Defending Democracy: A Feminist Blueprint

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We are facing an election unlike any other — one that will effectively serve as a referendum on authoritarianism versus democracy in the US.

We need to do more than hold on to hope. We need to anticipate and be ready for whatever comes next. To do so, we can learn from feminist-led pro-democracy movements around the world. Despite being targeted by authoritarian regimes, these leaders have harnessed their power through organizing and resistance.

We must center feminist movements and leaders as key to pro-democracy organizing — and not only because women’s rights are an essential prerequisite of any real democracy. It’s because the lessons we learn from feminist movements may be the key to defending our democracy.

Commit to nonviolence

President Trump has made it clear that he will not promise a peaceful transfer of power. There are legitimate concerns that Trump may tamper with accurate election results, such as throwing out mail-in ballots or claiming an early election victory. And he has emboldened an armed, white supremacist base, heightening the chance of right-wing extremist violence during and after the elections.

We must be ready to respond to these threats with urgent non-violent action. Research shows that nonviolent campaigns succeed almost twice as often as violent campaigns. Meanwhile, women and feminists have long known that they can more effectively organize and unify people through nonviolent action. In fact, up to 70% of nonviolent movements between 2010 and 2014 included the significant presence of women.
In Sudan, where a popular uprising successfully ousted a three decades-long military regime, women’s leadership in the protests kept them peaceful even in the face of violent tactics, lending more credibility to the movement. For instance, following a violent crackdown by a paramilitary group in Khartoum’s central square, protestors regrouped and creatively shifted tactics. They remained non-violent by calling for a massive general strike, bringing the city to a standstill. "Women are leading the protests because they are demanding their stolen rights. They went out [onto the streets] in order to regain their dignity as human beings, and they went out resisting violence, racism, discrimination and exploitation. They went out to demand social justice, and a state based on the rule of law." - Jena, member of the Sudanese Students Association

We can heed advice from Syrian activists like our partner, Maria Al-Abdeh, who shared this caution with us. The peaceful Syrian uprising for rights and democracy was twisted into a civil war by an authoritarian regime eager for a reason to retaliate against their citizens.

"As soon as peaceful protesters took up arms, the regime found an excuse to bombard us, detain us, murder us, and wipe out our cities and villages... We cannot take up arms against a powerful and ruthless regime; we’d be playing the regime's game and we would never be able to win at that. Our power is that we are a mass protest, and our ability to stay peaceful and united. Our goal was never to avenge; it was to build a free and fair society, and violence could never be the road to that."

Be inclusive and embrace collective leadership

"Do your work with love, not hate or anger... We need everyone from all walks of life to be part of this movement." - Aisha Mansour, MADRE Partner, Palestine

We need inclusive organizing that centers the leadership of oppressed peoples, for example, Black feminists who have protected their communities from racist, authoritarian attacks — and have fought for generations for the unrealized dream of true democracy. The Black freedom struggle, after all, goes beyond protecting the rights of one oppressed group; it's
ultimately an engine of democratization to transform our societies.

What’s more, it will take mass mobilization to rally in defense of democracy. To do so, we need strategies that allow people to look at a movement and see space for themselves. These inclusive approaches can galvanize even more people to action, resulting in larger, more unified and more powerful movements.

When movements are led from the bottom-up, not only are more people empowered to join in, it’s also more difficult for state forces to weaken them by targeting and discrediting its most prominent figureheads.

In Colombia, demonstrations began in November 2019 against corruption, inequality, and the right-wing government’s failure to implement the peace accord. These protests were all the more powerful because they were inclusive, with the participation of women, students, Indigenous and Afro-Colombian leaders — who called for democracy and peace, opposing the killings of human rights defenders.

In Iraq, people took to the streets in late 2019 calling for an end to the corrupt, sectarian brand of politics shaped by the 2003 US invasion. The decentralized protests, which succeeded in forcing the Prime Minister’s resignation, resurged this October to demand free and fair elections. Groups like the Organization for Women’s Freedom in Iraq (OWFI) have been a constant presence in Baghdad’s main protest square, where they set up tents to welcome and educate new arrivals to the movement, create spaces for women’s leadership, and offer support to protestors — like food, baking soda to counter tear gas, and safe transport to and from protests.

Build resilience for the long haul

After the November election, we may face a period of uncertainty, unrest, and contestation. We need to hold steady, take care of each other, and be ready to act.

Feminist organizers worldwide often lead resilient, long-lasting movements that can withstand challenges and keep up the pressure for change. That capacity is strengthened by their roots in their communities, but also through transnational solidarity to learn, exchange, and build collective power. Protests and support from abroad can also be vital in buttressing domestic protests and social change movements.
Belarusian protests — featuring significant women’s leadership — learned and borrowed tactics from other pro-democracy movements, such as the use of social media, solidarity chains, and collective leadership. Belarusians in the diaspora continue to organize demonstrations abroad, alongside supporters, in solidarity with the movement.

In Bolivia, one year of sustained, powerful grassroots and Indigenous-led organizing recently led to victory. After President Evo Morales was deposed last year in a coup, people issued a resounding repudiation of the far-right government and call for restoration of democracy by electing a candidate from the left Movement for Socialism (MAS) party. With core leadership by Indigenous women, activists engaged in continued social movement mobilization that pushed for the election to be held, even after it was twice-delayed. With resilience, we can reclaim democracy.

**What you can do**

We can be ready to act, drawing from the key resistance tactics of feminist movements across the world.

- Share this resource with five people — or more — from your community, and commit to defending democracy together.
- Get ready and practice for nonviolent protest, including how to prepare for direct action, stay safe in the streets, and de-escalate right-wing intimidation tactics. Join upcoming trainings on nonviolent action from Count Every Vote and the DC Peace Team, as well as from this list of nonviolent direct action training resources.
- Create a ‘Hold the Line’ team, learning from this step-by-step handbook on how to prepare for attempts to subvert the election results.
- Take a course about non-violent resistance globally.
- Build connections with grassroots feminist activists globally, and support for their vital human rights and pro-democracy organizing.

Together we can push back on authoritarianism and create a more just democracy, here in the US and globally.