

Carr Center Covid-19 Discussion Series

Reimagining Social Movements and Civil Resistance during the Global Pandemic

Carr Center faculty and fellows outline how social movements and civil resistance can take shape in a time of social distancing, and how these efforts are more important than ever in holding governments accountable.



Erica Chenoweth

BERTHOLD BEITZ PROFESSOR
IN HUMAN RIGHTS AND
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS



Matthew Smith

CARR CENTER FELLOW,
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER OF
FORTIFY RIGHTS



Salil Shetty

CARR CENTER SENIOR FELLOW

What are the effects of COVID-19 on social movements and civil resistance?

CHENOWETH – COVID-19 arrived during a time of unprecedented levels of mass mobilization around the world. The effects on ongoing movements are mixed for sure. Because of the need for physical distancing, movements in Hong Kong, Chile, Lebanon, Algeria, the U.S., and elsewhere have had to stop relying on protests, rallies, demonstrations, and other concentrated mass actions as their primary mode of resistance. But that doesn't mean that people power has faded into the background. All across the world, people have been using car caravans, *cacerolazos* (collectively banging pots and pans inside the home), walkouts from workplaces with health and safety concerns, and development of alternative institutions such as coordinated mask-sewing, community mutual aid pods, and crowdsourced emergency funds. And, of course, many movements are shifting their activities online, with digital rallies, teach-ins, and information-sharing. Some movements are likely using this period to regroup, build relationships, and develop strategies for the next phase of their campaigns. Such moments can often help to build capacity and resilience for the longer

term. I also think that the sudden and profound economic effects of large-scale stay-at-home actions may be showing people how disruptive and powerful mass noncooperation (such as stay-at-home strikes) can be. Over at the Crowd Counting Consortium, we are collecting data on the many methods that groups and movements are using right now—and our efforts so far suggest that people power is still flourishing, albeit at a somewhat lower intensity than before.

SMITH – We work in the international human rights movement to strengthen local and collective responses to violations, and we’re already seeing how COVID-19 is posing serious threats to human rights, specifically in Myanmar, Thailand, and Bangladesh. There are more than half a million Rohingya Muslims in their native Myanmar and more than a million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, all survivors of an ongoing genocide. Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh and internment camps in Myanmar are particularly at grave risk of COVID-19 transmission, and both governments are denying Rohingya access to internet and mobile communications. The restrictions predate COVID-19 and affect other communities living in the same areas as Rohingya, including Rakhine and Chin in Myanmar. The restrictions prevent access to vital public health guidance, relevant information hotlines, reporting services for suspected infections, and general communications within the community. This could have deadly consequences. Citing COVID-19, the Government of Myanmar also recently ordered telecommunication companies to shut down hundreds of websites, including media outlets involved in reporting on human rights violations. Under international law, the right to freedom of expression can be restricted, but only in limited and exceptional circumstances. Restrictions must be 1) provided by law, 2) necessary to achieve a legitimate aim, and 3) proportionate and necessary to the interest to be protected. The current shutdown of the internet and specific websites fails to meet this test. With monitors silenced and global attention diverted, human rights are under threat in Myanmar and violations continue unabated, so there’s work to do.

SHETTY – The number of countries where basic freedoms have been severely rolled back in a matter of days with the onset of COVID-19 is too many to count. From Orbán in Hungary assuming emergency powers that take away almost all civil and political rights, to Duterte’s shoot-at-sight call in the Philippines, to police excesses in Kenya, the immediate impact and long term consequences of these actions are worrisome. Widespread human rights violations off-line are coupled with a massive overreach towards a surveillance state on-line. Following the sudden announcement of lockdown by PM Modi, the haunting picture of hundreds of thousands (if not millions) of poor low-caste migrant workers, women, men and children carrying all their belongings on their heads, and walking barefoot from India’s mega cities back to their villages for hundreds of kilometers, made the headlines across the world. In just two days, more Indians died from starvation and exhaustion from the largest reverse migration in India’s history than from the COVID-19 virus. It is a very difficult time to raise these issues in the public domain as public support, particularly from those in power, which is low even in the best of times for human rights, is non-existent at times of crisis such as this. Human rights defenders in India find ourselves in a very challenging situation.

The number of countries where basic freedoms have been severely rolled back in a matter of days with the onset of COVID-19 is too many to count.

How are movements responding to the effects of the pandemic and to government policies?

CHENOWETH – It may be important to recognize that public pressure itself was crucial in understanding why some executives decided to take aggressive measures to limit the spread of the virus. Hong Kong’s leadership finally capitulated to public pressure to restrict the border crossing with mainland China after a strike and walkout by medical workers. In fact, the actions of movements and communities have probably saved countless lives. Perhaps the most immediate and life-saving impacts have been those where movements have begun to coordinate and distribute urgently needed resources to people in need. We have seen pop-up food banks, the offering up of vacant housing, crowdsourced hardship funds, online free medical consultation clinics, mass donations of surgical masks, gloves, gowns, and sanitizer, and mask-sewing, for instance. Many movements have also continued their work online, using the opportunity to continue to inform and educate the population about their claims, and to amplify those claims. For instance, many movements in the U.S. have responded to the moment by highlighting how racism and economic inequality explain why African Americans, undocumented people, and the poor are much more vulnerable to the virus than others. Groups mobilizing for prison abolition have renewed and intensified calls to end mass incarceration on urgent public health and humanitarian grounds. Others have highlighted the urgent needs of people facing domestic violence at home. Grassroots information-sharing about domestic violence in France led the government to develop 20 pop-up kiosks within grocery stores, where victims of domestic violence can safely go to seek help and resources. Of course, some people have responded to the pandemic and government policies with defiance. Some communities have refused to accept public health guidance and are actively gathering in groups and protesting against these measures. And far-right and white supremacist groups are reportedly exploiting the increase in reliance on digital social networks to ramp-up recruiting to their causes as well. So the long-term impacts are impossible to predict.

SMITH – When violations and mass atrocities take place, it’s the job of human rights monitors to get as close as possible to the problem to document the truth and collect evidence, including eyewitness and survivor testimonies and photographic and video evidence. That’s more difficult now, but human rights monitors are also accustomed to documenting violations in less than ideal conditions, and our team and partners are rising to the new challenge. We’re mobilizing to ensure human rights are protected amid the crisis. Just this week, our team at Fortify Rights worked with Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights to develop an open letter to Bangladesh’s Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, imploring her government to lift restrictions on access to mobile internet and communications in the refugee camps and to cease constructing fences designed to confine Rohingya. The letter was signed by 50 international and

Public pressure itself was crucial in understanding why some executives decided to take aggressive measures to limit the spread of the virus.

When violations and mass atrocities take place, it’s the job of human rights monitors to get as close as possible to the problem to document the truth and collect evidence.

Rohingya-led organizations, including the human rights clinic at Harvard Law School. Later this month, we're also planning to publish the results of a joint year-long investigation conducted with Athan, a Myanmar-based group working to protect freedom of expression. The investigation examines the arbitrary arrest, detention, and torture of university students. This report is highly relevant to the COVID-19 crisis given Myanmar's more than 600 political prisoners detained in substandard conditions. If introduced, COVID-19 would ravage Myanmar's prison system, putting at risk not only political prisoners but members of the general prison population as well. Our report aims to provide a point of departure for engaging Myanmar authorities on what needs to change.

SHETTY – First, activists and their immediate family are themselves at risk from this deadly virus, so they have to focus on self-care not as a privilege but as a responsibility. Second, in a public health emergency like this, everybody understands that there are trade offs and some temporary suspension of our cherished freedoms of movement, association and assembly is fully understandable. But in far too many places, the balance has gone completely in favor of states usurping power and diminishing people's rights far beyond what is essential to deal with the COVID-19 crisis. So many governments are using this opportunity to delegitimize human rights concerns and the needs of marginalized communities, whether migrants, daily wage earners, or refugees. There is now a large campaign in sections of the Indian media and public that link the spread of COVID-19 in India to Islam, thereby advancing the core agenda of the Hindu fundamentalist regime in power. Even the slightest criticism of the government or call for government accountability is seen as anti-national! The government of India wanted the Supreme Court to issue instructions to the media to only use government-approved reports on COVID-19. Instead of rejecting this outright, the Court laid the blame on the media for spreading fake news—the net effect of this is the Indian media, which is already servile to the regime, will become even more so. Third, activists are highlighting the reality that social distancing and lockdowns are not really an option for the poor, unless there are massive social safety nets put in place in advance. Activists are trying to shine a light on the appalling conditions facing refugees in Europe and the Rohingya camps in Bangladesh, as well as people in overcrowded prisons. Indonesia's decision to release almost 10,000 prisoners is one good positive outcome. Finally, many activist groups are having to provide direct humanitarian support to the most marginalized. There are great examples of Taiwanese citizens' groups playing a constructive role in fighting COVID-19. An important reality is that activist organizations that have paid staff are struggling to pay salaries as the crisis has led to reduced available funding.

So many governments are using this opportunity to delegitimize human rights concerns and the needs of marginalized communities, whether migrants, daily wage earners, or refugees.

How can resistance efforts best ensure government and corporate accountability during this time?

CHENOWETH – Knowledge is power. High-quality information and communication are essential in ensuring government and corporate accountability, and many movements and organizations are developing ways to aggregate information and make it as accessible as possible to the public. For instance, Local mutual aid pods have developed here in Massachusetts to highlight urgent needs and provide for crowdsourced and volunteer rapid response. United We Dream has distributed resources regarding updated guidance for DACA recipients seeking renewal, free clinics that are safe for undocumented people, ways to communicate about COVID-19 to family members, and information about the urgent needs of undocumented people. Journalists and voting rights groups are highlighting troubling developments, such as concerns about the recent primary in Wisconsin, to make sure that the public stays aware of ongoing threats to democracy. Although these may seem like digital interventions that have little short-term impact, in the long term these activities will undoubtedly strengthen civil society and highlight the urgent things that need to change in our society. Many movements are building their bases, sharpening their messaging, and planning strategies for what's next. And these groups will have high capacity for impact and transformation once the virus is behind us and the restrictions subside.

SMITH – It's critical that human rights defenders continue to document and expose human rights violations and continue to engage people in power. That can't stop. We're now preparing guidance for human rights defenders to stay effective in the current context, including best practices for collecting reliable and credible eyewitness and survivor testimony over the phone. Mental health is also crucial, now as ever. The human rights movement won't be effective if we aren't healthy, and now is the time to reach out and support each other. Our team stays in regular communication with each other, our partners, and allies through various platforms, but as a team, we've ramped up our use of video conferencing, using the space to discuss the work, but also to debrief on COVID-19 and provide for dedicated team social time. We're also encouraging the philanthropic community not to steer away from human rights at such a critical time. Some donors will be tempted to divert all available funds to health interventions, and while such inclinations are understandable, it would be counterproductive. Public health and human rights go hand-in-hand and failing to advance a comprehensive response that includes support for human rights is likely to lengthen and exacerbate the consequences of the crisis.

It's critical that human rights defenders continue to document and expose human rights violations and continue to engage people in power. That can't stop.

SHETTY – Going by some of the most serious crises the world has faced in the past—whether health related crises like Ebola or HIV-AIDS, or famines like the great Bengal famine of 1943—all the watchdogs of a democracy including independent media, judiciary, and social movements must be more active. This is the fundamental thesis of Amartya Sen, that the famine in India could have been much worse had it not been for a relatively independent press. It is obvious that the primary focus in the COVID-19 crisis must be to support the state, the private sector and civil society to comprehensively respond to the crisis in terms of the public health emergency. But it would be folly to suggest that this is not the time to press for this response to be done in a transparent and accountable manner, respecting human rights (even if in a slightly diminished form). Governments, corporations, philanthropists and the general public are rightly putting resources behind addressing the crisis. But there is little time and money going to ensure that these resources are spent in the most efficient and effective way. In the case of India, Prime Minister Modi has asked for worldwide contributions for a new initiative called PM Cares Fund. There is no explanation on why the existing PM’s Relief Fund is not being used for COVID-19, or on how this fund will be managed and accounted for. Serious questions have been raised on the production of testing kits and other essential equipment, why certain companies have been chosen and why the production is taking so long. Holding governments and corporations accountable to ensure delivery of all critical items is crucial for successfully fighting the virus. It is clear that lockdowns are a blunt instrument that governments can announce to be seen as taking decisive action. But the implications of this for the poor are very serious, and it is absolutely crucial that states are called out on creating support systems for those who are negatively affected in advance and not after the lockdown is put into effect. We are at a juncture in human history when many of the largest and most influential countries in the world have unethical, narcissistic, authoritarian and incompetent leaders who have been elected through a process of othering minorities, refugees, and peddling lies about past national glory. So when a truly global challenge like COVID-19 came along, we had a highly fragmented response when we needed a global one. I suspect they are the same countries that have made a mess in handling this crisis. The case for holding these leaders to account is even greater now than ever before. It is unfortunate that just like we don’t have a global response from the side of governments, we have even less of a global or even regional response from social movements and civic actors. There will be much to reflect on once this crisis is behind us.

Disclaimer: Please note some of Erica Chenoweth's comments are adapted from an op-ed that appears in The Guardian, "The global pandemic has spawned new forms of activism – and they're flourishing."