THE ANTI-
AUTHORITARIAN
PLAYBOOK

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25 ESSENTIAL ESSAYS FROM A CRUCIAL YEAR

ABOUT THE ANTI-AUTHORITARIAN PLAYBOOK

The Anti-Authoritarian Playbook is born out of four decades of anti-authoritarian activism. From directly confronting the violence and misinformation of organized far-right groups and their enablers, to running successful political and cultural campaigns, to traveling the world to work with people studying right wing ideologies and movements and building pro democracy resistance, Scot Nakagawa has learned a lot about the magnitude of what we're facing and how to address it. The Playbook is a platform for the dialogue he's been having with himself and others over those years of work. It's also a forum for discussion and peer education, and an invitation to join the community of people learning more about the struggle ahead.

The Anti-Authoritarian Playbook also helps to resource the work of the 22nd Century Initiative. At a time when traditional nonprofit structures and funding streams are at grave risk, paid subscriptions to the Playbook help to make us as nimble, strategic, and sustainable as we need to be in the fight for freedom and democracy that works for everyone. You can join the community of hundreds of people powering the 22nd Century Initiative's pro-democracy work with a paid subscription: https://antiauthoritarianplaybook.substack.com/subscribe

If you're new to this, welcome to the fight. If you're an old hand, thanks for all you do.

ABOUT SCOT NAKAGAWA

Scot is a 42-year veteran of social and economic justice advocacy now leading the 22nd Century Initiative. He has served as an organizer, political strategist, and social movement analyst and has worked with organizations such as the Coalition for Human Dignity, the National Anti-Klan Network, the National LGBTQ Task Force, the Highlander Research and Education Center, and numerous political campaigns. Nakagawa is also the co-founder and past Senior Partner of ChangeLab, an Asian American think/act laboratory addressing issues of social justice and Asian American leadership, and he currently authors the popular Substack newsletter The Anti-Authoritarian Playbook.

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Introduction: A Letter to Freedom Fighters

Dear Reader,

The Anti-Authoritarian Playbook isn't a manual with easy answers. It's an invitation to think strategically about the fight for democracy—not just what to do, but how to analyze power, anticipate threats, and build movements capable of winning.

Over the last year, thousands of people have begun following the Playbook, joining a community committed to the beautiful, necessary, transformational work of building the democracy we deserve. Each post is an invitation to strategic action, wherever we are, to address the current unprecedented global threat of authoritarianism, in ways that make the future possible.

This collection gathers 25 posts that illuminate the core ideas and strategies of the Playbook over this last year. We've organized these short essays into five parts that build on each other:
- **Part 1** examines our unprecedented moment—why "we haven't been here before" matters, how authoritarians manufacture crises, and what it takes to move from protest sparks to the sustained fire of movement.
- **Part 2** dissects authoritarian power itself: the coalitions that enable it, the theocratic and oligarchic forces driving it, and crucially, why they're winning the cultural war.
- **Part 3** shifts to action—from concrete demands and protecting the vulnerable to fighting beyond left-right divides to sustaining ourselves for the long haul.
- **Part 4** dives into proven tactics: the characteristics of successful resistance, dilemma actions that put authoritarians in lose-lose situations, mass mobilization strategies, the untapped power of elders, and how to create crisis moments that force democratic breakthroughs.
- **Part 5** completes the journey from defense to transformation—pivoting to offense, understanding mutual aid as political resistance, wielding culture as strategy, and recognizing democracy itself as infrastructure for liberation, not destination in itself.

Read these in order or jump to what calls you. Whether you're part of a nonprofit or foundation staff, someone who took your first action this year or a strategist who has been at it for decades, connected to an organization or not, read these essays as an organizer, asking: How does this change how I think about power? What is a new angle on this problem that we haven't considered before? What becomes possible if we think this way?

Each Part also includes a discussion guide to help you reflect and strategize in staff or group meetings, community dialogues, or other strategic convenings. Choose the questions that make most sense to you. Let them sharpen and pivot your strategy.

Finally, the Playbook drives strategy and action for 22nd Century Initiative, the organization that I direct. In 2025 I made more than 60 trips to various organizations from northern Idaho to New York City, sharing themes in this compendium and more from across the Playbook. We are planning to make more of this kind of content as accessible, digestible, and useful as possible in the months ahead. If you find these materials helpful, we invite you to donate to the 22nd Century Initiative on our website or become a paid subscriber to the Playbook.

The future depends not just on how we think, but by what we do together. Read this with others. Coordinate action. Defend each other. Win.

In Solidarity,
Scot

THE ANTI-AUTHORITARIAN PLAYBOOK

WHAT TIME IS IT?

UNDERSTANDING THE MOMENT

Introduction

Good strategy begins with an unflinching assessment of where we actually are.

The essays in this section make the case that we're facing something unprecedented in American history—not because authoritarianism is new, but because the conditions enabling it are qualitatively different. We're operating in a surveillance state the Stasi couldn't have imagined, with economic concentration that dwarfs the robber barons, in a globalized context where there's no external refuge, and with social infrastructure so eroded that traditional organizing models no longer work as designed. Expert consensus tells us we've already transitioned to competitive authoritarianism, not that we're sliding toward it. And the playbook being run against us—from potential deliberate economic collapse to the Duterte model of state-sanctioned violence—demands we prepare for scenarios that sound extreme but are drawn from recent history.

This moment requires strategic clarity. These five essays provide that clarity: explaining why "we haven't been here before" matters strategically, where we actually are in the authoritarian consolidation process, and what effective resistance looks like when the old rules no longer apply. Read them to understand the terrain we're fighting on, because you can't win a battle if you don't know what battlefield you're on.

Recommendations for Anti–Authoritarian Resistance
We Must Adapt, Not Assimilate
November 12, 2024

Our emotions are high as they should be. Anger, grief, and anxiety are all very natural reactions to the anxiety-provoking situation we are in; one in which we have already lost so much, and may soon lose much more. But as the contours of our struggle are changing, we will need to be careful about how we channel our emotions and take action in this new environment, mapping out paths for ourselves that will keep us safer while also reacting to the many possible scenarios that we may be faced with as authoritarian power asserts itself more aggressively.

The following recommendations were drawn from the experiences of freedom fighters that have survived and even defeated authoritarianism around the world. Consider adapting them to your local situations, and, remember, that as repression grows greater, the quality of our relationships with others will become more important relative to the quantity of our relationships. Build community, hold your trusted allies close, and don't obey in advance.

Recommendations:

1. Build Trusted, Small-Scale Affinity Groups
- **Why:** In high-risk environments, small, tight-knit groups offer safety, adaptability, and accountability.
- **How:**
  - Keep group membership small and based on trust.
  - Avoid centralized leadership to reduce vulnerability to infiltration.
  - Use informal communication channels and low-tech strategies to avoid surveillance.

2. Focus on Mutual Aid and Community Support
- **Why:** Providing tangible support to vulnerable neighbors builds trust and solidarity, creating a foundation for resistance.
- **How:**
  - Organize community kitchens, food banks, or shared gardens to address food insecurity and to create a greater degree of independence from oligarchs and authoritarian politicians.
  - Provide resources like childcare, elder care, or transportation for those marginalized by right-wing policies.
  - Offer quiet support to those targeted by local far-right actors, such as LGBTQ+ individuals, immigrants, or activists.
  - Politicize care giving, maintenance of the commons, and first responder services in the context of building community resilience and independence.

3. Establish Discreet Legal and Safety Networks
- **Why:** Legal aid and safety measures protect vulnerable individuals from harm or harassment.
- **How:**
  - Set up legal defense funds and provide "know your rights" training tailored to local laws.
  - Create rapid response networks to mobilize support when individuals are targeted by law enforcement or violent authoritarian groups.
  - Identify sympathetic lawyers, clergy, or local officials who can act as allies or provide safe spaces.

4. Use Art and Culture to Subtly Challenge Authoritarian Narratives
- **Why: Art and storytelling can inspire resistance and foster community cohesion without overtly provoking confrontation.**
- **How:**
  - Support local artists, musicians, and writers creating work that fosters solidarity and challenges extremist ideologies.
  - Use symbols, murals, or small public installations to quietly spread pro-democracy values.
  - Share stories of resilience and hope through local networks, zines, or online forums.

5. Leverage Faith and Community-Based Institutions
- **Why: Religious and civic organizations can provide cover and legitimacy for resistance efforts in areas where authoritarianism has been normalized.**
- **How:**
  - Partner with faith leaders committed to justice and equality to organize community events or offer sanctuary.
  - Use churches or other neutral community spaces for discreet gatherings or mutual aid efforts.
  - Emphasize shared values of compassion and dignity to build bridges with moderate community members.

6. Develop Secure Communication Strategies
- **Why: Surveillance and infiltration by law enforcement or vigilante authoritarian actors are significant risks.**
- **How:**
  - Use secure, encrypted communication tools (like Signal) for sensitive conversations.
  - Rely on low-tech options like word-of-mouth, handwritten notes, or face-to-face meetings when feasible.
  - Avoid social media for organizing; focus instead on secure, closed networks.

7. Prioritize Resilience Over Visibility
- **Why:** Open protests or direct challenges to entrenched power can lead to violent backlash in rural areas with far-right dominance, and can expose leaders and organizations to authoritarian leadership, making them targets for increasing repression.
- **How:**
    - Focus on quiet, long-term relationship-building instead of public displays of resistance.
    - Avoid direct confrontation with law enforcement or armed groups; instead, work to subtly undermine their influence through community-building that builds resiliency and trust, and through non-cooperation.
    - Use slow, strategic campaigns that build power over time without drawing unnecessary attention.

8. Educate and Empower Quietly
- **Why:** Building knowledge within the community prepares people to resist disinformation and authoritarian tactics.
- **How:**
    - Host discreet workshops on media literacy, nonviolent resistance, and community organizing.
    - Share resources on how to counter propaganda and engage with moderate neighbors who might be swayed by extremism.
    - Develop youth programs focused on critical thinking, civic engagement, and democratic values.

9. Build Alliances Beyond Local Borders
- **Why:** Isolated rural communities benefit from connecting with regional and national allies.
- **How:**
    - Link with broader anti-authoritarian networks for resources, training, and mutual support.
    - Partner with urban groups that can provide material aid or amplify rural voices in larger movements.
    - Create safe channels for exiled or at-risk activists to continue contributing to resistance efforts from outside the community.

10. Stay Adaptive and Flexible
- **Why:** Authoritarian environments are unpredictable, and rigid plans are easily disrupted.
- **How:**
    - Be prepared to shift tactics based on new threats or opportunities.
    - Keep resistance strategies varied, combining mutual aid, advocacy, and quiet defiance.
    - Emphasize the long game—building democratic norms and values incrementally over time.

One Last Word

By focusing on mutual aid, small-scale organizing, and the quiet cultivation of democratic values, anti-authoritarian groups can build a foundation for long-term change without putting themselves or their communities in unnecessary danger. Resistance in these contexts isn't about dramatic gestures—it's about survival, resilience, persistence, and the joy of building with others and creating deep connections. The denser our networks of relationships, and the stronger and less isolated we are, the more creative and effective we can be.

It's Not Fascism Yet, But...
Sussing Out What Might Be The Long Game
March 11, 2025

Many warn that what the Musk-Trump administration is doing in terms of economic policy and institutional shakedowns may tank the economy. If so, that may be an opportunity for pro-democracy forces to broaden our coalitions. But, tanking the economy may be just what they have in mind. If it is, the prospect of fascism should be given more serious consideration.

Trump and Musk deliberately tanking the economy fits within the framework of fascist and authoritarian strategy. Historically, economic crises have often paved the way for authoritarian takeovers, and there is ample reason to suspect that this is a calculated move rather than mere incompetence.

The Strategy Behind Economic Destruction

Former Trump administration official and white nationalist movement icon, Steve Bannon, has been explicit about his goal of "deconstructing the administrative state." This is not just about deregulation or small government—it's about crippling the federal government's ability to function so that a new order can be imposed in its place. Trump's economic policies—massive corporate giveaways, government privatization, and reckless deregulation—don't just benefit the ultra-wealthy; they also create economic chaos that can be exploited politically.

How Economic Collapse Paves the Way for Authoritarian Rule

1. Destabilization Creates a Crisis of Legitimacy
  - When the economy collapses, people lose faith in government institutions and look for a strongman to "restore order."
  - The Great Depression helped usher in fascist movements across Europe. Germany, Italy, and Spain all saw massive economic collapse before authoritarian leaders seized control.
  - In Russia, post-Soviet economic collapse allowed oligarchs and Vladimir Putin to consolidate power under the guise of restoring stability.

2. A Traumatized, Desperate Population is Easier to Control
  - Economic hardship makes people more susceptible to scapegoating —which is why authoritarian leaders always target vulnerable groups (immigrants, minorities, LGBTQ+ people, etc.).
  - In the Weimar Republic, Hitler's Nazi Party gained power by blaming Jews, communists, and others for Germany's economic struggles, promising national renewal through purging "undesirable" elements.

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3. Economic Collapse Justifies Emergency Measures
- Shock Doctrine: Naomi Klein's concept of "disaster capitalism" describes how elites use crises to impose policies that would normally be resisted.
- If the economy crashes, Trump and Musk can justify draconian economic policies, expanded executive powers, and the elimination of regulatory and democratic safeguards.

4. Privatization of the State
- One possible goal of economic collapse is to privatize government functions entirely, allowing billionaires like Musk to control public infrastructure, social services, and governance itself.
- This mirrors Putin's Russia, where oligarchs extracted wealth from the economy while consolidating power in a state-controlled kleptocracy.

How Trump and Musk Could Use Economic Collapse to Justify Fascist Policies

1. Nationalizing the Economy in a Fascist Model
- After ransacking the government for personal gain, they can pivot to a strongman economy, using emergency powers to seize control over industries, crush labor movements, and implement a corporate-nationalist economic model.
- This would resemble Mussolini's "corporatism", in which the state controlled key industries in collaboration with big business and suppressed workers' rights.

2. Scapegoating and Political Persecution
- As conditions deteriorate, the administration can redirect public anger toward immigrants, leftists, labor unions, and activists, claiming that they are responsible for the economic pain.
- Crackdowns on dissent become easier when the public is convinced that opposition movements are part of the "problem."

3. Militarization and Suppression of Dissent
- Economic collapse is the perfect pretext for deploying the military against protesters, expanding police power, and instituting mass surveillance.
- "Law and order" rhetoric is always strongest when people are afraid and desperate for stability.

What We Must Do to Prepare

1. Expose the Strategy
- Make it clear that the economic collapse isn't happening by accident—it is being engineered as a political weapon.
- Call out Bannon's philosophy of destruction and educate people on how fascists historically use crises to consolidate power.

2. Organize Worker and Consumer Resistance
- Strengthen labor unions to resist mass layoffs, wage suppression, and corporate takeovers of public goods.
- Encourage consumer strikes and targeted boycotts of companies complicit in economic destabilization.

3. Fight Against the Nationalization of Fascism
- If Trump-Musk attempt to seize control of industries, mobilize workers in those industries (e.g., energy, transportation, healthcare) to resist through mass strikes and work stoppages.

4. Support Alternative Economic Models
- Expand mutual aid networks, worker cooperatives, and decentralized local economies to make communities more resilient against economic collapse.
- The more we can bypass corporate and state-controlled economies, the harder it will be for authoritarians to control people through economic coercion.

5. Prepare for Mass Mobilization
- If they attempt a full economic coup, we must be ready for general strikes, direct action, and nonviolent mass resistance.
- **The People Power Movement in the Philippines (1986)** successfully ousted dictator Ferdinand Marcos through economic and civil disobedience—these tactics remain relevant today.

The Takeaway

Bannon and Trump aren't just willing to let the economy tank—they need it to tank to consolidate their vision of permanent authoritarian rule. This is part of the fascist playbook, and we must counter it by exposing their strategy, mobilizing workers, and building alternative economic and political structures that make it harder for them to seize total control.

Short-term, we must continue to illustrate and narrate the pain and suffering this administration is causing, and repeat, over and over again, that we are the victims of a billionaire steal of public goods and assets, including data and government contracts, and a deregulation regime that will make food and drugs, and other critical goods and services more unsafe for consumers. But, we also need to look to the future. The shock and awe campaign is just beginning and it is likely to get a lot worse.

If we act now, we can turn their crisis into an opportunity for mass democratic resistance. **We are the majority. It's time we learned how to act like it.**

Strategic Response to Duterte-Model Authoritarian Escalation
Urgent Recommendations for Movement Defense Against Legalized Violence
September 27, 2025

Based on September 25, 2025 executive actions and the Philippines precedent

Summary: The Duterte Model in America

The September 25, 2025 executive actions represent a dramatic escalation toward the "Duterte model" of authoritarian control - using terrorism designations to systematically target political opposition while creating legal cover for vigilante violence. The memorandum directs the FBI, DOJ, Treasury, and IRS to investigate "domestic terrorism networks" specifically targeting left-leaning progressive nonprofits, while designating "Antifa as a domestic terrorist organization" despite its decentralized nature.

This mirrors Duterte's strategy in the Philippines where "police involvement in the killings of drug suspects extends far beyond the officially acknowledged cases" with "planning and coordination by the police and in some cases local civilian officials" while maintaining plausible deniability through vigilante groups that were "likely supported by or under the control of Duterte's regime, despite their unofficial status".

The danger is immediate: Stephen Miller's declaration that "This is the first time in American history that there is an all-of-government effort to dismantle left-wing terrorism" combined with his characterization of "the Democratic Party as 'not a political party. It is a domestic extremist organization'" creates the ideological framework for systematic political violence.

Part I: Understanding the Duterte Model

How the Philippines Model Works

The Duterte drug war demonstrated how authoritarian leaders can orchestrate mass violence while maintaining legal cover:

1. Ideological Dehumanization: Duterte made "repeated calls on the public to kill drug addicts" instructing "If you know of any addicts, go ahead and kill them yourself" while police were told "My order is shoot to kill you. I don't care about human rights".

2. Coordinated State-Vigilante Operations: The "simultaneous fall" in both state and vigilante violence when operations were suspended "indicates both the impressive level of control of the government over the War on Drugs as well as suggests coordination between state forces and unofficial agents".

3. Plausible Deniability Through Outsourcing: Violence was attributed to vigilantes who were "carried out by members of law enforcement in plain clothes who took measures to make the killings appear as having been perpetrated by private actors".

4. Financial Incentives for Violence: Police received "financial incentives for police who kill people allegedly involved with the drugs trade" with payments "per head."

5. Legal Impunity: "Not a single police officer has been prosecuted or dismissed from duty in relation to killings during police drug operations" with Duterte promising "police and soldiers will never go to prison, not on my watch".

Results: 12,000-30,000 Killed

Human rights organizations estimate "12,000 to 30,000 civilians have been killed in the 'anti-drug operations' carried out by the Philippine National Police and vigilantes" while "An average of 34 people a day died during the first six months of Duterte's presidency".

Part II: The American Adaptation

Current Escalation Indicators

- **Terrorism Infrastructure Creation:** The executive actions establish comprehensive government machinery targeting political opposition through "the FBI's Joint Terrorism Taskforce" with coordination across "Treasury Department" to "identify and disrupt financial networks that fund domestic terrorism".
- **Targeting Opposition Infrastructure:** The order "directs the Internal Revenue Service to withdraw tax-exempt status from any organization it identifies as funding political violence" while specifically naming "billionaires George Soros and Reid Hoffman" without evidence.
- **Ideological Framework for Violence:** The designation of a decentralized movement as a "terrorist organization" combined with claims that "Antifa recruits, trains, and radicalizes young Americans to engage in this violence" creates justification for broad targeting.
- **County Sheriff Strategy:** Another threat vector is the likely use of county sheriffs as the mechanism for deputizing right-wing groups, replicating how Duterte used local officials to coordinate vigilante violence.

The Deputization Danger
County sheriffs represent the perfect mechanism for implementing the Duterte model because:
- Constitutional sheriffs movement already ideologically aligned
- Local law enforcement harder to monitor than federal agencies
- Existing relationships with militia and vigilante groups
- Can claim local law enforcement authority while enabling violence
- Creates plausible deniability for federal administration

Part III: Immediate Defense Strategies

1. Legal Rapid Response Infrastructure

Pre-positioned Legal Teams:
- Emergency restraining order templates prepared for terrorism designations
- Know Your Rights trainings for all movement organizations
- Rapid response legal hotlines operational 24/7
- Constitutional challenges prepared for filing within hours

Documentation Systems:
- Independent monitoring of all law enforcement activities
- Civilian oversight networks tracking sheriff department activities
- Real-time documentation of vigilante group coordination
- International human rights monitoring integration

2. Organizational Security Overhaul

Immediate Organizational Protections:
- Digital security upgrades for all progressive organizations
- Financial diversification away from traditional banking systems
- Leadership security protocols and safe house networks
- Communications security and encrypted coordination systems

Coalition Protection Networks:
- Mutual defense agreements between organizations
- Shared security infrastructure and threat assessment
- Coordinated rapid response to targeting attempts
- International solidarity and protection networks

3. Community Defense Infrastructure

Neighborhood Protection Networks:
- Community self-defense training programs
- Civilian safety escort systems for targeted individuals

- Emergency response protocols for vigilante attacks
- Safe house networks for people under threat

Information Warfare Defense:
- Counter-narrative campaigns exposing vigilante coordination
- Real-time documentation and broadcast of attacks
- International media coordination for global exposure
- Social media rapid response to disinformation

Part IV: Strategic Counter-Offensive

1. Expose the Coordination

Target the Sheriff-Vigilante Nexus:
- Investigate and expose coordination between sheriff departments and right-wing groups
- Document financial flows and communications between law enforcement and militias
- Create crisis moments around sheriff accountability through public exposure
- Force elected officials to choose sides on law enforcement politicization

International Exposure Strategy:
- Frame as "American Duterte model" in international media
- Engage international human rights organizations for monitoring
- Create diplomatic pressure through allied governments
- Document for future war crimes prosecutions

2. Corporate Accountability Campaigns

Target Enabling Infrastructure:
- Identify corporations providing services to sheriff departments engaging in political targeting
- Create crisis moments around corporate complicity in political violence
- Force corporate boards to choose between authoritarian enabling and business relationships
- Target insurance companies covering departments engaged in political violence

Financial System Pressure:
- International banking pressure around human rights violations
- Shareholder actions against companies enabling political violence
- Consumer pressure campaigns against regime-enabling corporations
- International investment community engagement on ESG concerns

3. Political Isolation Strategy

Electoral Consequences:
- Target sheriff elections with massive voter protection efforts
- Decrease the "profit" among elected officials supporting vigilante coordination
- Force state officials to choose between federal pressure and constituent safety
- Build electoral coalitions specifically around opposing political violence

Legislative Countermeasures:
- State-level legislation prohibiting coordination with vigilante groups
- Sanctuary policies protecting targeted organizations and individuals
- State attorney general investigations of federal overreach
- Interstate compacts for mutual protection against political targeting

Part V: Mass Mobilization for Ungovernable Response

1. Economic Disruption Strategy

Corporate Pressure Points:
- Mass boycotts of corporations in states with complicit sheriff departments
- Workplace actions in companies that service law enforcement
- Financial district disruptions targeting banks financing authoritarian infrastructure
- Supply chain disruptions affecting regime-enabling corporations

Economic Sanctuary Creation:
- Alternative economic networks independent of traditional banking
- Mutual aid systems supporting targeted organizations and individuals
- Community self-defense funding through alternative financial systems
- International solidarity funding for threatened organizations

2. Mass Civil Disobedience

Governmental Ungovernability:
- Mass non-cooperation with terrorism investigation requests
- Sanctuary actions protecting targeted individuals and organizations
- Civil disobedience at sheriff departments engaging in political targeting
- Mass resistance to vigilante violence through community defense

Crisis Moment Creation:
- Force public officials to choose sides through strategic confrontations
- Create unavoidable moral dilemmas around political violence
- Generate international attention through sustained resistance campaigns
- Make political violence more costly than tolerating opposition

3. International Solidarity

Global Democratic Alliance:
- Coordinate with international pro-democracy movements facing similar threats
- Engage international legal systems for accountability measures
- Create diplomatic pressure through allied government engagement
- Build global resistance networks sharing tactical knowledge

Information Warfare:
- International media campaigns exposing the American Duterte model
- Cultural and artistic interventions creating global awareness
- Academic and intellectual community engagement for legitimacy
- International monitoring and documentation systems

Part VI: Long-term Strategic Vision

1. Democratic Institution Building

Alternative Governance Structures:
- Community self-governance models independent of captured local government
- Democratic decision-making processes for movement coordination
- Participatory budgeting for community defense resources
- Restorative justice alternatives to traditional law enforcement

Independent Monitoring Systems:
- Civilian oversight of all law enforcement activities
- Independent media and documentation networks
- Community-controlled information and communication systems
- Democratic accountability mechanisms for movement leadership

2. Cultural and Narrative Transformation

Counter-Hegemonic Messaging:
- Reframe political violence as unAmerican and anti-democratic
- Create cultural narratives celebrating democratic resistance
- Build moral authority through consistent non-violent resistance
- Generate broad-based solidarity across traditional political divides

Part VII: Tactical Recommendations by Sector

For Progressive Organizations

Immediate Actions:
- Conduct comprehensive security audits and implement upgrades
- Diversify funding sources away from traditional foundations
- Establish secure communications with allied organizations
- Create emergency response protocols for targeting scenarios

Medium-term (30-90 Days):
- Build coalitions with moderate organizations concerned about political violence
- Engage legal teams for constitutional challenges to terrorism designations
- Develop alternative funding mechanisms independent of traditional banking
- Create international solidarity relationships for protection and support

For Community Groups

Immediate Actions:
- Establish neighborhood watch networks monitoring for vigilante activity
- Create emergency response systems for threatened community members
- Build relationships with sympathetic local officials and law enforcement
- Develop communication networks independent of social media platforms

Medium-term:
- Organize community self-defense training and mutual aid networks
- Build electoral coalitions to replace authoritarian-aligned local officials
- Create economic alternatives supporting community self-sufficiency
- Establish sanctuary spaces for threatened individuals and families

For Legal and Professional Networks

Immediate Actions:
- Prepare constitutional challenges to terrorism designations and surveillance
- Create rapid response legal networks for emergency interventions
- Document all instances of political targeting for future accountability
- Engage international legal systems for monitoring and potential prosecution

Medium-term:
- Build broad professional coalitions condemning political violence
- Create alternative professional networks independent of captured institutions
- Engage international professional organizations for pressure and solidarity
- Develop legal strategies for long-term democratic restoration

Takeaway: Preventing the American Duterte

The September 25 executive actions represent a clear escalation, likely toward the Duterte model of authoritarian control through legalized vigilante violence. The Philippines experience shows that once this system becomes operational, it can kill thousands while maintaining legal cover through plausible deniability.

The window for prevention is rapidly closing. The pro-democracy movement must immediately implement comprehensive defense strategies while building capacity for sustained resistance. This requires understanding that we are no longer facing normal political opposition but a systematic attempt to eliminate democratic opposition through state-sanctioned violence.

The choice is stark: build the infrastructure for effective resistance now, or face the Philippines scenario where "More than 6,000 people have been killed" by "vigilantes, hired guns and likely cops too" with victims who "do not enjoy due process" and are "always killed at night, sometimes inside their own homes."

The Duterte model succeeded in the Philippines because civil society was unprepared for systematic state-vigilante coordination. American democracy's survival depends on learning from that tragedy and building the defensive infrastructure necessary to make political violence ungovernable rather than inevitable.

The infrastructure, relationships, and capacity building outlined here must begin immediately. The crisis moments that will determine whether America follows the Philippines path are not distant possibilities—they are emerging now. The movement that acts strategically and at scale can still prevent the American Duterte. The movement that waits for institutions to provide protection will face the same fate as Philippines civil society: systematic elimination under legal cover.

Democracy's survival requires treating this threat with the urgency it demands and the strategic sophistication it requires. The time for half-measures and institutional faith is over. The time for comprehensive resistance infrastructure is now.

This analysis draws on Human Rights Watch documentation of the Philippines drug war and contemporary reporting on the September 25, 2025 executive actions.

We Haven't Been Here Before
October 23, 2025

It is often said that the U.S. has been here – as in threatened by authoritarianism – before, and that we can build a playbook for how to counter authoritarianism from past resistance movements. While this holds some truth, and there are many useful lessons from the past we can draw upon, the fact is that we haven't been here before, and the *"we've survived authoritarianism before"* narrative, while well-intentioned, can dangerously underestimate the unique threats we face today.

This moment is qualitatively different in ways that make both the authoritarian threat more severe and traditional resistance strategies insufficient.

How This Time Is Fundamentally Different

Late Capitalism Creates New Vulnerabilities

Economic Concentration Unprecedented:
- Six companies control 90% of American media
- Four companies control 70% of mobile communications
- Amazon controls 40% of e-commerce and much of web infrastructure
- A handful of tech companies control the information diet of billions around the world

Historical comparison: Even the robber barons of the Gilded Age didn't control information flow and daily communication the way today's tech monopolies do. They couldn't monitor every conversation or predict individual behavior through data analysis.

Financial System Weaponization:
- Digital payments allow instantaneous financial deplatforming
- Credit systems can destroy individuals without legal process
- Cryptocurrency provides new avenues for authoritarian control
- Global financial integration makes capital flight both easier and more devastating

Supply Chain Vulnerability:
- Just-in-time production means any disruption can cause shortages
- Global supply chains create dependencies that can be weaponized
- Essential goods production concentrated in authoritarian countries
- Food system industrialization makes local food security nearly impossible for urban populations

Technological Surveillance Capabilities

Mass Surveillance Infrastructure:
- Every digital device tracks location, communication, associations, behavior patterns
- Facial recognition systems can identify individuals in crowds
- Data fusion allows real-time tracking of entire populations
- Predictive algorithms can identify potential dissidents before they act

Historical comparison: The Stasi in East Germany had one informant for every 63 citizens and still couldn't achieve the surveillance granularity that smartphones provide automatically.

Information Warfare Evolution:
- Algorithmic manipulation can shape individual psychology in real-time
- Deep fakes make it impossible to distinguish real from fabricated evidence
- AI-generated content can flood information spaces faster than humans can fact-check
- Social media platforms can amplify or suppress information with unprecedented precision

Weapon System Advancement:
- Drone technology allows targeted assassination anywhere
- Non-lethal weapons enable crowd control without visible brutality
- Cyber weapons can destroy infrastructure without traditional military action
- Space-based systems make global surveillance and communication control possible

Globalized Context Changes Everything

No External Refuge:
- Historical American authoritarianism could be escaped through migration
- Global surveillance networks make hiding internationally much harder
- Climate change is eliminating many potential refuge destinations
- Authoritarian cooperation across borders prevents traditional exile strategies

Economic Interdependence:
- Global supply chains mean economic warfare affects everyone
- Financial systems integrated in ways that amplify disruption
- Climate crisis creates resource scarcity that intensifies conflicts
- Pandemic demonstrated how quickly global systems can collapse

Information Ecosystems:
- Disinformation campaigns operate across multiple countries simultaneously
- Tech platforms span national boundaries, making regulation difficult
- Cultural influence operations can destabilize societies from abroad
- Traditional media gatekeepers have been eliminated

Social Infrastructure Collapse

Atomized Society:
- Union membership at historic lows eliminates traditional organizing infrastructure
- Religious attendance declining removes community organizing spaces
- Social media replaces face-to-face relationships with algorithmic manipulation
- Geographic mobility destroys multigenerational community knowledge

Historical comparison: Previous authoritarian moments occurred within societies that had robust local institutions, extended families, and community networks that could preserve democratic culture underground. Those networks largely no longer exist.

Institutional Legitimacy Crisis:
- Trust in government, media, academia, and other institutions at historic lows
- Expertise itself under attack in ways that make collective fact-finding impossible
- Professional journalism economically devastated
- Educational institutions captured by competing ideological forces

What This Means for Resistance Strategy

Traditional Approaches Are Insufficient

Electoral Strategy Limitations:
- Gerrymandering and voter suppression now technologically enhanced
- Dark money flows can overwhelm grassroots organizing
- Information warfare can manipulate voter perceptions at scale
- Economic pressure can force compliance without legal coercion

Mass Movement Organizing Challenges:
- Digital surveillance makes organizing security exponentially more difficult
- Economic precarity makes sustained activism risky for most people
- Geographic dispersion reduces face-to-face organizing opportunities
- Information fragmentation makes shared narrative-building nearly impossible

Legal Strategy Constraints:
- Court capture more complete than in previous eras
- Corporate legal resources vastly outweigh public interest capacity
- New technologies often operate faster than legal systems can respond
- International legal frameworks inadequate for global tech platforms

New Strategic Requirements

Technology Resistance:
- Digital security and privacy protection essential for any organizing
- Alternative communication platforms and information systems necessary
- Economic systems that operate outside traditional financial surveillance
- Local production capabilities to reduce supply chain vulnerabilities

Prefigurative Institution Building:
- Create parallel systems that can function independently of captured institutions
- Develop local resilience to reduce dependence on global systems
- Build community networks that can preserve democratic culture
- Establish alternative economic relationships outside corporate control

International Solidarity:
- Coordinate with democratic movements globally since authoritarianism is now international
- Share strategies and resources across borders
- Create mutual aid networks that transcend national boundaries
- Develop communication systems that can't be controlled by any single government

Rapid Response Capabilities:
- Threats can escalate much faster than in previous eras
- Organizing must be able to mobilize quickly across large geographic areas
- Decision-making systems must balance security with speed
- Resource mobilization must be able to operate under economic warfare conditions

Strategic Implications

Time Horizons Are Compressed:
- Changes that previously took decades now happen in years
- Window for preventing consolidation may be much shorter
- Early intervention much more critical when amplification systems exist
- Reaction time between authoritarian actions and consolidation greatly reduced

Scale Requirements Are Larger:
- Resistance must be capable of operating at global scale
- Local organizing must connect to international networks
- Resource requirements exceed what traditional movements could mobilize
- Coalition building must span much more diverse groups

Security Culture Is Essential:
- All organizing must assume comprehensive surveillance
- Traditional organizing security models inadequate for digital age
- Information compartmentalization more complex but more necessary
- Physical and digital security must be integrated from the beginning

Systems Thinking Is Critical:
- Resistance must understand and address systemic vulnerabilities
- Single-issue organizing insufficient when systems are interconnected
- Economic, technological, and political strategies must be coordinated
- Environmental and social crises must be integrated into resistance planning

The Historical Analogy Problem

Why "We've Been Here Before" Is Dangerous:
1. It understates the threat by suggesting current institutions can handle current challenges
2. It relies on strategies developed for different technological and economic contexts
3. It assumes time horizons that may no longer exist
4. It underestimates the resources required for effective resistance
5. It misses opportunities to develop new approaches suited to current conditions

The appropriate historical comparison isn't to past American authoritarianism, but to societies that faced systemic breakdown and successfully built new institutions rather than just defending old ones.

This doesn't mean abandoning lessons from history, but understanding that this moment requires innovation beyond historical precedent. We need the courage and principles of past resistance movements combined with strategies adequate to current technological, economic, and social realities.

The stakes are both higher and the timeline more compressed than previous generations faced. This demands both greater urgency and more ambitious vision than "return to normal" allows. We're not just defending democracy - we're building the next version of it under conditions no previous generation has faced.

Where We Are
A Strategic Assessment of Authoritarian Consolidation
December 11, 2025

We need to be clear-eyed about where American democracy stands right now. The experts who study authoritarian consolidation globally have reached a sobering consensus: we've already crossed the threshold into what they call "competitive authoritarianism."

This isn't hyperbole. Steven Levitsky at Harvard, who literally wrote the book on competitive authoritarianism, stated flatly in April 2025 that the United States has transitioned into this form of governance. A survey of over 500 political scientists found the vast majority believe we're moving swiftly from liberal democracy toward authoritarianism. Even former Intelligence Community officers issued an analysis concluding with "moderate to high confidence" that cumulative dynamics are placing us on a trajectory toward competitive authoritarian rule.

What Competitive Authoritarianism Actually Means

This isn't the strongman dictatorships of mid-century Latin America or the one-party states of the Cold War. Elections continue. Opposition parties exist. Courts still function. But the state apparatus is systematically weaponized against opponents, and the playing field is tilted to entrench executive control.

The pattern is clear and follows an authoritarian playbook we've seen globally. Executive overreach through governance by decree. Politicized control of the civil service—Trump fired Inspectors General from 17 federal agencies in January without legally required congressional notice. Targeting perceived opponents through IRS investigations and regulatory agencies. Delegitimizing the entire opposition, threatening media, suing universities, purging NGOs, and demonizing Democratic donors. Using immigration enforcement as a consolidation tool, including deploying military forces against state governors' wishes.

Former IC officers documented five reinforcing trends: executive overreach, judicial capture, electoral manipulation, suppression of civil society and media, and erosion of checks and balances. The administration has restricted congressional oversight of federal agencies, subjected independent regulatory commissions to partisan control, and created what experts describe as a climate of fear that discourages open dissent even among some Republican officials.

Why It's Not Fully Consolidated (Yet)

Here's the critical part for our organizing strategy: Trump is politically weaker than successful autocrats typically are at this stage. Leaders like Bukele in El Salvador, Chávez in Venezuela, or Putin in Russia had approval ratings above 80% when they launched their major power grabs. Trump doesn't have that kind of support, which matters enormously.

The U.S. also has stronger institutional constraints than countries that slid into stable competitive authoritarianism. The relative independence of the judiciary, federalism, bicameralism, and midterm elections all create friction points that Hungary and Turkey lacked. Trump can't rewrite the Constitution or eliminate the structural features that create multiple power centers.

Most importantly, American opposition forces are well-organized, well-financed, and electorally viable. We're harder to co-opt, repress, or sideline than opposition movements in El Salvador, Hungary, or Turkey were. Our civil society is robust, our resources substantial, and our organizational capacity is real.

Experts point to Poland, South Korea, and Brazil as examples where countries that crossed into competitive authoritarianism swung back toward democracy. It's not inevitable that authoritarianism continues consolidating in the U.S. But they also point to Russia, Hungary, and Turkey as warnings about what happens when the opposition retreats or fragments.

What This Means for Strategy

First, we need to stop debating whether we're "sliding toward" authoritarianism. According to expert consensus, we've already slid. Levitsky describes it as "relatively mild compared to some others" and "certainly reversible." But, regardless, we're no longer in a liberal democracy. That clarity matters for strategy.

Second, even modest tilting of the playing field can cripple democracy. Robust opposition requires a large, replenishable pool of politicians, activists, lawyers, experts, donors, and journalists. If the administration successfully intimidates donors through IRS targeting, if lawyers fear professional destruction for taking opposition cases, if experts self-censor to protect their institutions, the opposition weakens even without mass arrests.

Third, Levitsky emphasizes that opposition under competitive authoritarianism is grueling. Worn down by harassment and threats, critics

are tempted to retreat to the sidelines. But that retreat is exactly how emergent authoritarianism takes root. When fear, exhaustion, or resignation crowds out commitment to democracy, the game is lost.

The strategic imperative is staying in the fight. Not just continuing to exist, but actively contesting power through every available channel: courts, elections, mass mobilization, economic pressure, and international solidarity. Competitive authoritarian regimes are vulnerable to sustained, strategic opposition precisely because they maintain democratic forms. Those forms can be exploited by movements that understand the terrain.

The Bottom Line

We're in a qualitatively different moment than we were a year ago. The transition to competitive authoritarianism has occurred. But it's early-stage, faces real structural constraints, and remains assailable. Whether it consolidates or gets pushed back depends entirely on whether pro-democracy forces maintain strategic coherence, organizational capacity, and the willingness to sustain pressure over time.

This isn't cause for despair; it's a call for strategic clarity. We know what stage we're at. We know the playbook being run against us. And we know our sources of strength. Now we must organize accordingly, with the understanding that the next phase determines whether this particular authoritarian putsch is a temporary, or a first step in lasting regime change.

The experts have done their job naming where we are. Now we do ours: building the resistance that prevents consolidation and creates the conditions for democratic renewal.

Discussion Guide
Part 1: Understanding the Moment

This discussion guide explores critical aspects of our current moment: the unprecedented nature of contemporary authoritarianism, the possibility of deliberate economic collapse, escalating state-sanctioned violence, our competitive authoritarian present, and what effective resistance requires. This isn't a cause for despair, it's a call to strategic clarity. Choose from the questions below to develop clear-eyed analysis that can inform strategic organizing.

1. "Where We Are" states that experts believe that the US has already transitioned to "competitive authoritarianism," meaning that elections continue but the state apparatus is systematically weaponized against opponents and the playing field is tilted to entrench executive control. At the same time, we have advantages that make the conditions ripe for democratic renewal. **How can we leverage those advantages strategically?**

2. "We Haven't Been Here Before" argues that this moment is qualitatively different from past authoritarian threats due to unprecedented economic concentration, mass surveillance capabilities, globalized context, and social infrastructure collapse. **How should organizing adapt** when tech monopolies control information flow, when supply chains can be weaponized instantly, and when geographic dispersion eliminates face-to-face organizing infrastructure? **What new strategic approaches does this moment demand?**

3. In "It's Not Fascism Yet, But..." we see that tanking the economy may be an intentional strategy to create crisis that justifies emergency powers, scapegoating, and privatization. **How might economic collapse change your organization's theory of change or programmatic priorities?**

4. "Strategic Response to Duterte Model" warns that this is a moment to strengthen security protocols and maintain nonviolent discipline no matter what. **What are your organization or group's greatest vulnerabilities, what protocols do you have in place, and what do you need to do to protect each other, partners, and community members?**

5. "Recommendations for Anti-Authoritarian Resistance" emphasizes that as repression grows, quality of relationships becomes more important than quantity. **What systems could you implement to allow both intimate community building and involvement in coordinated large-scale action? What would it look like to "politicize care giving" in your context?**

6. Now is the time to both resist authoritarian consolidation and demonstrate what democracy looks like. **What would it mean to shift from just defending existing institutions to building new ones that embody your values?**

7. **What keeps you in the fight when the analysis is this sobering? How do you maintain strategic clarity without despair?**

PART 2

WHO WE'RE UP AGAINST

UNDERMINING THE AUTHORITARIAN PLAYBOOK

Introduction

Authoritarians succeed because they understand something we often miss: power doesn't rest on politics or ideology alone, but on coalitions, culture, and deep human needs for safety, belonging, and meaning.

The essays in this section dissect how authoritarian power actually works—from the pyramid structure that concentrates control at the top while keeping people divided at the bottom, to the fault lines within authoritarian coalitions that make them more fragile than they appear. We examine the theocratic turn that's capturing institutions, why oligarchs are choosing authoritarianism over democracy, and crucially, why they're winning the cultural war while we focus on policy. Authoritarians and their supporters have built power where social capital is strong — churches, rural communities, tight-knit networks — and offer people belonging around grievance when institutions collapsed.

This strategic analysis isn't just about understanding opponents; it's about learning what works. When we grasp why authoritarians succeed at meeting human needs for security and community, we can build a pro-democracy movement that offers something better: genuine safety through solidarity, authentic belonging without conformity, and dignity that doesn't require dominating others. Understanding their power teaches us how to build ours.

Understanding and Undermining Authoritarian Coalitions
Insights for Activists
December 09, 2024

When we're up against a coalition as formidable and strategically ruthless as the MAGA movement, it can seem monolithic, like a single unified bloc. But scratch the surface, and you'll find fault lines. Authoritarian coalitions —MAGA included—are often held together more by transactional alliances than shared, deeply rooted ideology. Those alliances come with tensions, contradictions, and vulnerabilities that activists and community leaders can learn to navigate and exploit.

Let's break down some of the key points of division within the MAGA coalition and map out opportunities for action.

Social Issues: A Culture War Within

Religious Conservatives vs. Secular Authoritarians
- Potential Division: The religious right—Evangelicals and Catholics— focuses on "family values," opposing abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, and any deviation from patriarchal norms. But there's a libertarian wing within MAGA that prioritizes personal freedoms and economic deregulation over religious morality.
- Example: Libertarians within the coalition might resist hardline anti-LGBTQ+ policies, particularly if they clash with broader libertarian ideals.

Race and Immigration
- Potential Division: Business-aligned MAGA factions, like those in agriculture and tech, often rely on immigrant labor. This reliance can create friction with the nativist core, which demands harsh immigration restrictions.
- Example: Nativist factions might push for deportations that disrupt industries dependent on undocumented workers.

Gender Dynamics
- Potential Division: MAGA's traditionalist factions favor patriarchal gender roles, but conservative women with political ambitions—like Marjorie Taylor Greene—challenge these expectations, creating internal tensions.
- Example: The rise of high-profile women in MAGA politics energizes conservative women but can alienate factions wedded to traditional gender hierarchies.

Political Issues: Cracks in the Foundation of the Authoritarian Political Coalition

Populists vs. Establishment Republicans
- **Potential Division:** MAGA's populist rhetoric alienates business-friendly Republicans who prefer stability over chaos.
- **Example:** Kevin McCarthy's struggles as Speaker illustrate the growing rift between establishment Republicans and MAGA hardliners.

Election Denialism
- **Potential Division:** While it energizes the MAGA base, election denialism undermines institutional credibility, which makes some Republican operatives and donors nervous about long-term viability.
- **Example:** GOP leaders in Georgia, like Brad Raffensperger, faced MAGA backlash for refusing to overturn election results.

Strongman Politics
- **Potential Division:** Trump's demand for absolute loyalty risks alienating other aspiring authoritarian leaders like Ron DeSantis, whose governing style may appeal to different factions.
- **Example:** The 2024 Republican primary could further highlight these divisions.

Economic Issues: Populism Meets Corporate Interests

Protectionism vs. Global Business
- Potential Division: MAGA's protectionist trade policies, like tariffs on Chinese goods, conflict with the interests of industries dependent on global supply chains.
- Example: Tariffs harmed U.S. farmers, causing tension between rural MAGA voters and corporate leaders.

Entitlement Programs
- Potential Division: MAGA promises to protect Social Security and Medicare to appeal to working-class voters, but fiscal conservatives push for cuts to entitlement programs.
- Example: Budget debates often pit MAGA populists against GOP elites focused on reducing government spending.

Economic Inequality
- Potential Division: Working-class MAGA supporters disproportionately feel the effects of inflation and economic instability, creating friction with wealthier factions that benefit from GOP tax cuts.
- Example: Resistance to tax policies that favor the ultra-wealthy while ignoring economic pain in rural America.

Foreign Policy: A Tug-of-War on the World Stage

Isolationists vs. Interventionists
- Potential Division: The authoritarian "America First" approach, including skepticism of NATO and foreign aid, clashes with neoconservatives advocating for U.S. global dominance.
- Example: The coming regime's opposition to Ukraine aid exposes divisions with traditional Republicans.

China Policy
- Potential Division: While the coalition views China as a threat, disagreements exist over whether to focus on military escalation, trade policies, or technological decoupling.
- Example: Corporate interests might resist hardline measures that disrupt profitable trade relationships.

Israel and the Middle East
- Potential Division: Evangelicals within authoritarian factions strongly back Israel due to theological beliefs, while isolationist factions question U.S. involvement in the region.
- Example: Debates over U.S. financial support for Israeli settlements highlight these tensions.

Governing Style: Chaos vs. Control

Centralization of Power
- **Potential Division:** The coming regime's loyalty-based governance alienates technocrats and bureaucrats, even within conservative ranks.
- **Example:** The revolving door of administration officials in the last Trump administration reflected dysfunction caused by loyalty tests.

Militant Rhetoric vs. Caution
- **Potential Division:** Authoritarian extremists advocating for political violence strain relationships with more cautious conservatives who fear public backlash.
- **Example:** The fallout from January 6th divided Republicans over how to handle insurrection narratives.

Recommendations for Activists and Leaders

Expose Contradictions
- Highlight the tensions between the coming regime's working-class populists and its wealthy elites or between isolationists and interventionists. Use these conflicts to drive wedges in the coalition.

Leverage Wedge Issues
- Focus campaigns on entitlement programs, economic inequality, and election integrity—issues where authoritarian factions have opposing priorities.

Engage Disillusioned Conservatives
- Build coalitions with conservatives alienated by the extremism of the authoritarians, particularly on issues like political violence, foreign policy, and fiscal responsibility.

Promote Grassroots Resistance
- Empower local movements to organize against authoritarian policies that hurt rural communities, emphasizing shared democratic values over partisan divides.

Counter Authoritarian Narratives
- Use storytelling to expose how authoritarian policies harm its own base, emphasizing the universal value of democracy over divisive rhetoric.

The Takeaway

Understanding the reigning authoritarian coalition's internal fault lines reveals opportunities for action. Authoritarian alliances are fragile, built on shared grievances rather than unified vision. By exposing contradictions, amplifying wedge issues, and engaging across divides, activists can weaken authoritarian coalitions and build a more inclusive, democratic future.

Potential Divisions Between the Base And The Elites

Potential rifts and conflicts between the elites of U.S. authoritarian coalitions and their base are rooted in the divergent interests and expectations of these groups. While elites and the base may align on authoritarian goals, significant contradictions emerge when it comes to governing power, economic priorities, ideological consistency, and local versus centralized control. Below are key areas of potential conflict:

1. Governing Power
- **Elite Priorities:** Centralize power in the executive, minimize oversight, and use institutions for personal or corporate gain.
- **Base Expectations:** Empower the "common man," challenge entrenched elites, and restore a sense of lost agency.

- **Potential Rift:** Libertarian segments of the base may resist authoritarian overreach, particularly when it infringes on personal freedoms.

Example: Protests against mass surveillance programs that target right-wing activists alongside progressive groups.

6. Democracy
- **Elite Priorities:** Undermine democratic norms to secure and perpetuate power, including through voter suppression and gerrymandering.
- **Base Expectations:** Ensure that elections reflect their will and prevent perceived fraud.
- **Potential Rift:** Disillusionment arises when the base sees authoritarian measures as undermining their own voting power or autonomy.

Example: Tensions over voter suppression laws that disproportionately affect rural or low-income Republican voters.

7. Social Issues
- **Elite Priorities:** Exploit divisive social issues to mobilize support while maintaining a degree of pragmatism to avoid alienating donors or moderates.
- **Base Expectations:** Enforce hardline stances on issues like abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, and immigration.
- **Potential Rift:** The base may rebel against perceived compromises or inconsistent enforcement of social policies.

Example: Backlash from religious conservatives when Republican elites failed to defund Planned Parenthood.

8. Local vs. Centralized Control
- **Elite Priorities:** Centralize authority to execute authoritarian goals and eliminate opposition at the state or local level.
- **Base Expectations:** Preserve local control, particularly in rural areas or states with strong conservative majorities.
- **Potential Rift:** Local actors may resist top-down mandates, especially if they conflict with state sovereignty or local governance norms.

Example: Resistance from conservative governors to federal directives under Trump's presidency, including during natural disasters or health crises.

Recommendations for Exploiting Rifts

1. Amplify Base Discontent:
  - Highlight elite policies that harm working-class and rural communities.
  - Use storytelling to humanize the economic and social costs of corporate favoritism or federal overreach.

2. Expose Hypocrisy:
  - Point out inconsistencies between populist rhetoric and elite actions, such as deregulating industries that harm local communities.

3. Foster Grassroots Movements:
  - Build coalitions with disillusioned factions of the base, particularly on issues like economic justice or local control.

4. Promote Local Autonomy:
  - Emphasize the importance of local governance and community-led solutions as an alternative to authoritarian centralization.
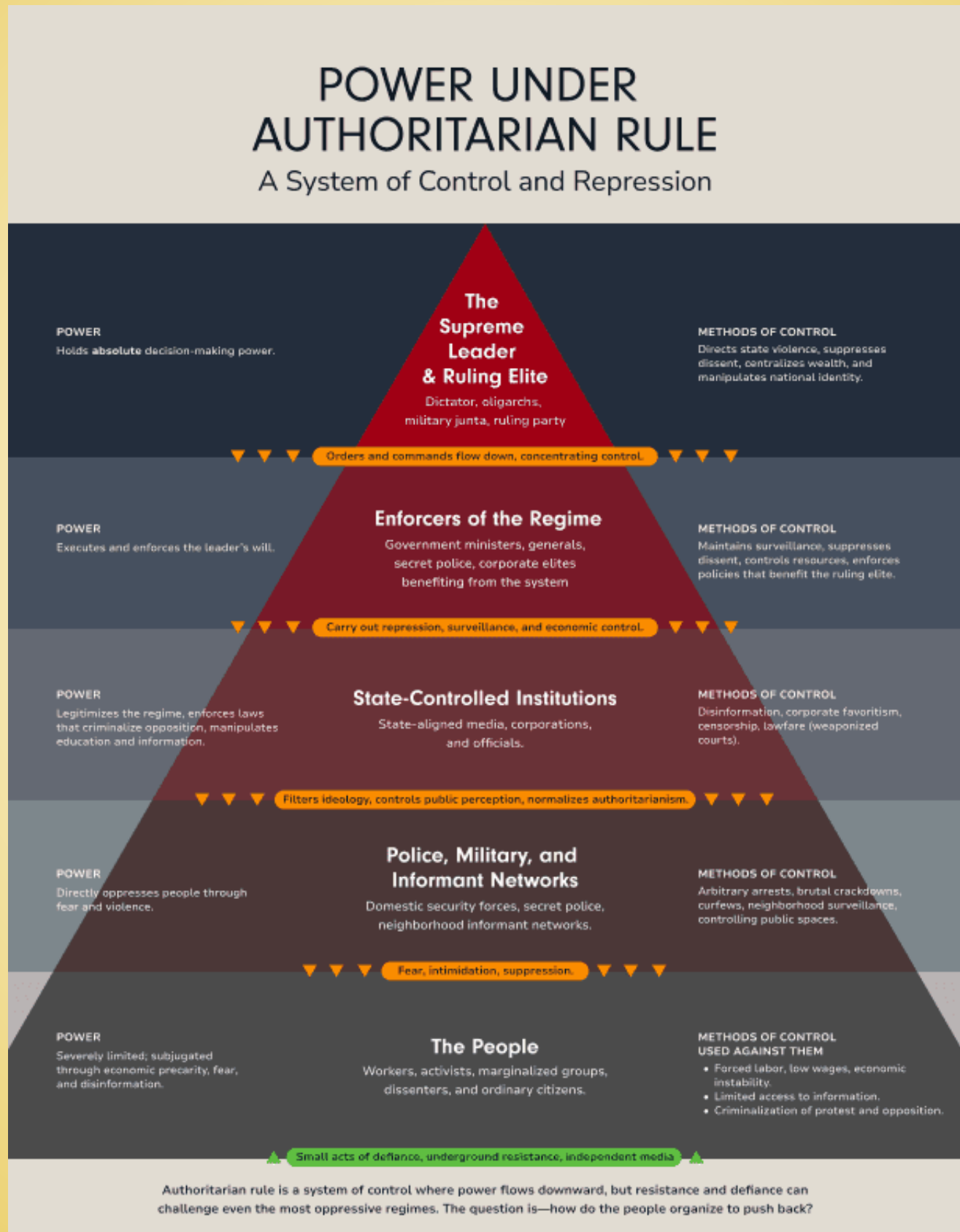
5. Leverage Libertarian Concerns:
  - Frame authoritarian surveillance, censorship, and militarization as threats to individual freedom and autonomy.

By understanding these rifts, pro-democracy activists can craft strategies to weaken authoritarian coalitions and promote a more inclusive and accountable political framework.

POWER UNDER AUTHORITARIAN RULE
A System of Control and Repression

The Supreme Leader & Ruling Elite
Dictator, oligarchs, military junta, ruling party

POWER
Holds **absolute** decision-making power.

METHODS OF CONTROL
Directs state violence, suppresses dissent, centralizes wealth, and manipulates national identity.

Orders and commands flow down, concentrating control.

Enforcers of the Regime
Government ministers, generals, secret police, corporate elites benefiting from the system

POWER
Executes and enforces the leader's will.

METHODS OF CONTROL
Maintains surveillance, suppresses dissent, controls resources, enforces policies that benefit the ruling elite.

Carry out repression, surveillance, and economic control.

State-Controlled Institutions
State-aligned media, corporations, and officials.

POWER
Legitimizes the regime, enforces laws that criminalize opposition, manipulates education and information.

METHODS OF CONTROL
Disinformation, corporate favoritism, censorship, lawfare (weaponized courts).

Filters ideology, controls public perception, normalizes authoritarianism.

Police, Military, and Informant Networks
Domestic security forces, secret police, neighborhood informant networks.

POWER
Directly oppresses people through fear and violence.

METHODS OF CONTROL
Arbitrary arrests, brutal crackdowns, curfews, neighborhood surveillance, controlling public spaces.

Fear, intimidation, suppression.

The People
Workers, activists, marginalized groups, dissenters, and ordinary citizens.

POWER
Severely limited; subjugated through economic precarity, fear, and disinformation.

METHODS OF CONTROL USED AGAINST THEM
- Forced labor, low wages, economic instability.
- Limited access to information.
- Criminalization of protest and opposition.

Small acts of defiance, underground resistance, independent media

Authoritarian rule is a system of control where power flows downward, but resistance and defiance can challenge even the most oppressive regimes. The question is—how do the people organize to push back?

This infographic is a visual representation of the hierarchical structure of power under an authoritarian regime, showing the relationships between the ruling elite, institutions, and "the people." The main takeaway is around how power is concentrated at the top and how it is enforced through various layers of control.

At the top, a small elite group holds all decision-making power. As you move down the pyramid, power diffuses outward but remains tightly controlled. At the bottom, "the people" are the most vulnerable and have the least agency individually, though tremendous power collectively. The goal of those at the top is to keep the people scared, forcing us into privilege silos that create the illusion of safety, but actually make us more vulnerable by keeping us divided.

Top Layer: The Supreme Leader & Ruling Elite
- **A small group of oligarchs sit at the peak of the pyramid.**
  - **Roles:** Dictator, oligarchs, military junta, ruling party.
  - **Power:** Holds absolute decision-making power.
  - **Methods of Control:** Directs state violence, suppresses dissent, centralizes wealth, and manipulates national identity.

Second Layer: Enforcers of the Regime
- **This layer includes authoritarian bureaucrats, military officers, intelligence agencies, and paramilitary forces.**
  - **Roles:** Government ministers, generals, secret police, corporate elites benefiting from the system.
  - **Power:** Executes and enforces the leader's will.
  - **Methods of Control:** Maintains surveillance, suppresses dissent, controls resources, enforces policies that benefit the ruling elite.

Third Layer: State-Controlled Institutions
- **This includes state-controlled media outlets, religious leaders, corporations, judiciary, puppet legislatures.**
  - **Roles:** State-aligned media, corporations, and officials.
  - **Power:** Legitimizes the regime, enforces laws that criminalize opposition, manipulates education and information.
  - **Methods of Control:** Disinformation, corporate favoritism, censorship, lawfare (weaponized courts).

Fourth Layer: Police, Military, and Informant Networks
- **This includes police forces, riot squads, cyber-surveillance agents, and informants.**
  - **Roles:** Domestic security forces, secret police, neighborhood informant networks.

- Power: Directly oppresses people through fear and violence.
- Methods of Control: Arbitrary arrests, brutal crackdowns, curfews, neighborhood surveillance, controlling public spaces.

Bottom Layer: The People who are controlled through:
- Forced labor, low wages, economic instability.
- Limited access to information.
- Criminalization of protest and opposition.
- Fear of surveillance and retaliation.

Authoritarian rule is a system of control where elite power flows downward, and total control is considered ideal to secure single-party, strongman rule. However, the people at the bottom of the power pyramid are, as representation, both the most vulnerable and suppressed, and the foundation of society. Because of this, resistance and defiance can challenge even the most oppressive regimes. The question is—how do the people organize to push back?

The Theocratic Turn
Understanding and Resisting the Global Rise of Religious Authoritarianism
June 12, 2025

The following is an edited version of a speech I recently gave to a group of concerned community members in Moscow, Idaho who gathered to address the rise of theocracy in their city. To learn more about what is happening in Moscow, stay tuned.

Introduction: The Moment We're In

We are witnessing a global phenomenon, the rise of theocratic movements across virtually every major faith tradition. From Modi's Hindu nationalism in India, to Erdogan's Islamist authoritarianism in Turkey, to the Taliban's return in Afghanistan, to the Christian nationalist movement here in the United States, religious authoritarianism is surging worldwide.

This isn't coincidence. It represents a radical response to what scholars call the "multiple modernities crisis," the collision between ancient faith traditions and the dislocating forces of globalization, digital information systems, and rapid cultural change.

Today, I want to help you understand this phenomenon, trace its specific evolution in the American context, and most importantly, equip you with strategies to resist it while building the inclusive democracy we need.

The Global Context: Why Now?

Several converging forces have created fertile ground for theocratic movements worldwide:

- **Cultural, Economic, and Political Disruption in the Information Age:** Digital technology has shattered traditional gatekeepers of religious knowledge. Anyone with a smartphone can claim prophetic authority, bypassing centuries-old institutions. This has democratized interpretation of religious texts and traditions but also unleashed authoritarian religious demagogues. Moreover, it has made religious demagoguery more profitable.
- **Globalization's Backlash**: Economic globalization has created unprecedented wealth alongside devastating inequality, and opened the door to threats to deeply held, often authoritarian, traditions. Traditional communities feel their ways of life under assault. Theocratic movements offer promises of restored order and divine protection.

- **The Secularization Crisis:** While secularization hasn't meant the end of religion, it has fundamentally changed religion's role in public life. Many believers feel marginalized, creating reactive movements seeking to reassert religious authority over society, which in turn creates opportunities for those who would exploit the faith crisis to build political and economic power.
- **Liberal Democratic Fragility:** Democracy's promise of progress through pluralism is being challenged by its own success in revealing deep disagreements about fundamental values. These disagreements tend to rest on a foundation of historical white supremacy and patriarchy, particularly in terms of racial integration, promotion of racial equity, and the changing roles of women in the family and in society, especially as a result of the advancement of reproductive freedom. Theocrats exploit this by offering certainty in place of complexity, stability of social hierarchies as opposed to change.

The American Story: From Christian Right to Christian Nationalism

Phase 1: The Christian Right Emergence (1960s-1980s)

The modern Christian Right didn't arise in a vacuum. It emerged from specific historical triggers:

- **The Real Origin Story**: Contrary to popular belief, the Christian Right wasn't primarily motivated by abortion. It was school desegregation that galvanized conservative Christians when the IRS threatened the tax-exempt status of segregated Christian schools like Bob Jones University.
- **Key Architects**: Leaders like Paul Weyrich, Jerry Falwell, and Pat Robertson understood that political power required organization beyond the pulpit. They built massive mailing lists, created PACs, and developed sophisticated voter mobilization strategies. Other Pioneers like Eagle Forum founder, Phyllis Schlafly, recognized that by politicizing and organizing the evangelical movement (in this period, the fastest growing social movement in the world), it was possible to build a popular front for neoliberal policies that would lift regulatory barriers to wealth accumulation, undermine the power of organized labor, and break the New Deal coalition.

Phase 2: The Institutionalization (1990s-2000s)

- **The Think Tank Revolution:** Organizations like the Heritage Foundation, the Family Research Council, and the American Family Association created intellectual infrastructure. They didn't just want to win elections; they wanted to reshape ideas.
- **The Homeschool Movement:** Christian conservatives built parallel educational systems, creating generations raised on revisionist history and biblical world views. This wasn't just about education, it was about creating a separate society and information eco-system.
- **Electoral Sophistication:** Karl Rove's 2004 strategy mobilized evangelical voters with unprecedented precision. The movement learned that winning required not just enthusiasm but data, micro-targeting, and professional organization.

Phase 3: Christian Nationalism Emerges (2010s-Present)

Something fundamental shifted around 2010. The Christian Right evolved into something more dangerous: Christian Nationalism.

- **Key Difference**: While the Christian Right wanted to influence a secular system, Christian Nationalists want to replace it. They believe America was founded as a Christian nation and must return to its "true" identity.
- **Strategic Innovations**:
  - **Constitutional Revisionism**: Promoting the myth that America was founded as explicitly Christian
  - **Election Skepticism**: Claiming divine mandate trumps popular will
  - **State Capture**: Focusing on state legislatures, school boards, and courts rather than just federal politics
  - **Militia Networks**: Some factions now embrace political violence as divinely justified

The New Apostolic Reformation: The Most Dangerous Evolution

Perhaps the most concerning development is the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR), a movement most Americans have never heard of but which has profound influence.

Core Beliefs:
- Modern-day apostles and prophets receive direct revelation from God
- Christians must take dominion over all spheres of society: government, education, media, arts, business, family, and religion
- Spritual warfare is literally fought against demonic forces controling institutions

Key Figures: Peter Wagner (founder), Lance Wallnau, Dutch Sheets, Paula White (President Trump's spiritual advisor)

Dangerous Innovations:

- **Prosperity Theology 2.0:** God wants Christians to be wealthy and powerful as proof of divine favor
- **Leveling Up Spiritual Warfare:** Believing they can change reality through prayer and spiritual warfare, which in turn makes winning policy fights a test of religious legitimacy
- **Seven Mountains Mandate:** Systematic strategy to capture control of society's key institutions
- **Political Impact:** NAR leaders provided theological justification for January 6th, claiming God had revealed Trump's victory and that resisting it meant resisting God himself.

Key Factions in American Theocracy

Today's theocratic movement isn't monolithic. Understanding the factions helps us recognize their different approaches:

1. Constitutional Originalists
  - Focus on legal and judicial capture
  - Promote "originalist" interpretation as coded Christian nationalism
  - Key players: Federalist Society, Alliance Defending Freedom

2. Dominion Theologians
  - Believe Christians must rule society directly
  - Support includes former Education Secretary Betsy DeVos's family foundation
  - Focus on education, media, politics

3. NAR Prophets and Apostles
  - Claim direct divine revelation
  - Growing influence in charismatic and Pentecostal churches
  - Increasingly militant in language and tactics

4. Paleo-Confederates
  - Like Douglas Wilson's movement in Moscow, Idaho
  - Combine Christian nationalism with Confederate nostalgia
  - Focus on local community takeovers

5. Catholic Integralists
  - Want Church and State reunified under Catholic teaching
  - Growing influence among conservative intellectuals
  - Key figures: Adrian Vermeule, Sohrab Ahmari

How They Built Their Base

The success of these movements comes from sophisticated base-building strategies:

- **Infrastructure Development**: Decades of investment in churches, schools, media, and think tanks created a parallel society with its own information ecosystem.
- **Cultural Warfare:** Rather than just political campaigns, they waged cultural campaigns through creating homeschool curricula, Christian entertainment, and promoting alternative histories.
- **Economic Networks:** Built Christian-only business networks, providing economic incentives for participation and punishment for dissent.
- **Media Ecosystems:** From Christian radio to Fox News to social media influencers, they created alternative information universes.
- **Crisis Exploitation:** Every cultural crisis became evidence of secular failure and divine judgment, driving recruitment.

Their Vision of the Future

Make no mistake about their end goals:

- **Governmental:** Replace constitutional democracy with biblical law interpreted by select religious leaders
- **Educational:** Mandatory Christian education, with secular subjects taught through biblical frameworks
- **Economic:** "Biblical" capitalism with tithe-like taxation funding religious institutions
- **Social**: Strict gender hierarchies, heteronormative families, racial "reconciliation" that preserves white leadership
- **Legal**: Replace constitutional law with biblical law, with religious authorities claiming to have a direct line to God having final say
- **Cultural**: Christian supremacy in all public spaces, other religions marginalized or banned

This isn't hyperbole, these are stated goals found in their own documents.

Impacts on Democracy

The damage is already visible:

Political:
- Election denial and voter suppression justified by divine mandate
- Rejection of pluralism as satanic influence
- Political violence increasingly seen as righteous

Cultural:
- Attacking public education and promoting religious alternatives
- Censoring books, curriculum, and cultural expression
- Creating parallel societies that reject democratic norms

Economic:
- Using economic pressure to enforce religious conformity
- Redirecting public funds to religious institutions
- Creating Christian-only business networks

On Democracy's Future:
- Fundamental rejection of the idea that legitimacy comes from popular consent
- Belief that God's will supersedes constitutional law
- Preparation for political violence if democratic means fail, including through training children in the use of firearms

Four Key Resistance Strategies

1. Expose and Educate
- Map the networks, funding, and strategies
- Conduct civic education about actual constitutional history, especially with young people who often attend schools in which civic education is no longer in the curriculum
- Also conduct education about the true meaning of democratic pluralism
- Create alternative media that competes with theocratic information ecosystems, including ecumenical Christian online ministries and communities
- Train activists to recognize and counter theocratic messaging

2. Defend Institutions While Building New Ones
- Protect public education, libraries, and democratic institutions
- Build parallel institutions that model inclusive values
- Support religious communities that oppose theocracy
- Strengthen unions, civic organizations, and mutual aid networks

3. Coalition Building Across Difference
- Unite secular and religious opponents of theocracy
- Build bridges between communities targeted by theocrats
- Create unlikely alliances around shared democratic values
- Organize both locally and nationally with consistent messaging

4. Electoral and Legal Strategies
- Run candidates for school boards, state legislatures, courts
- Challenge theocratic policies in court systematically
- Expose theocratic funding and coordination
- Protect voting rights and electoral integrity

Four Pivots: From "No" to "Yes"

1. From Secular Fundamentalism to Sacred Pluralism: Move beyond rejecting all religion to promoting a vision where multiple faiths and secular world views coexist with mutual respect. Show that diversity of belief strengthens rather than weakens society.

2. From Defensive Politics to Generative Culture: Stop only opposing theocratic culture and start creating compelling alternatives. Invest in arts, education, community-building that embody our values and attract people toward inclusive futures.

3. From Elite Resistance to Grassroots Democracy: Move beyond expert opposition to mass movement building. Create spaces where ordinary people can experience democratic participation, build relationships across difference, and develop shared power.

4. From Crisis Response to Systems Change: Stop only reacting to theocratic crises and start building economic and political systems that address the root causes - inequality, isolation, lack of meaning - that drive people toward authoritarian solutions.

What It Will Take

Building this alternative requires several commitments:

- **Long-term Thinking:** Theocrats built for decades. We need 20-year plans, not just 2-year election cycles-based organizing.
- **Cultural Investment:** We need to fund art, education, storytelling, and community-building that competes with theocratic alternatives.
- **Economic Justice:** We must address the inequality and insecurity that makes authoritarianism appealing.
- **Spiritual Seriousness:** We need to engage seriously with questions of meaning, purpose, and transcendence rather than ceding this terrain to authoritarians.
- **Democratic Practice:** We must model in our movements the inclusive, participatory democracy we want to see.

Conclusion: The Choice Before Us

The theocratic movement represents a fundamental choice about what kind of society we want to be. They offer certainty, hierarchy, and belonging to those who conform. We must offer something better: complexity managed through justice, equality that includes rather than excludes, and belonging that doesn't require conformity.

This isn't just about stopping bad policies, it's about whether democracy itself will survive. The theocrats understand the stakes. Now we must as well.

The choice is ours: retreat into our own enclaves, or build a multiracial, multi-faith democracy that proves inclusion is stronger than exclusion, that justice is more powerful than hate, and that love of neighbor transcends the barriers that divide us.

The future of democracy depends on our choice. Let's choose wisely, and let's choose together.

Why Are Oligarchs Turning to Authoritarianism Instead of Supporting Democracy?

July 24, 2025

For much of modern history, it was assumed that liberal democracy and capitalism went hand in hand; that free markets and free societies reinforced one another. But today, we're watching a global shift where oligarchs and corporate elites are increasingly embracing authoritarianism over democracy. Why?

Analysts from around the world point to several key factors:

1. Democracy Is No Longer Necessary for Capitalist Stability

In the 20th century, capitalism relied on a stable middle class to drive consumer demand and prevent social upheaval. This is why many business elites once saw democracy, social safety nets, and labor protections as necessary evils to prevent socialist revolutions and maintain political stability.

But in the 21st century, the nature of capitalism has changed.

- The economy is no longer as strongly driven by mass consumer spending. Wealth is now generated through financial speculation, technology monopolies, data extraction, and asset bubbles (asset bubbles are when the price of an asset rises rapidly and significantly above its intrinsic or fundamental value until it bursts) - not necessarily by selling goods to a strong middle class.
- Automation and globalization have weakened the bargaining power of workers, making union-busting and wage suppression easier.
- Capital is more mobile than ever. Billionaires don't need strong domestic economies when they can move their money and production offshore, or extract wealth from digital platforms that transcend national borders.

2. Oligarchs Prefer Authoritarianism Because It Protects Their Wealth and Power

Democracy creates unpredictability for the super-rich. It gives people the power to vote for regulations, tax increases, labor protections, and public goods that threaten the dominance of billionaires. So rather than risk democratic accountability, oligarchs are funding the rise of authoritarian governments that will protect their interests.

- **Authoritarian states crush labor movements and regulate dissent.**
  - In democratic societies, workers can organize, strike, and vote for laws that protect them. Authoritarianism eliminates these threats.
  - Example: In Russia, China, Hungary, and Turkey, crackdowns on labor unions and independent media have allowed oligarchs to operate with impunity.

- **Autocrats protect monopolies and weaken regulations.**
  - Corporate elites don't want free markets, they want rigged markets where they dominate.
  - Example: Under Trump, Musk, and other right-wing strongmen, regulatory agencies were gutted, allowing billionaires to consolidate even more power.

- **Authoritarianism helps billionaires avoid taxation.**
  - In democratic systems, there is always the risk that public pressure will force governments to raise taxes on the rich.
  - In authoritarian states, elites can cut backroom deals to keep their wealth untouched.

3. Oligarchs Are Betting on Nationalism and Xenophobia to Keep the Public Distracted

Rather than address economic inequality, oligarchs fund ultra-nationalist movements that redirect public anger toward immigrants, LGBTQ+ people, and marginalized communities.

- Instead of blaming corporate greed for stagnant wages, people are told to blame "illegal immigrants."
- Instead of blaming billionaires for buying elections, the right tells people to fear "globalist elites" (coded antisemitism).
- Instead of addressing climate catastrophe, they manufacture culture wars over trans rights, "woke capitalism," and "threats to traditional values."

This divide-and-conquer strategy prevents mass uprisings against the real source of economic distress: the unchecked power of oligarchs.

4. Authoritarianism Expands Their Control Over Data and Surveillance

The modern economy is built on data and surveillance capitalism. The more billionaires and corporations can track, manipulate, and predict human behavior, the more control they have over markets and politics.

- **Democratic institutions place limits on surveillance.**
    - Laws protecting privacy, free speech, and data rights make it harder for billionaires to monetize personal information and control public discourse.

- **Authoritarianism eliminates those limits.**
    - Under autocratic regimes, surveillance capitalism expands unchecked, as states and corporations work together to monitor, censor, and manipulate public opinion.

Example: Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter (X) has given him direct access to a real-time data stream on political discourse, organizing strategies, and movement building efforts - a goldmine for billionaires who want to suppress dissent.

5. The Climate Crisis is Making Oligarchs Abandon Democracy

One of the biggest unspoken reasons why oligarchs are turning against democracy is climate collapse.

- The super-rich know that climate disasters will trigger mass migration, food shortages, economic instability, and resource wars.
- They are preparing for mass unrest - not by solving the crisis, but by investing in private security forces, underground bunkers, and authoritarian governments that will crack down on protests and climate refugees.
- Rather than support a Green New Deal, billionaires fund politicians who will ensure that climate policies protect their profits at the expense of the public.

What Can Be Done?

If oligarchs are choosing authoritarianism over democracy, we need to fight back on multiple fronts, some aspirational and others more immediately actionable:

1. Break Corporate Control Over Politics
    - End Citizens United and remove corporate money from elections.
    - Strengthen antitrust laws to prevent billionaires from monopolizing industries.

2. Organize for Economic Justice
    - Support labor movements, worker cooperatives, and economic democracy initiatives.
    - Demand higher taxes on billionaires and reinvest wealth into public goods.

3. Expose the Authoritarian Playbook
- Call out how oligarchs use nationalism, racism, and manufactured crises to protect their wealth.
- Educate communities about the real causes of economic instability.

4. Build Parallel Institutions
- Support independent media, mutual aid networks, and decentralized organizing efforts that can operate outside state and corporate control.

5. Push for Democratic Reforms
- Expand voting rights, corporate accountability, and protections for press freedom before autocrats can dismantle them further.

Conclusion: This Is a Fight for the Future

The world's most powerful billionaires are choosing authoritarianism because they see democracy as a threat to their wealth and unchecked power. But this isn't inevitable.

We are not just fighting against authoritarianism - we are fighting for a new vision of democracy. One that is more inclusive, more just, and more economically fair than the one oligarchs are trying to destroy.

Their strategy is fear, division, and control. Ours must be solidarity, boldness, and direct action. Because if we don't fight for democracy now, we may not have another chance.

Why They're Winning
And What We Can Do About It
April 07, 2025

Authoritarians in the U.S. and around the world are clearly gaining ground rapidly. Their success has caused many to speculate about why and how they are winning, hoping to duplicate or riff on those winning strategies and tactics. In this endeavor, caution is advised, particularly around how we define "winning." To drive democracy forward, we should focus on the tactics that speak to the longing for security and belonging that people are expressing behind all the political rhetoric, threats, and rejections of political parties and institutions. In actions promoting democracy, we must recognize that sustainable movements require engaging people not just as parts of a larger whole, but as whole human beings.

Here's a strategy that the authoritarians deployed that we can build upon.

The Context: How They Won the War of Cultural Positioning…For Now

1. The Erosion of Social Capital and the Crisis of Meaning:

- Deindustrialization, offshoring, and the shift toward an information-based economy hollowed out traditional working-class communities, particularly in rural and post-industrial areas.
- With economic security crumbling, the institutions that once provided social cohesion, unions, local businesses, community organizations, and faith-based networks, began to weaken.
- This led to an increase in distrust of government, a loss of a unifying national economic identity, and a broader cultural fragmentation.

2. The Authoritarians' Strategic Advantage:

- The authoritarians understood that this was not just an economic crisis, but a cultural one, one that made people feel unmoored, disrespected, and abandoned.
- They built power where social capital was still strong, especially within conservative religious communities, gun culture, law enforcement and military networks, and tightly knit rural and exurban communities.
- They framed their movement not around policy, but around identity, grievance, and belonging, turning political participation into a form of cultural solidarity rather than an engagement with governance.

3. The Left's Strategic Blind Spots:

- Left and center-left movements remained focused on issue-based campaigns, advocating for policy solutions that, while crucial, often did not speak to the deeper cultural and emotional crises that people were experiencing.
- Many left-leaning organizers built power within cities and academia but struggled to engage rural and working-class communities where social capital had eroded.
- Elections became the primary measure of success, leaving movements vulnerable to the short-term thinking and cyclical energy of campaign politics.

What Should We Do About It?

1. Rebuild Social Capital Through Local Organizing

- Social justice advocates must prioritize movement-building at the community level, not just the national level.
- Invest in mutual aid, cooperative economics, labor organizing, and localized civic engagement—so that people have tangible ways to feel empowered and connected.
- Look beyond transactional activism (signing petitions, making calls) and focus more attention on building durable networks of trust, care, and action.

2. Focus on Cultural Strategy, Not Just Policy Wins

- The right won by capturing meaning and identity - not just by passing laws. The left must do the same by creating a culture of solidarity, dignity, and hope.
- Support independent media, storytelling, art, and cultural institutions that can *compete* with the right's propaganda machine.
- Reclaim language like *freedom*, *patriotism*, and *security*, rather than ceding them to reactionary forces.

3. Build Organizing Infrastructure Where the Right Has Gained Ground

- Focus on small towns, rural areas, and working-class suburbs where the far right has successfully organized, recognizing the polarization is a two-way phenomenon. Where the far right has polarized communities, there are two sides.

- Engage faith communities, military families, and disaffected (and disabled) workers by recognizing their real grievances and the contributions they can make, and working with them to develop alternatives to far right radicalization.
- Strengthen alliances with labor unions and working-class organizations, particularly in industries that still have high social capital like healthcare, logistics (transportation, warehousing, inventory management, and order fulfillment), and education.

4. Stop Playing Defense - Go on the Offensive with a Bold Vision

- The left has been too reactive to far right attacks. We need to offer our own compelling, forward-looking vision of the future.
- This means not just talking about "protecting democracy," but about expanding democracy - economic democracy, workplace democracy, community self-determination.
- Instead of debating the right on their terms, change the conversation entirely -about what kind of society we want to build rather than just what we want to stop.

5. Shift Away from Electoral-Only Strategies

- While elections are crucial, they should not be the *sole* focus of movement-building.
- Create *permanent* organizing structures that persist beyond election cycles, ensuring that political energy does not fade after each loss or victory.
- Train people not just to vote, but to organize; building local leadership pipelines and grassroots governance models.

Final Thought:

The far right succeeded because they understood that people need meaning, identity, and community, especially in times of economic and cultural instability. If the pro-democracy movement fails to recognize this, we will keep losing ground.

But the good news? We can win this. Because deep down, what the research shows is that most people don't want a future defined by hate, division, and repression. They want security, dignity, and belonging. It's up to us to offer them a movement that meets those needs; one that builds a new social fabric, not just defends a crumbling one.

Discussion Guide:
Part 2: Undermining the authoritarian playbook

This discussion guide explores authoritarian coalition dynamics, power structures, the theocratic movement, oligarchic interests, and why authoritarians are winning culturally. It also exposes important fault lines and opportunities to build new forms of power that can make pluralism possible and democracy sustainable. Most people don't want a future defined by hate and division, but rather by safety, dignity, and belonging. Choose the questions that will help your organization or group deepen your strategic analysis and collective response that offers people a movement that meets those needs.

1. "Understanding and Undermining Authoritarian Coalitions" identifies numerous fault lines within MAGA: religious conservatives vs. secular authoritarians, populists vs. establishment Republicans, protectionists vs. global business interests, and base vs. elite priorities. **Who in your community, region, or sector can you pull away from support for authoritarians? What unlikely alliances or wedge issues could your organization pursue based on understanding authoritarian coalition fault lines?**

2. The theocratic movement has evolved from the Christian Right (influencing secular systems) to Christian Nationalism (replacing secular systems) to the New Apostolic Reformation (claiming direct divine revelation and the "Seven Mountains Mandate" to capture all societal institutions). **Where do you see Christian Nationalist organizing in your community or sector, and what factions are most active?**

3. Wealth is now generated through financial speculation, tech monopolies, and data extraction rather than mass consumer markets. Meanwhile, authoritarianism crushes labor movements, protects monopolies, prevents taxation, and enables unlimited surveillance capitalism. **Who benefits from authoritarianism and why? What implications does this have for your theory of change?**

4. The organizing strategies of authoritarians aim to build power in cultural spaces – like churches, gun shows, and military/law enforcement networks – where social capital is strong. **Where does social capital still exist in the communities you're connected to?**

Are you organizing in places where the infrastructure of everyday democracy is already strong, or are you building where authoritarians have gained ground?

5. "Why They're Winning" argues that authoritarians succeeded by addressing cultural crisis, identity, grievance, and belonging while the left focused primarily on issue-based policy campaigns that didn't speak to deeper emotional and cultural needs. **How does your organization help people feel they belong to something larger than themselves?**

6. "The Theocratic Turn," calls for moving beyond "rejecting all religion" to promoting sacred pluralism where multiple faiths and secular worldviews coexist with mutual respect, showing that diversity of belief strengthens society. **What does sacred pluralism mean to you, and how is it connected to democracy? What would it mean to take seriously the human need for transcendence, meaning, and purpose in your organizing?**

7. In "Why Are Oligarchs Turning to Authoritarianism Instead of Supporting Democracy," it's clear we need to fight back on multiple fronts, some aspirational and others more immediately actionable. **What would economic democracy look like in your context?**

THE ANTI-AUTHORITARIAN PLAYBOOK

PART 3

WHAT WE CAN DO

SEIZING EVERY MOMENT TO BUILD LASTING PEOPLE-POWER

Introduction

Understanding the moment and analyzing power means nothing without strategic action sustained over time.

The essays in this section move from analysis to organizing, from the strategic necessity of protecting the most vulnerable as the first line of democracy defense, to building power at every level and through each crisis moment. We explore how to build broad coalitions that unite around democratic values rather than ideology, because the fight against authoritarianism transcends left versus right. Critically, we examine how authoritarians deliberately create trauma to drive people toward individual retreat precisely when collective action is most needed—and how movements from Argentina to Greece to Standing Rock have integrated healing into resistance rather than separating them. We have much to learn those who've survived authoritarian collapse before, each of whom carries hard-earned wisdom about adaptation, resilience, and sustained struggle.

This is a marathon, not a sprint. It requires both urgency and sustainability, both courage and rest, both individual healing and collective power. The future isn't shaped by those who wait, but by those who move collectively, care for each other, and refuse to surrender to despair. These essays show how.

Pro-Democracy Movement Playbook
Seizing the Moment and Building Lasting Power
April 28, 2025

Strategic Orientation for 2025

The diminishing popularity of Trump, his political network, and aligned figures (e.g., Elon Musk) signals an opening. The more unpopular the authoritarian agenda becomes, the more leverage we have at every level of government.

The key to making the most of this leverage is not just resisting, but advancing a positive, durable vision of democracy. The goal must be to institutionalize democracy through protecting marginalized groups, expanding rights, and rebuilding public trust through visible gains.

Core Strategic Principles:

- **Seize Momentum:** Exploit fractures and fatigue within the authoritarian coalition.
- **Shift from Defense to Offense:** Move from "stop Trump" to "build democracy."
- **Localize Action:** Meet people where they are: in city councils, school boards, statehouses, and with a particular focus on the smaller institutions with elected leadership, right down to the local water board.
- **Anchor in Specific Demands:** Ensure every protest, march, and statement is tied to both broad opposition, and concrete, achievable demands.
- **Invest in Resilient Coalitions:** Cross-racial, cross-class alliances are crucial.

Tactical Pivot: From Protest to Policy

Current Model: General protest, awareness-raising, reactive posture.

New Model: Targeted pressure and specific asks and follow-through mechanisms.

How to Pivot:
- Always pair protest with specific demands: "End the state anti-immigrant bill HBXXX" and not just "Support immigrants."
- Use moments of outrage as springboards: Channel outrage into legislative or administrative change.
- Use moments of outrage as springboards: Channel outrage into legislative or administrative change.

- Engage bureaucracies: Demand specific executive orders, administrative rules, funding allocations.
- Develop 'Demand Packages:' Target local, state, and national institutions.

Core Demand Frameworks

Universal (National) Demands
- Voting Rights Restoration (national standards for access and fairness)
- Judicial Reform (ethics rules, court expansion conversations)
- Immigration Reform (pathways to citizenship, asylum rights)
- Protections for Protest and Assembly (repeal anti-protest laws or create protective laws at the local level)
- Algorithmic Transparency (social media accountability reforms)

Blue State Agenda (where the ground is friendlier)
- Sanctuary Expansion (cities and states)
- Voting Innovations (automatic registration, ranked choice voting, expanded early voting)
- Anti-Disinformation Laws (state action where federal gridlock exists)
- State-Level Equal Rights Amendments
- Proactive Anti-Fascism Education (curriculum updates, public awareness campaigns)

Red State Agenda (hostile ground, but strategic)
- Local Safe Harbors: Municipal policies protecting immigrants, trans youth, and other vulnerable groups
- Ballot Initiatives: Where possible, use direct democracy to enshrine rights
- Court Challenges: Pre-prepare legal strategies to challenge unconstitutional executive actions
- Disruptive Civic Actions: Occupy, pressure, embarrass — but always tied to specific legal or electoral demands
- Build Parallel Institutions: Mutual aid, alternative media, civic spaces to withstand repression

Levels of Action
- **Local:**
  - Elect pro-democracy city officials, DAs, and school board members.
  - Pressure city councils for non-cooperation resolutions (e.g., with ICE).

- **State:**
  - Defend governors' executive actions against federal overreach.
  - Pass state laws expanding rights (even if symbolic, they lay groundwork).

- **National:**
  - Frame every federal policy fight around "saving democracy."
  - Use congressional investigations and executive orders aggressively

- **Messaging Priorities**
  - Hope, not Fear: Frame democracy as an exciting, hopeful project — not just "saving" something old.
  - Concrete Wins: Publicize every local success; "Democracy Works Here" campaigns.
  - People Power: Center stories of ordinary people leading change, not just celebrities or politicians.
  - Big Tent: Focus on shared democratic values across ideological differences (e.g., "Freedom to Vote").

Closing

The current moment demands audacity. Democracy advocates must pivot from reacting to building — faster, sharper, and at every level. Specific demands tied to institutional change are the key to turning temporary backlash against authoritarianism into permanent democratic renewal.

Protecting the Most Vulnerable
A Moral and Strategic Imperative for Democracy
May 12, 2025

In the fight for social justice and democracy, we must be clear about our first principles. Among them, none is more urgent than protecting the safety, rights, and freedoms of those made vulnerable by historical injustices, systemic failures, and authoritarian targeting. This is not just a moral imperative—it is a strategic necessity.

Authoritarianism thrives on scapegoating. It begins by isolating and persecuting specific groups, using them as test cases for broader repression. If the public tolerates or ignores these early assaults, authoritarianism expands its reach, tightening its grip on power and eroding democratic protections for all. This is why history shows us that the survival of democracy is directly linked to the defense of the most vulnerable.

Why Protecting the Most Vulnerable Must Be Our First Principle

The Most Vulnerable Are the Frontlines of Freedom and Democracy

The people most targeted by authoritarianism—immigrants, racial and religious minorities, LGBTQ+ communities, disabled people, and others— are not passive victims. They are often the first and fiercest defenders of democracy. From the Civil Rights Movement to ACT-UP to Indigenous land defenders, marginalized communities have consistently led struggles that expanded freedom for all. Protecting them is not charity; it is defending the very infrastructure of resistance and democracy.

The Most Vulnerable Are the Authoritarian Test Case for Repression

Authoritarianism does not begin with mass repression. It starts with smaller, targeted attacks to test the public's response. The Nazis did not begin by attacking all Germans—they first targeted Jews, Romani people, disabled people, LGBTQ people, and political dissidents. The U.S. War on Terror did not immediately erode civil liberties for all—it began with Muslim and immigrant communities before expanding mass surveillance and militarized policing more broadly. When society ignores repression against one group, it signals to authoritarians that they can expand their reach.

Social Justice and Democracy Are Interdependent

There is no democracy without social justice. Authoritarians win when they convince people that democracy and justice are separate concerns. If pro-democracy movements do not center the rights of marginalized groups, they will fail. We cannot expect those most affected by authoritarianism to fight alongside us if we have not fought for them first.

We Cannot Win Without the Targeted and Vulnerable

Democracy is a numbers game. We cannot afford to divide or alienate key communities by de-prioritizing their struggles in order to position ourselves as centrists or in order to avoid issues of race, gender, sexuality, religion, and disability, fearing them to be alienating to those more integrated into the mainstream. Authoritarians thrive on division, on turning the privileged into bystanders while they pick off vulnerable groups one by one. A broad-based, diverse coalition is the only thing that can outmatch authoritarianism.

Looking Away Dehumanizes Everyone, Including Bystanders

Dehumanization is a contagion. When a society normalizes the persecution of certain groups, it corrupts the moral compass of those who remain silent. Those who accept injustice toward others are more likely to accept repression against themselves when the time comes. The work of protecting the vulnerable is not just about justice—it is about preserving our own humanity.

The Path Forward: Proactive, Not Reactive Resistance

The authoritarian playbook relies on keeping opposition forces fragmented, reactive, and overwhelmed. If we only fight battles as they arise, we will always be on the defensive, always trying to hold back the tide rather than reshaping the landscape.
We need a long-term strategy that builds lasting, scalable infrastructure:

- Embed democratic values in community institutions (schools, workplaces, unions, cultural organizations, and community based advocacy groups).
- Develop strong rapid-response networks that can mobilize large numbers of people quickly when authoritarianism escalates.
- Create long-term cultural and political strategies that challenge authoritarian narratives and build a vision of democracy worth fighting for.

Conclusion: Winning is Possible—If We Prioritize the Right Things

If we fail to protect the most vulnerable, we will fail to protect democracy itself. The authoritarian threat is real, and its momentum is growing. But history has also shown that organized, broad-based, and strategic resistance can defeat even the most entrenched authoritarian regimes.

We have the numbers. We have the moral clarity. What we need is the discipline, coordination, and long-term strategy to make protection, resistance, and transformation the central pillars of our fight.

The question is not if we should act. The question is whether we are ready to do the work—together.

Fighting Authoritarianism Beyond Left vs. Right
A People-Powered Movement
February 09, 2025

The U.S. is teetering on the edge of authoritarianism. As Trump consolidates power and Musk moves to privatize governance itself, we are seeing the makings of an administrative coup—one that threatens to dismantle democracy and replace it with corporate feudalism. But here's the problem: too many people see this crisis as a partisan issue, as if authoritarianism is just another battle between Democrats and Republicans. That framing is a trap.

The fight against authoritarianism must be nonpartisan, and more than that, it must be rooted in something deeper than political ideology. It has to be built on the fundamental understanding that you are me and I am you—that our fates are intertwined, and authoritarian rule threatens all of us, regardless of our party affiliations. If we don't organize around this truth, we will remain divided, leaving the door wide open for the ruling elite to consolidate their control.

Reframing the Struggle: Authoritarianism as a Ruling Class Problem

Authoritarianism is not a grassroots movement. It's not an uprising of the people. It's a top-down, elite-driven power grab designed to strip us of our rights, concentrate wealth, and silence dissent. And it's not exclusive to the Republican Party or the political right—it's a tool used by the wealthy and powerful to dismantle democracy and replace it with a system where they make the rules, and we just suffer the consequences.

When Trump and Musk undermine the administrative state, stack courts with loyalists, and privatize public institutions, they aren't doing it to serve working people. They are doing it to cement an elite-controlled government that serves billionaires, not citizens and residents of the U.S.

This is why authoritarianism isn't a simple left vs. right issue. It's a ruling class vs. the people issue.

The mistake we must avoid is treating this struggle as just another partisan battle. That plays right into their hands. Authoritarians thrive on division. If we allow our resistance to be framed as a Democratic project, we alienate millions of people who oppose authoritarian rule but don't trust the Democratic Party. And let's be honest—the Democratic Party's historic failures to stand up for working people, its ties to corporate donors, and its lackluster defense of democracy haven't exactly inspired confidence.

We have to build a movement that is independent of party politics. A movement that speaks to people's lived experiences, not just their political beliefs. And that means organizing around shared values, not party lines.

The Problem With a Purely Partisan Resistance

1. **It leaves millions of potential allies behind.** Not everyone who opposes authoritarianism identifies as progressive or leftist. Many conservatives, independents, and libertarians value democracy, civil liberties, and local self-governance. A partisan approach alienates people who should be standing with us.

2. **It allows authoritarians to manipulate divisions.** Trump and Musk frame democracy as a leftist project to keep their base in line. By allowing this narrative to dominate, we make it easier for them to mobilize their supporters against democracy itself.

3. **It ignores the role of corporate elites in driving authoritarianism.** Neoliberalism has concentrated wealth and power in the hands of an unaccountable elite, creating the conditions for authoritarian rule. The fight against authoritarianism is also a fight against corporate control over public life.

How We Fight Back: A Nonpartisan, People-Powered Resistance

1. Build Coalitions Based on Shared Democratic Values, Not Ideology

This movement isn't about being progressive or conservative—it's about protecting the democratic potential of the U.S, individual freedoms, and community control over public life. We need to unite people around fundamental democratic principles like free and fair elections, the right to dissent, and the idea that government should serve the people, not corporate oligarchs.

Ask people: Do you believe in freedom? Do you think billionaires should run the government? Should workers have rights, remembering that whatever employment we have, our employers aren't just buying our labor with our wages, they are buying our free time, our freedom? Should the law apply equally to everyone? These are the questions that build broad-based solidarity.

2. Connect the Fight Against Authoritarianism to Economic Justice

People experiencing economic hardship are more susceptible to authoritarian strongmen who promise order and stability. If we fail to address economic injustice, we leave millions of working-class people without a reason to resist authoritarianism.

3. Take Back the Meaning of Freedom

Authoritarians manipulate the language of "freedom" to justify authoritarian rule. They claim that "freedom" means deregulating corporations, gutting public institutions, and silencing opposition. **We must redefine freedom as something that belongs to the people—not the state, not corporations, and not billionaires.**

💡 **True freedom means:**
- The freedom to vote without intimidation.
- The freedom to earn a living wage without corporate exploitation.
- The freedom to make personal decisions about your body and future.
- The freedom to organize, protest, and speak truth to power without fear of violence or repression.
- The freedom to balance work with time with our families, friends, communities, and ourselves and our free thoughts, musings, and imaginings.

4. Prepare for Mass Direct Action & Economic Disruption

Authoritarianism will not be stopped through elections alone. We must be ready to disrupt the economic and political systems that sustain it. That means:

- **Organizing general strikes** to shut down the economy if an authoritarian government tries to consolidate power.

- **Creating sanctuary states and cities** that refuse to comply with anti-democratic laws.

- **Mass mobilization** in workplaces, schools, and communities to resist authoritarian policies before they take root.

Learn from global movements—from the labor strikes that helped defeat Pinochet in Chile, to the protests that toppled authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe. We must build the capacity for large-scale, coordinated resistance.

The Takeaway: We Must Build the Future We Want, Not Just Fight Against the Present We Fear

The fight against authoritarianism cannot just be about stopping Trump or Musk. It has to be about creating a world where democracy is real—where ordinary people have power, where corporations don't rule, and where freedom isn't just a slogan used to justify oppression.

This is not an argument we can only make through discourse. We must tap our deepest desires, embrace our sensual selves, and inform our dreaming selves while building bridges between that which we dream of and direct political engagement.

We must make democracy tangible in people's everyday lives. That means investing in community-based governance, economic democracy, and local resilience networks that prove another way is possible. If we don't offer people a vision of the world we're fighting for, they will settle for the world that's being imposed on them.

The resistance must be nonpartisan, broad-based, economically grounded, and people-powered. If we succeed in making it so, we can win.

Mass Trauma and Authoritarian Capture
October 27, 2025

A crucial strategic trap that authoritarians deliberately set is to create trauma that drives people toward individualized responses precisely when collective action is most needed. This is absolutely a core part of the authoritarian playbook that recognizes that authoritarianism thrives when populations are too overwhelmed to organize politically.

The Trauma-Individualization-Capture Cycle

How it works:
1. Create or exploit crises that generate mass trauma
2. Promote individual therapeutic responses that absorb energy and attention
3. While people focus inward on healing, accelerate institutional capture
4. By the time people emerge from individual processing, democratic infrastructure has been dismantled

Historical Case Studies: Disaster as Authoritarian Capture Opportunity

1. Chile Under Pinochet (1973-1990): Military coup created massive trauma - thousands killed, tortured, disappeared; families destroyed; social fabric shattered.

Corporate Capture Strategy: While people were traumatized and terrorized, the "Chicago Boys," a group of economists, implemented radical free-market policies - privatizing public services, eliminating labor protections, opening markets to foreign capital.

Individual vs. Collective Response: Those who focused on individual survival and adaptation became complicit; those who maintained collective networks (unions, churches, student groups) eventually built the resistance that ended the dictatorship.

Key Lesson: The trauma was real and devastating, but the most effective healing came through collective resistance activities that also served political goals.

2. Post-Soviet Shock Therapy (1990s): The collapse of USSR created massive social trauma - economic collapse, loss of social services, existential uncertainty about identity and future.

Corporate Capture Strategy: While populations were reeling, Western advisors and local oligarchs rapidly privatized state assets, dismantled social protections, and created extreme inequality.

Contrast: Countries that maintained some collective institutions (Belarus, despite its problems) versus those that went full individualization (Russia) - the latter experienced deeper trauma and more complete oligarchic capture.

3. Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans (2005): Natural disaster created trauma, displacement, and social breakdown.

Corporate Capture Strategy: While residents dealt with individual trauma and displacement, education was privatized (charter schools), public housing demolished, and development policies favored gentrification over community rebuilding.

Collective Resistance Example: Organizations like the People's Hurricane Relief Fund that combined mutual aid with political organizing were more effective than purely service-oriented responses.

International Examples: Fighting Back While Traumatized

1. Argentina's Neighborhood Assemblies (2001-2003)

Context: Economic collapse, political crisis, mass unemployment created widespread trauma.

Collective Response: Instead of retreating to individual coping, neighborhoods formed assemblies that combined:
- Mutual aid (food distribution, childcare)
- Political action (blocking evictions, confronting banks)
- Emotional support through shared struggle
- Direct democracy practice

Result: Prevented complete neoliberal restructuring and maintained community power through the crisis.

2. Greek Solidarity Networks (2010-2015)

Context: Austerity measures created mass unemployment, poverty, and social breakdown.

Collective Response:
- Community clinics that provided healthcare while organizing against austerity
- Neighborhood assemblies that met material needs while building political power
- Occupied factories that maintained employment while challenging property relations

Key Innovation: They explicitly connected individual healing to collective action - understanding that personal well-being required political change.

3. Standing Rock Water Protectors (2016-2017)

Context: Indigenous communities facing environmental destruction and cultural genocide - ongoing historical trauma.

Collective Response:
- Traditional healing practices integrated with political resistance
- Prayer and ceremony as forms of both spiritual healing and political action
- Community care structures that sustained long-term resistance

Insight: Indigenous healing models that never separated individual from collective well-being proved more resilient than Western therapeutic approaches.

Adapting Healing Justice for Authoritarian Crisis

1. Reframe Trauma Response as Collective Resistance
- **Instead of**: "Take time to process your feelings"
- **Try**: "Let's process our feelings together while building power"
- **Practice**: Healing circles that explicitly connect personal experience to political analysis and action

2. Integrate Care into Organizing Work
- **Instead of**: Separating self-care from political work
- **Try**: Making political work inherently caring and sustaining
- **Practice**: Mutual aid that builds political relationships; direct actions that include healing components

3. Use Crisis for Political Education
- **Instead of:** Waiting until trauma is "resolved" to engage politically
- **Try:** Understanding political engagement as trauma treatment
- **Practice:** Study groups that analyze current crises while building collective analysis and relationships

4. Build Prefigurative Communities
- **Instead of:** Individual therapy to cope with broken systems
- **Try:** Creating alternative systems that meet needs while demonstrating possibilities
- **Practice:** Cooperative housing, community defense networks, alternative economic systems

Practical Recommendations: Turning Lemons into Lemonade

For Organizations:
1. **Trauma-informed organizing:** Acknowledge trauma while maintaining political focus - "We're scared AND we're taking action"
2. **Collective care strategies:** Build mutual aid that strengthens rather than substitutes for political power
3. **Emergency response protocols:** Pre-planned collective responses to likely crises that prevent individualized retreat

For Communities:
1. **Neighborhood resilience hubs:** Spaces that provide both services and political education/organizing
2. **Community defense networks:** Groups that provide safety while building collective capacity
3. **Alternative economic systems:** Cooperatives, time banks, mutual aid networks that reduce dependence on corporate systems

For Individuals in Crisis:
1. **Find others:** Isolation is the enemy - even small groups provide both emotional support and political possibility
2. **Take care of immediate needs collectively:** Food, housing, safety - but through networks that build power
3. **Connect daily survival to larger politics:** Understanding that personal well-being requires systemic change

The Strategic Framework

Short-term (Crisis Response):
- Meet immediate needs through collective action
- Prevent individual retreat through community connection
- Build relationships that can sustain longer-term work

Medium-term (Building Power):
- Use crisis to demonstrate failure of current systems
- Create alternative institutions that work better
- Develop collective capacity for larger confrontations

Long-term (Systemic Change):
- Transform trauma from individualized pathology to collective political analysis
- Build institutions that prevent future trauma by addressing root causes
- Create healing models that strengthen rather than weaken collective action

The key insight: In a burning house, you carry people to safety together. If they are too paralyzed by trauma, you don't stop to cajole, berate, or counsel, you carry them to safety and address the trauma they experienced then. But you also need to organize the fire department, change building codes, and address whatever keeps causing fires. Individual healing and collective action aren't sequential - they must happen simultaneously, with each strengthening the other.

Managing Stress, Anxiety, and Hopelessness in Times of Crisis

Lessons from Immigrants, Refugees, and Activists Who Have Survived the Collapse of the Familiar

July 10, 2025

We are living in times of uncertainty, rapid change, and existential threats that feel new. However, while they may feel novel here in the U.S. they are not without precedent globally. History is full of moments like these, where economies have collapsed, governments have failed, and authoritarian forces have taken hold. Immigrants and refugees who have lived through these crises before carry hard-earned wisdom on how to endure, adapt, and even thrive.

Here are 10 strategies for coping with and transforming the stress, anxiety, and despair of the present moment into resilience and action.

1. Learn from Those Who Have Lived Through Crisis Before

Immigrants and refugees from war zones, failed states, and economic collapses have had to navigate conditions that many in the U.S. are facing for the first time: food shortages, unreliable institutions, government disinformation, political persecution, and societal fractures. Instead of treating them as outsiders, we should listen to their survival strategies.

What to do:
- Read refugee memoirs and oral histories to understand how people psychologically and materially adapted to crises.
- Build bridges between local activist networks and immigrant-led organizations. Refugees can be powerful mentors in resilience, while the more privileged political status of many native-born activists can serve as a shield against the worst predations of an authoritarian state.

2. Control What You Can—Let Go of What You Can't

One of the greatest sources of stress is a sense of powerlessness in the face of overwhelming events. Immigrants and survivors of authoritarian rule learn to focus on what they can control; often small, daily actions that allow them to keep moving forward.

3. Prioritize Collective Care, Not Just Self-Care

In the U.S., self-care is often individualized: meditation apps, personal therapy, gym memberships. But in moments of upheaval, self-care must

be community care. In many immigrant and refugee communities, survival is only possible because of tight-knit networks that share resources, emotional support, and protection.

What to do:
- Build mutual aid networks. Whether it's food, housing, or child care, we survive together.
- Create healing spaces, not just protest spaces. Organize group meals, storytelling circles, or shared rituals.
- Offer skills, not just goods. Know how to sew? Cook? Speak another language? Teach and trade.

4. Maintain a Long View of History

Authoritarianism rises, but it also falls. Immigrants from authoritarian regimes often understand something many more privileged Americans don't: no system lasts forever. The world has seen fascism before, and it has been defeated before through resistance, adaptation, and sheer human will.

What to do:
- Learn about historical resistance movements (e.g., the fall of apartheid in South Africa, the overthrow of dictators in Latin America).
- Study how people built underground networks when their governments became hostile.
- Remember: We are not the first to face this. We won't be the last. But history shows we can fight back.

5. Develop Mental Agility—Learn to Adapt

What you planned for might not be what happens. Be open to all possibilities. Refugees fleeing collapsing states know that rigidity kills. When the world shifts beneath you, clinging to "normal" can leave you paralyzed and unable to both react effectively to threats, and to seize upon opportunities. Those who survive are those who adapt.

What to do:
- Expect unexpected shifts - economically, politically, socially.
- Be flexible in your organizing. If one strategy stops working, pivot. Even if that strategy stops working because of resource deprivation, remember that the availability or not of certain resources is one of many external conditions you will have to adapt to in a rapidly changing political environment.
- Develop new skills that might not seem "necessary" now but will be later (e.g., food growing, first aid, secure communications).

6. Build Stronger Local Networks—NOW

In Crisis, Your Community Is Your Safety Net. When institutions fail, local, trusted relationships are what save people. Immigrant communities, especially in the U.S., rely on word-of-mouth networks, religious groups, ethnic organizations, and underground support systems to navigate systemic failures.

What to do:
- Get to know your neighbors - especially those who might not already be in activist spaces.
- Develop emergency contact lists, food-sharing plans, and security protocols.
- Strengthen connections with local faith communities, unions, and small businesses. They can become powerful allies.

7. Guard Against Burnout - It's a Long Fight

The struggle is a marathon, not a sprint. Many refugees describe the first wave of a crisis as overwhelming, and also the most exhausting. If you burn out now, you won't have the energy to fight later.

What to do:
- Take real breaks. Disconnect from doom-scrolling.
- Protect your sleep, nutrition, and social connections.
- Rotate responsibilities in activist work. Everyone needs rest.

8. Use Art, Music, and Ritual as Resistance

Survivors of dictatorship, genocide, and war often say that what kept them alive was not just resistance, but culture. Songs, dance, art, and storytelling remind people of who they are and why they fight.

What to do:
- Learn songs and stories from past resistance movements.
- Use art to counter fear - murals, poetry, street theater, music.
- Ritualize joy. Even in hard times, celebrate wins, birthdays, milestones.

9. Find Humor in the Absurd

Authoritarian regimes fear laughter because humor makes them look weak. Immigrant communities have long used satire to cope with oppression - whether it's Cuban exiles mocking Castro or dissidents in Eastern Europe joking about the KGB.

What to do:
- Follow satirists and comedians who expose authoritarian hypocrisy.
- Share memes and videos that make oppression look ridiculous.
- Laugh. Not because things aren't serious, but because laughter is resistance.

10. Believe That a Better Future Is Still Possible

Hope Is a Discipline. Immigrants don't leave their homelands because they've given up - they leave because they still believe somewhere, life can be better. Their belief in possibility is part of what sustains them.

What to do:
- Practice radical hope. Not naive optimism, but the belief that what we do matters.
- Fight for what you love - not just against what you fear.
- Commit to the long haul. The road will be long, but we are not walking it alone.

Final Thought: We Are the Future's Ancestors

In times of upheaval, the most dangerous thing we can do is believe we are powerless. The world will not be shaped by those who stand still - it will be shaped by those who move.

Immigrants and refugees have been carrying these lessons for generations. Now, we must listen, learn, and act. The future is unwritten, but if we build resilient communities, adapt to change, and refuse to surrender to despair, we will be the ones who write it.

Discussion Guide:
Part 3: Seizing Every Moment to Build Lasting People-Power

This discussion guide is designed to help you move from analysis to action. Remember: This is a marathon, not a sprint. Authoritarian resistance requires both urgency and sustainability. The goal is not to do everything at once, but to do something concrete, to do it collectively, and to build capacity for the long haul. Choose from these questions to strengthen your strategy, identify concrete next steps, and move to shape the future.

1. "Protecting the Most Vulnerable," makes clear that protecting vulnerable communities is not just a moral imperative but a strategic necessity because authoritarianism tests repression on marginalized groups first, and these communities are often democracy's fiercest defenders. **Who are the most vulnerable communities in your area currently being targeted by authoritarian policies and actions, who is organizing to protect and defend these communities, and what are tangible ways you can show up?**

2. "Fighting Authoritarianism Beyond Left vs. Right" argues that resistance must be built on shared democratic values that can unite across ideology. **What fundamental democratic principles are important to you? Who are potential allies in your community who oppose authoritarianism even if they don't identify politically with you?**

3. "Mass Trauma and Authoritarian Capture" warns that authoritarians deliberately create trauma that drives people toward individualized therapeutic responses precisely when collective action is needed. **What community responses to recent crises or traumatic events have inspired you? How can you integrate healing into organizing work rather than separating self-care from political work?**

4. To stop authoritarian consolidation and build a lasting pro-democracy movement, we need both economic resistance (strikes, boycotts, divestment) and to build alternative economic institutions (cooperatives, mutual aid, time banks, alternative currencies). **Which corporations or industries are most essential to authoritarian power and most vulnerable to coordinated action? What alternative economic institutions exist in your community, and how could you strengthen them to the level that taking mass economic action like a general strike would become feasible?**

5. The articles in this selection emphasize culture as resistance, reclaiming the meaning of "freedom," and making democracy both tangible and joyful. **What cultural gifts or talents do you have that could contribute to movement building? How can you make pro-democracy organizing feel exciting to people in your area?**

6. There's so much we can learn from people who have been through these kinds of crises before about how to cope with and transform stress, anxiety, and despair into resilience and action. **What is one lesson that can help you be a person who moves and helps shape the future?**

7. Looking at everything discussed - specific demands, protecting vulnerable communities, coalition building, trauma-informed organizing, economic disruption, cultural work - **where do you have the most to offer? What is the one action you're committing to take in the next week and who will you tell about this commitment to create accountability?**

PART 4

HOW WE DO IT

THE STRATEGIC IMPERATIVE OF NONVIOLENT ACTION

Introduction

History teaches us that movements win when they make authoritarianism too costly to maintain—by gaining defections from pillars of power, creating opportunities for mass participation, and sustaining pressure that forces systems to choose between collapse and change.

The essays in this section draw on successful resistance movements worldwide to identify what actually works: unified vision with decentralized execution, tactical diversity beyond protests, converting rather than confronting regime supporters, and maintaining nonviolent discipline. We explore dilemma actions that put authoritarians in lose-lose situations where every response backfires, from Birmingham's Children's March to Otpor's money barrel to Gandhi's Salt March. We examine how to flood the zone with pro-democracy action, how to scale to the threshold where systems face existential crisis, and how to create strategic crisis moments that force democratic breakthroughs.

The key is finding many ways for people to plug in to strategic collective action—from kitchen table conversations to mass mobilizations, from corporate pressure campaigns to cultural resistance, from small trusted affinity groups to coordinated nationwide disruption. When millions act strategically in complementary ways, authoritarianism becomes impossible.

Best Characteristics of Anti-Authoritarian Organizing Under Authoritarian Regimes

June 15, 2025

Strategic Framework and Planning

- **Unified Vision with Decentralized Execution:** Successful movements like Serbia's Otpor! combined centralized strategic planning with decentralized tactical adaptation and recruitment. They pressured opposition parties to unify during campaigns while maintaining flexible, distributed organizing structures.
- **"Pillars of Support" Analysis:** Effective movements identify and systematically target regime "pillars of support" including security forces, economic elites, state media, and government bureaucracies. The goal is disrupting or converting these supporting institutions through strategic noncooperation.
- **Inverse-Sequence Planning:** Rather than planning immediate actions, successful movements start with their "vision of tomorrow" or ideal endgame, then work backwards step-by-step to determine tactical sequences.

Organizational Structure and Network Characteristics

- **Small, Adaptable, Decentralized Groups:** Hierarchical and centralized power structures are much easier to disrupt, while small groups are more flexible, easier to move, and better able to build trust and make decisions. Start with small, adaptable, decentralized groups that are nimble and responsive.
- **Distributed Training Infrastructure:** Otpor! trained 80,000 people (1.3% of Serbia's population) in just two years using decentralized training programs. They published grassroots training manuals and conducted thousands of workshops across the country, creating distributed capacity.
- **Network of Networks:** The most successful democracy movements include coalitions of Left and Center Right actors and networks. Building broad-based movements requires organizers capable of convening network leaders and helping groups understand complementary approaches.
- **Tactical Diversity and Innovation**
- **Beyond Mass Demonstrations:** Contemporary movements tend to over-rely on mass demonstrations while neglecting other techniques like general strikes and mass civil disobedience that can more forcefully disrupt regime stability. Diversify tactics to include methods of concentration (protests, rallies, sit-ins) and methods of dispersion (walkouts, stay-aways, consumer boycotts, labor strikes).

- **Creative Cultural Resistance:** Rather than focusing solely on large-scale demonstrations, movements begin with creative street theater and cultural actions that mock authoritarian leaders and shift political culture. Arts and culture focusing on safer, happier, inclusive visions are instrumental in building movements.
- **Repertoire Sequencing:** Movements that devise and sequence a broad repertoire of tactics, including both concentrated actions and dispersed acts of resistance, are more likely to endure and grow. Repeating the same tactics becomes boring, predictable, and unlikely to move the needle.

Security Culture and Digital Adaptation

- **Operational Security:** Activists have made significant technical and organizational innovations, from routinizing end-to-end encryption and virtual private networks to adopting decentralized movement structures in response to digital repression.
- **Affinity Groups and Trust Networks:** Under authoritarian conditions, diverse groups form small, trusted affinity groups to work under the radar and build creative, resilient movements. These structures provide security while maintaining operational capacity.

Counter-Recruitment and Defection Strategies

- **Converting Security Forces:** Successful movements deliberately target people within the regime, insisting that police and military are victims rather than enemies, encouraging defection. Otpor's message aimed to recruit support from law enforcement by showing they were victims of the regime.
- **Elite Fracturing:** Movements need to generate elite defections by disrupting or coercing pillars of support into noncooperation. Security forces are particularly important because they are ultimately the agents of repression.

Communication and Narrative Strategies

- **Counter-Narrative Development**: Rulers depend on obedience tied to regime-sponsored narratives. The greatest leaders of nonviolent resistance use the power of narratives to build momentum and public sympathy, undermining authoritarian claims of inevitability.
- **Humor and Mockery**: Otpor used creative street theater including actions like painting Milošević's face on a barrel for people to hit for one dinar, birthday "celebrations" for the dictator with prison uniforms as gifts, and widespread poster campaigns mocking authority.

Mass Participation and Coalition Building

- **Cross-Sector Mobilization:** Engage members of key organizational "pillars" like religious institutions, business groups, unions, professional associations in pro-democracy mobilization. Successful movements like Poland's Solidarity united workers, peasants, intellectuals and students.
- **Sustained Participation:** Mass uprising is more likely to succeed when it includes a larger proportion and more diverse cross-section of a nation's population. Historical successful campaigns averaged 2-2.7% population participation compared to 1.3% in recent movements.

Nonviolent Discipline and Training

- **Commitment to Nonviolence:** Nonviolent movements invest in training, devise codes of conduct and designate marshals to enforce nonviolent discipline. The stronger the organization, the more likely movements avoid responding to violence with violence.
- **Strategic Training Programs:** Movements like Otpor made training others a hallmark of their struggle, developing strategy while agreeing to rely on nonviolent tactics and train others in these methods.

Historical Examples and Models

- **Successful Cases:** Historical examples include Serbia's Otpor! (2000), Chile's anti-Pinochet movement (1973-1990), Danish resistance during WWII, the U.S. civil rights movement, Poland's Solidarity, the Philippines' Yellow Revolution (1983-86), and Kenya's Gen Z protests (2024).
- **Key Success Factors:** Research shows nonviolent civil resistance campaigns are far more effective than violent ones, with countries experiencing nonviolent campaigns being 10 times more likely to transition to democracy within five years compared to countries with violent campaigns.

Contemporary Challenges and Adaptations

- **Digital Authoritarianism:** Activists struggle with trade-offs between digital security and convenience, difficulty in movement-level coordination, and the digital landscape's increasing technical complexity while confronting technology companies that aid digital autocrats.
- **Authoritarian Learning:** Governments are learning and adapting to nonviolent challenges, often surprising movements with sudden crackdowns or provoking them into violence before building broad enough bases for popular support.

The most effective anti-authoritarian organizing under consolidating authoritarianism combines strategic planning with distributed execution, builds diverse coalitions across ideological lines, maintains strict nonviolent discipline while diversifying tactics, and focuses on converting rather than confronting regime supporters. Success requires sustained commitment to training, security culture, and long-term vision rather than reactive responses to immediate provocations.

Dilemma Actions
A Powerful Tactic for Confronting Unjust Power
March 21, 2025

What Are Dilemma Actions?

Dilemma actions are strategic nonviolent tactics designed to put authoritarian regimes, unjust power holders, or oppressive systems in a lose-lose situation. They force adversaries into making a choice where every possible response backfires against them, either by exposing their injustice, eroding their legitimacy, mobilizing public opposition, or empowering the resistance movement.

Dilemma actions are particularly well-suited for confronting authoritarianism, as they exploit the rigidity and insecurity of oppressive regimes. They leverage humor, creativity, and moral clarity to put oppressors in a damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't scenario.

How Do Dilemma Actions Work?

For a dilemma action to be effective, it should:
1. **Expose injustice:** The action should highlight the absurdity or brutality of the oppressive system.
2. **Create a difficult choice for the oppressor:**
    - If they repress the action, they look unreasonable, cruel, or ridiculous.
    - If they ignore or allow it, they lose control, embolden dissent, or appear weak.
3. **Maximize public visibility:** The action should be designed for media coverage, potential for going viral, and/or mass participation to amplify its impact.
4. **Be repeatable and escalate-able:** The action should build momentum and create further opportunities for resistance.

Examples of Dilemma Actions in the U.S. and Around the World

Dilemma actions have been used effectively across history, from civil rights movements to opposition to dictatorships. Below are some key examples:

1. The Children's March (U.S., 1963)
- **Context:** During the civil rights movement, segregationists in Birmingham, Alabama, were violently cracking down on protests.
- **Dilemma:** When the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) ran out of adult volunteers for civil disobedience, they organized thousands of children to march.

- **Lose-Lose for the Authorities:**
  - If police let them march, segregationists looked weak.
  - If police brutalized children, they looked monstrous—and that's exactly what happened.
  - The world saw fire hoses and attack dogs used against children, creating mass outrage and federal intervention that helped break segregation in Birmingham.

2. **Otpor's Money Drop (Serbia, 1990s)**
   - **Context:** During resistance to Serbian dictator Slobodan Milošević, the youth movement Otpor! needed a way to mock and undermine the regime.
   - **Dilemma:** They glued cans with Milošević's face onto sidewalks and put money inside to support his retirement or, if you couldn't afford to put money in because of his policies, you could hit the barrel with a bat. When police saw people beating the can, they had to either:
     - Arrest people for clubbing a can, which made them look ridiculous.
     - Let it continue, making the regime look weak.
   - **Outcome:** The stunt made police look absurd, boosted morale among protesters, and built momentum for Milošević's eventual overthrow in 2000.

3. **The Sunflower Movement (Taiwan, 2014)**
   - **Context:** The Taiwanese government tried to pass a trade agreement with China that many saw as a step toward Beijing's control over Taiwan.
   - **Dilemma:** Students occupied the Legislative Yuan (Taiwan's Parliament), forcing the government to either:
     - Violently remove them, triggering a public backlash.
     - Negotiate, giving legitimacy to the movement.
   - **Outcome:** The government backed down, and the trade agreement was scrapped, marking a major victory for Taiwan's democracy movement.

4. **Pussy Riot's Church Performance (Russia, 2012)**
   - **Context:** The feminist punk band Pussy Riot staged a performance in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior to protest Vladimir Putin's alliance with the Russian Orthodox Church.
   - **Dilemma:** The government had to either:
     - Ignore the protest, allowing dissent to spread.
     - Crack down harshly, exposing its authoritarianism.
   - **Outcome:** The band members were arrested and sentenced to years in prison, turning them into global icons and putting Putin's repression on full display.

5. **Gandhi's Salt March (India, 1930)**
   - **Context:** British colonial rule in India imposed a monopoly on salt, making it illegal for Indians to produce their own.

- **Dilemma:** Gandhi led a 240-mile march to the sea to illegally produce salt, forcing the British to either:
  - Arrest thousands of peaceful protesters, looking like oppressive colonialists.
  - Allow it, undermining their own rule.
- **Outcome:** The brutal crackdown triggered global condemnation, boosted the Indian independence movement, and exposed the injustice of British rule.

6. Standing Man Protest (Turkey, 2013)
- **Context**: In response to police violence against Gezi Park protesters in Turkey, an activist named Erdem Gündüz stood silently in Taksim Square.
- **Dilemma**: The government had to either:
  - Arrest someone for standing still, which would look absurd.
  - Let it continue, encouraging others to join.
- **Outcome**: The performance went viral, thousands of others joined in silent resistance, and it became a symbol of defiance against Turkey's authoritarianism.

Why Dilemma Actions Are So Effective

Dilemma actions succeed because they:
- **Expose the unjust nature of power**—they show the world exactly how repressive regimes function.
- **Force opponents to choose between looking weak or looking cruel**—either way, they lose.
- **Engage mass participation**—they allow ordinary people to join without requiring high-risk confrontation.
- **Generate powerful media moments**—they create viral, highly shareable images and stories.
- **Boost morale for the movement**—humor, satire, and creativity strengthen **solidarity and hope** among activists.

How to Use Dilemma Actions in the Present Moment

Dilemma actions are particularly powerful in resisting creeping authoritarianism, exposing corruption, and mobilizing public support.

If you're organizing resistance, consider:
- Where can you create a lose-lose situation for unjust power?
- How can you use humor, creativity, or moral contrast to expose injustice?
- What actions can spread virally and engage a broad audience?
- What symbols or cultural moments can you hijack to force your opponent's hand?

Final Thought: Nonviolence as a Strategic Weapon

Dilemma actions are not just symbolic protests—they are strategic acts of power that put authoritarianism on trial before the public. These actions are particularly good as fodder for performance artists, comedians, and practitioners of time-based art.

When movements master dilemma actions, they shift the battleground— forcing their opponents into mistakes, exposing their illegitimacy, and drawing more people into the movement.

In the fight against authoritarianism, oppression, and injustice, dilemma actions are one of the sharpest tools we have. The question is: How will we use them?

Flood the Zone with Us!
What People Without Organizations Can Do To Claim Freedom
March 04, 2025

Introduction: The Urgency of Mobilization

We are in a post-election period where authoritarian forces are actively engaging in administrative coup tactics and employing "flood the zone" disinformation strategies to seize power, undermine democracy, and erode trust in institutions. The time to mobilize is now. For those in communities where polarization is extreme and vulnerability is high, kitchen table actions may be the best ways to engage people. But, overall, the best defense against authoritarianism is a mass movement that is highly visible, disruptive, and resilient.

But what can individuals do if they aren't part of a formal organization? Plenty. In fact, in times of crisis, it is often individuals acting independently but in coordination with others who tip the balance. Below are ten impactful ways to fight authoritarianism—especially through mass disruptive action—and 13 groups you can join remotely to amplify your resistance

10 Ways to Fight Authoritarianism Without Joining an Organization

1. Mass Presence: Take Up Space, Be Seen, Be Loud
- Join and sustain protests, even if it's just you and a small group. Visibility matters.
- Organize disruptive public actions—sit-ins, die-ins, banner drops, or creative street theater—to flood public consciousness with the message that authoritarianism will not be tolerated.
- Engage in swarming tactics: Show up where they least expect it (e.g., country clubs, political fundraisers, corporate board meetings).

2. Flood the Information Zone—With Truth
- The far right is "flooding the zone" with lies—counter it by flooding the zone with truth.
- Use social media aggressively: Post, comment, share resources, and counter disinformation in community groups, neighborhood pages, and news site comment sections.
- Create a rapid response team with friends: When you see a disinformation campaign, counter it in real-time with factual narratives and strategic humor.

3. Mass Coordinated Work Stoppages and Economic Disruption
- If feasible, organize a sick-out or walkout with co-workers on key days to disrupt economic activity.
- Target corporations that support authoritarianism with boycotts, worker slowdowns, and public pressure campaigns.
- Coordinate no-purchase days or "week of resistance" economic disruptions to demonstrate people power. Remember that the consumption habits of the bottom 80% economically is responsible for 62% of the capital flow through our economy.

4. Build Parallel Systems of Mutual Aid and Resistance
- Authoritarians win when people feel alone and dependent on the state. Mutual aid builds resilience and expands freedom.
- Join or start a local mutual aid network focused on food distribution, rides to protests, or legal aid.
- Train your community in digital security, first aid, protest safety, and rapid response organizing.

5. Physically Defend Democratic Institutions
- If authoritarian groups attempt hostile takeovers of government buildings or institutions, nonviolent direct action can prevent them from seizing physical control.
- Organize human chains or blockades at sites of coup attempts or illegal power grabs.
- Mobilize rapid-response teams for peaceful but forceful resistance at courthouses, statehouses, and election offices.

6. Hold Elected Officials Accountable—Through Disruption
- Flood their offices with calls, emails, and in-person visits—make sure they know the price of complicity.
- Surprise interventions: Show up at town halls, fundraisers, and public appearances and confront them loudly and relentlessly.
- Demand public statements of opposition to authoritarian actions—refusal to speak up must be treated as complicity.

7. Protect and Shield Vulnerable Communities
- Be prepared to physically intervene against acts of political violence or harassment.
- Coordinate community patrols, court-watching programs, and emergency response teams to monitor and report on political violence.
- If mass arrests begin, mobilize legal observers and provide jail support and pooled bail funds.

8. Flood the Courts and Bureaucracy with Resistance

- Authoritarians rely on bureaucratic processes—we can slow them down by filing challenges, lawsuits, and mass requests for information.
- Engage in mass FOIA (Freedom of Information Act) requests to flood government agencies with transparency demands especially if you believe you have never been a target of surveillance and direct state repression.
- Volunteer with legal defense organizations that challenge authoritarian policies in court.

9. Disrupt Right-Wing Media & Disinformation Ecosystems

- Report and flag disinformation accounts to slow the spread of propaganda.
- Organize counter-demonstrations at anti-democratic media headquarters and amplify alternative media voices.
- Use strategic humor and culture-jamming tactics to mock, delegitimize, and disarm authoritarian propaganda.

10. Prepare for Mass, Sustained Direct Action

- The goal is to make the country ungovernable for authoritarians.
- Plan for long-term encampments, general strikes, and mass occupations of public spaces.
- Identify critical choke points in your local infrastructure that, if disrupted, can exert economic and political pressure.

13 Groups You Can Join to Take Action from Home

For those who want to connect with a larger movement, here are 13 organizations you can join remotely:

1. **Indivisible** – Grassroots resistance to authoritarianism through civic engagement.
2. **MoveOn** – Digital organizing, petitions, and advocacy against far-right policies.
3. **Common Cause** – Strengthening democracy through election protection and legal action.
4. **Democracy for America** – Supporting progressive candidates and mobilization.
5. **Center for Popular Democracy** – Organizing for democracy and racial justice.
6. **Fair Fight Action** – Founded by Stacey Abrams, defending voting rights.
7. **Color of Change** – Racial justice advocacy through digital activism.
8. **Stand Up America** – Mobilizing voters and defending democracy.
9. **Public Citizen** – Fighting corporate influence in politics.

10. **The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights** – Policy advocacy for civil rights.
11. **Women's March Digital Defenders** – Fighting online disinformation and hate.
12. Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ) – White allies organizing for racial justice and democracy.
13. **League of Women Voters / League In Action** – Electoral activism and civic engagement.

The Takeaway: The Power of Mass Disruptive Action

We are in an extremely urgent moment for democracy. The authoritarian right is flooding the zone with chaos, disinformation, and institutional takeovers. Our response must be equally overwhelming. Through mass disruptive action, coordinated resistance, and decentralized mobilization, we can block authoritarian power grabs and defend democracy.

No one is coming to save us. But together, we can make the cost of authoritarianism too high to sustain.

Flood the zone with us. Take the profit out of authoritarianism. Fight like our future depends on it—because it does.

From Spark to Sustained Fire
How the No Kings Movement Can Reach the Tipping Point
September 15, 2025

On June 14th, 2025, between 4-6 million Americans demonstrated something extraordinary: our capacity for coordinated mass action. With nearly 2% of the population taking to the streets in over 2,100 cities, we proved that resistance to authoritarianism isn't just deep, it's organized, widespread, and ready to escalate.

But we stand at a critical juncture. **Research shows that when 3.5% of a population engages in sustained resistance, authoritarian systems face an existential crisis.** We're already within the threshold where movements have a 40-60% chance of success. The infrastructure exists. The networks are activated. The question isn't whether we can reach the tipping point, it's how quickly we can get there and what we build while we do.

Months after the largest mobilization, it's time for us to take stock of where we are and begin to ask, what's next?

The Strategic Reality: From Defense to Sustained Offense

The No Kings protests demonstrated our defensive capacity - our ability to mobilize rapidly against authoritarian excess. But sustained movements require transitioning from episodic resistance to continuous pressure that makes authoritarian governance impossible. This means moving from protest to strategic noncompliance and disruption, from opposing what we reject to building what we demand.

The gap between 1.8% and 3.5% represents roughly 6 million more Americans. These are very likely not people we need to convince democracy matters; they're people waiting for a movement that can win. Our task is creating the conditions where participation becomes irresistible and sustained engagement becomes the pathway to the democracy we all want.

Strategic Recommendations for Reaching 3.5%

Organizational Infrastructure

- **Absorption:** Build systems for absorbing those who turn out for protests in order to channel them into multiple necessary forms of activism, including kitchen table activism, boycotts, and material aid, as well as connecting them with existing organizations with the infrastructure to support sustained engagement. Protesters can be absorbed through a multiple of simple to do acts, such as distributing talking points on paper for them to use to explain the protests to their families, friends, co-workers, and neighbors when they get home that are embedded with a QR code that they can use to share their information, participate in surveys, etc.
- **Establish Neighborhood Democracy Councils:** Build permanent, participatory decision-making bodies in every community that participated in No Kings protests. These councils coordinate local action while prefiguring the democratic alternatives we're fighting for, and may host community events and celebrations, and pivot to mutual aid as needed.
- **Create Rapid Response Networks:** Develop systems for turning millions into the streets within 48 hours of authoritarian escalation.
- **Build Cross-Movement Alliances:** Systematically connect labor unions, environmental groups, racial justice organizations, and civil liberties advocates around shared democratic infrastructure rather than single issues.
- **Establish Movement Security Culture:** Develop protocols for protecting organizers, communications, and decision-making processes from infiltration and surveillance while maintaining openness to new participants.

Economic Strategy

- **Launch Strategic Economic Disruption:** Identify the 20-30 corporations most essential to authoritarian power and coordinate sustained boycotts, strikes, and divestment campaigns that create economic crises requiring democratic solutions.
- **Build Alternative Economic Institutions:** Establish worker cooperatives, community land trusts, and participatory budgeting processes that demonstrate economic democracy while building material bases for sustained resistance.

- **Coordinate Strategic Strikes:** Work with labor unions to prepare for coordinated work stoppages that can shut down key economic sectors when authoritarian escalation crosses red lines.
- **Create Mutual Aid Networks:** Build community support systems that allow people to participate in sustained action without risking economic survival.

Cultural and Narrative Work

- **Shift from Opposition to Vision:** Move messaging from "Stop Trump" to "Build Democracy"—concrete proposals for participatory governance, economic justice, and community control that people can see and touch.
- **Create Cultural Demonstrations:** Use festivals, art installations, community celebrations, and cultural events to show what inclusive democracy looks like while building joy and connection within the movement.
- **Develop Popular Education Programs:** Establish widespread political education that teaches democratic skills—facilitation, conflict resolution, economic literacy—while building shared analysis of how change happens.
- **Build Independent Media Infrastructure:** Create communication systems that can reach millions without relying on corporate platforms, ensuring messages reach people where they are.

Political Strategy

- **Target Local Electoral Systems:** Win city councils, school boards, and county positions while transforming how these bodies operate—introducing participatory budgeting, community oversight, and direct democracy mechanisms.
- **Prepare for Constitutional Convention:** Begin organizing for state-level constitutional conventions that can implement structural democratic reforms beyond what federal politics allows.
- **Create Democratic Sanctuaries:** Establish jurisdictions that refuse cooperation with authoritarian policies while implementing alternative democratic practices.
- **Build Electoral Reform Coalitions:** Unite behind ranked choice voting, anti-gerrymandering, and campaign finance reform while demonstrating these changes through alternative political institutions.

Escalation Strategy

- Establish Clear Escalation Triggers: Define specific authoritarian actions that automatically trigger mass mobilization, with pre-planned responses that can deploy millions within days.

- Prepare for Sustained Occupations: Develop capacity for long-term occupations of key public spaces and buildings, with infrastructure for housing, feeding, and organizing thousands of participants.

- Coordinate Mass Non-Cooperation: Prepare for systematic non-compliance with authoritarian policies—tax resistance, draft resistance, refusal to cooperate with deportation efforts.

- Build Community Defense Networks: Establish neighborhood-level rapid response systems for protecting community members from state violence while maintaining nonviolent discipline.

The Next Six Months: From Momentum to Movement

The No Kings protests created momentum. Now we build the movement infrastructure that can sustain and escalate that momentum into sustained pressure. This requires treating the next six months as a movement-building period focused on reaching the 3.5% threshold and more, which is likely to be necessary in the U.S. today, through expanded participation and deeper organizational capacity.

Every person who participated on June 14th becomes an organizer in their community. Every organization that endorsed becomes part of coordinated strategy development. Every city that saw protests becomes a laboratory for democratic alternatives. We turn the energy of one day into the sustained engagement that can overwhelm authoritarian governance through sheer democratic participation.

The distance between 1.8% and 3.5% isn't a mountain to climb, it's the next wave of people waiting for a movement that combines the urgency of resistance with the joy of building something better. We don't just protest authoritarianism; we demonstrate the democracy that makes authoritarianism impossible.

The infrastructure exists. The numbers are within reach. The time for sustained action is now.

Crisis Moments Strategy for Pro-Democracy Movement
Anticipating and Leveraging Critical Junctures Over the Next 18 Months
September 29, 2025

The Democracy Crisis and the Power of Strategic Disruption

American democracy stands at an unprecedented crossroads. Today's authoritarian playbook is usually a process that happens bit by bit and is hard to distinguish from normal political jockeying, making party competition a distraction from the main event as democracy dies gradually as institutional, legal, and political constraints on authoritarians are gradually eroded. This gradual erosion creates a unique challenge for pro-democracy forces: how do you mobilize mass resistance against threats that appear incremental but are systematically dismantling democratic safeguards?

The answer lies in understanding a fundamental truth about social change: transformative victories are rarely won through institutional channels alone, but through strategic crisis creation that forces those in power to confront injustice they can no longer ignore, delay, or manage away. From the Civil Rights Movement's Birmingham Campaign to the labor strikes that won the 40-hour work week, history shows us that movements succeed when they create strategic disruptions that make the status quo more costly to maintain than meaningful change.

As Trump rolls out a tried and true authoritarian playbook by fabricating emergencies. that create the willing suspension of disbelief necessary to bypass democratic processes, the pro-democracy movement must master the art of creating genuine crisis moments that expose authoritarian overreach and force democratic breakthroughs. This requires shifting from defensive institutionalism to proactive movement building that can outmaneuver authoritarian crisis manufacturing through strategic disruption at scale.

The stakes could not be higher. As democracy researcher Ruth Ben-Ghiat warns, strongmen "don't just walk away, they rewrite history, they change the rules, they dismantle democracy piece by piece. And by the time people realize it, it's often too late." The next 18 months represent a critical window where the pro-democracy movement can still build the power necessary to make authoritarianism ungovernable, but only if we act strategically, at scale, and with the understanding that democracy is only won and defended when people mobilize to make injustice impossible to ignore.

Getting to the Point

The pro-democracy movement faces a critical 18-month (more or less) window where authoritarian forces will manufacture crises to consolidate power while genuine crisis moments will emerge that can be leveraged for democratic breakthrough. Success requires shifting from reactive defense to proactive crisis creation, building infrastructure for rapid mass mobilization, and strategically targeting corporate vulnerabilities to fracture the authoritarian coalition.

Part I: Understanding the Crisis Landscape

Authoritarian Crisis Manufacturing:
- Creates fake emergencies to bypass democratic processes
- Overwhelms opposition with multiple simultaneous crises ("flood the zone")
- Normalizes repression through manufactured inevitability
- Consolidates power through "state of exception" logic

Democratic Crisis Moments:
- Force accountability through strategic disruption
- Create unavoidable moral dilemmas for power holders
- Shift political landscapes by making injustice impossible to ignore
- Generate urgency where inaction becomes more costly than action

The 18-Month Timeline: Critical Junctures Ahead

Immediate (Next 6 months):
- Economic policy implementations affecting corporate interests
- Immigration enforcement escalations
- Regulatory rollbacks benefiting specific industries

Medium-term (6-12 months):
- Midterm election interference attempts
- Climate crisis intersection with authoritarian response
- Labor rights erosions triggering worker resistance
- International authoritarian network consolidation

Longer-term (12-18 months):
- Constitutional crisis moments around elections
- Economic instability from authoritarian policies
- Mass deportation crisis points
- Corporate coalition fractures under pressure

Part II: Historical Lessons - How Movements Win Through Crisis Creation

The Civil Rights Movement: Birmingham as a Masterclass in Crisis Strategy

The Birmingham Campaign of 1963 provides the definitive example of how movements create crisis moments that force democratic breakthroughs. Rather than relying solely on legal challenges or electoral politics, the movement strategically chose Birmingham precisely because of Police Commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor's reputation for violent overreaction. The campaign was designed to create a crisis that would force the nation to confront the moral bankruptcy of segregation.

Strategic Elements:
- **Target Selection**: Birmingham was chosen for its symbolic importance and the likelihood of generating violent opposition that would shock national conscience
- **Escalation Ladder**: From economic boycotts to mass arrests to using children as protesters, each phase increased pressure
- **Media Strategy**: Television coverage of police attacking peaceful protesters, including children, created unavoidable moral confrontation
- **Economic Pressure**: Downtown boycotts hit business interests hard enough to force negotiations

Results: The crisis forced President Kennedy to propose comprehensive civil rights legislation, fundamentally shifting the national political landscape. As movement strategist James Bevel explained, "We were trying to launch a systematic, sustained, mass-action campaign to destroy the system of segregation in Birmingham."

The Labor Movement: Creating Ungovernable Crisis Through Strategic Strikes

The great labor victories of the 1930s demonstrate how strategic crisis creation can force corporate and political elites to choose between meaningful concessions and system-wide breakdown. The 1936-37 General Motors sit-down strike in Flint, Michigan, exemplifies this approach.

Strategic Elements:
- **Economic Disruption:** Workers occupied factories, making production impossible and threatening GM's entire operation
- **Coalition Building:** Auto workers connected with broader labor movement and progressive politicians

- **Corporate Vulnerability**: Strike targeted GM's most profitable plants at peak production season
- **Political Pressure**: Created crisis that forced Governor Frank Murphy and eventually President Roosevelt to choose sides

Results: GM, the world's largest corporation, was forced to recognize the United Auto Workers, fundamentally shifting the balance of power between labor and capital across American industry.

The Anti-Apartheid Movement: Corporate Divestment as Coalition Fracturing

The international anti-apartheid movement's divestment campaign demonstrates how sustained pressure on corporate interests can fracture elite coalitions supporting authoritarian systems.

Strategic Elements:
- **Moral Framework:** Positioned corporate investment as complicity in racial oppression
- **Economic Leverage:** Targeted university endowments, pension funds, and corporate shareholders
- **Escalation Strategy:** From symbolic protests to binding divestment policies to international sanctions
- **Coalition Building:** Connected campus activists, institutional investors, and international solidarity movements

Results: Corporate divestment created economic crisis for the apartheid regime while demonstrating to South African elites that international support was evaporating, contributing significantly to the system's eventual collapse.

Vietnam War: Making Policy Ungovernable Through Mass Resistance

The anti-Vietnam War movement succeeded not through electoral politics alone, but by creating crises that made the war increasingly difficult to prosecute and politically unsustainable.

Strategic Elements:
- **Draft Resistance:** Made military conscription increasingly difficult and politically costly
- **Campus Disruption:** Created crisis at universities that trained future leaders and conducted war research
- **Economic Pressure:** Targeted defense contractors and university military research programs
- **International Solidarity:** Connected with global anti-war movements to isolate U.S. policy

Results: The combination of military crisis in Vietnam and domestic political crisis forced policy makers to choose between massive escalation (politically impossible) or withdrawal.

Part III: Strategic Framework for Crisis Moments

1. Proactive Crisis Creation Strategy

Principle: Don't wait for crises to emerge—create turning points that force democratic breakthroughs.

Learning from Birmingham: Like the Civil Rights Movement's strategic selection of Birmingham for its likelihood to generate shocking overreaction, the pro-democracy movement must identify vulnerable points where authoritarian overreach will backfire spectacularly.

Contemporary Application Examples:

Economic Disruption Campaigns:

- Target financial districts when deregulation policies are announced, forcing corporate leaders to publicly choose between short-term profits and democratic stability
- Coordinate workplace walkouts at regime-enabling corporations during key policy implementation moments
- Shut down supply chains for companies profiting from authoritarian policies, similar to how Birmingham boycotts hit business interests

Moral Confrontation Moments:
- Create situations at immigration detention facilities where corporate contractors must choose between government contracts and public reputation
- Force university boards to confront complicity in authoritarian research partnerships through campus occupations
- Generate crisis moments at corporate shareholder meetings where executives face direct accountability for regime enabling

Governmental Ungoverability:
- Make mass deportation policies impossible to implement through sanctuary city networks and mass non-cooperation
- Create election protection crisis moments that force officials to choose between voter suppression and democratic legitimacy
- Generate constitutional crisis through mass civil disobedience that exposes authoritarian law as illegitimate

Information Warfare:
- Counter "flood the zone" disinformation with coordinated truth-telling campaigns that create undeniable narrative clarity
- Use cultural and artistic interventions to create emotional crisis moments that break through information bubbles
- Generate crisis moments around press freedom that force media corporations to choose sides

Implementation Framework:
- Pre-positioned coalitions ready to act within 48 hours
- Escalation ladders from symbolic action to economic disruption
- Media strategies that frame crises as democracy vs. authoritarianism
- Legal support infrastructure for mass arrest scenarios

2. Corporate Coalition Fracturing Strategy

Learning from Anti-Apartheid Divestment: The international anti-apartheid movement demonstrated how sustained pressure on corporate interests can fracture elite coalitions supporting authoritarian systems by making complicity more costly than opposition.

Targeting Corporate Vulnerabilities:

Reputational Pressure Points:
- ESG commitments vs. authoritarian enabling (force public contradiction)
- International market dependencies (leverage global democratic pressure)
- Consumer brand vulnerabilities (organize targeted boycotts like Birmingham's downtown campaign)
- Shareholder pressure on governance issues (replicate divestment campaign strategies)

Economic Leverage Points:
- Supply chain disruptions through worker action (learning from Flint sit-down strikes)
- Consumer boycotts coordinated across movements (Birmingham economic pressure model)
- Investor divestment campaigns (anti-apartheid financial pressure)
- Regulatory arbitrage exploitation (create crisis through compliance costs)

Strategic Corporate Targets for Oligarch Peeling:

Tech Oligarchs:
- Crisis Creation Example: Coordinate massive platform boycotts during key authoritarian policy announcements, forcing tech leaders to choose between regime relationships and user base retention, similar to how Birmingham forced business leaders to choose between segregation and economic survival

Financial Elite:
- Crisis Creation Example: Target banks financing authoritarian policies through coordinated account closures and shareholder actions, replicating anti-apartheid divestment pressure but at accelerated pace through social media coordination

Industrial Titans:
- Crisis Creation Example: Organize workplace actions at factories benefiting from deregulation simultaneous with community environmental justice actions, creating multi-front corporate crisis similar to UAW's strategic targeting of GM's most vulnerable points

Media Moguls:
- Crisis Creation Example: Coordinate advertiser boycotts with newsroom worker actions during key propaganda moments, forcing media executives to choose between authoritarian alignment and business viability

3. Mass Mobilization Infrastructure

Learning from Vietnam Anti-War Movement: Success required building permanent organizational capacity that could rapidly escalate and sustain pressure across multiple fronts simultaneously, making policy ungovernable rather than just protesting it.

Pre-Crisis Organizing Requirements:

Permanent Coalition Structure:
- **State-level pro-democracy hubs** connecting all issue movements (replicating how anti-war movement connected students, labor, faith, and civil rights)
- **Rapid response networks** with 72-hour mobilization capacity (learning from Birmingham's ability to rapidly escalate from economic boycotts to mass direct action)
- **Cross-movement leadership** development and relationship building (how Civil Rights movement connected local leaders across the South)
- **Shared communications infrastructure** and messaging frameworks (anti-war movement's coordination across campuses and communities)

Tactical Capacity Building:
- Mass civil disobedience training programs
- Economic disruption campaign planning
- Corporate pressure campaign expertise
- Legal observer and jail support networks

Resource Infrastructure:
- Strike funds and mutual aid networks
- Safe houses and sanctuary infrastructure
- Independent media and communications systems
- Legal defense funds and bail resources

Part IV: 18-Month Action Calendar

Phase 1: Foundation Building (Months 1-6)

Immediate Priorities:
- Establish state pro-democracy coalitions in key battleground states
- Build corporate targeting research and campaign capacity
- Create rapid response trigger systems for manufactured crises
- Develop counter-narrative infrastructure

Key Crisis Opportunities:
- Immigration enforcement escalations → airport blockades, sanctuary actions
- Deregulation announcements → financial district disruptions
- Election interference attempts → voting rights mass actions
- Worker rights attacks → solidarity strike campaigns

Phase 2: Escalation and Testing (Months 6-12)

Strategic Focus:
- Test crisis creation capacity through targeted campaigns
- Force first major oligarch defections through sustained pressure
- Build international solidarity and pressure networks
- Establish ungovernable policy territories

Key Crisis Opportunities:
- Midterm election interference → electoral crisis response
- Climate emergency intersections → corporate climate accountability
- Economic instability → blame shifting to authoritarian policies
- Labor escalations → general strike capacity demonstration

Phase 3: Democratic Breakthrough (Months 12-18)

Strategic Focus:
- Create sustained ungovernable crisis for authoritarian regime
- Force major corporate coalition fractures
- Establish alternative democratic practices and institutions
- Prepare for 2026 electoral protection

Key Crisis Opportunities:
- Constitutional crisis moments → mass democratic response
- Economic collapse blame → regime legitimacy crisis
- International isolation → domestic pressure intensification
- Electoral coup attempts → general resistance mobilization

Part V: Tactical Playbook

Crisis Response Protocols

48-Hour Response Capacity:
1. Hour 0-6: Coalition alert system activation, situation assessment
2. Hour 6-12: Strategic response determination, resource mobilization
3. Hour 12-24: Public messaging launch, participant recruitment
4. Hour 24-48: Mass action deployment, media engagement

Escalation Ladders by Crisis Type:

Economic Policy Crises:
- Level 1: Symbolic protests at corporate headquarters
- Level 2: Consumer boycotts and shareholder actions
- Level 3: Supply chain disruptions and workplace actions
- Level 4: Financial district shutdowns and economic disruption

Electoral Crises:
- Level 1: Legal challenges and public pressure
- Level 2: Mass voter protection mobilization
- Level 3: Civil disobedience at election infrastructure
- Level 4: General strike and governmental non-cooperation

Immigration/Civil Rights Crises:
- Level 1: Sanctuary and protection actions
- Level 2: Transportation and logistics disruption
- Level 3: Mass civil disobedience campaigns
- Level 4: Corporate enabling accountability actions

Corporate Pressure Campaign Model

Phase 1: Research and Target Selection
- Vulnerability mapping (reputational, economic, regulatory)
- Coalition building among affected constituencies
- Narrative development and messaging strategy

Phase 2: Initial Pressure Application
- Shareholder actions and proxy campaigns
- Consumer pressure and boycott launches
- Worker organizing and solidarity building
- Regulatory and legal pressure initiation

Phase 3: Escalation and Crisis Creation
- Direct action at corporate facilities
- Supply chain disruption campaigns
- International pressure and reputation attacks
- Economic leverage point exploitation

Phase 4: Negotiation and Defection
- Public commitment extraction processes
- Coalition breaking and oligarch isolation
- Policy reversal and accountability mechanisms
- Movement building and lesson integration

Part VI: Infrastructure Requirements

Organizational Capacities Needed

Strategic Planning Infrastructure:
- Crisis scenario planning and war gaming capacity
- Corporate research and targeting expertise
- Rapid response legal and communications teams
- International coordination and solidarity networks

Operational Infrastructure:
- Mass mobilization and logistics systems
- Training and skill-building programs
- Communications and media production capacity
- Resource mobilization and distribution systems

Defensive Infrastructure:
- Legal defense and bail fund systems
- Safety and security protocols and training
- Mental health and trauma support systems
- Family and community protection networks

Relationship Building Priorities
- Coalition Relationships:
- Labor unions and worker organizations
- Civil rights and racial justice groups
- Climate and environmental justice movements
- Immigrant rights and sanctuary networks
- Faith communities and moral leadership
- Student and youth movements
- Women's and reproductive rights organizations
- LGBTQ+ rights advocates

Institutional Relationships:
- Sympathetic elected officials and staff
- Independent media and journalist networks
- International pro-democracy movements
- Academic and research institutions
- Progressive business leaders and investors

Cultural and artistic communities

Part VII: Success Metrics and Evaluation

Crisis Moment Success Indicators

Immediate Impact Metrics:
- Media coverage framing and narrative shift
- Corporate or political leader public responses
- Participation levels and geographic spread
- Policy or behavioral changes by targets

Medium-term Impact Metrics:
- Coalition growth and diversification
- Resource mobilization capacity increases
- Institutional response and adaptation
- Public opinion and narrative shifts

Long-term Impact Metrics:
- Democratic institutional strengthening
- Authoritarian coalition fragmentation
- Electoral and policy victory achievements
- Movement sustainability and evolution

Strategic Learning Integration

After-action Review Protocols:
- Rapid tactical assessment and lesson extraction
- Strategic effectiveness evaluation and adjustment
- Coalition relationship strengthening and repair
- Capacity building and skill development planning

Strategic Adaptation Mechanisms:
- Quarterly strategic plan reviews and updates
- Annual coalition assessment and relationship audit
- Crisis scenario planning updates and refinements
- Tactical innovation and experimentation cycles

The Takeaway: Seizing the Historic Moment for Democratic Transformation

History teaches us that democracy is not preserved by institutions alone, but by people willing to create strategic crises that force society to confront injustice it can no longer ignore. From Birmingham's children facing fire hoses to Flint workers occupying factories to students making war ungovernable, transformative victories come when movements build power capable of making the status quo more costly than meaningful change.

The authoritarian strategy of flooding the zone with manufactured crises can become its greatest weakness if the pro-democracy movement responds with coordinated, strategic crisis creation of its own. When an authoritarian regime attacks all of us at the same time, which no doubt what we are experiencing even if we aren't members of the most vulnerable groups, it creates potential for broad-based solidarity across lines that don't usually align, but only if those who oppose authoritarianism are organized to seize that opportunity.

The framework presented here is not merely theoretical; it builds on proven strategies that have defeated authoritarian systems before. The anti-apartheid movement's divestment campaigns proved that sustained pressure on corporate interests can fracture elite coalitions. The Civil Rights Movement's Birmingham strategy demonstrated how strategic crisis creation forces moral reckonings that reshape entire societies. The labor movement's sit-down strikes showed how economic disruption can compel powerful corporations to negotiate. The anti-war movement proved that mass resistance can make harmful policies ungovernable.

What made each of these movements successful was their understanding that lasting change requires more than protest; it requires building power capable of creating sustained crises that make injustice impossible to ignore and expensive to maintain.

They succeeded because they combined moral clarity with strategic disruption, permanent organizing with rapid response capacity, economic leverage with political pressure.

The next 18 months will determine whether freedoms that most Americans take for granted will survive the current authoritarian assault. The choice is stark: institutions will not save us; if we rely on them, we will lose. If we build the power necessary to drive democracy forward, we will win." But victory requires understanding that the ideal of democracy is a popular form of government; a form of government that becomes possible when we make injustice impossible to ignore through strategic crisis creation that forces democratic breakthroughs.

The infrastructure, relationships, and capacity building outlined in this framework must begin immediately. The crisis moments that will determine democracy's future are not distant possibilities - they are emerging now. The question is whether the pro-democracy movement will seize the initiative to create the kinds of strategic disruptions that have always been necessary to defend freedom against authoritarian power.

As Birmingham taught us, sometimes the most powerful thing a movement can do is create a crisis that forces society to choose sides. As Flint showed us, strategic economic disruption can compel even the most powerful corporations to negotiate. As the anti-apartheid struggle demonstrated, sustained pressure can fracture seemingly impregnable elite coalitions. As the anti-war movement proved, mass resistance can make harmful policies ungovernable.

The authoritarian playbook is known. The successful strategies for defeating it have been proven. What remains is the political will to build the power necessary to deploy them at the scale and speed required. Democracy's survival depends not on hoping institutions will hold, but on building movements capable of making authoritarianism ungovernable. The window is open, but it will not stay open forever. The time for strategic crisis creation is now.

Discussion Guide:
Part 3: The Strategic Imperative of Nonviolent Action

This discussion guide explores proven organizing characteristics, tactical innovation, and mass mobilization strategies that can both stop authoritarian consolidation and build the kind of lasting movement that can sustain the democracy of our dreams. History shows that movements win when we make authoritarianism too costly to maintain, and find many ways for people to plug in to strategic collective action. Choose from these questions to sharpen your strategic thinking and your tactical skills.

1. Effective movements identify "pillars of support" for authoritarianism - including businesses, military and veterans, faith leaders, civic organizations, and more - and systematically work to disrupt them and gain defections by pulling people away. **Who in your area has done some analysis of pillars of support? If nobody has done this, what would it take for you to map pillars in your area?**

2. Dilemma actions force opponents into situations where every response backfires: if they repress, they look cruel or ridiculous; if they ignore it, they appear weak. **Considering the context in your area, where are there opportunities for creative dilemma actions that put authorities or corporations in a damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't position?**

3. The research shows movements over-rely on mass demonstrations while neglecting tactics like general strikes, mass civil disobedience, consumer boycotts, labor strikes, and stay-aways. **What would mass noncooperation look like in your sector or community? What are some steps you can take to either join existing efforts to create infrastructure for mass noncooperation or initiate new efforts?**

4. "Crisis Moments Strategy for the Pro-Democracy Movement" distinguishes authoritarian crisis manufacturing (fake emergencies to bypass democracy) from democratic crisis creation (strategic disruption that forces accountability), which can be key to victory. **What would it look like to deliberately create a crisis moment that forces authorities, corporations, or institutions to make unavoidable choices that expose injustice?**

5. "Crisis Moments Strategy" also outlines a phased approach that mirrors the 12-18 month timeline experts say authoritarian consolidation can take:
- Foundation building, coalition establishment, crisis response infrastructure (first 6 months)
- Escalation and testing, forcing first oligarch defections, demonstrating ungovernable capacity (months 6-12)
- Sustained crisis creation, major coalition fractures, alternative institution building, 2026 electoral protection (months 12-18)

Which phase are you in? How does it match up with the 12-18 month timeline for authoritarian consolidation?

6. "From Spark to Sustained Fire" calls for absorption systems, rapid response networks, cross-movement alliances, economic disruption, and cultural work that can help scale up to the threshold that makes an authoritarian system face existential crisis. **What absorption infrastructure exists in your area that can channel protest participants into ongoing engagement? What would permanent, participatory decision-making bodies that prefigure the democratic alternatives we're fighting for while hosting community events and celebrations and pivoting to mutual aid as needed look like?**

7. Looking across all of these ideas — dilemma actions, tactical diversity, pillars analysis, flooding the zone, elder organizing, crisis creation, corporate targeting — **What infrastructure can you focus on building or contributing to building over the next 60-90 days?**

THE ANTI-AUTHORITARIAN PLAYBOOK

WHERE WE'RE GOING

TOWARD THE DEMOCRACY WE'VE NEVER HAD

Introduction

The goal isn't just to stop authoritarianism; it's to build a democratic, equitable, joyful society that makes authoritarianism impossible.

The essays in this section complete the journey from defense to transformation, starting with the strategic shift from reactive opposition to offensive power-building through mass noncooperation, economic disruption, and prefigurative organizing that models the democracy we want. We explore mutual aid not as charity but as political resistance that builds autonomous networks of care and weakens state control—from the Black Panther breakfast programs to Puerto Rico's post-Maria recovery centers. We examine why culture isn't a luxury but a battlefield where movements win by shifting narratives, building solidarity through art and performance, and occupying public imagination. Crucially, we recognize we're not fighting to restore a democracy that never fully existed for most people, but to birth the liberation democracy that has always been our deepest aspiration—one that finally delivers on its promises.

Democracy is not as destination, it's infrastructure that makes transformation possible. Defending flawed democratic space while building revolutionary alternatives isn't contradiction but strategic necessity. These essays show how resistance becomes creation, how defense enables offense, and how joy and celebration aren't rewards after victory but assets in the fight itself.

Pivoting From Defense to Offense
July 30, 2025

The Strategic Shift

Defense (necessary but insufficient):
- **Protests**: Express opposition but often reinforce the system by asking for permission and staying within prescribed boundaries
- **Critique**: Names the problem but doesn't disrupt power relations
- **Legal challenge**s: Important but rely on institutions that authoritarians are capturing
- **Electoral politics alone**: Playing by rules that authoritarians are rewriting in order to assure they can't lose elections

Offense (power-shifting):
- **Mass noncooperation**: Withdraws the consent and compliance that all governments require
- **Economic disruption**: Hits power where it matters most - profit and economic stability
- **Joy and celebration**: Creates magnetic alternative culture that draws people in
- **Prefigurative organizing**: Builds the democracy we want (diversity, pluralism, power-sharing, transparency) while fighting the authoritarianism we reject

Moving from Defense to Offense: Strategic Actions

Mass Noncooperation: The Core Strategy

Labor Actions:
- Strategic strikes in key sectors (healthcare, education, transportation, logistics)
- Sick-outs and coordinated work slowdowns
- Refusal to implement authoritarian policies by government workers
- Professional associations withdrawing cooperation (doctors, teachers, engineers)

Economic Noncooperation:
- Targeted boycotts of businesses supporting authoritarianism
- Bank redirects from institutions funding authoritarian projects
- Tax resistance campaigns in coordination with legal support
- Divestment from authoritarian-aligned investments (shareholder activism 2.0)

Civil Disobedience:
- Mass refusal to comply with unconstitutional orders
- Sanctuary city/state implementation and expansion
- Protection of vulnerable communities through direct action
- Occupation of public spaces essential for democracy (libraries, schools, community centers)

Institutional Noncooperation

Government Workers:
- Slow-walking harmful policies
- Information transparency (strategic leaks of public interest)
- Professional ethics refusals to implement unconstitutional orders

Business Community:
- Corporate resistance to authoritarian demands
- Protection of workers from political retaliation
- Maintenance of democratic norms in business operations

Formations to Build and Join

Resistance Networks

Local Formations:
- Neighborhood defense committees for mutual aid and protection
- Workplace organizing committees across industries
- Faith-based social justice networks
- Community resilience hubs providing essential services

Regional and State-Level:
- Resistant state coalitions coordinating sanctuary policies
- Interstate compacts for democratic governance
- Regional economic networks reducing dependence on authoritarian-controlled supply chains

Sectoral Networks:
- Cross-union solidarity beyond traditional labor boundaries
- Professional resistance networks (lawyers, doctors, teachers, etc.)
- Cultural worker collectives (artists, writers, performers)
- Tech worker resistance to surveillance and disinformation

Prefigurative Institutions

Economic Democracy:
- Cooperative businesses and community-owned enterprises
- Community land trusts and housing cooperatives
- Alternative financial institutions (credit unions, community banks)
- Solidarity economy networks

Community Governance:
- Participatory budgeting initiatives
- Community assemblies for local decision-making
- Restorative justice programs as alternatives to carceral systems
- Community-controlled education initiatives

Building Insurgency Mentality + Joyful Community

The Mindset Shift

From Victim to Agent:
- **"We are the ones we've been waiting for"** rather than waiting for electoral salvation
- **Strategic thinking** about power rather than moral appeals to authority
- **Collective efficacy** rather than individual helplessness
- **Historical perspective** that change comes from organized people, not politicians

From Scarcity to Abundance:
- **Mutual aid** as community building, not charity
- **Shared resources** and skill-sharing networks
- **Cultural commons** (art, music, storytelling) as resistance tools
- **Celebration and joy** as acts of political defiance

Creating Magnetic Culture

Joyful Resistance:
- **Block parties** and community celebrations with political purpose
- **Art builds** and cultural actions that engage broader communities
- **Community gardens** and skill-shares that prefigure the world we want
- **Festivals of resistance** that combine fun with political education

Storytelling and Narrative:
- **"We're winning"** stories that build confidence and momentum
- **Local heroes** and success stories that people can relate to
- **Vision of the future** that's tangible and appealing
- **Cultural products** (music, art, memes) that spread organically

Community Care Infrastructure

Mutual Aid Beyond Crisis:
- Childcare cooperatives for activists and working families
- Community kitchens and food security networks
- Mental health support for sustainable organizing
- Housing support and eviction defense

Security Culture:
- Digital security training and practices
- Know Your Rights training for interactions with authorities
- Jail solidarity and legal support networks
- Community self-defense (physical and digital)

Strategic Sequencing: Building Power Over Time

Phase 1: Base Building (Current)Mutual aid networks that meet immediate needs
- Issue-based campaigns that bring people together
- Community assemblies for democratic practice
- Cultural events that build relationships and shared identity

Phase 2: Escalation
- Coordinated noncooperation campaigns
- Economic pressure on key pillars of authoritarian support
- Mass mobilizations that demonstrate popular power
- Institutional resistance by government workers and professionals

Phase 3: Alternative Power
- Parallel institutions providing essential services
- Democratic governance structures at community level
- Economic alternatives reducing dependence on extractive systems
- Cultural hegemony where democratic values become common sense

Key Principles for Offensive Strategy

Strategic Nonviolent Action
- Mass participation rather than militant minorities
- Diversity of tactics within nonviolent framework
- Security culture that protects participants
- Discipline that maintains movement integrity

Intersectional Solidarity
- Multi-issue organizing that connects struggles
- Leadership development across all affected communities
- Resource sharing between movements
- Mutual defense against state repression

Prefigurative Politics
- Practice democracy while fighting authoritarianism
- Model the change we want to see
- Build sustainable movement culture
- Integrate joy and resistance

Overcoming Fear Through Community

Collective Courage
- Courage is contagious - people take risks when they see others doing so
- Shared responsibility reduces individual risk
- Community support provides safety net for taking action
- Celebration of courage rather than shaming of fear

Joy as Resistance
- They want us to be afraid and isolated - joy and community are acts of defiance
- Cultural resistance through art, music, and celebration
- Humor and irreverence that deflates authoritarian pomposity
- Hope through action rather than passive optimism

The key is understanding that authoritarianism requires mass compliance to function. When significant numbers of people withdraw their cooperation, from workers refusing to implement harmful policies to communities protecting each other, to businesses refusing authoritarian demands, the system becomes unstable.

This isn't about perfect people making perfect choices. It's about creating conditions where the right choice becomes the easy choice because you have community support, alternative resources, and a culture that celebrates resistance rather than compliance.

The goal isn't just to stop authoritarianism. It's to build a democratic, equitable, joyful society that makes authoritarianism impossible.

Mutual Aid
From Surviving to Thriving
March 10, 2025

What Is Mutual Aid?

Mutual aid is a form of collective care in which communities come together to share resources, provide for one another's needs, and build systems of support independent of the state or corporate entities. Unlike charity, which often reinforces hierarchical power structures, mutual aid is based on solidarity, not charity—meaning people help one another as equals, recognizing that we all have a stake in each other's survival.

Mutual aid networks function outside of or alongside state-controlled institutions and provide essential services, resources, and support without relying on permission from political elites or corporate gatekeepers. Historically, mutual aid has been a lifeline for communities marginalized by capitalism, white supremacy, and state violence.

Why Mutual Aid Is a Powerful Tool Against Authoritarianism

1. It Builds Autonomous Networks of Care That Weaken State Control
- Authoritarian regimes thrive by forcing dependence on the state, using access to resources (food, shelter, healthcare) as a tool of control.
- Mutual aid bypasses this system by creating alternative structures that meet people's needs without state intervention.
- When people no longer rely on an authoritarian state for survival, they are less susceptible to coercion.

Example: Black Panther Party's Free Breakfast Program (1969–1970s)
- The Black Panthers provided free meals to tens of thousands of children in Black communities, directly challenging the state's failure to care for marginalized people.
- The FBI saw this as such a threat to state power that J. Edgar Hoover called it "the greatest threat to internal security."
- This shows that authoritarians recognize mutual aid as a form of political resistance.

2. It Creates Resilience Against Economic and Political Repression
- Authoritarian governments often use economic deprivation to punish dissent—cutting off resources, suppressing wages, or criminalizing poverty.
- Mutual aid provides a safety net when state institutions fail or actively work against vulnerable communities.

Example: Puerto Rico's Mutual Aid Centers After Hurricane Maria (2017)
- After the U.S. federal government failed to provide timely disaster relief, Puerto Ricans organized community-led recovery centers to distribute food, water, and medical aid.
- These centers exposed government neglect and proved that grassroots organizations can out-perform the state in crisis response.
- This model has since inspired similar mutual aid efforts worldwide to resist state abandonment.

3. It Strengthens Community Solidarity and Weakens Divide-and-Conquer Tactics
- Authoritarian regimes maintain control by dividing people—along racial, class, or ideological lines—to prevent unified resistance.
- Mutual aid networks build relationships across these divides, creating a culture of solidarity instead of fear and competition.

Example: COVID-19 Mutual Aid Networks (2020–Present)
- At the height of the pandemic, mutual aid groups formed globally to provide food, medical supplies, and financial assistance to people left behind by government relief programs.
- These networks cut across political and racial lines, proving that collective care is stronger than authoritarian neglect.

4. It Develops Infrastructure That Can Sustain Resistance Movements
- Resistance is only as strong as the communities that sustain it.
- Mutual aid provides the food, shelter, medical care, and legal support that activists and movement organizers need to continue fighting authoritarian policies.

Example: The Underground Railroad (19th Century)
- Enslaved people escaping the South relied on mutual aid networks of free Black communities, abolitionists, and religious groups.
- These networks provided shelter, resources, and transportation, enabling people to resist and escape an oppressive system without waiting for the state to intervene.
- Resistance movements always require infrastructure, and mutual aid is how communities build it.

Key Takeaways: Mutual Aid as a Political Martial Art
- It breaks dependence on authoritarian institutions by providing food, healthcare, and other resources outside state control.
- It neutralizes economic punishment by ensuring people can survive repression without surrendering to coercion.

- It builds community power and strengthens movements that challenge authoritarianism.
- It provides the logistical backbone for resistance, sustaining activists, protest movements, and oppressed communities.

How to Start or Support a Mutual Aid Network in Your Community
- Identify Local Needs: Food insecurity, eviction defense, bail funds, disaster relief, community defense, childcare, etc.
- Find Existing Groups: Many mutual aid networks already exist—plug in and support their efforts.
- Create Local Resource Sharing: Distribute supplies, provide skill-sharing, or help with transportation and housing needs.
- Build Solidarity, Not Charity: Mutual aid is about collective care, not saviorism. Listen to community needs and work as equals.
- Defend Mutual Aid from Criminalization: Authoritarians often try to shut down mutual aid efforts—be prepared to defend and protect them.

Final Thought: Mutual Aid Is an Act of Defiance

Mutual aid is not just about helping people—it is about undermining systems of oppression, weakening authoritarian control, and building power from below. History shows that when people take care of each other, they take power away from those who exploit and oppress them.

In the face of rising authoritarianism, mutual aid isn't just an option—it's a necessity.

The Power of Cultural Strategies in the Fight for Freedom From Fear, Intimidation, Violence, Repression, and Coercion

March 03, 2025

Why Cultural Work is Essential to Defeating Authoritarianism and Building Inclusive Democracy

Authoritarianism is not just a political system—it is a culture. It thrives by reshaping narratives, controlling collective memory, and suppressing diverse voices. To resist authoritarianism effectively, we must engage in cultural strategies that counteract its influence, using art, storytelling, and performance to create a more inclusive democracy.

What Are Cultural Strategies?

Cultural strategies, as conceived of by activists such as <u>Liz Manne, Erin Potts, and Jeff Chang</u>, involve the use of cultural work to shift narratives, shape political consciousness, and mobilize communities. These strategies include:

- **Shifting dominant narratives**: Creating alternative stories that challenge authoritarian myths and highlight marginalized voices.
- **Building cultural power**: Strengthening artistic and creative communities that serve as hubs for resistance and social change.
- **Creating shared symbols of resistance**: Using visual art, music, performance, and storytelling, especially but not exclusively in a participatory ways, to build solidarity and inspire action.
- **Occupying and reclaiming public spaces**: Transforming physical and digital spaces into arenas of dissent and democratic expression.
- **Mobilizing through cultural production**: Leveraging film, literature, and digital media to amplify movement messages and engage broader audiences.
- **Challenging historical erasure**: Preserving histories of resistance through documentation, storytelling, and community archiving.

Cultural Work Shapes Collective Memory and Resilience

- **Authoritarians Rewrite History**: Dictatorships manipulate history to justify their rule and erase resistance movements.
- **Art as a Counter-Narrative**: Visual art, literature, and film preserve historical truths, ensuring that stories of resistance are not lost.
- **Documentary & Storytelling as Tools of Truth**: Authoritarian regimes rely on disinformation—storytelling humanizes resistance and centers marginalized voices.

Art and Performance Generate Emotional Connection and Mobilization

- Facts Alone Do Not Inspire Action: People act on emotion, not just logic. Poetry, film, and performance create visceral experiences that make injustice impossible to ignore.
- Music and Performance Build Solidarity: Protest music, spoken word, and theater create shared emotional experiences, deepening collective action.
- Time-Based Art as a Tool for Reflection: Installations, performance pieces, and durational works force audiences to engage deeply with complex issues, cultivating sustained resistance.

Visual Culture Can Undermine Authoritarian Symbols and Myths

- Authoritarianism Relies on Spectacle: Flags, marches, and propaganda create a culture of fear and obedience.
- Subversive Art Disrupts Political Myths: Satire, public murals, and viral digital content can mock authoritarian leaders, destabilizing their legitimacy.
- Art Reclaims Public Space: Occupying physical and digital space with dissenting visuals disrupts authoritarian dominance over media and public consciousness.

Culture Creates Alternative Spaces for Democracy

- Authoritarianism Shrinks Public Imagination: It tells people "there is no alternative." Art makes new futures feel possible.
- Grassroots Media Challenges State-Controlled Narratives: Independent film, alternative news outlets, and social media art projects bypass state propaganda and offer platforms for dissent.
- Creative Expression Helps People Reclaim Agency: Writing, performing, and creating empower individuals to see themselves as agents of change rather than passive subjects.

Eleven Examples of Effective Cultural Strategies from the U.S. and Around the World

1. <u>The Civil Rights Movement Freedom Songs (U.S.)</u> – Protest songs like <u>"We Shall Overcome"</u> built on spirituals familiar to the community and made them more politically explicit, unifying activists and reinforcing the movement's spirit as activists learned the songs and sang them together in meetings and public protests.

2. The Chicano Murals Movement (U.S.) – Public murals in the 1960s and 70s reclaimed space and asserted cultural identity against systemic oppression.

3. Thai Pro-Democracy Flash Mobs (Thailand) – Using pop culture references like the Hunger Games' three-finger salute as a symbol of resistance against authoritarian rule.

4. Chile's "No" Campaign (Chile, 1988) – A creative media campaign used humor and positivity to defeat Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship in a national referendum.

5. South African Anti-Apartheid Theatre (South Africa) – Street theater and plays by groups like the Market Theatre exposed apartheid's brutality and mobilized global solidarity.

6. Hong Kong's Lennon Walls (Hong Kong, 2019) – Public spaces filled with sticky notes carrying messages of defiance and hope during protests against China's influence.

7. Indigenous Land Back Movement (Global, Canada, U.S.) – Art, ceremonies, and storytelling used to assert Indigenous sovereignty and reclaim stolen lands.

8. Pussy Riot's Guerrilla Performances (Russia) – Feminist punk rock protests in public spaces drew international attention to political repression in Russia.

9. Black Lives Matter Street Murals (U.S.) – Massive street paintings of "Black Lives Matter" in major cities became powerful, visual declarations of resistance.

10. The Ukrainian War Effort through Street Art (Ukraine, 2022-Present) – Murals and performances across Ukraine and abroad highlighting the resilience of Ukrainian identity amid Russian aggression.

11. ACT-UP (U.S.) – The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT-UP) used direct action, die-ins, and powerful visual campaigns, including the "Silence = Death" poster, to challenge government neglect of the AIDS crisis and demand healthcare justice.

Key Takeaways: Why Cultural Strategy Must Be Central to Pro-Democracy Movements

Storytelling shifts political consciousness by personalizing oppression and making struggles relatable.

- Art disrupts authoritarian control of public narratives and creates symbols of resistance.
- Performance builds solidarity and fosters collective action by creating shared experiences.
- Alternative media platforms challenge authoritarian control of information and inspire civic engagement.
- Visual culture transforms public spaces into arenas of dissent and counteracts oppressive iconography.

How to Incorporate Cultural Work into Resistance Strategies
- Support artists and cultural workers who amplify democratic values and marginalized voices.
- Use film and storytelling as tools of education—create and share content that exposes authoritarian tactics.
- Occupy public spaces with resistance art—murals, street performance, and projections disrupt authoritarian symbolism.
- Encourage poetry and personal storytelling as forms of grassroots journalism and historical preservation.
- Leverage digital platforms to circulate counter-narratives and empower decentralized cultural resistance.

Final Thought: Culture is Not a Luxury—It is a Battlefield

We cannot defeat authoritarianism through policy and elections alone. Culture shapes the way people perceive reality, who they believe they are, and what they think is possible. If we leave culture in the hands of authoritarians, we cede the most powerful tool for shaping society. By investing in cultural work, we lay the foundation for a democratic future where all voices matter, and no one is erased.

Beyond Resistance
Building the Democracy We've Never Had
September 16, 2025

We stand at the end of an era. The familiar landmarks of liberal democracy, the institutions, norms, and assumptions that have shaped our political landscape for generations, are crumbling before our eyes. The pace of global change has outstripped the adaptive capacity of democratic systems designed for a slower, more stable world. Extreme inequality, technological disruption, climate crisis, and mass migration have exposed democracy's vulnerabilities in ways that authoritarian movements exploit with devastating effectiveness.

But this moment of crisis is also a moment of unprecedented possibility. We are not fighting to return to a democracy that never fully existed for most people. We are fighting to birth the democracy that has always been our deepest aspiration - one that finally lives up to its liberatory potential.

The False Choice of Restoration

Too often, pro democracy forces in the U.S. frame their work as defending democracy against authoritarianism, as if democracy were a finished project under attack rather than an unfinished revolution waiting to be completed. This defensive posture accepts the premise that what we had before was good enough, that our task is preservation rather than transformation.

The democracy we inherited was built with tools of exclusion, extraction, and domination. It was designed by and for white, property-owning men in a world of slavery, genocide, and the subjugation of women. Every expansion of democratic participation - from abolition to women's suffrage to civil rights - required breaking the rules of the existing system, not defending them.

June Jordan understood this deeper truth, calling upon us to struggle as the women who helped lead the South African freedom movement did who recognized that "We are the ones we've been waiting for." We cannot wait for institutions to save us or for someone else to grant us the democracy we deserve. We must create it ourselves, right now, in the midst of crisis.

The Struggle for the Future

The current authoritarian moment is not simply about Donald Trump or even American politics. It represents a global contest over who will

shape the future of human civilization. On one side stand the forces of repression: ethnic nationalism with its violent xenophobia, religious bigotry with its dreams of domination, and misogyny with its rejection of human equality. These forces offer the familiar comforts of hierarchy, the false security of "us versus them," and the seductive simplicity of authoritarian rule.

On the other side stand those of us who value freedom, fairness, compassion, mutual interdependence in the context of equity, and joy.

This is not a battle between left and right, progressive and conservative. It is a battle between two fundamentally different visions of what it means to be human, and what kind of world our children will inherit.

The Liberation Democracy We're Building

The democracy we're fighting for has never existed, but it lives in the dreams and struggles of every movement for justice throughout history. It lives in the Underground Railroad and the lunch counter sit-ins. It lives in the Stonewall riots and the farmworkers' strikes. It lives in the disability rights movement and the fight for indigenous sovereignty.

Marsha P. Johnson, who threw the first brick at Stonewall, understood that liberation cannot be partial: "History isn't something you look back at and say it was inevitable, it happens because people make decisions that are sometimes very impulsive and of the moment, but those moments are cumulative realities." Every moment of resistance, every act of courage, every choice to stand with the oppressed rather than the oppressor, builds toward the world we're creating.

From South Africa, Steve Biko taught us that "The most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed." Our first task is to free our own minds from the limitations of what we've been told is possible. Our second task is to help others do the same.

From Brazil, Paulo Freire showed us that "Education either functions as an instrument of conformity or as the practice of freedom." Every conversation we have, every relationship we build, every community we strengthen is an act of popular education - teaching ourselves and others that another world is possible.

Modeling Joy and Freedom in Real Time

The most radical thing we can do in a time of fear is to model the joy and freedom we're fighting for. People need to see what liberation looks like,

not just hear arguments about why authoritarianism is bad. They need to witness communities where mutual aid replaces charity, where decisions are made collectively, where difference is celebrated rather than feared.

As Toni Morrison wrote, "The function, the very serious function of racism is distraction." The same is true of all forms of oppression - they distract us from the beautiful, creative, generative work of building beloved community. When we create spaces of joy, art, celebration, and genuine connection, we break the spell of scarcity and fear that authoritarianism depends on.

Concrete Actions for Civil Resisters

1. **Create Prefigurative Communities**: Build the democracy you want to see in microcosm. Start with your community-based organizations and service groups, your neighborhood, your family. Practice democratic decision-making, prioritize the voices of those most impacted by injustice, and create cultures of care and accountability.
2. **Make Mutual Aid Revolutionary**: Transform charity into solidarity by building systems where people support each other not out of pity but out of recognition of our fundamental interdependence. Make these networks visible celebrations of what community can look like.
3. **Defend AND Expand**: Yes, defend existing democratic institutions from authoritarian capture. But simultaneously build alternative institutions that model the democracy we're creating. Don't just resist voter suppression, create new forms of participatory democracy that go beyond the ballot box.
4. **Center Joy and Celebration:** Organize festivals, block parties, cultural events, and celebrations that embody the values you're fighting for. Let people experience the joy of liberated community. Make resistance irresistible.
5. **Practice Revolutionary Love:** Follow the lead of those most impacted by injustice while building coalitions that cross every line of difference. Practice the radical vulnerability that builds trust across communities that have been taught to fear each other.
6. **Tell New Stories**: Create art, media, and cultural narratives that help people imagine the world we're building. Move beyond critique to vision, beyond resistance to creation.
7. **Build Long-Term Power**: Invest in the slow work of political education, leadership development, and institution-building that creates lasting change rather than just reactive mobilization.

The Democracy We Deserve

Ella Baker taught us that "Remember, we are not fighting for the freedom of the black man, but for the freedom of the human spirit." The democracy we're building is not just for Americans, or just for any one group of people. It is for the liberation of the human spirit itself - the recognition that every person has inherent dignity, that communities can govern themselves with wisdom and compassion, and that justice and joy are not luxuries but necessities.

We are not trying to execute a U-turn back to a democracy that never fully existed. We are moving forward to a democracy that has never been tried on this scale - one that is truly of, by, and for all people. One that recognizes, as the Zapatistas say, "A world where many worlds fit."

The authoritarians offer a return to an imagined past built on domination and hierarchy. We offer something far more powerful: a future built on liberation and love.

The choice is not between order and chaos, between tradition and destruction. The choice is between a world organized around fear and a world organized around love. Between a politics of scarcity and a politics of abundance. Between the false promise of authoritarian simplicity and the beautiful complexity of authentic democracy.

As James Baldwin knew, "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced." We are facing the end of an era and the birth of a new one. The question is not whether change will come - it is already here. The question is whether that change will be shaped by the forces of domination or the forces of liberation.

We have everything we need to choose liberation. We have each other. We have the wisdom of every freedom struggle that came before us. We have the courage that comes from knowing that, as Adrienne Maree Brown reminds us, "We are in a time that asks us to be ancestors."

The democracy we're building starts now, with every relationship we transform, every community we strengthen, every moment we choose love over fear. The future is not something that happens to us. It is something we create, together, with our hands and hearts and unbreakable commitment to each other's freedom.

This is our time. This is our work. This is our gift to the generations who will come after us: a world where democracy finally means what it has

always promised - a society where everyone belongs, everyone matters, and everyone is free.

The choice before us is not between democracy and authoritarianism. It is between the democracy that never was and the democracy that could be. Between a world organized around domination and a world organized around love. The future is calling us forward. Let us answer with joy.

Democracy as Infrastructure
A Call to Action for Progressive Leaders
November 01, 2025

The following is a speech I gave on October 23, 2025 to participants in the Activists Mobilizing for Power (AMP) training conference sponsored by the <u>Western States Center</u>, an organization leading the fight against white nationalism in the West.

Let me start with something we all know but rarely say out loud: We have every right to question why we should fight to save a democracy that has never fully embraced us.
You've been asked to join coalitions that want your bodies at rallies but not your voices in strategy sessions. They want your energy but not your analysis. Meanwhile, you're already fighting the daily violence of economic inequality, environmental racism, and state-sanctioned brutality.

So you're caught in a double bind: asked to join coalitions that don't really want you, to defend a system that was never designed for you, against threats that feel abstract compared to the fights you're already in.

I get it. I see you. And I'm not here to tell you those concerns are wrong.

But I want to share something striking from my work defending democracy. I spend a lot of time with business owners, entrepreneurs, tech workers— people probably to your political right. And here's what's fascinating: I don't have to convince them democracy is in jeopardy. They get it immediately.

They see democracy as infrastructure - imperfect infrastructure that nevertheless makes their work possible. They understand that rule of law, even flawed rule of law, beats rule by personal whim. That regulatory predictability, even with imperfect regulations, beats arbitrary enforcement designed to reward friends and punish enemies.

They don't need democracy as a beautiful ideal. They need it as a functional necessity. And here's the irony: The people who've benefited most from this flawed system are quickest to understand why it's worth defending. Meanwhile, those most failed by the system - you, your communities, your movements - are most skeptical about defending it.

This isn't criticism. This is strategic intelligence.

The Deeper Analysis

Let's be clear about what we're facing. The threat to democracy isn't just about election integrity, or whether or not Jimmy Kimmel gets to tell jokes about Donald Trump on late night TV. It's about the probability of consolidation of authoritarianism across all of our institutions and states; a situation that will make every struggle you care about infinitely harder.

The super-authoritarian turn we're in is an extension of the neoliberal policies many of you fought for decades - policies that deregulated business, privatized community care, and insulated elite markets from democratic accountability. Having achieved extreme wealth inequality, they now want to secure their power against an uncertain future of AI displacement, resource scarcity, and climate disasters. How? By destroying democracy itself because they see democracy as the ultimate check on concentrated power.

The forces threatening democracy aren't separate enemies. They're the same forces you've been fighting all along. Corporate power that sees accountability as an obstacle. White nationalist movements that view multiracial democracy as an existential threat. Patriarchal systems that understand democracy means the end of male dominance. Plutocrats who know genuine democracy would redistribute their wealth.

The fight against authoritarianism IS the fight for economic justice, racial equity, gender liberation, and environmental survival.

The Strategic Reality

We're not choosing between perfect democracy and imperfect democracy. We're choosing between **imperfect democracy and no democracy at all**.

And democracy is not our destination - **it's our infrastructure**.

Every organization in this room exists because of democratic infrastructure you might take for granted. Your right to organize. To protest. To file lawsuits. To run candidates. To hold this conference. To criticize government without disappearing in the night.

These aren't abstract principles; they're the practical tools that make your work possible. Under authoritarianism, these rights don't get limited. They get **criminalized**. Look around the world. In Hungary, civil society groups are labeled "foreign agents." In Russia, environmental organizers are designated "extremists." In China, labor leaders disappear. In Myanmar, democracy activists are shot in the streets.

Your organizations don't just lose funding under authoritarianism - they become illegal. Your leaders don't just face harassment - they face imprisonment. Your communities don't just lose political voice - they lose the right to exist in public space.

The Lesson of History

This tension isn't new. Every successful social justice movement has faced this choice: defend democratic space while fighting to expand it, or watch it collapse.

Labor organizers in the 1930s fought fascism abroad while fighting for workers' rights at home, not because they loved capitalism, but because fascist victory would end labor organizing entirely. The CIO didn't moderate their demands when joining anti-fascist coalitions. They used those coalitions to build power and win unprecedented gains.

Civil rights leaders in the 1960s could have said, "Why fight for a democracy that enslaved us, lynched us, excluded us?" Instead, they defended institutions while exposing their failures. Martin Luther King Jr. didn't soften his critique when speaking against Vietnam, but he understood that flawed democracy with rights was better than losing those rights entirely.

Every movement faced critics saying they were legitimizing oppressive systems. Every one had to choose: defend imperfect democracy while building something better, or let it collapse and hope something better will emerge from ashes.

The ones who chose defense plus transformation gave us just about every freedom we have.

The Mathematics of Resistance

Here's what research on democratic breakdowns tells us: When authoritarians consolidate power, institutional resistance alone has about a 7% success rate. Courts, legislators, bureaucrats, they matter but aren't enough.

But when institutional resistance combines with sustained mass civil resistance - when millions engage in organized protest, strategic strikes, coordinated noncooperation - the success rate jumps to over 50%.

South Korea 2016-2017. Sudan 2019. Ukraine's Orange Revolution. Each succeeded because electoral challenges and institutional resistance were backed by massive street mobilization.

This is why your organizing matters so much. Building mass movements for justice isn't separate from defending democracy; it's the foundation that makes democratic defense possible.

The Authoritarians' Strategy

Authoritarians understand something we sometimes forget: they're counting on our hesitancy. They've studied every successful authoritarian takeover, and they know the key is dividing the opposition.

They want us divided between those defending imperfect democracy and those demanding perfect justice. They want us arguing about whether this system deserves protection while they dismantle the framework that makes organizing possible.

Steve Bannon talks explicitly about "flooding the zone with shit," creating chaos so people give up on rational discourse. Viktor Orbán wrote the playbook on using democratic procedures to destroy democracy while keeping opposition movements fighting each other.

They know unified opposition is their greatest threat. That's why they work so hard to keep us divided. Our unity around democracy as infrastructure is their greatest threat.

Our Moment: Reluctant Guardians

We didn't choose to be the generation that has to save democracy. We wanted to be the generation that perfected it. We wanted to write new chapters of justice, not prevent the book from being burned.

But history has made us something more complex and perhaps more powerful: we are both the prophets of what democracy could become AND the mechanics keeping it running long enough to get there.

Prophetic vision without mechanical work leads to beautiful speeches over graves. Mechanical work without prophetic vision preserves systems that don't deserve preservation.

We are called to be both. Reluctant guardians with radical visions. Emergency medics who are also surgeons preparing for democracy's transformation.

The Strategic Framework: Triple Power

What does this mean practically? We fight on three fronts simultaneously:

Stop thinking of democracy as the system that failed you. Start thinking of it as the infrastructure that allows you to fight for something better.

Stop seeing democratic defense as separate from justice work. Start seeing it as the foundation that makes justice possible.

Stop letting perfect be the enemy of possible. Start using what's possible as stepping stones to transformation.

Your organizations need you to be strategic. They need you to understand that we can't build the world we want on the ashes of the only currently existing system that allows us to organize for that world.

But I'm also asking the broader pro-democracy movement: Stop treating progressives as dangerous allies who need managing. Start understanding that progressive analysis makes you stronger. Stop asking people to check their values at the door.

The Organizing Imperative

This is about organizing; building sustained, community-based power that can defend democracy today and transform it tomorrow.

Every doorknock for a defensive campaign is an opportunity for transformational politics. Every phone call to protect voting rights connects someone to ongoing organizing. Every rally to defend democracy builds relationships for justice work.

The most effective defense of democracy is organizing that builds lasting power for the communities authoritarianism targets first and hardest.

Closing: The Generational Responsibility

The ancestors of our movements faced this choice before us. They chose defense plus transformation. They chose to be both guardians and revolutionaries.

Ida B. Wells fought for voting rights while founding the NAACP. Eugene Debs ran for president while organizing railroad workers. Dorothy Day provided mutual aid while protesting war. Cesar Chavez built farmworker power while registering voters.

They didn't choose between tactics - they used each to strengthen the other. Because of their strategic thinking, you have organizations to belong to, rights to exercise, and power to build.

Now the choice is ours.

Future generations will ask: Did the progressives of 2025 choose strategic thinking over ideological purity? Did they defend democracy while transforming it? Did they understand that democracy as infrastructure was not a compromise of their values but the application of their values to this historical moment?

Did they choose to be heroes when history called?

The answer is in your hands. It starts with what you do when you leave this room today. It continues with how you organize, build coalitions, run campaigns tomorrow, next week, next month.

It continues with whether you can hold both the urgency of the defensive moment and the patience of the transformational visionary. Whether you can be both emergency responders and long-term builders.

Democracy as infrastructure. Justice as destination. Triple power as strategy. Coalition as necessity. Transformation as possibility.

This is our moment. This is our choice. This is our call.

The future is watching. The ancestors are counting on us. The communities we serve are depending on us.

And the work - the beautiful, necessary, transformational work of building the democracy we deserve - begins now.

Discussion Guide:
Part 5: Toward the Democracy We've Never Had

This discussion guide explores shifting from defensive to offensive organizing: mutual aid as political resistance, cultural strategies, and understanding democracy as the infrastructure for liberation. The goal isn't just to stop authoritarianism; it's to build an equitable, joyful society that makes authoritarianism impossible. Choose from these questions to transform your strategic orientation to activate or strengthen transformational possibility.

1. The "Pivoting to Offense" article contrasts defensive work (protests, critique, legal challenges, electoral politics alone) with offensive work (mass noncooperation, economic disruption, joy and celebration, prefigurative organizing that builds the democracy we want while fighting authoritarianism). **What shifts, and what becomes possible if your focus is withdrawing consent from harmful systems, rather than just making demands on the system?**

2. Mutual aid is not charity, but political resistance that builds autonomous networks of care, weakens state control, creates resilience against repression, neutralizes economic punishment, and provides infrastructure for sustained movements. **What would it mean to understand mutual aid networks as the "logistical backbone for resistance" rather than service provision? What mutual aid networks exist in your community?**

3. Culture is a battlefield where authoritarians reshape narratives, control memory, and suppress voices. Cultural work can also shift political consciousness, disrupt authoritarian narratives, build solidarity, and transform public spaces. **Who are the artists and cultural workers in your area that either are already engaged in pro-democracy organizing, or could be?**

4. The "Democracy as Infrastructure" speech argues that we should stop thinking of democracy as a beautiful ideal to defend and start seeing it as imperfect infrastructure that makes organizing possible - including the right to protest, file lawsuits, run candidates, hold conferences, and criticize the government without disappearing. **Under authoritarianism, these aren't just limited, they're criminalized? How do you hold both the critique of democracy's failures and recognition of its necessity?**

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If democracy is infrastructure, what are you building with that infrastructure—what's your actual destination?

5. "Beyond Resistance" argues we're not fighting to restore democracy that never fully existed for most people, but to birth democracy that has always been our aspiration—one that finally lives up to its liberatory potential. It calls for creating prefigurative communities, making mutual aid revolutionary, defending AND expanding, centering joy, practicing revolutionary love, telling new stories, and building long-term power. **How can you create microcosms of that democracy right now in your family, organization, neighborhood?**

6. The "Democracy as Infrastructure" framework proposes triple power: defensive fight, constructive fight, and offensive fight. Each front reinforces the others. **Map your organization's work onto the "Triple Power" framework. Are you doing all three, or stuck in one mode?**

7. This collection makes clear that joy and celebration are political strategy - creating magnetic alternative culture that draws people in, modeling the freedom and liberation we're fighting for, making resistance irresistible through block parties, community celebrations, art builds, festivals of resistance, cultural events that combine fun with political education. **How do you create magnetic culture that makes people want to join your movement? What does joy as resistance mean practically?**

After discussing these questions, work individually or in small groups to map an integrated offensive strategy:

- **Defensive work**
  - What are you defending right now?
  - What infrastructure must be protected?
  - What timescale: immediate threat or longer-term erosion?

- **Offensive work**
  - Where can you withdraw compliance or cooperation?
  - Who can you target for economic disruption?
  - What cultural work can you prioritize?
  - What democratic alternatives can you build?

- **Triple power integration:**
  - Defensive + Constructive: How does mutual aid enable your defensive work?
  - Constructive + Offensive: How do alternatives you're building create base for offensive campaigns?
  - Offensive + Defensive: How do electoral/policy victories protect organizing space?

- **Your Joy and Celebration Plan**
  - What would magnetic culture look like in your context?
  - What event could combine joy with political purpose in next 60 days?
  - How do you make resistance irresistible?