

How jokes and silence speak volumes in protesting dictators, oppression

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Before 1999 when their country finally returned to civil rule, people in Nigeria faced odds similar to those often encountered by citizens in societies living under oppressive regimes. Among other obstacles, they had little to no means to ventilate their grievances.

They couldn't seek redress in the courts because the court system was compromised, limiting the opportunity for obtaining justice. To some degree, there was [press freedom](#), but not the sort that journalists could take for granted. Thus, many media outlets did the prudent thing and desisted from publishing stories that were critical of the military. For their part, ordinary [people](#) couldn't openly protest for fear of being thrown in jail or, even worse still, shot.

Did the certainty of political punishment for protest mean that people then stopped protesting?

"Certainly not," said Ebenezer Obadare, a University of Kansas professor of sociology who researches civil society and civic transformation in Africa. "You still do it. The question then becomes, how do you do it?"

Obadare, in his new book "Humor, Silence, and Civil Society in Nigeria," details how Nigerian advocates for freedom in the 1990s innovated arts of subtle resistance similar to the tactics of Eastern European dissidents under Communist dictatorship, namely the ability to tell jokes and use silence in a way that spoke volumes.

"People want to be free, and people would do anything to keep hope alive, to pursue freedom. And they do it in all kinds of socially mediated and culturally embedded ways," he said.

Obadare worked in the 1990s as a reporter and researcher for TEMPO news magazine in Lagos, Nigeria, and the publication was often at odds with the military regime. From day to day, staff members never knew if the government would seize and lock the building's doors, preventing them from working that day, and they became known for their adept use of operating as mobile journalists in Nigeria.

Following a fortuitous encounter with a foreign journalist who was curious about the magazine's push for freedom, Obadare was introduced to the idea of civil society. He was surprised to discover later the success of the idea measured by the amount of influence nongovernmental organizations, or NGOs, would have within the country.

His book is the account of a personal journey to argue otherwise.

"All in all, I'd like readers to come away with the key idea that civil society is a far more complicated, and far more nuanced, idea than the NGO-centric object of funders' affection; that it is more accurately understood as the total dimension of independent life outside the state and that its forms and practices are always subject to, if not determined by, the strictures of rule," Obadare said. "It's important to know that in Eastern Europe where the idea's global renaissance was kick-started, the dissidents couldn't legally form associations, let alone NGOs."

Instead, and in order to address the problem of not being able to associate publicly, dissidents and activists resorted to forms of interpersonal contact that the government typically couldn't police, and the use of communication that typically is seen as nonthreatening: humor and silence.

"Humor is a means of political communication in that sense," Obadare said. "Granted, you couldn't write a joke in the newspaper, because it would get censored, it's almost impossible to stop someone from talking to his or her neighbor. That's how these ideas spread. Today, with the expansion of the Internet, including social media channels, such as Facebook and Twitter, humor can quite literally go viral. These virtual spaces are not easily accessible to political censorship. That doesn't mean the state doesn't try, or sometimes succeed."

Silence also served as a powerful tool both in Eastern Europe and

Nigeria as activists who were very eloquent and outspoken made a point to draw attention to their silence.

"That makes you understand why it had the kind of influence that it had," Obadare said. "The Nigerian opposition leader who elected not to speak in opposition didn't just stay quiet, he announced almost ostentatiously that he was going to keep quiet."

Humor and silence have come into play in other situations across the world and throughout history as forms of protest against oppressive regimes, and Obadare hopes these examples might inspire people living today in oppressive states or perhaps for citizens protesting institutional injustices in more free societies.

"These and similiar strategies have a way of keeping hope alive and maintaining voice, even in situations where the state would rather shut down the voice. The effectiveness is not seen in the sense that you joke about a dictator this morning and then he is removed in the evening. No, it hardly ever happens that way," Obadare said. "But just like the drip, drip of water on a rock, the rock doesn't erode in one day. However, over time then you see the effect of that drip, drip. That's the way most unconventional strategies work."

Provided by University of Kansas

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