

Pillars of Power

Summary Definition: Power stems not just from a ruler's ability to use force, but from the consent and cooperation of the ruled, which can be voluntarily and nonviolently withdrawn by identifying, targeting and undermining the ruler's "pillars of support" — the institutions and organizations that sustain its power.

Origins: Gandhi, Gene Sharp, Robert Helvey

Conventional wisdom tells us that power resides in the hands of those at the top, and that when push comes to shove, "power grows out of the barrel of a gun," as Mao famously said. If so, then the only way to defeat a violent opponent is through the use of even greater violence.

At the root of all nonviolent action, however, is a different understanding of the nature of power — one that flips this conventional wisdom on its head. This understanding posits that power is ultimately dependent on the cooperation and obedience of large numbers of people acting through the institutions that constitute the state. These are its pillars of support.

Some of these pillars, such as the military, the police and the courts, are coercive in nature, compelling obedience through force or the threat thereof, while other pillars, like the media, education system and religious institutions, support the system through their influence over culture and popular opinion. Hence, the power of even the most charismatic or ruthless leader is contingent upon the support of key institutions, themselves vulnerable to popular action or withdrawal of consent from the general population.

Once people decide they no longer accept the status quo and begin to resist, the balance of power shifts. For example, when millions of Americans participated in the successful five-year national boycott of grapes led by Cesar Chavez to improve the pay and workers conditions of exploited farm workers; when tens of thousands of activists effectively shut down the World Trade Organization gathering in Seattle in 1999 by blocking the streets and entrances to the convention center; when thousands of U.S. soldiers refuse to deploy or redeploy to the wars in Iraq or Afghanistan, the power of the powerful is constrained, and can, in extreme situations, disintegrate entirely.

For activists, the key takeaway lesson of the pillars of support concept is to identify a ruling target's pillars of support, determine which can be won over and how, and then set about working to win over, or at least neutralize, those pillars of support, so that the foundation that sustains the target begins to crumble.

Power ultimately rests not in the grip of presidents, generals and billionaires, but in the hands of millions of ordinary people who keep society running smoothly on a day-to-day basis, and who can shut it down should they so choose. This is the meaning of the slogan people power. One of the principle reasons that so many injustices persist is not that the powerful can simply do whatever they want with impunity, but because most people are ignorant of the power they can wield by withdrawing their consent.

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