

# Introduction

The brightest lights at the end of the tunnel in Africa must be those held aloft by ordinary citizens. Africans' resilience and stubborn refusal to cave in to despair against the odds of despotism at home and an increasingly hostile environment can be ignored only at great cost by those seriously concerned with the recovery of the region.

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At first only a few individuals stepped dangerously across the line of anonymity to demand human rights and democratic freedoms in Kenya, a country whose leader used prison and torture to silence critics. Risking their own safety and careers, they openly demanded freedom of speech, the right of assembly, and the ability to elect their leaders.

Later, some local organizations joined the growing demands for reforms; and some Western governments added pressure on the regime. Ordinary people joined peaceful protests – protests that often were met by riot police and paramilitary troops swinging clubs, throwing tear gas and sometimes using guns. Still the protests continued. The regime, fearful of losing control, reluctantly granted more freedom. This is the story of how human rights and democracy activists can help stir the human spirit as well as political opposition and establish a *culture of resistance* in an undemocratic country. It also highlights a seldom-recognized feature of such resistance: *individual activism*. Individual activists in Kenya helped get the resistance movement started.

Activism has played a key role in the transformation of many authoritarian regimes – from the Philippines to South Korea, in parts of the former Soviet Union, across much of sub-Saharan Africa and in Latin America. But little is known about how such activism actually starts, what tactics initial activists use to get attention and gain more public support. This is the story of how activists can trigger the establishment of a resistance movement that can push a regime to make political advances in human rights and democratic freedoms.

Contrary to a major social movement theory that suggests such movements are largely dependent on political, economic or international conditions beyond the control of activists, this book shows how activists, especially initially, forged ahead on their own initiative despite unfavorable conditions.

Activism in an authoritarian state can be dangerous work. Although some activists may have had selfish motives, many, especially in the risky early stages of the resistance, had far more to lose than to gain by their participation. Most modern scholars deny that people can act on principle and not strictly self interest. Why

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1 Chege, Michael. 1994. "What's Right with Africa?" In *Current History*, May, 194.

should we be so surprised at the possibility that people can act out of something other than self-interest? The view that self-interest is the only motive is not only a cynical view about mankind, it is one that vastly underestimates the human spirit and the human potential.

Principled ideas (e.g., justice, freedom) were found to offer a better explanation of motivations than self-interest for many, but not all, of the early activists. Other “pro-social” motivations such as “duty, love,” are just as real, even in politics, as scholars such as Jane Mansbridge note.<sup>2</sup> This does not mean that self-interest played no role in the motivation of activists, however. After the initial, most dangerous phases of resistance, after individual activists helped wrest some concessions from the regime, organizational activists, including political opposition party leaders, put added pressure on the regime. In this later phase, motivations based on self-interest were more evident as activism for some meant jobs, or a chance at political power. A follow-up study to this one based on what early activists did when in power may well conclude that some of the early activists’ original motivations were much more self-serving than was apparent when they took considerable risks during initial stages of resistance.

There is no guarantee of success. If a regime responds with massive repression, it can force the resistance underground, but at the risk of starting a civil war and earning international condemnation. If the regime is reluctant to use massive force and at least pretends to abide by the rule of law, open resistance can grow and reforms are possible.

This study is evidence that at a time when people living in half the world’s countries (56 percent of the global population) still lack basic political freedoms,<sup>3</sup> people are not helpless victims of circumstances but can stand up, speak out, and force an authoritarian regime to improve human rights and democratic freedoms. The findings support a much more optimistic assessment of the ability of people to shape their own destinies than described in most of the literature on democratic transitions and social movements.

This book is a case study that focuses on individual and group initiatives. The author is fully aware of – and uses in this book – other ways to focus on political change, including a structural or institutional approach, as well as paying close attention to international factors. But this is one of the few studies to examine from the ground up the dynamics of political activism or resistance in an African country: how it starts; how it can grow; how at times it can also falter; how people can risk much for principles they believe in, and how a reform movement is sometimes used for personal gain or power.

This is also one of the few studies to apply social movement theory to an African country. Building in part on theories of social movements (in this case the term

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2 Mansbridge, Jane J., ed. 1990. *Beyond Self-Interest*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, ix.

3 Freedom House. 2005. *Freedom in the World 2005: The Annual Survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties*. New York: Freedom House.

*resistance movement* is used), the present investigation builds on previous work but also differs.<sup>4</sup> Social movement analyses usually focus on organizations; and they generally assume such organizations already exist. This book takes a different approach and includes the important, though largely undetected in other studies, role of individual activists, people who challenge a regime early on without the benefit and protection of an organization. It shows how this, in turn, can help encourage organizational activism.

Moving beyond a static model of social movements and resistance, this book provides the kind of dynamic research that newer thinking about the study of resistance politics calls for involving many participants from different parts of society. The methodology used suggests an alternative research focus in regions where formal institutions are not strong, as often is the case in the developing world. Instead of concentrating on institutions of varying quality, the focus for an investigation of democratization and a human rights struggle can gain fresh insights from assessing the political process of resistance – and the tactics of people leading it.

As already mentioned, this is not a book based only on one theory or focus, that of agency, or activism. Institutional factors are also carefully considered and their effects are noted. Someone who examines political change through an institutional focus might argue that institutional and so-called structural factors were the main determinants of what happened in Kenya. They might point to the levels of government repression as limiting the amount of activism that can take place in an authoritarian regime. They might also point to Kenya as less repressive than some other African nations because it eventually allowed protests; then they might conclude that this ‘institutional’ factor, not activism, was the key to any ground that a resistance movement gained.

This book suggests a different view: that without the activism that took place, reforms would have come much slower. The research finds a clear relation between repression and activism, but the relation is not as straightforward as it may at first seem. Instead of blocking resistance, state repression led to more resistance, a feature noted in some earlier literature. As will be noted, a regime bent on destroying an opposition activist movement can probably do so, but only at risk to their eventual hold on power. Extreme repression can drive a movement underground but probably will not destroy it; and it can re-emerge in armed rebellion and possibly civil war. This is an institutional argument used in this book.

Activism, on the contrary, can push a strong authoritarian regime to make some concessions. It can encourage widening participation in the resistance even in the face of repression. This is an agency argument. The emphasis of this study is on the role of agency or personal initiatives in the face of institutional barriers.

Others may look at this book and disagree with another finding: that domestic activism played a greater role in regime concessions than international pressures.

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4 A number of terms are used in the literature to explain protest politics, including social movements, contentious politics, and sometimes people power. Definitions will be clarified in chapter 1.

Many excellent studies of international relations are made from afar and not on the ground. Such archival or statistical studies add richly to our understanding of factors involved in political change. Other studies, including this one, are based primarily on field research and add closer perspectives.

The resistance movement in Kenya is examined in the context of both domestic and international politics, including the ending of the Cold War, the role of diplomats, donors and international watchdog agencies in affecting human rights and democracy in Kenya. Both bi-lateral donors and multi-national ones, including the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank played a role in shaping Kenya's human rights and democracy. On several occasions, donors withheld new funding pending reforms; and international agencies such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch publicized abuses and brought world attention to the plight of key activists when they were threatened or arrested by the regime. On balance, however, the research shows that in Kenya domestic pressure posed a greater threat to the regime than inconsistent pressures from the diplomatic and donor community and thus provided the primary reason the regime made concessions.

In summary, both institutional and agency factors are considered in this book. But the emphasis is on the role of agency or initiatives by people in the face of institutional barriers. The book points to the need for a greater appreciation of what people can do in the face of difficult and dangerous barriers, or institutional obstacles.

Chapter 1 presents the main theoretical arguments of the book and includes a model that helps explain the findings in Kenya and which can be tested in other authoritarian settings, past or present. Chapter 2 examines Kenya's history of repression and resistance up to 1987, when overt resistance became more evident again in response to state repression. The next four chapters are empirical chapters, examining the work of individual activists (chapter 3), organizational activists (chapters 4 and 5) and mass participation and the shift of norms for a segment of the population from deference to defiance (chapter 6). Chapter 7 is the conclusion with a summary of the findings and their implications for future research. Chapter 8 is the Appendix, which includes a section on how this research was carried out, as well as further examples of the repression that took place in Kenya.

How much can one generalize from a single case study? Historical, cultural, political and other circumstances will differ from country to country. There is no certainty that the Kenya resistance will be mirrored elsewhere; and the study makes no prediction that such resistance leads to more human rights and democracy, or a regime change as happened in Kenya. The author makes no cause and effect prediction that activism results in more democracy. But the Kenya findings show that a resistance movement can pressure some regimes to make reforms. Some scholars may point to a country like Zimbabwe, however, and ask if activism is so important, then why hasn't it brought more human rights and democracy there? This is a good research question for a subsequent study. Some of the factors worth examining in follow-up studies include: what tactics did activists use; did the regime resort to extreme repression to block an activist resistance?

The methodology and focus used in this study can help researchers analyze activism and document early resistance in other authoritarian states; it can help explain how such movements start and how they help establish a culture of resistance. The study's findings are based on a careful review of news accounts and some 70 in-depth interviews, including with most of the key human rights and democracy activists in Kenya between 1987 and 2002, when Kenya's then ruling party suffered its first defeat. It presents a model based on three major domestic elements involved in the establishment of a culture of resistance: first, individual activism; second, organizational activism building on initial concessions won by individual activists; third, and overlapping both of these to some degree, mass public support expressed in open, usually illegal political rallies.

This study treats activism as an independent variable, not beyond the influence of such factors as regime repression, economic hardships and international issues, but not controlled by them either. Regime repression continued to be a catalyst for activism. Each stage of activism helped open wider the door of opportunity for additional resistance to the regime.