungary, France, and Poland all showed that coordination can block authoritarians or win key elections, but none fully solved what came next. That is why planning for the day after matters.

Start informal conversations about the first decisions after the election and the areas where coordination will be needed immediately. Rather than locking in detailed agreements, outline shared priorities, basic crisis protocols, and clear channels for dialogue. Delivering early and visible results is what allows coordination to survive once unity is no longer automatic. Without a plan for delivery, electoral cooperation can quickly turn into frustration, blame, and government paralysis.



# TIPS

## A REWARD COOPERATION PUBLICLY

When coordination works, whether through a tactical withdrawal, a non-aggression pact, or a post-vote alliance, make it visible. Acknowledge those who take risks or step aside for the larger goal. Public recognition builds trust, encourages others to do the same, and turns isolated decisions into a shared and clear signal of democratic responsibility.

## B IF YOU CAN'T GO NATIONAL, GO LOCAL

When the national stage is locked down, shift the fight to where the regime is weaker: local races, councils, and communities. These spaces allow new leaders to emerge, alliances to form, and tangible wins that improve everyday life. Every local victory builds networks, trust, and proof that the regime can be beaten. Each win should be treated as a building block, connected into a broader story that can scale up.



# DON'T FUCK IT UP

## PLAN FOR PRESSURE, NOT FOR COMFORT

Authoritarian forces will try to break coordination before it becomes dangerous for their interests. They will target the weakest links with pressure, co-optation, intimidation, selective deals, legal threats, or media attacks. Some actors will be tempted to defect; others will be punished for holding the line.

Prepare for this in advance, especially around the issues where the coalition is most vulnerable. Identify who can be isolated, where the internal fault lines are, and what forms of pressure are most likely to come. Build crisis protocols and secure channels for communication before the pressure hits. Coordination does not fail only because people disagree. It can also fail when those disagreements are successfully weaponized.

Do

# WHO'S DONE IT WELL

## POLISH DEMOCRATIC OPPOSITION

### Smart opposition cooperation

POLAND

In Poland's 2023 elections, the democratic opposition rejected a one-size-fits-all alliance. Civic Coalition, Third Way, and The Left ran separate campaigns for the *Sejm* (Lower House), bound by a non-aggression pact while uniting behind a single candidate in each Senate race. Through a "one candidate per district" Senate Pact, they eliminated vote-splitting in the upper house. Civil society groups like WSCHÓD and Polish Women's Strike amplified turnout drives while keeping their own voices. What mattered was not uniformity, but synchronicity: strategic separation where it expanded appeal and strict unity where the rules demanded it. This hybrid approach helped secure a democratic majority and end eight years of PiS dominance.

"Building a coalition isn't about ownership; it's about trust. By sharing knowledge, resources, and visibility, we built a network where success was collective. Parties did their job; civil society did theirs."

ENSEMBLE

NOUVEAU FRONT POPULAIRE

## REPUBLICAN FRONT

### Anti-Le Pen withdrawals

FRANCE

In France's 2024 legislative elections, Marine Le Pen's far-right Rassemblement National led the first round, with three-way runoffs in over 300 districts favoring its path to power. In a coordinated act under the Republican Front banner, 213 center-left and center-right candidates withdrew—131 from the New Popular Front and 82 from Macron's Ensemble—ensuring only one pro-democracy contender remained in each race.

These withdrawals were not about comfort or ideological alignment. They were about responsibility under pressure. Civil society pressure, clear messaging, and public endorsements reframed these withdrawals as acts of democratic maturity rather than weakness. Cooperation signaled seriousness and an understanding of what was at stake. The result: RN fell from first in round one to third in the Assembly, blocking a far-right government.

**THE IMPACT OF WITHDRAWALS:**

- → Head-to-head contests: In districts with just two candidates, pro-democracy contenders flipped 40% of races from the first-round leader.
- → When votes stayed split: In 89 districts without coordination, the first-round leader–usually the National Rally–won 92% of the time.




# UNITED FOR HUNGARY

## Primaries to build trust

HUNGARY

Ahead of the 2022 elections, six Hungarian opposition parties, from greens to conservatives, agreed to hold nationwide primaries to avoid splitting the vote against Viktor Orbán. Coordination was not about ideological harmony or pretending that deeper differences did not exist. The coalition partnered with civic-tech group aHang to create a secure online-offline voting system, trained 10,000 volunteers, and drew 850,000 participants—around 11% of the electorate. The two-round process selected joint candidates in every district and Péter Márki-Zay as the united PM challenger.

Though the election was lost, the primaries proved that what mattered was not uniformity, but a shared commitment to a democratic process. Organized entirely by civil society and with no funding from the state, the primaries forged lasting channels of cooperation and trust across deeply divided forces.

> "What we built wasn't just a primary but was a new way of doing politics. Parties that had spent years shouting past each other had to sit down, listen, negotiate, and place trust in a process guaranteed by independents."

# LEARN MORE

## RELATED AATK PLAYS

"Human Politics." Vol. 9, *Leadership*.

"Big Tent Coalitions." Vol. 5, *Opposition Coordination*.

"Run an Open Primary." Vol. 5, *Opposition Coordination*.

"Smart Coordination." Vol. 5, *Opposition Coordination*.

"Build a People-Powered Alliance." Vol. 7, *Institutions and Civic Space*.

→ AATK PLAYS AVAILABLE AT ANTIAUTHORITARIAN.COM

## RELATED ELECTION BRIEFS

2024. "Poland Beats Backsliding."

2024. "Defusing the far-right bomb (France)."

2024. "A New Era? (South Africa)."

# 6

# A NEW DISRUPTIVE STYLE

Breaking the mold,
earning the attention

# THE PLAY

In an age of political spectacle and emotional overload, democratic leadership must look and feel different from politics as usual. To reach those who are still vulnerable to authoritarian narratives, leaders need to break the mold: be emotionally real, digitally fluent, and willing to name the elephant in the room.

This style breaks with the over-rehearsed persona of traditional politics. It replaces polish with presence: acknowledging mistakes, showing emotion, and turning lived experience into political purpose. It is based on plain language, pop culture, and online-native storytelling that can go from memes to viral formats.

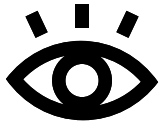
A disruptive style should not be a performance for its own sake. It embodies democratic values both in public and behind the scenes, making consistency its calling card. It's not just about talking change. It's about looking, sounding, and acting like change itself.

This is how democratic leadership builds lasting loyalty and breaks through cynicism.



# WHY IT WORKS

- **PEOPLE CONNECT TO WHAT FEELS DIFFERENT.** In a world of political theater, authenticity stands out. When leaders show consistent alignment between words and actions, trust grows.
- **HUMANITY BREAKS DISTANCE.** Showing emotion, doubt, and conviction makes leaders feel closer and political power feel more accessible.
- **BOLDNESS CAPTURES ATTENTION.** New and daring leadership cuts through the noise, sparks curiosity, and invites people to pay closer attention and learn more.
- **CONSISTENCY BUILDS CREDIBILITY.** When values are visible both onstage and backstage, they become the cultural DNA of democratic leadership.
- **FOLLOWERS BECOME MESSENGERS.** A genuine, disruptive style travels because people don't just consume it: they repeat it, remix it, defend it, and make it their own.



# HOW IT WORKS

## 1 LET THE STRUGGLE SPEAK THROUGH YOUR EMOTIONS

Forget the polished mask. People don't need a perfect leader, they're looking for someone real. Let emotion emerge from the struggle, not from performance. Speak from lived emotion, and tie it directly to what you're fighting for. If you're angry, name the injustice causing it. If you're hopeful, show what makes change possible. Pita Limjaroenrat's openness after being blocked from office and his refusal to hide frustration or disappointment turned emotion into credibility rather than weakness, especially among the young voters that energized his coalition. This is a great example of how emotion became power because it was rooted in purpose. That is what made it credible.

## 2 TURN YOUR LIFE INTO YOUR MESSAGE

Personal stories help people understand political struggles and see themselves inside them. Use your lived experience to clarify the fight and give it personal meaning. Let people see doubt, tension, and learning, not as weaknesses, but as part of leadership under pressure. This is not about "making confessions." It is about turning real experience into political connection and trust through stories that feel human and relatable. In Senegal, Bassirou Diomaye Faye showed how leadership can turn life itself into a message, without spectacle or overexposure, by embodying restraint, humility, and coherence between his personal story and his political vision.

## 3 FROM REAL PAIN TO BOLD VISION

Bold ideas only land when they grow out of what people are actually living. Listen in markets, on buses, and in WhatsApp groups. Pay special attention to what feels unfair, rigged, or impossible to fix. Start there.

Zohran Mamdani's focus on housing affordability and everyday cost pressures, alongside Pita's grounding of future-oriented reforms in the frustrations of younger Thai voters, show how boldness gains force when it starts from shared pain. Building your proposals around issues and problems that feel urgent, tangible, and shared makes boldness feel like empathy, not abstraction.

## 4 MAKE IT BIG, SIMPLE, AND SPECIFIC

Match the scale of the solution to the scale of the problem. Go to the root, cut the jargon, and express it in visual, repeatable language that people can remember and pass on. Don't fear being told it's "too unrealistic" or "impossible." For many people those labels can mean you're challenging entrenched interests or naming truths those in power would rather avoid.

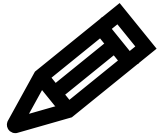
## 5 LEAD IT, LIVE IT, SPREAD IT

The bolder the vision, the more voices it needs. Invite artists, influencers, or any unexpected ally to carry it in their own way. Make it easy for them to adapt, remix, and share the message so it feels like theirs. Mamdani's ecosystem of community leaders, meme pages, and influencers who amplified his message shows how leadership becomes culture when others are invited to join in and carry it.

## 6 MAKE IT IMPOSSIBLE TO IGNORE

Attention is power. Disruptive leadership does not whisper, it leaves a mark. Sometimes that mark comes from contrast, not volume. Pair moral clarity with bold delivery. Use symbols, visuals, and actions that people cannot unsee. Go where others won't. Say what others avoid. Create moments that cut through the noise.

Bassirou Diomaye Faye showed that disruption does not always require spectacle. In a political culture often dominated by confrontation and performance, his quiet composure and refusal to play that game made restraint itself impossible to ignore. When a message is rooted in truth and actions match words, a simple gesture can become a rallying point.



# TIPS

## A AUTHENTICITY INCLUDES INTENTION

Being real does not mean saying everything you feel the moment you feel it. Oversharing can come across as self-centered, and emotional outbursts may break trust instead of building it. Authenticity requires choice. Before speaking, ask yourself if this serves the cause and helps move people. Emotions are powerful. So are their consequences. Use them wisely.

## B CLARITY BEATS EXPLANATION

The bolder the proposal, the stronger the temptation to defend it with data, diagrams, and disclaimers. Resist that impulse. You are not writing a white paper, you are fighting for democracy. This doesn't mean being sloppy or irresponsible, it means leading with clarity. If an idea needs a long explanation to be understood, it is either too complex or poorly framed. Say it in one clear, simple, repeatable line. Let people grasp the urgency and direction immediately.

Rigor matters. So keep evidence, research, and data as your backbone, ready to back up and defend the proposal when challenged. And yet, do not let explanation replace clarity. The force of the message should not be diluted because of caution.



# DON'T FUCK IT UP

## BOLD IS NOT RIDICULOUS

A powerful proposal should stretch the imagination without breaking it. Anchor the idea in real struggles and show how it can be done. Use concrete examples, lived experience, or policies that have worked elsewhere to make it tangible. If your message or actions feel out of context or disconnected from people's reality, you risk alienating the very audience you want to reach. Be daring but stay coherent, grounded, and rooted in people's reality.

Do

# WHO'S DONE IT WELL



## PITA LIMJAROENRAT

### From fandom to force

THAILAND

Young, bold, and emotionally transparent, Pita broke away from Thailand's stiff political script. He spoke in plain, unvarnished language, combining humor, cultural references, and social media fluency to connect with millions —especially younger voters. His style wasn't just political communication —it was culture. Supporters built a fandom around him, remixing speeches into memes, rallying in coordinated colors, and adopting his gestures as symbols of defiance.

> "Radical is the new normal in Thailand (...) We are a movement and the party is simply a vehicle. Our time will come."

In doing so, he made democratic values feel alive and current, standing in sharp contrast to the military elite's rigidity and showing that democratic leadership can be both

serious in intent and fresh in delivery. Pita blended charisma with policy clarity, pairing big, future-focused proposals with a grounded understanding of everyday struggles.

Even when blocked from becoming prime minister, his openness about disappointment and determination deepened trust. He didn't just lead a party —he embodied a vision of a Thailand ready to imagine, and fight for, a different future.



## ZOHRAN MAMDANI

### Authenticity, discipline, and charisma

UNITED STATES

In the 2025 Democratic primary for New York City mayor, Zohran Mamdani surged from 1% in early polls to defeat Andrew Cuomo with 56%. His disruptive style fused message discipline with contagious charisma: walking every neighborhood, releasing daily videos in his trademark suit, tie, and smile, and projecting visible commitment to ordinary New Yorkers. He stayed true to his core beliefs while offering bold solutions to lived struggles —chiefly the city's affordability crisis. His content felt lived, not staged, with community leaders and influencers amplifying his voice. Online and offline, Mamdani was consistent and coherent: authentic, disciplined, and magnetic.

By showing that democratic leadership could look grounded, human, and effective, he helped restore belief in politics, even among voters cynical about establishment politics. Although Mamdani was not running against an authoritarian and competed in a deep-blue city, his campaign remains a powerful example of disruptive democratic leadership.

> "New York will remain a city of immigrants, a city built by immigrants, powered by immigrants, and as of tonight, led by an immigrant."

By showing that he was real—not just that he looked real—he broke the establishment mold and proved that grounded democratic populism can still inspire and win.



## BASSIROU DIOMAYE FAYE

### Quiet disruption, loud change

SENEGAL

At 44, Bassirou Diomaye Faye became Senegal's youngest president, rising from detention to national leadership in just weeks. A discreet former tax inspector with little political exposure, he represented a generational and moral shift in Senegalese politics. His calm, unpretentious style stood apart from the elite political class —favoring plain, direct language about corruption, fairness, and dignity over the grand rhetoric typical of presidential campaigns.

Faye's credibility came less from performance than from coherence. Released shortly before the election, he carried himself with humility and restraint. His campaign drew strong support from a restless youth base seeking integrity and political renewal, yet he avoided fiery populism. Dressed often in traditional boubou, he projected cultural rootedness and quiet confidence. In a region where politics is often loud and personal, his composure felt radical, helping restore belief that democratic leadership could govern with dignity rather than spectacle.

> "In electing me, the Senegalese people have decided on a break with a past. I promise to govern with humility and transparency."

# LEARN MORE

## RELATED AATK PLAYS

"Show Up Real." Vol. 9, *Leadership*.

"Dream Big, Act Bigger." Vol. 9, *Leadership*.

"Face the Elephant in the Room." Vol. 9, *Leadership*.

"Make it Cool." Vol. 6, *Movement Building*.

→ AATK PLAYS AVAILABLE AT ANTIAUTHORITARIAN.COM

## RELATED ELECTION BRIEFS



2026. "A Tiger Takes on Colombia."



2026. "An Uncertain Change (Nepal)."



2025. "Time to Deliver (Germany)."



2025. "Hope through the Ballot (Bolivia)."



2025. "The Zohran Lightning (US)."

# 7

# CHALLENGE THEM IN COURT

Turning the law into a frontline of democratic resistance

# THE PLAY

Democratic erosion often unfolds gradually, and yet the individual moves that drive it thrive on speed. Elected authoritarians fast-track laws, dismantle oversight institutions, and sign corrupt contracts before resistance can catch up. Speed is one of their greatest advantages: democratic checks structurally struggle to react in time.

This play is about using legal action to protect democracy. Courts rarely stop authoritarianism, but they can slow it down. Even in hostile environments, they can act as a brake. Courts are not neutral or reliable by default. In many contexts, they are politicized, partially captured, or inconsistent. Judges read the political climate, calculate risks, and respond to pressure.

But even weakened judicial systems still contain cracks and openings worth exploiting. Those opportunities are usually narrow and fragile. Litigation must therefore be strategic and clearly focused on defending democratic rules and basic rights, rather than coming across as a partisan tool.

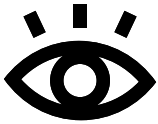
By filing well-chosen cases, democratic actors can slow authoritarian advances and destabilize consolidation. Even when courts retain only partial legitimacy, delaying or constraining authoritarian decisions can matter. And even when rulings fail, litigation can force public scrutiny, expose abuse, and raise the political cost of authoritarian moves.

When legal action is linked to public campaigns, dry court battles can become civic causes people rally behind. Courts will not defeat authoritarianism on their own. However, they can buy time, preserve political space, and protect the legitimacy that democratic forces need to keep fighting.



# WHY IT WORKS

- **AUTHORITARIAN MOMENTUM IS SLOWED DOWN.** Procedural delays and legal scrutiny interrupt the speed authoritarians rely on to overwhelm opposition and lock in decisions.
- **INSTITUTIONAL GUARDRAILS ARE PROTECTED.** Legal action can help defend core institutions when they are targeted, keeping key checks and balances alive under pressure.
- **AUTHORITARIANS ARE PUT ON THE DEFENSIVE.** Legal challenges compel authoritarians to justify their actions publicly: that is a moment not spent consolidating power elsewhere.
- **TIME IS BOUGHT FOR OTHER DEMOCRATIC ACTIONS.** Even limited legal delays can preserve space to organize protests, shift public opinion, build coalitions, or activate other plays.
- **DEMOCRATIC LEGITIMACY IS BROADENED.** Defending democratic rules under pressure can become a shared arena for civic actors, independent professionals, and political forces.
- **IMPUNITY IS COMBATED.** Holding authoritarians accountable, from local enforcers to top leaders, signals that abuse has consequences: the law still matters.



# HOW IT WORKS

## 1 MONITOR COURTS AND SPOT OPPORTUNITIES EARLY

Authoritarians advance through power grabs, and courts are often among the first targets, through rushed appointments, budget clauses, or procedural tweaks. Monitoring courts is about timing and political awareness, not legal curiosity. Track nominations, reforms, and rulings, and turn early warnings into public alerts so threats become visible before they harden and become a reality.

## 2 BUILD A LEGAL POWER NETWORK

Build a trusted network of lawyers, rights defenders, retired judges, legal clinics and watchdog groups who know and understand both law and power. This mix can also include NGOs, civic leaders, and digital creators to ground cases in public legitimacy. This group must litigate strategically and explain risks, limits, and stakes in language people can understand.

In Slovenia, for instance, a similar multidisciplinary network spanning several organizations became a civic shield during the Janša government, helping contain abuse under pressure without relying on courtroom victories alone.

## 3 CHOOSE POPULAR, WINNABLE CASES

Prioritize cases that are legally solid and strategically defensible in the public arena. Focus on abuses that affect everyday life, such as censorship, stolen public funds, or misuse of emergency powers. The goal is not to litigate everything, but to choose fights that expose clear wrongdoing and make authoritarian behavior difficult to defend in public. The Aar Sunu Election case in Senegal shows how, even in difficult environments, a legal challenge against something as basic and blatantly self-serving as postponing an election can concentrate legitimacy, avoid partisan framing, and mobilize broad civic backing.

## 4 TURN LEGAL BATTLES INTO PUBLIC MOMENTS

Every case is also tried in the court of public opinion. Don't let legal action stay confined to courtrooms. Turn key legal steps into public moments people can follow and understand. Show up publicly, mobilize observers, brief the press, and explain in plain language what is being decided and why it matters. Use clear narratives, visuals, and timelines. When rulings limit abuse or slow power grabs, make that visible. When they don't, use the outcome to show pressure, bias, or capture, and explain clearly what is now at stake.

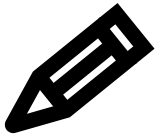
## 5 USE MULTI-FRONT LEGAL PRESSURE

Multi-front litigation is demanding, slow, and often risky, but in some contexts it has shown it can prevent authoritarians from advancing uncontested. File in different courts when possible, trigger audits, and activate oversight bodies to complicate and delay power grabs. When domestic courts are compromised, explore regional or international mechanisms. These processes may not deliver quick wins. The goal is not to win every case, but to force scrutiny across arenas and make quiet consolidation harder.

## 6 PROFESSIONAL LEGITIMACY, PUBLIC STAKES

Support bar associations, legal scholars, and respected professionals in speaking out publicly. These voices help frame legal action as a defense of the rule of law, not partisan opposition. Equip them with clear, accessible narratives that explain what is at stake beyond day-to-day politics, as happened in Poland, where the Free Courts initiative helped build civic support around judicial independence.

As these voices often become targets, prepare legal defense strategies, basic digital security, and international visibility in advance. The higher the public profile and the broader the support network, the harder they are to silence.



# TIPS

## A ACT EARLY. BE LOUD

Judicial capture rarely starts with a headline. It begins with a quiet appointment, a procedural tweak, or a reform buried in a budget bill. By the time the damage is obvious, it is often too late.

That is why timing matters. Pay close attention to nominations, reforms, and rule changes. React quickly and bring other actors in before decisions are locked in. Raise public attention while there is still time to influence the outcome. Delaying or blocking even a single appointment or reform can buy crucial time and send a clear signal: power grabs will not go unnoticed.

## B MAKE COMMUNICATION PART OF THE STRATEGY

Legal battles alone don't win hearts. From the start, treat communication as part of the legal strategy itself. Translate complex cases into clear, human stories that show what is at stake. Use plain and simple language, concrete examples, and credible voices to connect court fights with people's daily lives. Align litigation with civic campaigns, protests, and watchdog efforts so cases do not stand alone. Legal action is strongest when it becomes part of a broader democratic struggle people can recognize, understand, and join.



# DON'T FUCK IT UP

## COURTS ARE NOT A SUBSTITUTE FOR POLITICS

Use the courts to defend checks and balances, expose corruption, and stop real abuses of power. Do not use them to replace politics. Litigation is a tool to slow authoritarian overreach, not a shortcut to block agendas you have lost in the political arena.

Weaponizing the judiciary to fight political battles you cannot win elsewhere is a dead end. Lawfare corrodes democratic legitimacy, distorts incentives, and often backfires. It also hands authoritarians exactly what they want: a pretext to attack the courts, intimidate judges, and justify institutional capture. In the process, you lose allies, expose potential defenders, and weaken the very institutions you are trying to protect.

Do

# WHO'S DONE IT WELL




## AAR SUNU ELECTION

### The legal fight that brought back the ballot

SENEGAL

In early 2024, President Macky Sall postponed Senegal's presidential election—a move widely condemned as unconstitutional. *Aar Sunu Election* ("Protect Our Election"), a coalition of 100+ civic groups, transformed outrage into coordinated legal and public pressure. While opposition parties filed petitions, Aar Sunu supplied legitimacy, technical expertise, and media visibility, ensuring the fight was framed as a defense of democracy, not a partisan gain. The Constitutional Council ultimately ruled the delay illegal and ordered prompt elections, paving the way for a peaceful transition of power and reaffirming Senegal's democratic tradition.

> "We were not defending a candidate. We were defending the people's right to choose. That's what the Constitutional Council affirmed."




## FREE COURTS

### Lighting up the resistance

POLAND

When Poland's Law and Justice party moved to capture the judiciary, the *Wolne Sądy* ("Free Courts") initiative turned legal defense into a public cause. Founded by lawyers and civil society leaders in 2017, they simplified complex legal threats through videos, education, and viral messaging, while organizing the iconic "Chain of Light" candle protests in over 200 towns. Alongside symbolic action, they defended persecuted judges, filed strategic cases in Polish and EU courts, and built global alliances —contributing to rulings and EU measures against unlawful reforms. By the 2023 pro-rule-of-law victory, they had kept judicial independence in the national conversation and laid groundwork for its restoration.

> "When the courts stood up, we stood with them. And when they were silenced, we lit the streets until they were heard again."

# LEGAL NETWORK FOR THE PROTECTION OF DEMOCRACY

## Turning the law into a civic shield

SLOVENIA

Formed in 2020 amid Janša's attacks on media, NGOs, and the judiciary, Slovenia's *Pravna mreža* turned litigation into a civic shield. Unlike traditional watchdogs, it built proactive infrastructure: anticipating threats, issuing early warnings, and providing legal backup to journalists, NGOs, academics, and citizens under pressure. In its first year, it fielded 1,150+ requests, filed 150+ appeals, and launched 50+ lawsuits. The network delivered tangible protections—defending protesters, annulling illegitimate fines, and pushing courts to strike down or amend abusive COVID decrees. It translated interventions into accessible public messages, mobilizing support, and raising the cost of abuse. By 2022, it had issued 20+ constitutional interventions, from blocking NGO defunding to defending academic freedom, showing how civil society can resist authoritarianism while strengthening democratic institutions.

> "We protect the constitutional foundations of democracy where others stay silent. We bring legal certainty where confusion is used as a weapon."

# LEARN MORE

## RELATED AATK PLAYS

"Challenge them in Court." Vol. 7, *Institutions and Civic Space*.

"Protect Judicial Independence." Vol. 7, *Institutions and Civic Space*.

"Target Their International Partners." Vol. 8, *International Support*.

"Trigger International Mechanisms." Vol. 8, *International Support*.

→ AATK PLAYS AVAILABLE AT ANTIAUTHORITARIAN.COM

# LEARN MORE

## RELATED ELECTION BRIEFS



2024. “Poland Beats Backsliding.”



2024. “Democracy on the Edge (Senegal).”



2024. “Defusing the far-right bomb (France).”

# 8

# LOCK THE VOTE

Turning electoral defense into a national mission

# THE PLAY

Democracy can't win if the vote isn't well protected. Whenever possible, authoritarians work to tilt the electoral field. They restrict participation, dominate media coverage, change electoral rules, manipulate district boundaries, and bend electoral bodies to shape outcomes before a single ballot is cast; often discouraging turnout and undermining trust long before election day.

These attacks cannot always be prevented, but they can certainly be confronted. When the vote is under threat, defending it becomes both a political and moral struggle, not just a technical task. This play reframes electoral defense from "monitoring the vote" into a broad, multi-actor effort to safeguard the fairness and legitimacy of democratic choice.

This means organizing citizen observers, watchdogs, legal teams, community leaders, and values-based messengers before, during, and after election day. Everything done before the vote makes an effective response possible on election day. Everything done afterward helps determine whether manipulation succeeds or

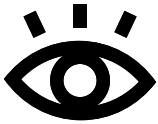
is challenged. That means contesting irregularities, supporting election officials under pressure, countering disinformation, and mobilizing public and institutional pressure before manipulation hardens into a political outcome.

The approach depends on context. Where institutions still function, electoral defense can rely on citizen watchful oversight and legal channels. Where the state is captured, parallel vote tabulation may be necessary to preserve an independent record of the results. In those contexts, defending the vote may not guarantee victory, but it can make electoral theft harder to sustain and reshape the terrain of democratic legitimacy.



# WHY IT WORKS

- **THE POLITICAL COST OF MANIPULATION IS RAISED.** A large monitoring effort makes electoral abuse harder to hide. Visibility increases scrutiny and makes fraud more politically costly.
- **WHAT COUNTS AS LEGITIMATE IS SHAPED.** Independent verification can produce credible evidence that challenges rigged elections. Even when it does not reverse the outcome, it constrains what can credibly be presented as legitimate.
- **DEMOCRATIC ACTORS ARE ALIGNED.** Electoral defense at scale can unite civil society, political parties, media, and ordinary citizens around a single, concrete objective.
- **DEFENSE IS TURNED INTO PARTICIPATION.** Framing vote protection as a civic duty motivates people to volunteer and strengthens turnout efforts.
- **LASTING CIVIC CAPACITY IS BUILT.** The trust, coordination, and infrastructure created to defend the vote become a long-term asset for future democratic resistance.



# HOW IT WORKS

## 1 BUILD THE PILLARS OF THE DEFENSE NETWORK

Before mobilizing people, define the architecture of electoral defense based on realistic scenarios. Clarify what you are preparing for: watchful oversight within functioning institutions, or full independent monitoring and parallel vote tabulation where trust is broken.

Set clear roles, decision chains, and responsibilities for legal support, incident reporting, verification, and rapid response. Map in advance the lawyers, legal organizations, and electoral procedures available to challenge manipulation, protect observers, and contest irregularities quickly. Then, design simple protocols that can operate under pressure: how incidents are reported, validated, escalated, communicated, and, when necessary, converted into formal complaints or legal action. The goal is not simply to document problems, but to enable real-time response when it matters most.

At this stage, don't focus on scale. Focus on building a structure that can later absorb thousands of volunteers without having to improvise.

## 2 LAUNCH AND PROMOTE THE MONITORING EFFORT

Announce the initiative early to make it visible, credible, and participatory. The goal is not just recruitment, but public legitimacy: signaling that defending the vote is a shared civic responsibility, not a partisan maneuver. In the U.S. in 2020, the public launch of the Protect the Results coalition helped frame vote defense as a democratic cause and certification as a civic duty rather than a partisan fight.

Use social media, press outreach, and community spaces to show that citizens are prepared and ready to act. Where possible, establish early contact with international election observation missions. Their presence can deter manipulation, increase scrutiny, and reinforce the credibility of the monitoring effort.

Public endorsements from respected figures can help turn electoral defense into a matter of civic pride. Engage community leaders, local groups, and values-based messengers who can reach beyond traditional political audiences.

## 3 RECRUIT AND TRAIN OBSERVERS AT SCALE

Once the effort is public and legitimate, launch recruitment across all available channels: civil society organizations, media, grassroots networks, and political organizations where appropriate.

Provide simple, modular training that sets clear expectations. Focus on observation protocols, communication channels, and reporting tools. Venezuela's Comanditos is an example of how large-scale recruitment, simple training, and clear roles can enable ordinary citizens to monitor elections even under authoritarian pressure.

Make procedures easy to follow so people from different backgrounds can participate confidently on election day. Training should answer three questions: what matters, what doesn't, and how to report incidents safely. Observers must be able to identify not just ballot fraud, but also intimidation, obstruction, restricted access for monitors, or abuse of campaign rules.

## 4 TRAIN ON PARALLEL VOTE TABULATION (IF NECESSARY)

Parallel vote tabulation (PVT) is not a default tool. It is a contingency for high-risk contexts where institutions are captured and official results cannot be trusted. If those conditions apply, prepare a PVT strategy that is fast, simple, and credible. Avoid complex platforms that can create friction. Use the tools people already know, such as WhatsApp, Telegram, or basic online forms. Test the system in advance so it can operate in real time alongside the official count.

Define a representative sample of strategic polling stations and establish clear procedures for transmitting results and flagging anomalies immediately. The goal is not perfection, but fast, credible evidence that makes large-scale manipulation harder to sustain. In Belarus, *Golos* demonstrated how parallel vote tabulation using familiar tools can produce nationally credible evidence even when official institutions are fully captured.

## 5 DEPLOY, SUPPORT, AND COMMUNICATE ON ELECTION DAY

Ensure observers are strategically positioned, well-equipped, confident, and in constant contact with coordination teams. Provide logistics and supplies to keep them active throughout the day.

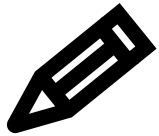
Monitoring only matters if you can respond. When irregularities occur, activate rapid-response mechanisms: file legal complaints, alert electoral authorities, mobilize public pressure, and coordinate messaging to expose and contest manipulation in real time. Where possible, engage directly with local election officials, institutional actors, and trusted intermediaries who can help prevent irregularities from shaping the outcome.

Share verified updates and positive stories from the field to reinforce trust in the monitoring process and to respond quickly to disinformation or attempts to discredit the process.

## 6 BE PREPARED FOR POST-ELECTION MANIPULATION

Even if election day goes smoothly, manipulation may continue during certification. Prepare in advance: draft public statements, rapid-response kits, legal protocols, and aligned messaging with allies. Build relationships early with journalists, academics, diplomats, and election observation missions so verified evidence can be quickly documented, communicated, and amplified when needed.

Where international observers are present, establish clear channels to share verified incidents and legal concerns in real time. Be equally prepared to counter false claims of fraud. The goal is not always to reverse the outcome, but to shape what citizens, institutions, and the international community recognize as legitimate. In more open systems, this may mean protecting a fair certification process; in captured states, it may mean exposing fraud and increasing international pressure.



# TIPS

## A BUILD COMMUNITY AND PROTECT YOUR PEOPLE

Electoral defense is sustained by people, not by protocols alone. Invest early in building a shared community among observers, especially in high-pressure or repressive contexts. Organize trainings and meetings that empower participants and assign roles based on skills and availability. Make those spaces engaging, leaving room for informal interaction and trust-building, not just technical instruction.

Community is also protection. On election day, set up a central coordination hub where observers can report incidents, receive guidance, and get real-time updates. This shared and steady support reduces fear, improves decision-making under pressure, and helps people stay in place. A strong sense of belonging reduces dropout, improves performance, and turns observers into democracy defenders long after election day.

## B INTERNATIONALIZE THE FIGHT

When electoral theft is imminent or underway, be ready to go beyond domestic action. Use verified monitoring data and parallel counts to brief foreign governments, regional bodies, global watchdogs, and international election observation missions. Reach out in advance to diplomats, diaspora networks, foreign media, and international organizations so that, if fraud occurs, your evidence and narrative can move immediately. International visibility amplifies domestic pressure and raises the political cost of holding on to stolen power.



# DON'T FUCK IT UP

## KEEP IT SIMPLE

Use the tools people already know for reporting incidents: text messages, photos, videos, and simple forms. Keep protocols as simple as possible to reduce mistakes under pressure.

In high-risk contexts, prepare for disruption. Have offline backups such as printed checklists, power banks, and basic storage devices, and set up fallback systems like SMS relays or hotlines. The goal is not to build sophisticated platforms, but to make sure reliable information keeps flowing when everything else starts to fail.

Do

# WHO'S DONE IT WELL




## COMANDITOS

### Grassroots defenders of the vote

VENEZUELA

Ahead of Venezuela's 2024 presidential elections—held amid credible fears of repression and fraud—the opposition organized a nationwide civic defense network known as *comanditos* ("Small Commandos"). Nearly 60,000 citizens formed small neighborhood cells of around ten people, recruited through community meetings and WhatsApp groups. Trained to spot irregularities, document incidents, and remain calm under pressure, each *comandito* operated autonomously while reporting to a broader decentralized structure.

On election day, their mission was clear: to secure the legally required voting records. Members photographed official tallies and sent them via WhatsApp to a central team, where volunteers uploaded them into a parallel vote-counting system and published results online for public verification. Collecting over 25,000 records—covering 86% of the vote—the *comanditos* exposed large-scale discrepancies, proving that organized citizen networks can defend truth and transparency even under authoritarian pressure.

> **"When we published those results online, it wasn't just a challenge to the government –it was a moment of truth for all of us. For the first time, we weren't just speaking about fraud, we were proving it, showing the world and Venezuelans the real numbers."**




## GOLOS

### Voice of Truth

BELARUS

During Belarus's 2020 election, IT specialists launched *Golos*, a platform on Telegram and Viber that allowed voters to anonymously submit photos of their marked ballots. Each ballot was authenticated through the legally required commission signatures, with AI verifying about 70% and volunteers from Honest People and Zubr checking the rest. Over 550,000 submissions—nearly 10% of all votes—created a nationwide dataset, resilient even during government internet shutdowns thanks to offline photo storage. At many polling stations, *Golos* data showed Tsikhanouskaya receiving many more votes than officials reported —evidence that the official results simply could not be true. With contributions from all across the country, *Golos* offered a nationally credi-

ble picture: opposition candidate Tsikhanouskaya won at least 56% against Lukashenko's 28-34%, directly contradicting the regime's claim of 80%. These findings, shared with media, civil society, and international watchdogs, became a powerful tool to expose fraud, challenge the official narrative, and fuel mass protests.

> "Our top priority when building Golos was protecting voters' anonymity. In a country where speaking out could be dangerous, we had to ensure people felt safe. Anonymity was everything; it was the only way to ensure people could participate."







## PROTECT THE RESULTS COALITION

### Building a civic firewall around certification

UNITED STATES

In 2020, as Donald Trump refused to say whether he would accept the election result, U.S. civil society groups moved early to prepare for a possible post-election power grab. Led by Indivisible and Stand Up America, Protect the Results launched in July to respond if Trump contested the outcome, refused to concede, or claimed victory before all votes were counted. What began with more than 30 groups grew to a bipartisan coalition of more than 175 organizations by January 2021.

Its strength came not only from its scale but also from its range: grassroots networks, labor unions, faith groups, democracy watchdogs, and advocacy organizations from different ideological and political traditions joined the effort, helping frame vote defense as a broad civic cause

rather than a narrow partisan fight. This was not classic election observation, but a pre-built defense structure for the dangerous period between voting and certification: public messaging, digital outreach, and rapid-response mobilization designed to ensure that any attempt to stop the count or overturn valid results would face immediate civic pressure.

By mid-October, the coalition had already prepared more than 170 actions for November 4th if Trump tried to halt the count or falsely claim victory, giving the effort a tangible deterrent capacity even if its precise independent effect was hard to measure. In that sense, Protect the Results showed how, in a still-functioning but deeply stressed democracy, defending the vote can mean building a civic firewall before manipulation hardens into a political outcome.

**"For years, Trump and his allies have sought to undermine faith in our elections and erode our democratic institutions, but election officials from both parties, independent courts, and the Electoral College have withstood these assaults time and time again."**

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# 9

# JUJITSU THEIR REPRESSION

Turning crackdowns into a blow against the regime's legitimacy

# THE PLAY

Authoritarians rely on repression to intimidate and isolate opponents. In many contexts, repression is not hidden or exceptional: it is deliberate, normalized, and sometimes even socially accepted. Arrests, police brutality, censorship, and public harassment are meant to break morale, normalize fear, and scare off potential allies.

Even so, in elected authoritarian contexts, repression often works through more subtle tools: lawfare, smear campaigns, troll armies, economic pressure, and informal intimidation. Authoritarians do not need to repress everyone directly to silence critics. Targeting a few is often enough to trigger self-censorship, fear, and silence across a much wider circle.

Repression is real, traumatic, and can escalate quickly. This play is not about minimizing or treating it lightly. It is about understanding that, under certain conditions, repression can be framed as the reflex of a regime under pressure. If anticipated and named, repression becomes easier to interpret as weakness rather than authority.

By explaining in advance how and why a regime is likely to act, you prepare audiences both emotionally and politically. When repression arrives, it feels less like chaos and more like confirmation. This probably won't eliminate fear, but it can certainly reduce paralysis and help people understand those events as part of a broader struggle rather than as isolated punishment.

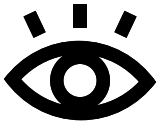
Reframing repression does not always mean provoking outrage. Where repression is more "discreet", the task is different: to expose disproportion and the human cost of abuse, especially when it falls on people who are not seen as political. In those contexts, authoritarian legitimacy erodes slowly, through accumulation rather than explosion.

When applied with persistence, consistency, moral clarity, and a clear focus on key audiences, this play can transform different forms of repression from tools of control into long-term costs for authoritarian power.



# WHY IT WORKS

- **CRACKS ARE MADE VISIBLE.** Repression is meant to project control. But when it is exposed and anticipated, it can also signal fear, overreach, and insecurity inside the regime.
- **PRE-BUNKING SHAPES THE NARRATIVE.** When democratic actors pre-bunk how authoritarian pressure operates, it can be understood as part of a broader pattern.
- **APATHY IS TURNED INTO EMPATHY.** Exposing the disproportion, arbitrariness, or human cost of more "subtle" forms of repression can open space for broader public support.
- **MORAL CONTRAST IS BUILT.** Measured, dignified responses can sharpen the contrast between restraint and brutality and weaken the regime's claim to legitimacy.



# HOW IT WORKS

## 1 ANTICIPATE THE ATTACKS

Repression will eventually come, whether subtle or brutal. Prepare your audience before it hits: outline plausible scenarios. Explain why repression occurs and what it means: they cannot fully control dissent through democratic legitimacy, so when resistance appears, they try to contain it through force, fear, or social punishment. In doing so, they do not need to target everyone. Often, hitting a few is just enough to send a message and trigger self-censorship, silence, and social distancing across a much wider circle.

That way, when it happens, it will not feel random or incomprehensible. It will fit an already established interpretation. For instance, this kind of anticipatory framing helped youth leaders in Nepal interpret the crackdown not as chaos, but as confirmation of the regime's weakness. It didn't eliminate fear or make violence harmless, but it helped reduce shock and prevent paralysis, by helping people recognize repression as proof of pressure rather than proof of omnipotence.

## 2 DOCUMENT WITH CARE, DISTRIBUTE WITH SPEED

If you can do it safely, capture and record acts of physical repression: videos, photos, witness testimonies. Release them immediately through trusted channels and protect sources whenever possible. The objective is not volume, it's credibility and speed: getting verifiable information out before authoritarian ecosystems reshape the narrative and distort the story. Documentation should aim to create understanding and concern, not just outrage.

But not all repression is visible at first glance. In many contexts, it operates through forms of pressure that are harder to capture: legal threats, smear campaigns, economic intimidation, or informal demands to "step back." These forms of repression can also be documented by gathering testimonies, identifying patterns, and exposing them through credible accounts that make the invisible visible.

## 3 MEET REPRESSION WITH DIGNITY

Composure, even under pressure, is a strategic asset. Your demeanor becomes part of the message: you stand for principles, while they respond with intimidation, abuse, or illegitimate force. Anger is legitimate, but it should be expressed after the events, so as to clarify injustice, rather than in the moment, when it can increase risk for them or invite escalation.

Restraint sharpens contrast. Being cool and collected makes repression look heavier, more arbitrary, and less defensible when it is met without loss of control. Leyla Güven's hunger strike illustrates well how sustained composure can transform repression into moral authority. Dignity does not neutralize repression or extreme personal risk, but it can limit its capacity to isolate, humiliate, or dehumanize those it targets.

## 4 USE HUMOR AS A SHIELD

Humor can be a defensive tool. Satire, irony, or symbolic defiance can puncture an image of authority and reduce fear. This works only when used with care and never as a dismissal of harm. Humor and irony can erode legitimacy only if they do not trivialize repression or appear detached from suffering.

Irony can backfire when it alienates people who already live under fear. But in some contexts, satire can signal resilience, show that you are not broken, and make repression look excessive rather than justified. In this way, it can sharpen moral contrast and protect the morale of your base without denying reality. Humor works only when it reinforces a clear message: these are not harmless or ridiculous figures. They are dangerous and violent, and that is unmistakable.

## 5 BUILD MORAL CONTRAST

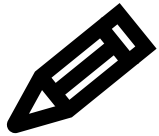
Not every act of repression carries the same political weight. Choose the examples that show the regime at its clearest: overreaching, disproportionate, or absurd. Visible repression can help reframe abuse not as "law enforcement," but as an assault on basic decency. More discreet forms of repression can also be exposed by revealing the coordination behind them: troll armies, smear campaigns, political proxies, or economic pressure operating in sync.

Moral contrast does not come from slogans alone. It is built through visible behavior under pressure and through stories that make the regime's conduct legible to wider audiences. These stories make the contrast tangible. Turn "dignity versus cruelty" into something people can feel, not just hear about.

Contrast is not a one-off moment. It builds up over time. Repetition matters, especially to reach people who may not be politically aligned but still remain attentive. The Candlelight Revolution in South Korea, for instance, showed how sustained restraint, repeated week after week, can turn repression into a legitimacy crisis. When handled well, this contrast may not neutralize repression or its costs, but it can reduce its effectiveness, turning fear into solidarity, isolation into connection, and intimidation into a liability for those who deploy it.

## 6 INVITE SOLIDARITY

To widen support, solidarity has to feel invited, paced, and protected. Engage professional and social groups, and seek international attention when it meaningfully raises the cost of abuse. Use personal stories, shared symbols, and accessible framing to connect repression to broader values and concerns. The goal is to make repression legible and disturbing to wider audiences, including less politicized sectors. This is especially important in hybrid regimes, where exposing repression can help shift broader public opinion. To reach them, do not frame repression only as an attack on "activists" or "the opposition," but as part of a wider climate of fear, pressure, and silence that should concern anyone who cares about basic democratic life.



# TIPS

## A PRE-BUNK AND FRAME FIRST

Framing is most powerful before repression hits. By setting the narrative in advance, you claim authority and shape how people will interpret what follows. Outrage alone isn't enough. Prepare lines, visuals, and trusted messengers ahead of time so you can define the frame within minutes, not days. If you wait, you'll end up reacting to their story instead of forcing them to react to yours.

## B DON'T EXPOSE PEOPLE LIGHTLY

In repressive contexts, visibility is never neutral. When documenting repression, remember that deciding what to show, when to show it, and who gets exposed is a matter of safety and strategy. Treat documentation, testimony, and public appearances as sensitive material, particularly when they can trigger arrests, blacklists, harassment, judicial persecution, threats, or mass trolling.

The same applies when deciding how and when to escalate. Never push people into risks they did not choose or haven't fully understood. Reassess constantly. If repression intensifies, responses should be proportional and selective. Not every moment calls for escalation. In some contexts, restraint and survival are what make persistence possible.



# DON'T FUCK IT UP

## ONE FAKE CAN BREAK THE FRAME

Repression creates urgency, and urgency is when mistakes tend to happen. Circulating or validating unverified images, videos, or testimonies can collapse your credibility in seconds. Authoritarian ecosystems are built to seize on errors, label them as "fake," "staged," or "provocation," and use them to discredit the entire story.

Verify before amplifying. If something cannot be confirmed, caution is key. One false or manipulated piece of content can be enough to undermine real abuses, shift attention away from repression, and turn moral contrast against you. Speed matters a lot, but not losing credibility matters even more.

Do

# WHO'S DONE IT WELL



## GEN Z MOVEMENT

### When repression collapsed a government

NEPAL

In September 2025, Nepal's government abruptly banned 26 major social media platforms, triggering a wave of youth-led protests that became known as the Gen Z movement. What began as a digital-rights rally quickly turned into a broader revolt against corruption and elite privilege. When security forces fired live ammunition and detained hundreds, protesters reframed the violence as proof of a government afraid of its own people. Using VPNs and encrypted apps, they shared videos of the crackdown worldwide, ensuring that what the regime tried to suppress became undeniable evidence of the regime's weakness.

"If a government is afraid of Wi-Fi, it's not the youth that's weak."

The backlash was immediate. Under growing domestic outrage and international pressure, Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli lifted the

social media ban and resigned days later. An interim government led by former Chief Justice Sushila Karki was appointed to restore calm and investigate the use of force. What was meant to silence dissent instead destroyed the ruling coalition's credibility and elevated a new generation of civic leaders. The protests showed and proved that, when repression is met with unity, documentation, and moral clarity, even a digital blackout can end in democratic renewal.

Minneapolis
City of Lakes

## MINNEAPOLIS ICE OBSERVERS

### Filming repression, forcing backlash

UNITED STATES

In early 2026, as Trump's immigration crackdown intensified in Minnesota, grassroots networks, clergy, immigrant-rights groups, and neighborhood volunteers moved quickly to make repression visible. They tracked ICE movements, warned residents, documented raids, and encouraged people to film abuses whenever they could do so safely. When federal agents killed Renee Good and Alex Pretti, videos and eyewitness documentation helped prevent the Trump administration from controlling the story, turning local violence into nationally visible evidence of overreach and repression.

That response helped widen solidarity and make the crackdown politically costly. Tens of thousands mobilized in Minneapolis and across the country, with more than 1,000 rallies nationwide and up to 50,000 people joining a Minneapolis protest and general strike.

As footage circulated and backlash grew, public opinion moved noticeably: by February 2026, 65% of Americans said ICE had gone too far, and Trump's approval

> "ICE's violence is not a statistic, it has names, families, and futures attached to it, and we refuse to look away or stay silent."

ratings declined sharply. Federal tactics in Minnesota were later revised and the broader ICE surge was scaled back. The case showed how documenting repression quickly, credibly, and at scale can turn fear into mobilization and abuse into a legitimacy problem for the elected authoritarian regime.



## LEYLA GÜVEN

### Hunger strike for justice

TURKEY

While imprisoned in Turkey in 2018, Kurdish politician Leyla Güven refused to disappear into silence. Instead of reacting with outrage or escalation, she launched a hunger strike as an act of disciplined, nonviolent defiance aimed at exposing systemic repression against Kurdish political representation. By anticipating the state's attempt to isolate and erase her, Güven reframed repression as evidence of a regime unable to govern dissent through institutional means.

Güven's action transformed confinement into visibility. As her health deteriorated, thousands of supporters across Turkey and the Kurdish diaspora joined coordinated hunger strikes, amplifying the moral contrast between a state relying on coercion and a movement responding with restraint and sacrifice. The regime faced a legitimacy trap: ignoring the protest risked death and backlash,

> "Our struggle against isolation and our struggle for social peace will continue in all areas. This struggle must lead to an honorable peace."

while repression deepened public unease. Though it did not trigger immediate democratic change, Güven's strike prompted limited concessions and challenged the normalization of abuse. It demonstrated how composure, documentation, and sustained dignity can turn repression into a long-term political cost, transforming fear into solidarity and punishment into moral authority.




## CANDLELIGHT REVOLUTION

### Candles made crackdowns backfire

SOUTH KOREA

When revelations of corruption engulfed President Park Geunhye in 2016, authorities tried to dismiss protests as mobs and intimidate organizers. Citizens answered with candles. Vigils multiplied across cities, their dignity and restraint contrasting sharply with a presidency mired in scandal. Every attempt to belittle or outlast them backfired —turnout grew, sympathy widened, and Park's credibility collapsed. Over five months, 15-17 million people—an unprecedented share of South Korea's population—joined weekly protests. Police barriers only amplified their moral authority and the media carried the striking contrast worldwide. By late 2016, Park's approval had sunk to 4%. On December 9, parliament voted overwhelmingly to impeach her. Three months later, the Constitutional Court upheld the decision unanimously. What began as repression turned into a legitimacy crisis too large to contain.

> "The government tried to scare us into silence, but each attempt only lit more candles. Their pressure showed their fear – and made us stronger."

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