Session Notes ---- LCN Webinar: Organizing Under Authoritarianism

Throughout history, governments and authorities have used crisis moments to consolidate power, and COVID-19 is no different. Our session on Thursday 14th May brought together organizers from around the world to explore how to turn this threat into an opportunity to deepen our organizing and strengthen democratic institutions.

We were joined by a panel of speakers from Syria, Hungary and Nicaragua, and together in an interactive session we explored the common signs of authoritarianism that we're seeing at this moment, the opportunities to respond and resist and the sources and stories of hope can we draw on as we respond?

We enter these sessions without all the answers, but we bring our own experiences, knowledge and resources to figure this out together. This document aims at capturing this powerful content and turning these insights into a resource that we can all draw upon in our work, continue to build and share with the world. Please note --- the content below are the verbatim comments, questions or summarised points from the session chat box and group discussions.

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▶️ A video is not available for this session for security reasons. ▶️

🗣️ This is a collaborative document --- we invite you to help shape it! 🗣️

👉Add your comments/thoughts on the notes.

👉Share other examples of resources and ideas you've seen

👉Want to join our future calls? Join our mailing list or follow us on twitter for updates

Resources shared during the session

- Lots of good English summaries of Ahang campaigns (in Hungary) here: https://ahang.hu/en/blog/

- Article about Hong Kong: https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2020/05/how-hong-kong-beating-coronavirus/611524/?fbclid=IwAR1wZ0KEHYnco4WgRlVlA1imhOLijZ14tEDf-eeXJypxDKpCR_8GGGlShK8

Poem: Darwish - "Defiance"

Tighten my fetters.
Confiscate my papers and cigarettes.
Fill my mouth with dust.
Poetry is blood in the heart, salt in bread, moisture in eyes.
It is written with fingernails, with eyes, with daggers.

I shall proclaim in my detention cell, in the bathroom, in
the stable, under the lash, manacled, in the violence of chains, that a
million birds on the branches of my heart, are singing fighting eye sockets
and daggers

I will recite it in my prison cell –
in the bathroom –
in the stable –
Under the whip –
Under the chains –
In spite of my handcuffs
I have a million nightingales
On the branches of my heart
Singing the song of liberation.

Key takeaways (taken from the chat)

As summarised by @AliceFuller:

Organising under authoritarianism

All through history, authorities have used crisis moments, like COVID, to consolidate power.

Here's how we counter it:

- **Develop a shared vision**: People will generally accept the authoritarian's vision, even when it conflicts with their values, because they're scared. So make your vision better.
- **Build community:** Capitalise on the sense of unity people are feeling at the moment, by using tried-and-tested community organising techniques
- **Use tech** to your advantage. The online space created by virtue of the fact everyone is home is often safer than face-to-face methods - use it. e.g. massive online demo organised in response to Authorisation Act in Hungry
- **Activate non-state institutions** and groups people trust e.g. alliances of healthcare workers in Nicaragua (echoes here of Gene Sharp's timeless advice)
- **Tell a story** - the pandemic makes the systemic issues (socio-economic, racial, gender, health inequalities) we've been fighting for much more visible. Leverage this.
- **Remember the future**: don't become paralysed or defeatist; fight for an alternate version of the future

What did we learn today that can support our work to strengthen and rebuild democracy?

Building a shared vision:
- The importance of taking back the narrative through a shared vision. Visioning work matters!
- Having a shared vision.
- [omitted]'s reminder that we must build shared vision and hope is incredibly important
- how fear is a weapon which gets misused in lots of ways --- we must counter it

Seizing the moment to organize and build movements
- Crisis is not always bad for organizers. Crisis reveals vulnerabilities in the state that organizers can exploit
- COVID is providing us with an opportunity for bringing more people into our movements as evidence of the system's problems are becoming evident to literally millions. whether on health, education, the economic system or just the racial inequalities

Building relationships across our communities
- Personal connections
- we must contest to bring others into our movements

Adapting approaches quickly & think outside the box
- it make me realize I need to use different approach...think outside the box
- that COVID is forcing us to rethink "community" and the Us. We now have new ones and maybe more urgent or promising ones that are not geographically close

- Switch rapidly to new ways of organizing, adapted to the new situation.

Building structures
- The more we work on building structure the tougher it is for an authoritarian regime to break the movement

Joining together in solidarity with other organizers is important
- I think COVID has an interesting unifying effect among organisers in the global north and south, whereby we're talking about varying degrees of authoritarianism, and how to counter it

Focus on capacity building
- And the related comments about how front line workers, many women, have a lot power right now to do strikes, credibility within communities to mobilize and suggest changes, move from humanitarian aid to educating, awareness building, building trust to build campaigns and movements.

Audience discussion (Ideas/comments)

(from chat box)

- I am concerned about the huge crackdown on human rights defenders and civil rights organizers in India. Mass arrests using laws. So, I really want some guidance on effective ways to help release political prisoners in India and to address the autocracy of govt

- I really appreciate [omitted]'s analysis of Syria's movement and especially the importance for all movements, especially fighting oppressive regimes, to develop a shared and inclusive vision of what they're struggling for, as well as what they are against. This is very difficult to do where civil society has been undermined and fragmented over many years, but is key to the success of the movement..

- I agree - I think it is important to know what tools or tactics they would have to counter the movements (i.e. divide and conquer) or "fake news" etc and how to embed that in our strategies in our we plan to respond or how to prevent those tactics to work

- Many state governments in India are scraping labour laws to boost business. This includes the right to organise, among other critical rights.How should the trade unions protest this, as we don't have power - union density is lower than 10%

- I'm interested if in Nicaragua the fact that Ortega is downplaying COVID could be an opportunity to hold online information sessions that people could join that focus on COVID best practices as a way to build trust. What's the risk that would entail? Thinking about how to bring people into relationship now when so many are hungry for that

- It's interesting that in Hungary, Orban has consciously used the pandemic to strengthen his power. But in Nicaragua, Ortega says COVOID does not exist and minimizes its impact. Different authoritarians with separate strategies to hold power. Why has Ortega not followed the playbook of other authoritarians? Does this make him more or less vulnerable?

- great points about needing clear strategies and tactics to counter fake news and efforts to fragment and split movements by opponents. This includes building unity, building capacity of grassroots leadership for strategic planning and ensuring nonviolent discipline, and also communication strategies to build and distribute to counter fake news and create your own narratives focused on the common and shared values and vision for the future.

- From what I've heard is that since Nicaragua was already in a financial crisis prior to Covid-19, Ortega couldn't risk the further economic impact of acknowledging the virus did exist.

- Authoritarians may be glad when movements pivot to providing relief, but this is a short-term gain for them because the movements can keep organizing, building ties to people, involving them, and building the movement's legitimacy - all of this will build the foundation of the movement for the future.

- It's interesting - in Jordan I always analyzed that the government couldn't risk a healthcare crisis - cuz that could deal with a revolution - so coming in and "saving the ppl" builds credibility. Even when the government is doing a good job, they constantly have to remind everyone that the King is behind it. been an interesting dynamic between our government and the role of the Royal family

- something similar is happening in the US around immigration and closing the borders. It was a long time goal of the Trump administration and I think now is being brought in under the guise of public health. it's a real challenge

- I believe an important thing to look at is whether either strategy works in that context; denying COVID or claiming that the dictator is doing the right thing. The opportunity is in studying what narrative "conspiracy vs we have a strong competent leader" works better with our people and conversely, what mobilizing narrative works better to support building a democratic society

- our government usually resisted neighborhood organizing and now due to COVID they are pushing ppl to work together or report on each other

- I'm leading a group now fighting more aggressively for universal healthcare and the stories we get inside of the us are very similar, poor workers are still being told that nothing is happening, some continue to work while sick, many are sent home at the first sign of something wrong, without pay and without medical access

- The crisis is not agnostic to power so power is in a better position to leverage it, but at the same time influence can be organized more easily in the fluid situation that is the crisis.

- I see a boost in the credibility in science and the experience of health care providers. They can provide compelling self-us-now narrative that would be difficult to deny. Question: How is Hungry / Nicaragua / Syria connecting with the power?

- Hearing [omitted] talk about the healthcare workers reminded me of Gene Sharp's advice on organising non-state institutions and groups in 'from dictatorship to democracy'

- Great question Michelle, very interesting, especially as right-wing narratives in some places have worked to attack credibility of health workers.

- I can see how online demos would achieve the second aim Doug (build solidarity and support between activists/demonstrators) but agree on the first

- It's interesting - in Jordan the government released an app to get people to report on others who are doing public/group gatherings - i am very conflicted - are they asking us to monitor each other so they can keep control - or is it really about our safety. so its interesting to see how governments are using technology as control

- in the US, some states have created processes for employers to report workers that do not feel safe to report to work, so they can cut them off of unemployment benefits or threaten to prosecute them for unemployment fraud

- We are a species that sees patterns, even if they are not there. So these two different responses look like "2 sides of the same coin" may be; but I don't see it that way. Yes, each regime is trying to figure out how to expand its power. And they are also using misinformation. These are tactics which they used before. But they can also make mistakes that create opportunities to disrupt. It is important to understand the adversary's strategy in detail, not with general understanding of similarities. It is in the differences that we find opportunities to act.

- This is something also happening in Venezuela. For me it's time to make awareness campaigns to engage more people to our movements

- What we are doing right now is mapping allies.

- In state after state here "we" (citizens, not government) are taking loaded/unloaded and visible firearms to express their disgust with the government. At times, I have felt quite torn about following stay at home orders/mask wearing part of the crisis, the high rate of unemployment and finding or crafting a message that reaches those protestors who may or may not have been part of our movements pre-COVID19. Such a split in our "citizenry" (poor word I know) that is widening to my surprise-turning-to-horror. But this is not like what most of your are describing. I feel out of touch focusing on bridging people's ideologies and values (and "beliefs" (fake news)) here.

- Our State Health Director has gun-toters circling her home daily with her children there. I am uncertain whether there would be so many threats if these leaders were not women! Thx for comment.

- lots of zoom meetings, friends who we already kneed, friends of friends. linking to similar groups…

- The childcare crisis is also a major barrier to women's participation

- Similar in Michigan, and the targets that Trump has drawn are often women leading in the moment, stoking a set of his base that are willing to use violence threatening gestures in public demonstrations.

- Well the government is denying the covid , but the military forces are using the mask, and they have their own hospital and one of the first cases of covid then went public was a person from the army.

- There are some creative ways to organise workers who are not organised. In many workplaces, especially airports in Asia, the employers are forcing the workers to resign, one of the unions started a 'do not sign' campaign and put out a press release on their Facebook page, Instagram and also at the workplace. The press release had contact information and many unorganized workers at the airport called and said we wanted to be represented by the union

- Allies - I'm also thinking about influencers - TikTok has increased in popularity during pandemic. Millions are watching right now. My 21 year old shows me videos all the time. Influential for young generation new voters.

- It means organizing FOR childcare and with childcare workers is a dynamic strategy.

- Some unions have started crisis centres where unorganized workers are approaching for support as they are being illegally terminated and want to join a union for support

- UNCOVERED. UNCOVIDERED?

Questions we were asking:

(from the chat)

- I wonder also how the way space has been collapsed so much and so many people are working online creates a new and yet to be totally dominated "public" space in which to operate?

- My question is do you believe community organizing is possible in such an authoritarian environment or does a big scale civil resistance culture/movement has to precede first to create the right environment for organizers? And if this civil resistance is totally crushed and the public space/domain is now plagued by social distancing now, how can organizing be feasible in this environment?

- Do you think activists can create change when they live in such difficult situations in a country like Egypt or Syria? If you have to choose to be an organizer from inside or outside, what option you will choose from your own experience (I think you had practiced both experiences)

- How do they do online demonstrations?   we are having some strikes but the part of causing some chaos for the other side is lost

- Are video calls less or more of a risk than FB posts?

- I guess I'm curious why it's hard to do this work on video platforms? Not just online organizing, but face to face using online platforms. The question is whether the risks are less doing video calls now that it may be more difficult for the government to surveil online work (or maybe it's not?)

- The importance of public demonstrations is two fold: it visualizes opposition to the adversary, but it also visualizes the solidarity and support between the activists/demonstrators. I am uncertain what an online demonstration accomplishes on either of these. Can [omitted] speak to more about why this was chosen, the resources needed to pull it off, and the impact they sought to have. I wonder if the online organizing could be combined with other safe but public tactics, such as lights off campaigns, banging pots and pans in unison, etc. Are we looking for online work to replace old tactics or to reinforce existing tactics that have shown effectiveness?

- These stories of building solidarity, vision, community are inspiring. How do you assess your ability to increase the popular power, greater support, increased numbers who now share your positions and will take action to oppose the regime or their specific actions?

- What [omitted] said about the benefits of this physical isolation with everyone in their home meaning we know where to reach them. But isn't the connecting based on voluntary interest and opting in. One element of organizing (door to door or

neighbor to unknown neighbor) means we are reaching out to those who are not yet opting in. How do you reach out to those who are not already involved and connected in this time?