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# Effective crisis governance

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# Effective crisis governance

## **Abstract**

When a crisis develops, what sort of governance—what sort of system for running society—is most resilient? Does centralized control give the best prospect of survival? Or is something more decentralized needed?

Possible political sources of crisis include military invasion, internal coups, political paralysis, major corruption, and revolutionary change. Wars in the past century triggered changes in governance in countries such as Germany, Japan, and Cambodia. Coups affected dozens of countries, from Chile to Greece. Revolutions transformed Russia, China, and Iran.

At least as significant are changes enabled by belief systems. The spread of neoliberalism—based on belief in unfettered markets—has transformed political systems, especially in the United States, the United Kingdom, and other English-speaking countries. Belief in political freedoms and fair elections has underpinned challenges to repressive regimes in Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine, and elsewhere. Belief in racial equality was behind the successful struggle against apartheid in South Africa.

## **Keywords**

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# Effective crisis governance

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## Brian Martin

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When a crisis develops, what sort of governance - what sort of system for running society - is most resilient? Does centralized control give the best prospect of survival? Or is something more decentralized needed?[\[1\]](#)

Possible political sources of crisis include military invasion, internal coups, political paralysis, major corruption, and revolutionary change. Wars in the past century triggered changes in governance in countries such as Germany, Japan, and Cambodia. Coups affected dozens of countries, from Chile to Greece. Revolutions transformed Russia, China, and Iran.

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Environmental impacts intersect with political and economic systems and crises in various ways. Disasters with environmental impacts can affect politics, as when the devastation from the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami encouraged the signing of a peace agreement in Indonesia's war-torn province of Aceh. Governments can influence responses to crises with environmental impacts, as when the Burmese government

hindered international relief efforts following the devastating 2008 cyclone Nargis. Some types of political and economic systems are more prone to contributing to environmental problems, and some systems are better at responding to emerging or full-blown environmental crises. [\[2\]](#)

War, which can be considered a type of political crisis, is devastating to humans and the environment and in fact can be a source of environmental crisis. Massive refugee movements - themselves a source of political crisis - can be triggered by war and political repression but also by environmental disasters. Global warming has the potential of creating huge numbers of "environmental migrants." [\[3\]](#)

Resilience is the capacity of a system to respond effectively to assaults like these on its functioning or very existence. Resilience in the case of communication technology includes the capacity to keep functioning despite breakdowns or attack: the Internet was originally designed, remember, to maintain communication in the face of nuclear attack. The resilience of political systems includes both the survival and the maintenance of formal decisionmaking processes and of associated systems - such as transport, food, and communication - for maintaining the survival and social functioning of the population. [\[4\]](#)

When considering responses to crises, it is useful to distinguish two contrasting sorts of governance: stiff and flexible. Stiff governance can be well suited for a particular task, often for a particular threat. The classic example is a dictatorship with a command economy, ideally designed for warfare: central direction can be used to mobilize resources for defense or attack. Such a system can have great difficulty dealing with other sorts of threats, however. A command economy cannot innovate easily because the initiative of the populace is suppressed, which means that retooling for a different sort of threat - economic competition, for instance, or a shortage of liquid fuels - is more difficult.

Flexible governance, in contrast, is based on the capacity to adapt, improvise, and change directions. It may not be ideally designed for any specific threat, but it is able to deal credibly with a variety of threats. In general, systems based on participation, high skill levels, robust debate, and mutual respect are more likely to be flexible.

Command systems might seem to have a greater capacity to respond to a new type of threat because the people in command can simply direct people and resources to deal with it. But these systems have several inherent difficulties in actually doing this. Because relatively few people have an input into decisionmaking, there is lower capacity to recognize novel threats and to innovate against them. Subjects - those who are expected to follow orders - are typically less than enthusiastic in obeying. Finally, change can

be threatening to those with power and privilege, so maintaining the relations of power can become more important than making sure the system survives.

An example of stiff governance is China in the 1950s, with a command economy driven by political ideology. The Great Leap Forward, launched in 1957, was an attempt to accelerate economic development. But the result was a vast famine that killed tens of millions of people and caused massive destruction of property and damage to the environment. The political system was incapable of responding to the catastrophe it created. Had there been a more flexible, open system in China, with independent media, things might have turned out differently. Countries with a flexible governance system are far less susceptible to famine because leaders are under greater pressure to respond to emerging crises. In essence, there is a feedback mechanism to stimulate political responses to a crisis, preventing cover-up and making inaction untenable. [\[5\]](#)

Centralized rule thus can be a threat in itself as well as an obstacle to responding to other sorts of threats. Fiji was a thriving multicultural democracy when, in 1987, there were two military coups. The result was mobilization of racism, emigration of skilled professionals, decline in the economy, general cultural stagnation, and ongoing political instability. [\[6\]](#)

## **Lessons from Civil Resistance**

The history of civil resistance against repressive regimes reveals features that raise the odds of governance systems responding effectively to technological or political threats. The power of a mobilized citizenry is dramatically revealed in popular challenges to autocratic governments through demonstrations, strikes, boycotts, sit-ins, and other forms of protest, but without physical violence. This method of struggle is called nonviolent action, civil resistance, or "people power." In country after country, repressive rulers have succumbed to people power, for example in the Philippines in 1986, Eastern Europe in 1989, and Egypt in 2011. In these dramatic episodes, large numbers of people protested by using rallies, strikes, boycotts, and a host of other techniques, usually with little or no violence by the protesters. [\[7\]](#)

Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, in a path-breaking study of people-power movements between 1900 and 2006, showed that regime-change and anti-occupation nonviolent movements are more likely to be successful than armed movements in achieving their goals when facing similarly repressive opponents. (See Table XX-1.) They also found that success is more likely when large numbers of people are mobilized and when protesters are innovative tactically and strategically. When more people are actively involved, there is a greater capacity to try out creative

ideas for resistance, which are needed to counter new repressive moves by the government. Greater participation needs to be accompanied by an ethos of inclusiveness, so that diverse groups can support the common cause. Groups with skills in many areas - including communication, organization, finance, languages, persuasion, and psychology - are valuable to help the movement operate effectively and survive attacks. If, for example, the movement depends on a single sector, such as students, it is easier for the government to repress or co-opt it. Wider participation provides a greater capacity for learning. This also provides a better basis for a stable, free society if the movement is successful in toppling a ruler.[\[8\]](#)

**Table 25-1. Outcomes of Violent and Nonviolent Campaigns Aimed at Regime Change, Anti-occupation, or Secession, 1900-2006**

Outcome	Regime Change		Anti-occupation		Secession	
	Violent	Nonviolent	Violent	Nonviolent	Violent	Nonviolent
	(111 campaigns)	(81 campaigns)	(59 campaigns)	(17 campaigns)	(41 campaigns)	(4 campaigns)
	(percent)					
Success	27	59	36	35	10	0
Limited success	12	24	10	41	22	0
Failure	61	17	54	24	68	100

Source: Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 73.

People power can be used to resist coups, as happened in Germany in 1920, Algeria in 1961, and the Soviet Union in 1991. In each case, the key was the willingness of large numbers of people to take action - without using violence. In contrast, armed resistance to coups easily degenerates into civil war, which is a different sort of crisis, and a highly damaging one.[\[9\]](#)

## Flexible Governance

Flexible governance means that there are methods for making and implementing decisions affecting entire communities in ways that enable rapid adaptation to new situations. This form of governance virtually requires flexible technological systems, which typically are modular, adaptable, and low cost.

In the energy sector, the best example of a rigid, inflexible

technology is nuclear power, with its high capital cost, long lead times for construction, large unit sizes, and potential for causing environmental catastrophe through reactor accidents, terrorist attacks, or the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Because of its scale and potential risk, nuclear power requires special security measures, which in turn limit the possibility for citizen participation. Introduction of a "plutonium economy" based on the nuclear fuel cycle would drastically limit flexibility in both energy systems and governance. [\[10\]](#)

Small-scale renewable energy systems are better matched to flexible governance. Community-level solar and wind systems are relatively low cost, quick to construct, and small in scale, with only a small potential for environmental risk: for example, terrorists are unlikely to attack them. These features mean that communities are less locked in to the technology and, just as important, that corporate and government commitments to the system are less entrenched. [\[11\]](#)

Most technologies are intermediate in scale between nuclear power and a solar hot water heater, but the same sort of analysis applies: technologies with lower unit costs and lower potential risks to health and the environment are usually also more amenable to citizen control. In short, flexible technological systems are well suited to flexible governance.

The experience of people power against repression provides a template for the sort of governance most likely to be effective in crises. There are four key features.

- *Participation of significant numbers of people.* Significant participation is essential for rapidly responding to crises. People's commitment comes from being involved in decisionmaking and feeling part of the solution. Genuine participation is greatest when power is shared. Governance with extensive participation goes under various names, including participatory democracy, self-management, workers' control, and neighborhood power. [\[12\]](#)
- *Resources, including food, transport, and especially communication.* Resources, including material and technological resources, need to be available and ready. A society needs to have the capacity to deal with future contingencies rather than putting all its resources into one development path.
- *Openness, tolerance, and inclusion, with involvement of many different sectors of the population.* Openness, tolerance, and inclusion are necessary to be able to mobilize the entire society to meet the challenge. When significant groups are opposed to action, this can paralyze efforts. The governance form most suited to inclusion is consensus, sometimes called unitary democracy, in contrast to representative government, which can be called adversary democracy. But just as electoral systems require

innovation and modification to address problems such as voting fraud, consensus systems require experience, testing, and innovation to address problems such as entrenched resistance to a near-unanimous agreement. There is now considerable experience with consensus-building processes. [\[13\]](#)

- *Learning skills for struggle and developing strategic acumen.* Skills and strategic acumen are needed to be effective in responding to threats intelligently rather than in an instinctive, unreflective way. Strategic insight is most likely to flourish in a form of governance that gives considerable autonomy to smaller units, while enabling communication between them so that insights can be shared, tested, and applied.

These four features are mutually supportive. Widespread participation is necessary for collective change or response, but it needs to be coordinated, hence the need for communication infrastructure and skills. Strategy can be more adaptable when there is openness to participation by a wide diversity of individuals with different perspectives and recognition that their perspectives and ideas may be worthwhile.

Openness, tolerance, and inclusion include forging links with sectors of the population often seen to be part of the problem. In a military coup, soldiers are at the heart of the threat. People-power resistance requires winning over some of the soldiers, weakening their resolve or convincing them to join the opposition. Armed resistance is counterproductive for this purpose when it stimulates unity within the regime, as often occurs. By analogy, in dealing with other sorts of threats, tactics need to be chosen that win over some people normally seen as being on the "other side," whether corporate elites, government personnel, or security forces. [\[14\]](#)

Adding these elements together, the form of governance most promising for responding to threats will have significant citizen participation in decisionmaking, will allocate ample resources for communication and contingencies, will include diverse groups in the population, and will allow decentralized yet coordinated action.

## **Transforming Governance**

Rather than try to describe this flexible form of governance - which can quickly degenerate into arguments about preferred models - it is useful to look instead at methods for moving toward these four elements. In other words, rather than fixating on the desirable end state, which might not be knowable anyway, it is worth turning each of the elements of flexible governance into methods for transforming governance.

***Significant Participation.*** Initiatives to foster participation can be taken at all levels. Within local groups - including formal associations from sports clubs to churches and informal groups - leaders and members can foster greater participation. Local governments can introduce various forms of citizen participation. Companies can promote worker participation.

One of the most promising initiatives is the movement for "deliberative democracy," which includes experiments in direct decisionmaking by citizens on important policy issues. An example is inviting a randomly selected group of 12 to 25 citizens to address a policy issue over a period of several days, reading materials, hearing from experts and partisans, and developing recommendations, under the guidance of neutral facilitators. Called planning cells or citizens juries, hundreds of such exercises have been held in various countries, including Australia, Britain, Germany and the United States. Many such deliberative-democracy initiatives are taking place below the radar of mainstream politics and the mass media, so few people realize how much of this activity is occurring. [\[15\]](#)

In crises, opportunities can exist for dramatically increased participation. Historically, there are numerous examples of popular participation in crisis situations, such as in Paris in 1871, Russia in 1917, Spain in the late 1930s, and France in 1968 . These revolutions of popular control were all crushed by the state, but they do show the possibility for citizens to reorganize decisionmaking at short notice. [\[16\]](#)

In contrast, after the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991 there was a rapid transition to predatory capitalism involving massive corruption: popular mobilization was restricted to resisting a coup rather than creating a participatory alternative. This suggests the importance of local initiatives that build the foundation for a genuinely participatory alternative. [\[17\]](#)

In Argentina following the 1999 economic collapse and the freezing of bank assets in December 2001, in a surge of local initiatives workers took over failed businesses and communities made decisions in neighborhood assemblies. The Argentine initiatives have succeeded more than some previous ones, perhaps because there was less of an attempt to take over the state and more emphasis on creating a living alternative. [\[18\]](#)

Environmental movements can contribute to transforming governance through the way they operate. When movements are made up of many local groups that foster participation - for example, through consensus decisionmaking - and are not dominated by central offices and paid staff, they are ideally poised to react quickly and creatively to existing and new crises. They also provide a model of flexible governance.

***Resources for Struggle.*** Promoting the development of resources for any struggle is an ongoing process in which many groups are involved. The movement for appropriate technology - typically small-scale, low-cost, locally produced, and locally managed technology for energy, agriculture, transport, and other sectors - is a model for building resources that support resilient governance. Communities using appropriate technology are better able to survive in the face of economic or physical-system collapse: they can rely on their own resources without excessive dependence on imports or specialist skills. [\[19\]](#)

The Transition Towns movement, motivated by preparation for a looming shortage of cheap liquid fuels and the impacts of climate change, combines local participation in planning with the promotion of community resilience, including local production of food, energy, and housing. In this model, resources for struggle are developed as part of the struggle itself. [\[20\]](#)

In the communication sector, the key is the ability to maintain communication in a crisis. The technology for network communication is becoming ever more developed with the Internet, Web 2.0, and social media. These provide powerful tools for rapidly and flexibly responding to emergencies, and when people gain practice in coordinating responses, this has relevance for both political and environmental crises.

Working against this ability are governments and corporations that seek to limit communication freedom, for example through censorship, surveillance, and controls over innovation in the guise of intellectual property. If governments can shut down or restrict the Internet for political purposes - has happened in Egypt in 2011, among other places - and use digital surveillance techniques to track dissidents, the ability and willingness of citizens to coordinate against threats, whether political or environmental, will be reduced. The struggle for free communication can be considered an essential part of the struggle for more flexible governance. [\[21\]](#)

***Openness, Tolerance, and Inclusion.*** Movements that polarize society, turning some groups into enemies, contribute to stiff governance. U.S. foreign and domestic policies have done this. Foreign military interventions such as in Afghanistan and Iraq, with civilian deaths as "collateral damage," create enmity and enemies and then, when foreign groups retaliate, become justifications for further interventions. The domestic response to 9/11, which involved labeling terrorists as enemies to be destroyed, did little to include a range of groups in a struggle against the roots of terrorism. In this context, efforts to promote tolerance and inclusion - nationally and internationally - are important in moving toward flexible governance. [\[22\]](#)

One of the biggest challenges ahead is growing economic

inequality, leading to disenfranchisement of all but the wealthy. Responding to economic, resource, or political crises will be much more difficult in societies divided into haves and have-nots. This suggests that movements for greater economic equality can, as a side effect, help build resilience. The Occupy Movement has put the issue of inequality on the popular and political agenda, but it remains to be seen if this can slow or reverse the continuing increase in inequality stimulated by corporate globalization.

Pervasive corruption is a major obstacle to good governance. One of the most powerful tools against corruption is nonviolent action; some popular challenges to repressive regimes, such as in Egypt in 2011, have been stimulated by opposition to high-level corruption. Political and economic systems that permit fair participation by a wide range of groups rather than siphoning spoils to the ruling elite are more likely to lead to prosperity. Inclusion thus is a key to greater commitment in addressing social problems. [\[23\]](#)

***Learning Skills for Struggle and Developing Strategic Acumen.*** Numerous initiatives and movements around the world foster greater skills for satisfying human needs, from agriculture to software development. A prime example is the open source movement, building software and other products that draw on contributions from numerous volunteers. Another example is the ever-increasing information and tools for learning available on the Internet, enabling learning outside of institutions. Community renewable energy projects foster learning of practical skills; the Danish community wind-power movement in the 1970s did this while sparking development of what is now a major industry. Also relevant are self-help groups - for example, addressing particular diseases or experiences ranging from breast cancer to having a family member in prison. There are a growing number of activist handbooks and activist training programs. [\[24\]](#)

As more and more people increase their education (formal and informal) and engage in civic initiatives (face-to-face or online), skills and strategic flexibility increase. Especially relevant for this are initiatives to give experience in governance, such as participatory budgeting, pioneered in cities in Brazil. In a typical process of participatory budgeting, multiple citizen assemblies discuss priorities, and then a participatory budget council, with representatives from the assemblies, deliberates on priorities, negotiating between the assemblies and the city administration. [\[25\]](#)

## **In a Crisis**

International governance is particularly unsuited for dealing with crises. The United Nations might give the appearance of having a centralized response capability, but in reality it is the tool of

powerful governments that have their own agendas. There is little citizen participation and little capacity for skill development. The result is a form of symbolic politics that gives only the illusion of authority and response capacity. [\[26\]](#)

In Rwanda in 1994, for example, when mass killings commenced, western governments pulled out their citizens, thereby removing sources of information on and witnesses of human rights violations. The United Nations Security Council dithered and then withdrew most U.N. peacekeepers. In this case, international governments utterly failed to avert or confront a genocide in which over half a million people were killed. [\[27\]](#)

Rapidly developing crises are obvious and hence are more likely to stimulate responses. Far more challenging are slow-moving crises, which escape attention but can cause just as much damage. An example is the oil spill in Guadalupe Dunes, California, which released as much oil as in the famous 1989 Exxon Valdez spill but which is virtually unknown. Because it happened more slowly, over decades, people in the region accommodated the Guadalupe Dunes oil releases, psychologically and socially. [\[28\]](#)

Climate change is the most prominent slow-moving crisis. As in the case of war and genocide, many governments and international bodies have provided only symbolic gestures. By far the most effective response has come from grassroots groups and local governments, indicating the importance of participation in dealing with environmental crises.

## **Moving toward Flexible Governance**

Governance is often seen as a comprehensive package: an entire system, operating according to a consistent set of principles, whether it be dictatorship, representative government, or a modern-day plutocracy in which the rich rule via captive politicians. Any such pure system of governance would be suited for one set of conditions but be vulnerable to sudden changes. However, actual systems in the world today are mixed. The United States, for example, could be considered a combination of representative government, plutocracy, a security state, and pockets of participatory democracy ranging from cooperatives to the free software movement. Governance in practice contains rigidities, capacities, and possibilities.

In the face of threats and crises - political, economic, and resource-based - the most promising sort of governance is flexible, able to draw on widespread participation and an abundance of human and material resources. The inclusion of different groups provides a greater diversity of knowledge and experience for meeting challenges. Whether or not there is an ideal system with all these characteristics, it is possible to move in the direction of

flexible governance by taking initiatives that support participation, resources for struggle, inclusion, and skills development.

In responding to environmental and resource crises, activists usually focus primarily on the immediate issues - trying to stop logging, for example, or the burning of fossil fuels and other damaging activities. To maximize long-term effectiveness, it is valuable to complement these actions with efforts to transform governance, as otherwise the same problems will recur. Ideally, responses to environmental problems should themselves incorporate the elements of flexible governance, so that current actions can help create the sort of institutions that are more capable of dealing with problems and preventing them in the first place.

## Notes

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