The Marketing of Rebellion: Insurgents, Media and International Activism

Book Review by Shahbaz Israr Khan


Who shall earn support, the savviest or the neediest? Most probably the savviest! I am not talking about corporate sector support, where the Darwinian norms rule, but the support of global civil society. Isn’t it astonishing? Most of us would like to consider the opposite to be true, that civil society support goes to the neediest not the savviest. Imagine a movement in great need, unable to draft proposals or communicate in international languages, unable to operate a website, with a profile that does not match the profile of a donor agency, and so on. Will it be supported by the civil society? Probably not. Why?

Effective causes, movements and insurgencies need resources, media projection, national and transnational support to challenge their opposition. The harsh reality is that the global civil societies have limited resources and choose to support the movements that are best suited to their own goals, objectives, and agendas, and have the potential to win their cause. In this process, a strict cost to benefit analysis of movements is done and only a handful movements are finally supported. In these ‘Darwinian Markets’, movements have to best prepare themselves according to the international demands and criteria and in doing so they need to market themselves aggressively, effectively and efficiently in order to gain major transnational backing by civil society and Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs).

Clifford Bob’s book, The Marketing of Rebellion: Insurgents, Media and International Activism, accounts several factors and strategies required by movements and insurgencies for gaining media attention and international support in contemporary world politics. Bob systematically compares two recent movements that won major support and NGOs backing: Nigeria’s Ogoni ethnic group and Mexico’s Zapatistas rebels. Both of these movements became global causes while other similar movements remained isolated and obscure. Through in-depth analysis, the author highlights two broad marketing strategies that made these movements superior and more receptive in the international community including: i) raising NGO awareness through targeted lobbying and diffuse consciousness-raising (primary using the media) and ii) framing of movements to match NGO’s goals, culture, tactics, ethics, and organizational needs.

In the first case of Nigeria’s Ogoni ethnic group, the Movement for the Survival of the Ogani People (MOSOP) had a influential leader who had forceful command over English, broad understanding of the NGO and media scene and experience in advertising, television and journalism: Ken Saro-Wiwa. In the beginning, the movement failed to attract transnational support because of a failure to match themselves to Key NGO attributes, interests, and requirements, and an inability to grab the media attention. Learning from mistakes, the movement reframed its grievances and began lobbying specific NGOs. MOSOP adopted an environmental frame by playing the ‘Shell Card’ – highlighting the social and environmental impact of the Shell Company. This aligned the movement with the global dimensions of environment and indigenous rights, and thus attracted the support of NGOs and the media. The oppression of the government against...
minorities further attracted human rights organizations to back the movement. When we compare MOSOP to other movements, such as the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC), the importance of a non-violent strategy as a means of attracting NGO and civil society support also becomes clear.

In the second case, the Mexico Zapatista rebellion, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) made itself known to the world through diffuse consciousness-raising (primary using the media). In 1994, 2500 lightly armed Zapatista soldiers captured the city of San Cristobal de las Casas, and the Zapatistas proclaimed themselves to be the product of a 500 year struggle by Mexico’s poor and dispossessed. The Zapatistas developed printed and electronic materials, launched a website, and developed close contacts with the journalists of major periodicals such as the New York Times. Significantly, Marcos played a figurehead role in the promotion of the movement by his writings; his interesting and convincing style of communication eventually made him an ‘international icon of revolt’.

Like MOSOP, EZLN also changed its strategy according to international market demands, shunning military attacks in favour of armed non-violence and transforming their initially socialist orientation to indigenous rights. Moreover, they also opposed NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement) and Neoliberalism in order to boost the movement. In contrast, Bob argues, the EPR (Popular Revolutionary Army) in Mexico was unable to score significant support either inside or outside the country, primarily due to their inflexible policies, inability to attract the press, and retention of violent strategies.

To this end, Bob makes five arguments: i) international support by global civil society or Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) is neither easy nor automatic, but is instead competitive and uncertain; ii) the development and retention of support are best conceived of, not as philanthropic gestures, but as exchanges based on the relative powers of each party to the transaction; iii) competition for NGO intervention occurs in a context of economic, political, and organizational inequality that systematically advantages some over others; iv) despite these structural biases, the choices of insurgents (how they market themselves) matter; and v) because of these market dynamics, the effect of assistance is more ambiguous than is often acknowledged.

To expand on the latter argument, Bob demonstrates that although framing a movement according to international standards has its benefits, in most instances, it is a complete disaster for the movement’s original motives, goals, and objectives. Movements must, therefore, be very cautious if they are to frame their issue according to international concerns, without losing sight of the original campaign. As Bob mentions, even as the Ogani won worldwide exposure, some of their friends in the indigenous rights community were shaking their heads at how movement’s original demands for political autonomy had been misunderstood abroad as environmental and human rights issues took central stage. In addition, the book paints a bleak picture of contemporary global civil society/NGOs that is mostly unseen, finally recommending that global civil society itself should reshape its goals and tactics, so that support may reach the neediest rather than the savviest.

The book is written in simple yet interesting and eloquent style. The comparisons between the different movements and groups within two very different societies (Mexico and Nigeria) against very different opponents and the subsequent analysis of their successes and failures in a global context have made this book well worth reading. I highly recommend this book (and its lessons) for all those who are involved in social movements and seek international support for their cause.

About the Author

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