



Focus #2: Prevention

Preventive action is potentially the most efficient form of conflict management, because relatively low-cost approaches can avert the outbreak or resumption of violence. Prevention often aims to address causes of rebellion identified in Issue Brief #1, such as political exclusion and inadequate crosscutting cleavages, thereby reducing grievance, identity salience, and mobilization capacity for violence. Some common preventive strategies include democracy promotion, economic sanctions, and military intervention. However, these also risk fueling violence, as detailed below and in Issue Brief #6. By contrast, other prevention strategies are lower cost, less risky, and potentially more effective. One option is to support nonviolent resistance as the alternative to rebellion. Another is to promote crosscutting cleavages – via inter-ethnic professional associations, joint peace committees to address rumors of ethnic violence, and electoral rules that incentivize multi-ethnic political campaigns.

Key Points

- Preventive action can sometimes avert violence, but some strategies – including democratization, economic sanctions, and military intervention – may exacerbate conflict, so additional options should be explored.
- Less risky strategies include promoting nonviolent resistance movements as the alternative to rebellion, and punishing states that attack nonviolent protesters.
- Another prudent option is to support inter-ethnic peace committees, which jointly investigate and adjudicate alleged ethnic crimes, to reduce vigilante retaliation and riots.

Timely Intervention

Early action is crucial for prevention, but it may be difficult to know where precisely to focus resources, because statistical early-warning models are beset by false positives (Rudolf, 2016). For example, one of the most prominent scholarly forecasting tools claims to have predicted in retrospect 18 of 21 country-years of instability in a decade, a remarkable 86-percent accuracy (Goldstone, et al., 2010). Upon closer inspection, however, the model actually predicted 251 country-years of instability to find those 18, so its false positive rate was 93-percent (Figure 1). If such a model were used to guide future prevention efforts, the vast majority of resources could be wasted. This underscores the potential comparative value of *qualitative* conflict analysis, based on deeper exploration of a country's actors, history, fragility, and resiliencies – especially if integrated with an understanding of the causal mechanisms of both violent conflict and mitigation efforts.

Figure 1. Early-Warning Models and False Positives

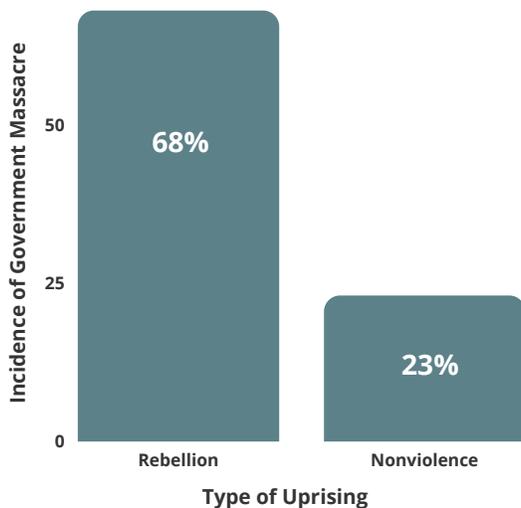
Country Years of Instability, 1995-2004				
		Actual		Accuracy
		Yes	No	
Predicted	Yes	18	233	7% (18/251)
	No	3	992	

Preventive action can be either structural or acute. Structural prevention is typically longer-term and may include promoting economic growth or reforming a country's political institutions - but these also pose significant risks. For example, democratization is statistically correlated with increased incidence of civil war (Mansfield and Snyder, 1995), and economic liberalization often creates grievance that can fuel violence (Paris, 2001). Acute preventive action is typically a response to crisis. Tactics may include issuing deterrent threats against a state or its domestic rebels. More coercive forms of acute prevention, including sanctions and military intervention, raise larger risks and should be weighed against safer alternatives.

Nonviolent Resistance

Nonviolent resistance has at least two favorable attributes: it typically does not provoke large-scale retaliatory state violence, and it sometimes can achieve political change that redresses grievance. For both the international community and local populations, therefore, nonviolence may be preferable to rebellion, which is much more likely to spur massacres (Figure 2). Although nonviolent resistance also entails risk, it succeeds more often than commonly believed (Schock, 2005). At least 116 nonviolent campaigns have achieved regime change, secession, or self-determination over the past four decades alone (Chenoweth and Shay, 2020). Chenoweth (2020) argues that nonviolent movements are more likely than rebellions to succeed because they engage broad public participation and thereby encourage defections from empathetic regime officials. Popovic (2020) identifies four key tactics for success of these movements: making specific demands, forging a broad coalition, targeting key pillars of the regime including security forces, and scrupulously avoiding violence. However, in practice, such movements often contain elements of at least “unarmed violence,” which may not always be counter-productive (Anisin, 2020).

Figure 2. Nonviolence is Less Likely to Provoke Massacres



Source: Perkoski and Chenoweth (2018), for years 1955 - 2013.

Note: Massacre means the government killed at least 1,000 noncombatants in response to the uprising.

Documented nonviolent uprisings have increased in recent years, especially 2019. However, their average efficacy has decreased, apparently because organizational strategy has weakened and regimes have learned how to counter them (Cody, 2007; Caryl, 2011; Sochua, 2014). Recent movements tend to employ less confrontational approaches such as public gatherings, rather than challenging regime stability via general strikes, sit-ins, sabotage, or mass civil disobedience. Their growing reliance on social media also has increased vulnerability to state surveillance and disruption (Chenoweth, 2020). Foreign policy can help such movements by training protest leaders, imposing sanctions on states that harm nonviolent protesters, and aiding victims (Ackerman and Merriman, 2019). Promotion of nonviolent resistance does not always succeed but has relatively low cost and risk, and thus is a prudent tool of preventive conflict management.

Mitigating Rumors

Riots may be triggered by rumors of inter-ethnic crimes, so a key prevention tactic is to counter misinformation and disinformation. Examining India from 1950 to 1995, Varshney (2001) discovered that rumors were less likely to spur riots in cities where Muslims and Hindus interacted regularly. Such interaction was either informal among families - mitigating the mutual demonization that can sustain rumors - or formal in professional associations like unions, creating economic incentives for inter-group cooperation. This often gave rise to local inter-ethnic “peace committees,” which investigated rumors, such as a Hindu killing a Muslim. If such a rumor were disproved, the Muslim members reassured their community that no crime had occurred. But if it were confirmed, the Hindu members punished the offender themselves, via *in-group policing*, so the Muslim community felt justice had been served and did not pursue vigilante retribution.

In the West, too, riots are inflamed by false information, facilitated by social media. For example, near Paris in 2019, rumors spread on Facebook, Snapchat, and Twitter that ethnic Roma kidnappers were stealing children and trafficking their organs. Because there was little interaction with this ostracized community, the rumors were not quashed, and 19 Parisians were arrested for organizing and perpetrating revenge attacks. Local police belatedly dispelled the rumors on social media as “fake news” (Breedon, 2019).

Although foreign assistance cannot forge inter-ethnic civil society overnight, it can create mechanisms analogous to peace committees. As detailed in Issue Brief #7, an international NGO has established text-based services for local residents to submit rumors to an inter-ethnic team, which either dispels them or confirms them after warning officials to prepare for potential backlash. This approach has been employed to mitigate violence in countries such as South Sudan and could be replicated elsewhere, providing another low-cost, low-risk approach to effective prevention of violence.