Which characteristics distinguish successful movements for social change from unsuccessful ones?

If asked to picture a successful social movement, many of us would likely have the same vision. The dominant narrative of social movements in history would have us conjure up images of public marches, demonstrations and speeches. The faces of Martin Luther King Jr, Betty Friedan and Emmeline Pankhurst - leading figures who successfully mobilised their communities to achieve sweeping change - would dominate these impressions.

According to Encyclopedia Britannica, movements for social change encompass any 'loosely organised but sustained campaign in support of a social goal, typically either the implementation or the prevention of a change in society's structure or values' (Turner et al, 2023). Despite this broad definition, academic discourse has established an incredibly narrow set of characteristics to determine which social movements will succeed and which will fail. Whilst well-known social movements in the West seem to suggest a common pattern of features that define their success, this essay will explore a number of social movements in the Global South in order to: firstly, argue that the benchmark for the 'success' of a social movement cannot be tied to legislative change, especially within undemocratic states; and secondly, suggest that it is impossible to determine a singular set of 'successful' characteristics when nations have different sociopolitical structures within which to act.

From the 1960s, Western social movement theories began to achieve discursive dominance as sociology researchers analysed the patterns underpinning successful movements for social change. Of these, the main tenets that will be referred to in this essay are: McAdam's political opportunity theory, referring to a movement's ability to exploit vulnerabilities in the existing political system; McCarthy and Zald's resource mobilisation theory, which posits the presence and effective use of resources such as 'formally structured movement organisations' (Ford, 2013), donors and communication networks as central to success; and Tilly's espousal of 'contentious repertoires of performances such as associations, public meetings… or street demonstrations' (Tilly, 2004). In turn, the success of a movement has been traditionally defined by its ability to 'change legislatures in favour of reforms the contenders deem necessary' (Bayat, 2016).

Such theories are supported by some of the most well-known Western social movements. The Civil Rights Movement, for example, employed extensive resource mobilisation through strong social and communication networks as well as the creation of a 'social movement industry' composed of a coalition of groups like the NAACP, WPC and MIA. Through this, it achieved significant success in the passing of landmark rights acts in the 1960s (Shultziner, 2013). The second-wave feminist movement, whilst dependent on resource mobilisation, also saw its success and public legitimacy considerably bolstered by political opportunity, evidenced in the establishment of the President's Commission on the Status of Women by President Kennedy in 1961 (Anand, 2018).

However, the success of such movements does not mean that their key characteristics can be applied to non-Western nations to achieve similarly favourable outcomes of 'success'. The global community is not a homogenous entity, and individual nations have heterogeneous histories, cultures, economies and sociopolitical structures. Authoritarian or semi-democratic regimes led by unelected autocrats or military rulers significantly limit political opportunity. In turn, the high level of visibility attributed to the kinds of demonstration and public display characterised by 'contentious repertoires of performance' would allow governments to readily identify and target

social movement groups, compromising the longevity of the movement. Thus, as historian Francesca Polletta suggests, the hegemony of Western modes of thinking leads to the emergence of 'awkward movements in the Global South… whose composition, goals, or tactics make them difficult to study or theorise' (Polletta, 2006).

One such movement is the LGBTQ+ movement in South Africa during apartheid government. Traditionally, the successful Western counterparts of this human rights movement have opted to 'come out… [evolving] in the direction of public visibility in order to succeed' (Chabot and Duyvendak, 2002). This is evident in the 1969 Stonewall riots, or the subsequent annual pride parades held worldwide. However, in South Africa, the apartheid government's complete repression of social movements from the 1960s to the mid-1990s led to the retreat of LGBTQ+ activist groups underground. Risking incarceration if they publicly resurfaced, they shifted to more covert forms of visibility: setting up safe spaces and support groups in rural areas, and offering discreet counselling services, treatment and education to individuals living with HIV (Reid, 2013). As this movement did not achieve the model of formal legislative change embodied by its Western counterpart, by Western theory, it would be considered somewhat subpar in political consciousness and maturity; in other words, unsuccessful.

However, whilst the South African movement did not directly lead to the decriminalisation of same-sex relationships or practices, through education, treatment and support, it enhanced the quality of life of marginalised individuals, enacting enough consistent and compelling change to ensure the political momentum of its cause. The flexible and adaptive survival strategies devised by the movement steered away from unwanted government attention or confrontation whilst simultaneously protecting the welfare of individual constituents. Thus, whilst the covert, underground mechanisms of the South African LGBTQ+ movement did not conform to the standards of social mobilisation theory tied to more politically open Western nations, they provide evidence that movements have demonstrated flexibility and adaptability in their approach to activism in order to achieve non-traditional benchmarks of success.

Similarly, the Rondas Campesina Movement of rural Peru in the 1980s offers a new framework for theorising 'success.' In response to historical discontent with the local justice system's corruption and inability to effectively curb theft, campesinos (peasant farmers) began to form 'ronda' patrol groups. This loosely organised social movement began with small acts of vigilantism, and eventually expanded to the establishment of an informal community government in which elected ronda committees continued patrols, offered access to free dispute resolution cases, and took charge of small public works projects (Escobar and Alvarez, 1992). Again, by Western theory, this social movement achieved little change. Campesino communities today still face high levels of poverty, only a few campesinos have broken into elected office, and ronda systems never completely replaced city-based magistrates and the local judiciary.

However, the rondas almost entirely eliminated the issue of stock-rustling to increase local incomes and food security, reduced the number of unsettled disputes by about ninety percent in ten years, and facilitated the construction of medical posts and irrigation channels in their villages (Escobar and Alvarez, 1992). Whilst overarching legislative structures were not altered and benefits were limited to individual villages, the achievements of the Ronda movement in giving campesinos greater power and autonomy over their local communities, especially where provincial authorities failed, should be acknowledged as highly successful - particularly when considering that attempts to adhere to Western patterns of activism by '[changing] overarching structures… would likely lead to repression by local authorities' (Scott, 1985), and thus failure of the movement as a whole.

In addition to social movements of the Global South establishing unconventional forms of 'success', several have also demonstrated that the heavily Eurocentric characteristics used to determine success are incompatible with the political structures of repressive regimes. Hence, it is impossible to construct one homogenous set of features. This is perhaps most clearly exemplified in the Iranian feminist movement of the late 1990s. During the early 1980s, in response to the Khomeini government's overturning of several liberal laws for women's rights, activism was carried out much in the same way as traditional Western feminist movements - through public demonstrations and street marches. However, this only led to the regime's brutal repression of all women's groups and a resultant decade of demoralisation and limited formal mobilisation. By the late 1980s, Iranian women had shifted their strategy to what Asef Bayat coined the phenomenon of 'non-movements' incomparable to Western modes of activism; the 'collective endeavours… and shared practices… of millions of noncollective actors… in the main squares, backstreets, courthouses, or communities' (Bayat, 2009). These non-movements involved mundane daily practices that escaped persecution in public environments, like playing sports, music, and neglecting to wear the hijab properly through 'loose hijab' or 'bad-hijabi' practices. Additionally, citizens participated in actions as simple as complaining in workplaces, bus stops and ration lines, or women's magazines like Farzaneh and Zanan running occasional articles on women's education and feminist interpretations of Islam.

Even more recently, non-movements have stepped in where Western models of activism in Iran have largely failed. For example, the One Million Signature Campaign to repeal discriminatory laws against women faced declining national support due to constant government repression, 'internal conflict among campaign activists' (Butt, 2020), and increasing state brutality against campaigners, as seen in the violent putdown of the June 2006 demonstrations. As a result, the campaign underwent a major shift in strategy, opting to advocate its agenda under the radar by transferring the campaign's major messaging to social media, and having signature seekers 'fan out in ones and twos, to small towns and villages… shops, beauty salons, offices' as opposed to openly seeking signatures in public. Returning to Polletta's aforementioned sentiment, this social movement would certainly be considered 'awkward' by Western theorists. It lacked clear, known leaders or organisations, was dispersed and murky in its strategy and theoretical framework, and made little to no disruption to daily life. However, despite the lack of public and 'contentious repertoires' employed by the movement, shifting societal attitudes accelerated by these incremental encroaching actions have led to considerable inroads. These include the introduction of maternity leave and the provision of women's sports facilities and nurseries for the children of working women by the government (Bayat, 2009). Further, the movement's avoidance of direct conflict with the state and its reliance instead on a loose social network of supporters allowed it to better resonate with ordinary citizens, many of whom wouldn't otherwise have participated in public demonstrations or organisations for fear of persecution.

Thus, this 'non-movement' survived and adapted where traditional, Western patterns of mobilisation for women's rights did not. That is, it survived and adapted in a nation where 'political opportunity' and the chance to engage in organised and open opposition were severely limited due to a repressive regime structure. The movement's ability to galvanise collective public sentiment and achieve some degree of legislative change through fragmented and seemingly insignificant, but insistently pervasive, daily activities unequivocally demonstrates that the success of social movements across the world has not been intrinsically linked to resource mobilisation or contentious repertoires. That is to say, the success of social movements for change is not strictly contingent on the ability to work within one's existing political system rather than outside of it.

As clearly demonstrated in these examples, neither the goals for change nor the modes of operation that have led many Western social movements to success cannot always be applied to the rest of the world. Movements across vastly different political, social and cultural environments have resulted in the need to shape new paradigms of mobilisation that are separate from what has been established by Western social movement theory and history. In communities where political opportunity and access to extensive resources are limited, we must realise that movements with unconventional characteristics, such as informality and covertness, are often necessary - and additionally, that a movement's achievement of incremental social improvements as opposed to sweeping legislative change cannot deem it a 'failure.'

In this way, a more productive way to theorise social movements would perhaps be to firstly acknowledge and embrace their innate heterogeneity, rather than chasing down a single - and erroneous - set of characteristics denoting an exclusionary model of 'success'. Only then can we decentre Western narratives and incorporate the diverse historical patterns of mobilisation in the Global South into academic discourse. Only then can we truly understand the multifarious nature of social movements around the world, ensuring a future where all forms of social change and development are not just understood, but encouraged and propelled.

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