

**Rethinking Civil Disobedience:
Rawls, Resistance, and the Ethics of Protest
in Non-Democratic Societies**

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Author's Declaration

I, the undersigned, Parisa Ahmadi, candidate for the MA degree in Philosophy, declare herewith that the present thesis titled "Rethinking Civil Disobedience: Rawls, Resistance, and the Ethics of Protest in Non-Democratic Societies" is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright. I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

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Abstract

This thesis explores whether the traditional concept of civil disobedience, shaped mainly by John Rawls's liberal democratic theory, can be expanded to include morally justified acts of resistance in non-democratic, authoritarian, and repressive regimes. Rawls defines civil disobedience as a public, nonviolent, and conscientious breach of law in a nearly just society. However, this definition excludes many important acts of protest occurring in parts of the world where justice is not institutionalized and public dissent is criminalized.

Through philosophical analysis and real-world examples, particularly the Iranian women's movement against compulsory hijab laws, this study argues that civil disobedience must be understood more broadly. Drawing on the works of Candice Delmas, Avia Pasternak, Fabian Wendt, and others, it challenges the assumptions that civil disobedience must always be nonviolent or polite, or that it can only occur within functioning democracies.

The thesis proposes an expanded definition of civil disobedience as a morally motivated act of public or symbolic resistance aimed at addressing serious injustice, regardless of political context. This definition accommodates a wider spectrum of protest, including uncivil or disruptive tactics, especially when legal avenues for dissent are closed. By incorporating theories of political authority and legitimacy, particularly from Wendt, and ethical frameworks for resistance, such as just war theory, the study provides a more inclusive understanding of resistance in the modern world.

This work concludes that civil disobedience is not just a practice for stable democracies but a global form of moral and political action. Recognizing its diverse expressions helps us better

understand how individuals around the world demand dignity, justice, and freedom even when democracy is far from reach.

Acknowledgements

When I began this thesis, my thoughts were with the Iranian women who were, and still are, resisting injustice every day, in the streets, in their homes, in their words, and in their silences. They risk their jobs, their families, and their lives simply for dignity and freedom. I kept asking myself: how is it possible that these acts are not considered civil disobedience? How can a theory that ignores them be complete? This thesis was born from that question, and from the deep moral urgency of trying to answer it.

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To the community of thinkers, friends, and peers who helped me shape and question my arguments, thank you for the conversations, critiques, and encouragement. This thesis was written in dialogue with many, even when I was working alone.

Finally, I dedicate this work to the women of Iran. You have never stopped resisting. Your defiance is not only political, it is poetic, and it has shaken the meaning of justice itself. This is for you.

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Introduction

Civil disobedience has been one of the most important forms of political protest, especially in democratic societies. People have used it to challenge laws or government actions that they believe are unjust. From Henry David Thoreau's writings to the Civil Rights Movement marches in the United States, civil disobedience has played a central role in the fight for justice. One of the most influential modern theories of civil disobedience comes from John Rawls. In his book *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls describes civil disobedience as a public, nonviolent, and conscientious act that breaks the law to bring attention to injustice and push for change (Rawls 1999, 320). For Rawls, this protest helps support a just society by correcting its failures respectfully and morally. It preserves the balance, meaning it helps maintain the legitimacy and stability of the political system while pointing out areas that need reform. Civil disobedience, in this view, does not aim to overthrow or dismantle the political structure, but to align it more closely with its own foundational principles of justice.

However, Rawls limits civil disobedience to "nearly just" societies. While he does not say directly that civil disobedience only exists in democratic societies, his theory is written for that context. He defines civil disobedience as a way to fix serious injustices inside a liberal democracy that is mostly fair and stable. In this view, civil disobedience works like a moral warning system: it reminds the state of its own values and helps strengthen institutions that are already legitimate. As Rawls writes, "The role of civil disobedience within a more or less just democratic state is to help maintain and strengthen just institutions" (Rawls 1999, 336). This idea assumes that the public can participate in debate, that laws can be challenged in courts, and that political leaders listen to criticism. But in many parts of the world, people do not have this opportunity; protest is punished,

censorship is strong, and even peaceful resistance can lead to prison or death. Rawls does not address these cases, and so his theory leaves them outside of what counts as an act of civil disobedience.

This thesis begins with the idea that Rawls's definition is too narrow. People all over the world, including in non-democratic countries, engage in acts of public resistance guided by conscience and moral belief. These actions may not be peaceful or "civil" as Rawls describes them, but they are still meaningful and courageous responses to injustice. They deserve to be understood as a form of civil disobedience, even if they do not fully meet Rawls's conditions.

Before continuing, it is important to clarify what is meant by non-democratic, authoritarian, and repressive regimes. These terms are sometimes used together, but they are not the same. A non-democratic regime is one where leaders are not chosen through free and fair elections, and citizens do not have full participation in political decisions (Dahl 1971, 3–10). Authoritarian regimes go further by concentrating power in the hands of a small group or a single leader, often limiting civil liberties like freedom of speech, press, and assembly (Linz 2000, 159–160). Repressive regimes are a more extreme form, where the state actively uses violence, surveillance, and fear to control the population and silence opposition (Schedler 2006, 3–4). In this thesis, I use the term "non-democratic" in a broad sense to include both authoritarian and repressive systems, while recognizing that the level and type of oppression can vary from one country to another. This distinction matters because the risks and meanings of civil disobedience can be very different depending on the political context.

The main goal of this thesis is to offer a broader understanding of civil disobedience that includes resistance in non-democratic contexts. I argue that civil disobedience is not limited to stable liberal democracies and can take different forms, depending on the political situation. Not to stretch the

term "civil disobedience" for rhetorical effect, but to reflect the truth: people fighting injustice under authoritarian regimes deserve the same moral respect as protesters in liberal democracies.

In doing so, I draw on the work of philosophers such as Candice Delmas, Tommie Shelby, Avia Pasternak, and Amia Srinivasan, who each offer important critiques of Rawls's theory and help us see civil disobedience in a more complex and realistic way.

In her book *A Duty to Resist*, Candice Delmas questions the idea that civil disobedience must always be civil and nonviolent. She argues that in situations of profound injustice, people may have a moral obligation to resist, even if that means breaking laws in disruptive or uncivil ways. She writes, "Disobedience to law is not always morally problematic, and obedience is not always morally desirable" (Delmas 2018, 5). For Delmas, Rawls's focus on civility can silence those who live under repressive conditions.

Avia Pasternak also challenges Rawls's framework. In her article *Political Riots as Civil Protest*, she argues that riots can sometimes be the only way people can express their political demands in countries where protest is banned or punished. She believes some riots, when purposeful, communicative, and aimed at injustice, can be morally similar to civil disobedience (Pasternak 2021a, 423). In her book *Political Rioting: A Moral Assessment*, she further develops this argument and provides a framework for thinking about when and how riots can be ethically justified (Pasternak 2021b).

Amia Srinivasan's essay *The Aptness of Anger* adds another important perspective. She writes about how emotions like anger are often seen as irrational in political discussions, especially when expressed by marginalized people. However, she argues that anger can be a clear and meaningful reaction to injustice. It can also motivate people to act and speak out when silence is no longer

possible (Srinivasan 2017, 128–129). This emotional side of civil disobedience is often ignored in liberal theories, but is very important in many real-life cases of resistance.

In *Dark Ghettos*, Tommie Shelby discusses structural injustice in poor and marginalized communities. He argues that when people live under unfair conditions for a long time and the legal system does not protect them, their moral obligation to follow the law becomes weaker (Shelby 2016, 71–73). Although Shelby focuses on democratic societies, his ideas help us understand why civil disobedience can still be morally right in situations where justice is missing.

This thesis also asks whether civil disobedience must always be nonviolent. While Rawls and many other theorists insist on nonviolence, this view may not fully apply in authoritarian settings. I use ideas from Helen Frowe's *The Ethics of War and Peace* to explore when limited violence might be morally justified. Frowe argues that violence can be acceptable if it meets just cause, proportionality, and necessity (Frowe 2023, 66–73). These ideas help us think more carefully about how to judge civil disobedience in places where peaceful protest is impossible or extremely dangerous.

Another important part of this discussion is the question of political authority. Rawls sees authority as legitimate when it is connected to a fair and just system. But what happens when people do not see the system as legitimate? This is where the work of Fabian Wendt becomes helpful. In *Competing Fundamentalisms*, Wendt offers a pluralist theory of political authority. He argues that we should not assume there is only one form of legitimate authority, especially in diverse or unjust societies. Instead, authority can be questioned and re-evaluated based on moral and social context (Wendt 2020, 78–81). This opens space to see civil disobedience not only as a call for reform but also as a challenge to the way authority itself is structured or justified.

I also want to mention the work of Elettra Repetto, a former doctoral researcher at our university, whose thesis also critiques Rawls and discusses symbolic protest and resistance in non-democratic contexts. Her work is important and relevant to this topic. While there are similarities between our projects, this thesis takes a different direction by focusing on three specific critiques of Rawls: the democratic condition, the legitimate authority, and the strict requirement of nonviolence. I also introduce the idea of a "middle space" between civil disobedience and revolution and offer the Iranian women's movement as a real example of public and morally grounded resistance.

This thesis is divided into five main chapters. Chapter 1 presents Rawls's theory and explains its limitations. Chapter 2 reviews the academic literature and shows how different thinkers have responded to Rawls and expanded the idea of civil disobedience. Chapter 3 examines how civil disobedience occurs in non-democratic settings, using Iran as a clarifying example. Chapter 4 discusses the ethics of violence and considers when violent resistance might be morally acceptable. Chapter 5 introduces the role of political authority and argues for a more flexible approach to legitimacy and resistance.

1. The Rawlsian Framework

John Rawls is one of the most important political philosophers of the 20th century. His theory of justice has shaped many discussions about fairness, equality, and the role of government in a democratic society. In his book *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls explains civil disobedience and how it can play a positive role in a democracy. He defines civil disobedience as a "public, nonviolent, conscientious yet political act contrary to law usually done to bring about a change in the law or policies of the government" (Rawls 1999, 320). In his view, civil disobedience is not a threat to society but a way to protect justice by appealing to shared moral values.

This chapter introduces Rawls's theory of civil disobedience and explains how it fits into his larger idea of a fair and stable society. It also shows the main limitations of his theory, which will be discussed in the rest of this thesis. These limitations are, first, that Rawls only talks about civil disobedience in democratic systems, second, that he insists it must always be nonviolent, and third, that the authority is legitimate and should be respected. These three conditions make it difficult or impossible to apply Rawls's theory to many situations today.

1.1. Justice as Fairness and Political Stability

Rawls builds his theory on two basic principles of justice. The first is that everyone should have the same basic rights and liberties. The second is that social and economic inequalities are only acceptable if they help the least advantaged (Rawls 1999, 53). He calls this theory "justice as fairness." In this framework, civil disobedience plays an important role. It allows citizens to respond when the political system fails to follow its moral rules. It helps keep a democracy just and stable by providing a peaceful way to correct serious wrongs.

However, Rawls sets strong conditions for when civil disobedience is allowed. It should only be used in cases of major injustice and only after all legal methods have failed. It must be done with respect for the law and the authority, and protesters should be willing to accept the legal consequences. These conditions show that civil disobedience is still part of a respectful and moral political system (Rawls 1999, 321).

Also, Rawls says this model is about resistance movements in "nearly just" societies. He excludes countries that do not have basic freedoms like free speech, fair trials, or open public debate. He writes, "...civil disobedience is a form of address. It is a political act not only because it is addressed to the sense of justice of the majority, but also because it is done in public, usually with fair notice; and it is nonviolent. [...] It makes sense only in a society in which there is a shared conception of justice and a reasonably just constitution." (Rawls 1999, 320). This means that his theory is not well-suited to justify acts of protest in authoritarian or repressive regimes.

Fabian Wendt, in his writings on political obligation and authority, also emphasizes the importance of state legitimacy. For Wendt, authority is not only about enforcing rules, but also about the moral justification behind the state's power. This focus on justification can help us reconsider Rawls's assumption that civil disobedience is appropriate when directed at a legitimate authority and respecting it. Wendt's argument suggests that when the state fails to meet its moral duties, especially in authoritarian settings, its authority becomes questionable. In such cases, acts of disobedience might still carry moral weight, even if they happen outside Rawls's ideal context.

1.2. Civil Disobedience as a Public Moral Appeal

One of the most important parts of Rawls's theory is that civil disobedience must be public and based on moral principles. He believes that protest should not be hidden or selfish. It should send

a clear message to the public and show respect for the democratic system. Protesters should try to persuade others by appealing to shared ideas of justice. In this way, civil disobedience is more than just breaking the law; it is a form of political communication.

This idea depends on the belief that a society has a shared moral language and space for open discussion. In well-functioning democracies, this may be true, but in many parts of the world, people cannot access a fair legal system or a public space where their voices can be heard. In those cases, the public appeal that Rawls discusses becomes more difficult or impossible. If protest is punished or silenced, then following Rawls's rules for civil disobedience may not be realistic.

1.3. The Role of Nonviolence

Another important condition in Rawls's theory is that civil disobedience must be nonviolent. He argues that nonviolence respects the law and helps with public support. Violence, in contrast, can be seen as a threat to democracy and can reduce sympathy for the cause (Rawls 1999, 326–328). This is why Rawls believes that protest must avoid physical harm and destruction.

One may say that asking people to stay peaceful and to accept punishment is too demanding, especially when they are fighting against serious injustice. In some situations, nonviolence may not work or even allow injustice to continue. This is especially true in non-democratic regimes where peaceful protest is punished and ignored. Rawls's strong focus on nonviolence can make it difficult to support protests in these conditions.

Violence itself is not a single act; it is a spectrum. It can range from symbolic damage to property, like spray-painting a government wall or burning a police noticeboard, to targeted attacks on state agents, and all the way to indiscriminate or retaliatory violence. Not all of these carry the same

moral weight. Some forms may be carefully chosen to make a political point or to resist immediate harm, while others may cross ethical lines.

Rawls's ideal of nonviolence is important. It reminds us of the power of peaceful protest. But it also reflects the assumptions of a stable, liberal democracy where dissent is tolerated. As later chapters will show, in non-democratic or authoritarian regimes, people may have no other way to resist injustice except through forms of disruption, confrontation, or even limited violence. Understanding that violence exists on a spectrum helps us see these acts not as failures of morality but as part of a broad and complex reality of resistance.

1.4. Civil Disobedience and the Question of Riots

Rawls clearly differentiates civil disobedience and other forms of protest, like riots or revolutions. An act of civil disobedience is calm, principled, and focused. Riots, on the other hand, are often emotional and violent, and they do not follow the same moral or political standards. Rawls does not spend much time discussing riots, but it is clear that he does not see them as a valid form of civil disobedience (Rawls 1999, 321).

Avia Pasternak argues that in non-democratic societies where protest is banned and public expression is controlled, riots may be the only way for people to express their political demands. In her article *Political Riots as Civil Protest*, she writes that Rawls's theory does not give us the tools to understand resistance in regimes where the state refuses to listen to peaceful protest (Pasternak 2021a, 418). In these cases, riots may still carry political meaning and moral value.

1.5. Early Critiques and the Limits of Liberalism

Many early critics of Rawls pointed out that his theory relies too much on ideal conditions. One important critic is Iris Marion Young. In her book *Inclusion and Democracy*, she argues that liberal theories like Rawls's do not pay enough attention to structural injustice and how power works in real societies (Young 2000). She believes that not all groups have equal access to public debate or the ability to use legal systems fairly, making Rawls's theory less useful for understanding the experience of marginalized people.

Candice Delmas also criticizes Rawls's focus on civility. In her book *A Duty to Resist*, she argues that in cases of deep injustice, people may need to resist in ways that are not civil or polite. She believes that Rawls's definition of civil disobedience is too narrow and risks ignoring people who cannot follow the rules of liberal protest. She writes, "Disobedience to law is not always morally problematic, and obedience is not always morally desirable" (Delmas 2018, 5). For Delmas, resistance can take many forms, and sometimes it must be disruptive to be effective.

From Wendt's perspective, this again raises questions about whether the state still holds valid authority. If a government suppresses open dialogue and denies moral engagement, it loses the ethical basis for obedience. Civil disobedience, in this view, is a response to broken authority rather than its rejection. This approach makes room for resistance that is morally acceptable, even if they are not peaceful.

1.6. Moving Toward a Broader Definition

Rawls's theory of civil disobedience is still a powerful and influential foundation. It helps us understand how protest works inside a democratic society. However, as this chapter has shown, it is inspiring but limited when we try to apply it in other political contexts. Rawls's strong

requirements of democracy, respecting authority, and nonviolence leave out many important acts of resistance around the world today.

This thesis builds on Rawls's work but argues for a more flexible and inclusive approach. It recognizes that civil disobedience can happen in authoritarian regimes and sometimes may include disruption or limited violence. The concept of authority is central to this expansion. Drawing on Fabian Wendt's arguments, we can see that the moral right of the state to demand obedience is not absolute; it depends on the state's commitment to justice and the well-being of its people. When those conditions break down, resistance can still be legitimate.

In the next chapter, I will review the work of other philosophers who have expanded the idea of civil disobedience. These include Delmas, Pasternak, Srinivasan, Shelby, and Elettra Repetto, a scholar from our university whose research on protest in non-democratic societies is especially relevant. While her work focuses on the expressive value of political resistance, this thesis adds a more detailed critique of Rawls's theory. It tries to introduce the idea of a "middle space" between civil disobedience and revolution.

2. Expanding Civil Disobedience Beyond Liberal Democracies

John Rawls's idea of civil disobedience is closely connected to liberal democracies. His theory of civil disobedience only makes sense when people have political rights, legal access to protest, and public reason can still be used to appeal to others. However, many acts of resistance occur in countries where these basic conditions do not exist. This chapter explains why Rawls's definition is too narrow. It also shows how other thinkers help us develop a broader understanding of civil disobedience, including non-democratic countries.

2.1. Rawls's Democratic Condition

As explained in Chapter 1, Rawls defines civil disobedience as a public, nonviolent, and conscientious act that aims to change unjust laws. He adds that such acts are justified in "nearly just" societies, where legal institutions work and people share some basic ideas about justice (Rawls 1999, 319–336). According to Rawls, civil disobedience is a stabilizing tool within a democracy. It helps protect justice by reminding the majority of their moral values when legal mechanisms fail.

This definition works well on paper when we presume an ideal state, but it leaves out many meaningful protests in practice. In authoritarian regimes or places where the law is not fair, protest is often banned, and people risk punishment for speaking out. If we follow Rawls too strictly, we are forced to say that these actions are not civil disobedience, even though they are public, principled, well-organized, and morally motivated. This creates a serious problem, especially when the protest is not a riot either. It means that much of what we recognize as courageous resistance would not be seen as legitimate.

Iris Marion Young criticizes Rawls's approach for assuming an ideal political world. In *Inclusion and Democracy*, she explains how liberal theories often ignore the role of power and inequality. She writes that many groups, such as women, ethnic minorities, or the poor, are not fully included in public debate, even in democracies. According to Young, we cannot limit political communication to formal or polite discussions. Stories, emotions, and disruptive acts must also be part of political life (Young 2000, 97).

At the center of this discussion is the idea of political authority. Rawls assumes that the state in question has legitimate authority, meaning that its laws ought to be followed because they are based on fairness and public agreement. But what happens when the authority itself is unjust or not accepted by its citizens? In non-democratic states, the state may have power, but in some cases, it lacks this kind of moral authority. This lack opens the door for civil disobedience as a legitimate resistance, even if the political system tries to suppress it.

This view helps us understand why civil disobedience needs to be redefined. When people are excluded from public spaces or treated unfairly by the law, they may need other ways to express their moral and political views. In such cases, resistance can still be considered civil disobedience, even if it does not follow Rawls's rules.

2.2. Civil Disobedience in Repressive Systems

History shows that civil disobedience happens not only in democracies but also in oppressive regimes. From the Iranian women protesting the compulsory hijab law to student movements in Myanmar, people worldwide act publicly and courageously even when they know the risks. These protests often follow many values that Rawls respects: they are sincere, thoughtful, and aim for justice.

Tommie Shelby's book *Dark Ghettos* provides helpful tools for understanding this resistance. Although he focuses on communities in democratic countries, Shelby argues that when laws are deeply unfair, people have no strong moral duty to obey them. In other words, if the system is already violating justice, breaking the law may be right (Shelby 2016, 73–75). This argument can also apply to authoritarian regimes.

2.3. Delmas and the Moral Duty to Resist

Candice Delmas strongly answers Rawls's limits in her book *A Duty to Resist*. She challenges the idea that civil disobedience must always be peaceful and polite. In her view, when laws oppress people, following the rules can help injustice continue. In such cases, people might not only be allowed to resist but also have a moral duty to do so. As Delmas puts it, "Obedience to the law is not always morally desirable, and disobedience is not always morally problematic" (Delmas 2018, 5).

Delmas also says that insisting on civility can silence important voices. For example, some protesters may use disruptive tactics, refuse to accept punishment, or break laws anonymously. These acts still reflect moral courage and a deep sense of justice. According to Delmas, we must include these forms of resistance in our understanding of civil disobedience (Delmas 2018, 18–23).

Wendt's approach supports this idea by suggesting that we must always ask whether the authority deserves our obedience. If the answer is no, because of injustice or exclusion, then even disobedient uncivil acts might be morally right (Wendt 2023, 104–106).

2.4. Pasternak and the Politics of Riots

Another important challenge comes from Avia Pasternak, who studies riots as political actions. In her article *Political Riots as Civil Protest*, she explains that people sometimes have no legal or peaceful way to protest in non-democratic states. In these cases, riots may be the only way to make their voices heard. She writes, "The distinction between civil disobedience and riots collapses when the state blocks all other forms of dissent" (Pasternak 2021a, 423).

In her book *Political Rioting: A Moral Assessment*, Pasternak gives criteria to judge when riots may be morally justified. She says we should look at the protest's goals, the level of harm, and whether the riot expresses a clear political message. If a riot aims to fight injustice and has no peaceful alternative, it may deserve the same respect we give to civil disobedience (Pasternak 2021b).

This view helps us recognize a broader range of political resistance. It also supports the idea that civil disobedience is about following rules and standing up for justice, even in very difficult circumstances.

2.5. A Spectrum of Resistance

Instead of seeing civil disobedience and violence as completely separate, imagining a spectrum of resistance might be more helpful. On one end, there are peaceful, legal protests. On the other end, there are violent revolutions. In between, we can place many kinds of actions, some legal, some not; some peaceful, some confrontational.

This view allows us to include protests like the Iranian women's movement. The state does not allow their acts, such as removing the compulsory hijab, sharing videos online, and organizing in private, but they are public, meaningful, and morally motivated. These protests show that civil disobedience does not have to happen in a democracy to be real or important.

2.6. Revising Conditions

Rawls's theory still offers practical ideas about justice, public reason, and moral integrity. But if we want a global and realistic view of civil disobedience, we need to change the conditions he sets.

Instead of requiring a liberal democracy, we can ask:

- Are all the legal ways closed?
- Does a sincere concern for justice guide it?
- Is it public or symbolically expressive and communicative?
- Does it try to address a serious harm or unfairness?
- Does it seek some fundamental or structural change?

We can also ask: Does the state have legitimate authority, or is it only using power without moral justification? As Wendt suggests, civil disobedience becomes more defensible when the authority itself lacks legitimacy. This helps us recognize the value of protest not just in free societies, but also in those where fairness is denied.

By focusing on these qualities, we can keep the moral force of civil disobedience while recognizing its many different forms worldwide.

3. Civil Disobedience in Non-democratic Contexts

John Rawls believes that civil disobedience should occur within a liberal democracy where people share common values and have access to legal ways of protest. But today, many acts of protest occur in countries that do not meet these conditions. This chapter argues that civil disobedience does not belong only to democracies. People resist injustice everywhere, including under authoritarian governments. Their actions may look different from the ones Rawls described, but they are still morally and politically important.

To understand this better, we must also think about political authority. When the state uses power without legitimacy or the consent of its citizens, people may no longer feel morally obligated to obey its laws. Fabian Wendt argues that authority must be justified, not only accepted. If people never had a chance to give meaningful consent, or if the regime constantly violates their rights, then their political obligation is weak or missing altogether (Wendt 2023, 41–44). This opens the door for justified disobedience even if the system does not allow it.

3.1. The Iranian Case: Hijab Protests as Civil Disobedience

The Iranian women's movement is an example of civil disobedience in a non-democratic society. For decades, women in Iran have been forced to wear the hijab in public and have had significant burdens for it. This law is not just a dress code; it represents the government's control over women's bodies and personal choices, which has caused women to lose many aspects of social life. Many women have protested this law in simple but powerful ways by publicly removing their headscarves, sharing videos of their actions online, or walking silently through the streets without a hijab.

These acts are illegal and often punished by the state, but they are also deeply moral. The women who protest are not acting out of selfish reasons. They are appealing to justice and human dignity. Their actions are public, conscientious, and risky. Even though Iran is not a democracy, these protests meet many moral standards of civil disobedience. They show that people can resist unjust laws even without a safe or legal way.

Some critics might say these protests are not civil disobedience because they do not follow the rules of nonviolence or public debate. However, in this case, the state controls the public space, and peaceful protest is criminalized. This forces many activists to turn to digital platforms. By removing their hijab, posting videos, or sharing protest content online, they engage in forms of civil disobedience that are public in a broader sense: they address society and the world, but without revealing their identities, in order to reduce the risk of arrest or harm. These digital acts are not private or apolitical. They are deliberate, morally motivated challenges to state authority, shaped by the hostile conditions in which they take place.

The history of protesting the compulsory hijab in Iran shows that violence in the *Jin, Jiyan, Azadi* movement was not only unavoidable in some cases but also proportionate to the level of repression enforced by the state, particularly through the morality police. The protests did not begin with violence; they began with symbolic, peaceful acts of defiance. One of the most iconic early examples was Vida Movahed, who in December 2017 stood silently on a utility box in Tehran's city center, placing her white scarf on a stick and holding it like a flag. She made no speech, no chant, only a quiet but powerful expression of resistance. Yet even this peaceful and solitary act led to her arrest.

This set the tone for what would become a long, dangerous struggle. When such acts of nonviolent civil disobedience are met with arrest, beatings, imprisonment, and public shaming, the space for

purely peaceful protest narrows. Over time, as more women were beaten, threatened, and even killed, as in the case of *Mahsa Jina Amini*, the moral calculus shifted. Violence in the form of burning police vehicles or throwing back tear gas canisters did not come from nowhere. It was a response to systematic state violence enforced not only through law but through everyday harassment, surveillance, and physical force. In this context, limited violence became a form of *collective self-defense*, a way of resisting a machinery of repression that had closed off other avenues of dissent.

Understanding this progression is key. It shows that the use of violence was not about chaos or revenge; it was a last resort after years of failed peaceful appeals. These acts remained morally focused, directed at state symbols and agents of repression, not at civilians or random targets. Seen this way, they belong to a broader tradition of civil resistance, one in which the line between civil disobedience and justified disruption becomes more complicated, but no less important to defend.

3.2. Agency, Risk, and Moral Courage

Civil disobedience in non-democratic regimes should be taken seriously because it requires great personal courage. In many authoritarian countries, protest is not only illegal but also dangerous. People can face arrest, torture, or even death for speaking out, and despite all of these, many still choose to act. Their choice shows that civil disobedience is not just about having legal rights. It is about moral agency, the ability to act on what is right even when the law is wrong. Tommie Shelby argues that when laws are part of an unjust system, people are not morally required to follow them; breaking such laws can be the right thing to do (Shelby 2016, 73–75). This is especially true when a protest is done in a way that shows conscience, solidarity, and a clear moral message.

This connects with Wendt's argument that the legitimacy of state power depends on whether people have genuine reasons to see it as justified. If that connection is broken, people may disobey and show moral integrity by doing so. Their courage, even when silent or symbolic, becomes a rejection of illegitimate authority.

In these cases, risk is not just physical. Protesters also risk social rejection, job loss, or family pressure. Still, they act because they cannot live without justice. This moral courage should be part of our understanding of civil disobedience.

3.3. Rethinking Publicness and Legitimacy

In liberal theory, civil disobedience must be public. Rawls believes that protests should be open and visible so that they can appeal to others and influence public opinion. But in many places, public space is tightly controlled. Governments block access to media, punish public gatherings, and use surveillance to watch citizens. Under these conditions, protest may take different forms.

Sometimes, protests happen online, where people can share messages, images, and videos of resistance. Sometimes, they happen in quiet acts, like refusing to obey a law or boycotting a company. These forms of protest communicate dissent, express moral judgment, and challenge unjust authority. Not all of them count as civil disobedience, but all are influential and legitimate forms of protest.

Avia Pasternak writes that we must think more carefully about what counts as "public." In non-democratic societies, even a private act can have a public meaning if it is shared, seen, or inspires others (Pasternak 2021b). This shows that publicness is not only about visibility, it is also about purpose, message, and connection, which is accessible anonymously.

In Wendt's terms, even hidden or symbolic acts may question the legitimacy of power. If people act because they no longer recognize the authority as justified, then their actions, even if quiet, carry a powerful moral message.

3.4. Civil Disobedience, Riots, and Resistance

In authoritarian regimes, the line between civil disobedience and other forms of resistance becomes harder to draw. Sometimes protests turn into riots, and sometimes people use violence. Rawls would say that these are no longer civil. However, as discussed in Chapter 2, scholars like Candice Delmas and Avia Pasternak argue that the line is unclear.

Riots can still be expressions of political protest. They can happen when all peaceful options are blocked. Some riots are carefully targeted and meant to draw attention to injustice. Others are emotional reactions to long periods of repression. In both cases, they are more than just acts of disorder. They are political statements, often coming from people who have no other way to be heard.

Therefore, while this thesis expands the concept of civil disobedience to include disruptive acts like riots, it does not defend all riots indiscriminately. A morally justifiable riot must be intentional, targeted, and necessary, grounded in resistance to injustice, not opportunistic destruction. This framework draws on Delmas's defense of moral urgency, Pasternak's focus on symbolic violence, and Frowe's requirement of last resort.

- Intentionality: Is the riot aimed at a political or moral goal (e.g., fighting a law, protesting injustice), or is it opportunistic or purely reactive?

As Delmas emphasizes, even uncivil or disruptive protest must be motivated by a clear ethical purpose, what she calls "moral integrity in resistance." Without such intention, the protest risks becoming nihilistic or self-serving (2018, 3-6, 112-120).

- Targeting: Are the actions directed at symbols of injustice (like government property or police vehicles used in repression), or do they harm random individuals and private property unrelated to the issue?

Pasternak distinguishes between riotous acts aimed at state repression and those that randomly target civilians or unrelated businesses (2021, 36-41). Only the former can potentially be understood as a morally meaningful civil protest.

- Necessity and Last Resort: Are all peaceful avenues for protest blocked, making disruptive resistance the only way to express dissent?

Frowe stresses that even morally justified resistance must pass the test of necessity: violence is only defensible when it is the final option left to counter injustice (2023, 66-73).

This thesis tries to introduce the idea of a "middle space" between Rawlsian civil disobedience and revolution. In this space, people resist in ways that are not entirely peaceful, not fully legal, and not fully public, but still conscientious, communicative, and morally important. Their actions do not try to destroy the political system entirely, but they do challenge its injustices.

Conclusion of this Chapter

This chapter has shown that civil disobedience is not limited by democracy. People resist injustice in many different contexts, in many different ways. Their protests may not follow liberal norms, but are still guided by conscience, justice, and moral courage. By looking at examples like the

Iranian women's movement, we can see how civil disobedience has a different face under repression, but its core values remain the same.

Authority, in this context, is not just legal power. It must be morally justified. As Fabian Wendt argues, without that justification, people are not wrong to challenge it. Their acts of disobedience, even small or symbolic, show that moral resistance is possible even under fear and silence.

To understand civil disobedience today, we must accept that it exists on a spectrum. It can be peaceful or disruptive, visible or hidden, legal or illegal. What matters most is the moral purpose behind the act. The next chapter will explore whether violence can ever be part of that purpose.

4. The Ethics of Violence in Political Resistance

Most definitions of civil disobedience argue that it must always be nonviolent, as John Rawls emphasizes that violence makes protest illegitimate and dangerous. He writes that civil disobedience must be peaceful in both action and spirit, and that violence is likely to destroy the respect needed for dialogue in a democracy (Rawls 1999, 320–328). Many liberal thinkers agree with this view and see nonviolence as a sign of moral strength and respect for the rule of law.

However, this chapter asks whether nonviolence should be considered an absolute condition for civil disobedience, especially in non-democratic societies. When peaceful protest is banned or punished, and when people are facing violence from the state, should they still be expected to remain nonviolent? Can violence ever be justified as part of political resistance?

This chapter explores these questions by reviewing arguments for and against the use of violence in civil disobedience. It focuses especially on Helen Frowe's just war theory, which gives us ethical tools to judge when violence might be justified. The goal is not to promote violence, only to recognize that in some situations strict nonviolence may not be morally required or even possible.

4.1. Rawls and the Ideal of Nonviolence

Rawls believes that nonviolence is essential for civil disobedience to be legitimate. In his view, civil disobedience is supposed to work within the legal and moral framework of a democratic society. He argues that protesters must show respect for the law, even while breaking it, and that violence would send the wrong message about the acceptance of law and authority; it would suggest that the protester is trying to destroy the system, not reform it (Rawls 1999, 326–328).

Nonviolence also has a strategic purpose: Rawls believes it helps create public sympathy. Peaceful protest shows moral seriousness and makes it more likely that others will support the cause. Violent acts, on the other hand, may create fear or justify repression.

But this argument assumes that the protester lives in a society where people listen to public arguments, law enforcement responds with restraint, and reform is possible; in other words, the voice would not be silenced cruelly. In non-democratic societies, these assumptions are not realistic. People who protest peacefully may be arrested, tortured, or killed. Insisting on nonviolence may be unrealistic and morally unfair.

Also, we must consider the nature of political authority itself. In countries where the state consistently violates the rights of its citizens, it becomes difficult to see its authority as legitimate. Fabian Wendt argues that political authority must be justified by a system of reasons that the governed can reasonably accept. If a government rules by coercion and fear rather than public justification, its claim to authority weakens significantly (Wendt 2018, 3–6). In these cases, resisting that authority, even through forceful means, might not be morally wrong, but rather a response to an already broken moral order.

Also, as Avia Pasternak says, self-defense is unavoidable when preserving the voice is the goal. Pasternak's work touches on the complex question of when violence in political protest might be justified. While she does not advocate violence outright, she argues that in some cases, particularly in authoritarian regimes, acts of political violence may be morally defensible as forms of collective self-defense. In contexts where the state uses force to suppress all peaceful dissent and criminalizes public expression, citizens may have no other means of resisting oppression. Pasternak emphasizes that such violence must be purposeful, proportionate to the state's violence and the goals of the protest, and directed against symbols or agents of injustice, not random or retaliatory. This

perspective challenges liberal theories that reject all violence as morally illegitimate and helps expand the conversation on civil disobedience to include a wider range of resistance tactics (Pasternak 2021b).

This argument becomes particularly vivid when examined in real-world cases such as the Iranian women's protests. During the 2022–2023 uprising sparked by the death of Mahsa Amini, many protesters were confronted with violent crackdowns by state forces, especially the morality police. In several documented instances, demonstrators responded by damaging or burning police motorcycles. These vehicles were not neutral property; they were being used to follow, intimidate, and arrest protesters. From the perspective Pasternak offers, such actions could be interpreted as a form of collective self-defense, rather than gratuitous violence. The protesters targeted specific tools of repression, not civilians, and they aimed to resist immediate harm and prevent further arrests or abuse.

4.2. Just War Theory and the Limits of Nonviolence

To explore the ethical limits of nonviolence, we can turn to Helen Frowe's work on the ethics of war and peace. Frowe gives a set of conditions that help us think about when violence might be justified. These include:

- **Just cause:** Is the violence used to stop serious injustice or protect basic rights?
- **Necessity:** Is violence the only or least harmful option left?
- **Proportionality:** Is the level of violence reasonable compared to the harm being addressed?
- **Discrimination:** Is the violence directed at the right targets (such as property or state institutions) rather than innocent people?

(Frowe 2023, 66–73)

These conditions come from just war theory, but they can also help us think about political resistance. If a person or group uses limited violence to protect themselves or others, to stop state violence, or to draw attention to serious injustice, their actions might still be morally defensible.

For example, destroying a CCTV camera used for state surveillance might be a form of symbolic resistance. It causes property damage, but it does not harm a person. If this act is meant to protest an unjust system and there are no peaceful alternatives, it could meet the requirements of just cause, necessity, and proportionality.

As a more complicated example, during the 2022 uprising in Iran, following the death of Mahsa (Jina) Amini, a new form of protest emerged: *amāmeḥ-parāni*, the act of knocking turbans off clerics' heads. This gesture was not physically violent while it was quite symbolic and emotionally charged, especially given the clerical regime's long history of controlling women's bodies, forcing mandatory hijab, and suppressing disagreement through religious authority.

This act was not self-defense in a literal sense, but an embodied expression of political anger. It responded to decades of lived experience under a theocratic system where clerics use their clothing as both a symbol and instrument of power. In many cases, women had been harassed by mullahs in public, threatened with arrest for not wearing the hijab, and denied personal agency. The *amāmeḥ* thus became a visual representation of that oppression.

Seen in this light, *amāmeḥ-parāni* fits what Avia Pasternak and others describe as morally communicative protest, an act of symbolic resistance, driven by anger, dignity, and memory. It reflects what Amia Srinivasan calls the aptness of anger in political struggle: when rational public discourse is denied, anger becomes a morally appropriate response to long-term injustice (Srinivasan 2018, 127). These actions are emotionally raw, but they are not random; they are

targeted and deeply meaningful forms of dissent, especially in a context where protest is criminalized and institutional change is inaccessible.

Frowe also reminds us that moral rules must take context into account. In a free society, peaceful protest is usually the right choice. But in a society where peaceful protest is suppressed, other options may become morally justified. This does not mean any action will be accepted, but it opens minds to a more realistic understanding of resistance, especially when a peaceful protest means that people should pay more expenses and gain fewer results.

4.3. Strategic and Ethical Dilemmas under the Authoritarian Regimes

In authoritarian regimes, protest always comes with risk. The state often responds to peaceful actions with force. Protesters may decide to act in ways that are more confrontational or even have to react violently. These decisions are often made out of desperation, not hatred.

This creates a difficult moral situation. If the state already uses violence against its people, can we still say that the protest must be nonviolent? What if the state views any protest as a threat, even if it is peaceful? In these cases, protesters may feel that symbolic or limited violence is the only way to make their voices heard.

This does not mean that violence should become the norm. Many scholars, including Frowe, warn against the dangers of losing control. Violence can easily spread and harm innocent people. It can also give authoritarian governments an excuse to crack down even harder. This is why protesters must think carefully before using violent tactics.

Wendt emphasizes that even under failed authority, citizens still aim to act morally when they resist. What separates civil resistance from general rebellion is that it still tries to claim legitimacy,

not to destroy all order, but to restore justice where authority has failed (Wendt 2018, 62–63). This is especially important for understanding the ethical difference between protests aimed at destabilization and protests aimed at moral repair.

But we must also ask: Is it fair to judge protesters only by liberal standards when they do not live in liberal societies? If the law does not protect them, and if peaceful protest brings no change, then some level of resistance, even if not peaceful, may still be morally justified.

Conclusion of this Chapter

Rawls was right to see nonviolence as a powerful and moral form of protest. In many cases, it is still the best and most effective path. But his theory does not give enough space for the real-life struggles of people in authoritarian states. In such places, nonviolence may not always be possible, and insisting on it may create unfair moral expectations.

By using Helen Frowe's framework, we can develop a more balanced view. Violence should not be encouraged or praised easily, but under certain conditions, it may be morally allowed. What matters most, first of all, is the goal of the protest. No protest can be morally justified if its aims are themselves illegitimate; for example, if the purpose is to promote oppression, discrimination, or domination. The goal must be clearly oriented toward correcting an injustice or defending basic human rights. In this sense, the goal acts as a moral filter: only protests with just aims can be considered for moral justification.

Once this condition is satisfied, the next most important consideration is proportionality. This means that any use of force must be limited and appropriate to the harm being resisted or prevented. Protesters must take care to ensure that the means they use do not cause more damage than the injustice they are responding to. Violence must be a last resort, directed only at specific agents or

tools of oppression, and used with restraint. In this way, proportionality becomes the ethical test that guards against the escalation of violence, even in morally urgent struggles.

Wendt's theory of authority helps us understand why resistance, even when forceful, can still be ethically meaningful. If political authority depends on legitimacy, that is, the justified right to rule, then when legitimacy is lost, the moral obligation to obey the law does not just weaken; it may disappear entirely.

To understand this point more clearly, it helps to ask: What does it mean to obey the law as law? According to Joseph Raz, a law is authoritative when it gives people content-independent reasons to act, meaning people have a reason to follow it not just because of its content (e.g., that stealing is wrong), but because it is the law. For example, I may have a reason to pay taxes because the law requires it, regardless of whether I agree with the tax policy. This kind of authority only exists when the law is seen as legitimate.

In democratic societies, both moral reasons and authority-based reasons often align. But in authoritarian regimes, where laws are made and enforced without public accountability or consent, the authority-based reasons disappear. What remains are only moral reasons, and sometimes, those moral reasons may even support breaking the law. In such cases, acts of civil disobedience or even forceful resistance are not simply lawbreaking; they are expressions of moral judgment in the absence of legitimate political authority.

This chapter shows that the ethics of civil disobedience must include space for protest that is not always peaceful. In the next and final chapter, I will summarize this thesis's main arguments and explain how they contribute to a broader and more realistic understanding of civil disobedience.

5. Authority and the Legitimacy of Disobedience

Civil disobedience protests specific laws or policies, but without disrespecting the state's authority. This idea comes from liberal political theories, particularly from the work of John Rawls. In *A Theory of Justice*, he writes that civil disobedience must demonstrate respect for the law, even while it is being broken (Rawls 1999, 321). Rawls believes that disobedience should not reject the state's authority and should serve as a moral reminder to help the system correct its mistakes. In other words, civil disobedience is not meant to overthrow the state, but to improve it.

What if the authority itself is unjust? What if the state is not a democracy, or if it does not give people the basic rights and freedoms to challenge it peacefully? In these cases, does the idea of respecting authority still make sense? Or should we rethink the role of authority in our understanding of civil disobedience?

5.1. Rawls's View of Authority

Rawls treats political authority as something legitimate, especially in societies that are "nearly just." In these societies, people accept the basic rules of the political system, and the government is expected to act reasonably. Citizens have legal rights and access to public institutions. Civil disobedience works in this context because it appeals to shared values and tries to bring the system back into moral balance (Rawls 1999, 319–336).

But Rawls's framework assumes that people already accept the authority of the state. He does not say much about what happens when that authority is broken or when the political system itself becomes the source of injustice. In such cases, the state is not a neutral actor but a powerful

institution that can harm, silence, or punish its citizens. Respecting this kind of authority may not be morally required. In fact, it may be wrong.

This is a major limit in Rawls's theory. By assuming that the authority of the state remains legitimate even in the face of injustice, his theory cannot easily explain resistance in authoritarian regimes. It also struggles to describe a protest that aims not only to change a law but to question the deeper structures of power that produce injustice in the first place.

5.2. Fabian Wendt and the Moral Basis of Authority

Philosopher Fabian Wendt offers a helpful way to rethink political authority. In his book *Compromise, Peace and Public Justification*, Wendt argues that authority is only legitimate when it is justified to the people who are expected to follow it (Wendt 2018, 28–35). If citizens no longer accept the moral reasons behind the law, or if the state cannot explain its actions in a way that people can reasonably accept, then its authority loses its moral force.

Wendt's view is based on the idea of public justification. He believes that laws and policies should be explained in ways that all reasonable people can understand and accept. This means that authority must be constantly justified, not just enforced. If a government cannot give fair reasons for its actions, especially to those who are most affected, then its claim to authority becomes weak or invalid.

This idea is very important for civil disobedience. If the state has lost its authority, then breaking the law is not necessarily a sign of disrespect. It can be a way to demand better reasons, to call for real justification, or to refuse to follow rules that are no longer morally defensible.

5.3. Authority in Practice: Iran and Other Authoritarian States

This idea becomes even clearer when we look at real-life examples, like the protests in Iran. During the 2022–2023 movement following the death of Mahsa Amini, many Iranians protested laws that they saw as unjust, especially those controlling women's dress and behavior. The state responded with violence, arrests, and censorship. In such a situation, it is hard to say that the government still holds moral authority in the Rawlsian sense.

Protesters in Iran are not rejecting authority to cause chaos. They are challenging a system that no longer treats them as equals or respects their voices. Their actions, though technically illegal, are morally grounded. As Wendt might argue, these citizens are asking for public justification, something their government refuses to offer. Their disobedience is not a failure of morality but an expression of it.

The same logic applies to many authoritarian states around the world. When the state becomes the source of harm, protest is not an attack on legitimate authority; it is a call to restore moral order. The state must earn its authority through justice, not just demand it through power.

5.4. Authority, Trust, and Obedience

Authority is not just about laws. It is also about trust. People follow rules because they believe those rules are fair and that those in power are working for the public good. When this trust breaks down, authority becomes fragile. People may still obey out of fear, but they no longer believe in the system.

In such moments, civil disobedience becomes a way to reclaim moral agency. It allows individuals to say: "I no longer accept this authority because it does not speak for justice." This kind of disobedience is powerful because it questions the very source of power. It asks not only what the law says, but whether the law is right, and whether those who enforce it have earned their role.

Wendt's work reminds us that authority is not natural or automatic. It must be built, justified, and maintained through fair treatment, open dialogue, and respect for all people. When these things are missing, civil disobedience is not just understandable, it may be the only moral path left.

Conclusion of this Chapter

Rawls's theory of civil disobedience starts from the idea that authority is legitimate and deserves respect. But this view only works in societies where authority is earned through justice and shared moral values. In many parts of the world, this is not the case.

By using Fabian Wendt's theory of authority, we can see that civil disobedience is not a rejection of order, but a demand for better justification. It is a way to challenge power that has lost its moral foundation. This chapter has shown that authority is not only a condition for civil disobedience but also one of its main targets. When authority is unjust, disobedience becomes a form of moral speech.

In the next and final chapter, I will summarize the overall argument of this thesis and reflect on how rethinking civil disobedience beyond Rawls, beyond democracy, and beyond strict nonviolence can help us understand protest in the world today.

Conclusions

This thesis began with a question: Can civil disobedience be morally meaningful outside of liberal democracies? John Rawls’s theory has shaped the way we understand acts of protest. In his account, civil disobedience is defined as a public, nonviolent, and conscientious breach of law, carried out within a “nearly just” democratic society where people already agree on the basic principles of justice and have access to legal ways of expressing disagreement (Rawls 1999, 320–336). But this democratic framing raises an urgent problem: it excludes those who live under authoritarian rule or in deeply unjust systems, precisely the people who often have the greatest need to resist.

This thesis has argued that civil disobedience should not be restricted to democratic contexts or judged only by liberal standards like civility and nonviolence. People who face oppression, censorship, and surveillance should not be excluded from moral movements. When they resist injustice, they are still acting as moral agents, even if their acts do not fit exactly to Rawls’s criteria. Their resistance deserves not only political attention but also philosophical legitimacy.

1. A Review of the Argument

In Chapter 1, I introduced Rawls’s classical theory and its three main conditions: that civil disobedience must be public, nonviolent, and situated within a democratic system. While his model provides a coherent framework for protest within stable liberal democracies, it unintentionally marginalizes a large part of real-world resistance. Many contemporary movements, especially those in non-democratic societies, do not enjoy access to public deliberation, the rule of law, or

institutional channels of dissent. Rawls's theory, therefore, risks narrowing the moral vocabulary we use to describe legitimate protest.

In Chapter 2, I turned to philosophers who challenge and expand Rawls's limits. Candice Delmas, for example, argues that in conditions of systemic injustice, protest may need to be uncivil, not out of carelessness, but out of necessity (Delmas 2018, 5). Avia Pasternak shows how riots, often dismissed as irrational or criminal, may be legitimate forms of political protest when peaceful avenues are blocked (Pasternak 2021a, 423). Meanwhile, Iris Marion Young and Tommie Shelby argue that structural inequality and exclusion, even in democracies, distort who can participate in public discourse and how justice is realized (Young 2000; Shelby 2016). These critiques support a more inclusive and realistic theory of civil disobedience: one that listens to marginalized voices and recognizes that formality and politeness are not the only signs of moral seriousness.

Chapter 3 applied these ideas to the Iranian women's movement, a challenging example of resistance in an authoritarian regime. After the death of Mahsa (Jina) Amini, Iranian women and their allies defied compulsory hijab laws and broader gender repression; their protests ranged from silent defiance, such as removing headscarves in public, to online campaigns and economic strikes. These acts were public, symbolically expressive, and morally motivated, even though they occurred outside a democratic framework. They were not random or impulsive. They were ethical acts of civil disobedience rooted in dignity, autonomy, and resistance to illegitimate authority.

Chapter 4 dealt with the role of violence. Rawls and many liberal thinkers hold that civil disobedience must always be nonviolent. But in many authoritarian regimes, nonviolence is not always effective or even possible. Peaceful protesters may be arrested, beaten, or killed. Here, I brought in Helen Frowe's adaptation of just war theory to assess when limited violence might be justified. Frowe's criteria, just cause, necessity, proportionality, and appropriate targeting, provide

a careful ethical framework for judging acts of resistance that include property damage or symbolic force (Frowe 2023, 66–73). Pasternak adds that in certain cases, especially where the state suppresses all dissent, collective self-defense may morally justify even confrontational resistance (Pasternak 2021a).

Chapter 5 explored the role of political authority in theories of civil disobedience. Rawls assumes that civil disobedience occurs within a legitimate system. But what if the government lacks legitimacy? What if its laws are enforced not to promote justice but to preserve power? Fabian Wendt offers a helpful alternative. He argues that authority must be justified, not merely exercised. For political power to be morally binding, people must have reasons to obey it because it is the law, not just because they are afraid of punishment (Wendt 2018, 2–44). If the state fails to supply moral justification, citizens may have no obligation to obey and resistance becomes not only permissible but morally urgent.

2. A New Definition

After all these arguments and examples, this thesis offers a revised and expanded definition of civil disobedience:

Civil disobedience is a public or symbolically expressive act of principled resistance against perceived injustice, carried out conscientiously and with the intention of moral or political change, regardless of whether it occurs within a democratic system or under authoritarian rule.

It may take peaceful or disruptive forms, and while it often involves breaking the law, it is guided by a sincere concern for justice. It seeks to appeal to society's moral conscience. The legitimacy of such disobedience does not depend on the regime's democratic nature but on the morality of the protester's purpose, the proportionality of their actions and whether it is the last resort or not.

This expanded definition shows that civil disobedience is not limited to liberal democracies. Instead, it is a universal moral tool, a way to challenge injustice, assert human dignity and demand change, even under repressive conditions.

3. The Iranian Uprising and the “Aptness of Anger”

The 2022–2023 uprising in Iran illustrates how protest can be both morally serious and politically significant, without following liberal rules of civility or legality. From nationwide strikes and digital campaigns to symbolic acts of defiance, such as removing hijabs or burning images of state leaders, the protests were thoughtful, organized, and ethically grounded.

Not all acts were peaceful. Some protesters, particularly in response to violence from security forces, damaged police vehicles or attacked state property. These actions were forceful but targeted and proportional, aimed at resisting repression, not at harming civilians. As Amia Srinivasan has argued, anger in political protest can be morally “apt” when it is a rational response to systemic injustice (Srinivasan 2018, 127). These protests were not riots in a criminal sense; they were morally and symbolically driven protests, part of a broader fight for dignity and justice.

4. Why Naming Matters

One may ask: Why is it important to call these acts “civil disobedience” or not? Isn’t this just a semantic debate? The answer is that the term “civil disobedience” carries moral prestige in political theory and public discourse. It signals conscience, seriousness, and a legitimate claim to justice. Calling an act a “riot” or “unrest” often suggests chaos or criminality. These labels shape how protesters are treated, judged, and remembered.

Expanding the concept of civil disobedience does three important things:

It grants moral recognition to people resisting injustice in non-democratic contexts. Their actions are no less meaningful because they take place under repression.

It challenges the liberal bias in traditional political theory by recognizing that morality and courage exist even where democracy does not.

It makes political philosophy more inclusive, allowing it to reflect real struggles, from Iranian women and Kurdish activists to marginalized voices worldwide.

5. Final Thoughts

This thesis argues that many acts of resistance, even when they are disruptive, imperfect, or carried out under authoritarian rule, deserve the same moral respect traditionally reserved for civil disobedience in liberal democracies. What matters is not whether a protest checks every box on Rawls's list, but whether it is a sincere and principled act of conscience, aimed at confronting injustice.

This is not just a theoretical claim. It is a political and moral one. As long as our definitions of civil disobedience are narrow, we risk silencing those who protest in the most dangerous and unjust environments. But when we expand our moral imagination, we make space for a more truthful, more global understanding of what it means to resist.

Protest may be loud or quiet, visible or hidden, peaceful or disruptive. But when it is guided by justice, responsibility, and courage, it deserves our philosophical attention and moral respect. Civil disobedience is not the privilege of liberal democracies; it is the language of conscience, wherever it speaks.

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