



Power, Violence and Civic Space

*"...politics is no longer to the **same boundaries** as before, and is **no longer tied solely to state actors and institutions**, the result being that additional players, new roles, new resources, unfamiliar rules and new contradictions and conflicts appear on the scene. **In the old game, each playing piece made one move only. This is no longer true of the new nameless game for power and domination.**"¹*

In order to understand and respond to the crackdown against activists and civic space it is important to understand power and violence. Violence and the threat of violence are a strategy to maintain social control and the interests of those in power. Both power and violence are always changing and take direct and indirect, visible and invisible forms in both public and private arenas.

Types of Violence²

- **Structural:** Systemic, embedded exclusion, impoverishment, and invisibility. (Galtung)
- **Institutional:** Legal and policy restrictions on access to: justice, funding, registration, operations, communication, ICT's and targeted policing, controls and surveillance.
- **Direct:** Physical threats, attacks, and intimidation from both state/ non-state actors including repression, threats, and presence of police, military, political and religious extremists sanctioning and inciting attacks, and criminal networks/ gangs.
- **Cultural:** Refers to the ideologies that underpin, normalize, and legitimize *direct* and *structural* violence including through religious beliefs. (Pearce).
- **Symbolic:** Unconscious everyday cultural/social domination considered legitimate, where people are complicit in their own domination—gender, race, etc. (Bourdieu and Wacquant)

Power - Intersecting arenas and dimensions³

Power is often seen as monolithic, a win-lose relationship or a zero-sum game, where some have all the power and wield it over others as a means of domination and control. In fact, power is relational and dynamic depending on contexts and purpose. Power *over* is used to gain and maintain control over decision-making, resources, and who and what matters. The complexity of this kind of power can be understood if we look at three particular interacting and overlapping forms or faces of power, each with specific impacts and expressions:

¹ Ulrich Beck, 2005 (cited by John Gaventa, Institute of Development Studies Working Paper #327)

² Rosemary McGee with Jesús Alfonso Flórez Lopez, Institute of Development Studies, Working Paper 474 Power, "Violence, Citizenship and Agency: A Columbian Case Study"

³ VeneKlasen, L. and Miller, V. (2002) *A New Weave of Power, People & Politics: The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation*, Practical Action Publishing. Raji Hunjan and Jethro Pettit (2011), *Power: A practical guide to power analysis for social change*, Carnegie UK Trust. Miller, V., L. VeneKlasen, M Reilly, and C. Clark (2006) *Making Change Happen 3: Concepts for revisioning Power for Justice, Equality and Peace*, Washington DC: Just Associates. https://justassociates.org/sites/justassociates.org/files/mch3_2011_final_0.pdf.

- **Visible/Formal:** State and formal political and state power—the laws, rules, authorities, institutions, policies and structures decision-making and enforcing the rules. Many social change strategies, focus only on these visible forms of power, yet other dimensions of power that are exercised in less obvious ways may play a large role in how and whether change happens.
- **Shadow/Hidden Power:** Organized interests that work to influence and control state power and the political agenda, including who participates and who benefits in decision-making. Often operating behind the scenes, these actors and interests work to exclude and delegitimize the concerns of less powerful groups, dominate the political narrative and use indirect or direct threats and violence to create fear and maintain power.
- **Invisible Power:** The power of beliefs, ideology, social norms and culture to shape people’s worldview, sense of self, values, and acceptance of what is “normal” can be the most insidious because it is internalized. Cultural, religious and political actors also manipulate beliefs and narratives to legitimize certain ideas, behaviors, and delegitimize, and even demonize, others.

Actors operating with formal and hidden power use invisible power to bolster their own power.

Challenging and Transforming Power

To effectively respond to these different manifestations of power, we need our own multi-dimensional change strategies and forms of transformative power.

Influencing Visible: strategies include lobbying, advocacy, policy development, accountability efforts, reforming institutions, creating new protection mechanisms, court cases, evidence-based research.

Challenging Shadow/Hidden: Mass-based mobilizations to expose and challenge shadow interests; boycotts, campaigns, protests and other “outside” strategies to pressure formal power.

Changing Invisible: Analyze and question dominant norms, biases and ideology; challenge narratives, and create contrasting narratives to inspire new thinking and solutions. Deal with internalized fear and resignation (self-care, community, cultural resistance, collective analysis).

Building Transformative Power is about cultivating our **power within** – confidence, dignity, inner strength – and our **power with** – the collective power we have together with others. With this foundation we realize we have **power to** act and make change in our lives. We can envision the alternatives, practices and solutions for which we strive and build the **power for** this transformation.