

Rallies are one of the most commonly used forms of nonviolent action, but how much do activists know about making them as effective as possible? *Brian Martin* explains how to analyse the dynamics of rally action.

Rallying support

● Brian Martin

"We must do something! Let's call a rally!" Speakers are organised, leaflets produced and participants get to show solidarity with the cause. End of story?

Not quite. Although many rallies are routine affairs, this form of action still holds the potential for threatening the status quo. This is most obviously the case in repressive regimes where any form of protest is taboo. Massive rallies were a key to the collapse of the East German communist regime in 1989.

Even in nominally more tolerant countries, some rallies are treated with great hostility by authorities. The most well-known recent examples are the large anti-corporate protests in Seattle, Genoa and many other cities, in which police have used harsh measures to attack protesters. For some participants, the action becomes a battle in which the aim is to overcome police attempts at control.

To gain insight into rally dynamics, it is fruitful to look at political jiu-jitsu, which is the process by which the injustice of a violent attack on nonviolent protesters is channelled into greater support for the protesters. Famous examples of this include the 1905 shooting of peaceful protesters in Russia, an event that fatally undermined peasant support for the Czar, and the 1960 Sharpeville massacre, in which South African police shot protesters (some of whom had been throwing stones), causing a huge hostile reaction around the world.

The concept of political jiu-jitsu was formulated by eminent nonviolence researcher Gene Sharp, and is expounded in his monumental book *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*. In his analysis of the dynamics of nonviolent action, the typical stages are laying the groundwork, mounting a challenge, maintaining solidarity and discipline in the face of repression, political jiu-jitsu, and redistribution of power.

When people observe an obvious

injustice, many of them are upset or outraged. For this to occur, the injustice must be readily perceived and understood. Sharp showed how political jiu-jitsu could win over uncommitted parties, arouse dissent and opposition in the opponent's camp, and increase support from those sympathetic to the protesters.

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The trouble is that opponents of the protesters are also aware of these dynamics. Sharp did not examine sophisticated police tactics and protester countertactics, but it is straightforward to do so.

Managing perceptions

Police almost always deny being violent. They also use various forms of media management. This is not new. For example, in the famous 1930 salt satyagraha led by Gandhi, police brutally beat satyagrahis. The British claimed that Indians carted off to hospital were faking their injuries. Similarly, all governments deny that they use or sanction torture, though torture is carried out in dozens of countries.

At rallies, only a few people actually see what is happening at any given location. Most, including many participants, learn about the action largely through media reports. To counter police denials and media management, protesters can develop links with credible media observers and use alternative media.

In the case of the salt satyagraha, US journalist Webb Miller reported on the action and exposed British government lies. This was crucial in undermining support for British colonial policy within Britain as well as in the US and other countries.

Protesters cannot assume that their sincerity or nonviolent discipline will be apparent to anyone else. One facet of a rally is the presence of bodies in physical space; another crucial facet is what the action signifies to observers. Mobilising meanings can be just as important as mobilising bodies. Therefore, it is vital to liaise with media observers and other independent, authoritative witnesses.

"Off-stage" violence

Another police technique for avoiding political jiu-jitsu is to use violence "off stage", for example beating protesters when no cameras are around. This may outrage the protesters but the potential for wider mobilisation is minimised.

One response to this is for lots of protesters to have their own cameras and videorecorders. It's now possible to obtain inconspicuous cameras (often used for surveillance). If enough participants can record police attacks, it becomes very difficult for police to confiscate all the recording equipment. Photos can be given to the media and posted on websites.

Care is needed. Alternative media can become targets of police. It may be wise to have duplicate facilities or to otherwise disperse collection and collation of evidence.

The power of images can be enormous. Police violence against certain groups is routine but usually arouses relatively little concern since only a few people know about it. The assault on Rodney King by Los Angeles police would have been no different except for a video-recording that dramatically revealed the one-sided attack.

Another example is the 1991 massacre of East Timorese protesters by Indonesian troops. This might

have passed virtually unremarked outside East Timor except that journalist Max Stahl recorded the events on videotape and was able to smuggle the tape out of the country. Shown on television worldwide, it was a key factor in generating international support for the East Timorese resistance.

“Nonlethal weapons”

Another way police avoid triggering outrage is by using “nonlethal” weapons, such as pepper spray, which can be damaging or frightening but do not seem so bad to observers. An assault with a baton is widely understood by observers, as everyone can readily imagine the consequences of being hit. Pepper spray in someone’s eyes can be just as painful and damaging but, as well as being less visible to observers, is more of an unknown quantity. Various other so-called nonlethal weapons, including plastic bullets, electroshock weapons and disorienting sounds, also serve to disguise the nature of the assault.

To counter nonlethal weapons, protesters need to educate themselves and the public about the impacts of repression technology. For example, decades ago a new torture technique was used in Northern Ireland: reducing sensory inputs through hoods, white noise and physical restraints. This didn’t seem, on first glance, as harmful as beatings. It was only after scientists documented the incredibly harmful effects of this treatment that what was called sensory deprivation became recognised as a form of torture.

Similar efforts are required, and taking place, over weapons such as pepper spray. As well as testimony by researchers, graphic accounts and convenient ways of labelling the impact can help to expose the reality of nonlethal weapons. Evidence of the use of weapons is essential, such as munition casings that can reveal the companies involved in the repression technology trade.

Provoking violence

A classic technique for undermining support for protesters is to get them to be violent. One approach is to attempt to humiliate protesters in the hope that a few of them will respond aggressively. As soon as protesters use even a little violence, the qualitative difference between the two sides is undermined. Media pressure for action shots amplifies the slightest protester violence. In guerrilla warfare, the guerrillas may inflict only a tiny fraction of the violence but many outsiders simply see the struggle as one of violence on both sides.

Authorities know full well that if even a few protesters are violent,



First time around. An anti-war rally from 1991.

PHOTO: JULIA GUEST

using violence against all of them is far easier to justify. As well as egging on susceptible protesters, police may fail to act against those who are violent and use infiltrators to foment or initiate violence from the protester side.

Gene Sharp recognises this quite well. In his model, maintaining non-violent discipline is central to the success of nonviolent action. As well as scrupulously avoiding violence, it can help to expose agents provocateurs and to have a well-publicised stand against violence. This is well known to many activists.

Political jiu-jitsu works because of the disproportion between action and response, such as a peaceful protest met by a brutal attack. The same idea can be transposed into other realms. If protesters are polite and respectful, even the slightest assault will seem unjust, whereas if protesters are rude and hostile, police and observers may feel that stronger police action is justified. As before, effective communication of what is happening is crucial to mobilising support.

Conclusion

By creative use of the idea of political jiu-jitsu, it’s possible to develop a robust plan of action to ensure that rallies are as effective as possible. If protesters are well prepared, then any police violence is likely to backfire, though of course there are no guarantees. If the police are aware of the preparations, then they are less likely to be violent in the first place. What is going on is, in essence, a struggle over how to trigger or avoid triggering a backlash against police attacks.

It would be unwise for protesters to seek to provoke a police attack with the aim of mobilising support. If such an intent became known, it would undermine the protesters’ credibility. In any case, triggering political jiu-jitsu is not essential for the success of nonviolent action. If authorities allow the action to proceed, that in itself provides gains and can lay the foundation for

stronger, larger actions in the future.

The key thing here is not any specific recommendation but rather the importance of analysing action — rallies or any other method — with a keen understanding of the dynamics of nonviolent action. Opponents often have an intuitive understanding of these dynamics, too, so it is not good enough to assume that actions automatically succeed if they follow some formula. Participants need to think through the implications both of their own actions and the possible reactions by police, observers and supporters.

The legal aftermath of rallies, whether this is police cases against protesters or protester cases against police, offers relatively little prospect of mobilising support. Indeed, one might imagine that the courts were designed to inhibit political jiu-jitsu. Courts are widely seen to be about justice (even if lawyers know otherwise), whereas political jiu-jitsu is triggered by awareness of injustice. Presenting a case to a court can have its place, but mobilising support is far more likely on the street than in the courtroom.

Before organising the next rally, though, it is worth examining the point of the exercise. Is it disruption, symbolism, solidarity or mobilisation? Some say that mass rallies are no longer such a productive form of action, especially given the immense efforts that authorities have invested in dealing with them. Understanding rally dynamics is important but so is working out goals and strategies before deciding on what type of action to take.

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