
Assessing Your Political Environment

Self-Paced Course

This course will guide you in analyzing your country's political environment and exploring ways in which this could affect the implementation of your activism plan. You will address the challenges of political realities with practical advice to accomplish your goals.

This text is from an online version of the course, and as such may contain references to links and other functions that are not accessible through this downloadable version.

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Assessing Your Political Environment

Course Overview

Course Overview

The course is not intended to transfer skills, but rather to encourage you to analyze your political environment. By taking the time to complete this assessment, you'll understand the important link between a successful activism plan and a healthy democratic environment. Undemocratic environments set challenging obstacles to activism and advocacy. A realistic knowledge of the political environment will enable you to adjust your plan to the political environment and to make it as effective as possible.

Course Description

The class will focus on how to best analyze and assess the political environment in your country. I'll help you determine the best strategies to achieve your personal goals or adjust your activism plan to the political realities. A realistic knowledge of your political environment is a key factor in the success of any activism project. The type of government and the laws will be examined in this course. First, you'll study the branches of government and their functionalities. Some of the questions that will be discussed will include the following.

- Is your government democratically elected?
- Can people advocate to amend or make new laws?
- Is your judiciary independent? Do people get fair trials?
- Does your government use emergency laws?
- What are the implications of ruling with emergency laws?
- Do you have a free press? Do you have freedom of expression?

Further, you will go deeper in studying your political environment to see how the existing laws are implemented. For this, we will discuss some of the following questions: What is the law concerning NGOs? Does your government encourage or discourage certain types of NGOs and activism work? Are you allowed to organize a network and a campaign? Can you network with foreign organizations? Does the activism work in your country independent from government interference or the activist has to work with certain government bodies and agencies in order to succeed?

Finally, you'll determine if your project is viable in your current political environment. If the project is not realistic or viable, it will need to be adjusted accordingly as to suit the

political realities. This course is about the limitations of any political environment and the best ways to adjust to them or to attempt to correct them.

Course Objectives

By the end of this class, you will be able to:

- Have a deeper understanding of the political environment in your country and how it will affect your activism goals and plans.
- Understand how the branches of government function in your country and how they can affect your activism.
- Assess how relevant freedoms and liberties are practiced in your country, and their effect on your activism.
- Understand how civil society groups function in your country and whether they can be useful to you.
- Know to what extent and in what way your activism plan needs to be adjusted to fit your country's political realities.
- Know the areas in which your political environment can benefit you, as well as the limitations it sets on your actions.

Assessing Your Political Environment

Lesson 1: Introduction

Lesson Overview and Objectives

Overview

In our first session, we will get to know each other better and discuss your personal activism goals, so that we can make sure to focus our time together on your needs. We will define a set of objectives for the mentorship that we will add them to the course files so that you can refer to them throughout the mentorship.

We will also go over the structure of the online course and how we will work together.

Objectives

- Review the course topics and tools
- Agree on a set of objectives for the mentorship.

Assignment

- Read the Freedom House “Freedom in the World” report for your country ([Egypt](#) | [Jordan](#))
- Read the Freedom House “Freedom in the World” [checklist questions](#) that measure civil and political liberties.
- For participants fluent in English: read a Freedom House “Freedom in the World” [report](#) for a country of your choice that is ranked as “free.”

Assessing Your Political Environment

Lesson 2: The Link Between Activism and the Political Environment

Lesson Overview and Objectives

Overview

In this lesson, we will compare free and non-free environments to better understand the impact the political environment has on activism.

Objectives

By the end of this lesson, you'll be able to:

- Understand how the political environment has a direct impact on the outcome of any activism goal.
- Appreciate the opportunities for activism in a free political environment.
- Recognize the challenges of activism in a non-free political environment.

Assignment

In this section, we'll discuss two hypothetical scenarios:

- A- Working in a free environment
- B- Working in a non-free environment

First, we'll look at an activist in a free environment, stressing how her activism plan goes smoothly and how the state protects the right of the individual to advocate.

At the same time, we will be looking at the same activist in a non-free environment, emphasizing some of the obstacles she might face. I'll use the following questions in the discussion of both scenarios; please make a side-by-side list for the two comparisons:

- Activist A wants to set up an NGO -- is it possible to get a license for an NGO in her country? (See section below for definition of NGOs.)
- (If the answer is no, then we move into: how can you advocate changing the law in your country?)
- If yes, what are the laws governing NGOs?

- How are the laws carried out? In case there is a problem with the law or its implementation, how can A be effective in amending the law or improving its implementation?
- Can A raise awareness through the media and public debate? Is freedom of expression allowed – or is it squashed?
- Can A influence legislation by speaking to political parties and its leaders and elected officials?
- Can A (and her followers) hold legislators and executives accountable because they were publicly elected?
- Can A hold a public demonstration to express her frustration?
- If A is persecuted by the authorities, will she have a fair trial in an independent judicial system?
- If A has opponents who are close to the government, would it make a difference if A is in a democratic or non-democratic environment?
- Can A partner and communicate with foreign and international NGOs to help her with her cause?
- Does the government react differently to different types of activism?

Assessing Your Political Environment

Lesson 3: Analyze Your Branches of Government

Lesson Overview and Objectives

Overview

In this lesson, we'll discuss the branches of government, how they function in your country, and how they can protect or jeopardize your activism plan. We'll discuss:

- The role of the Legislative Branch.
- The role of the Executive Branch.
- The role of the Judicial Branch.

Objectives

- To better understand the way your government works and how you should deal with it in the course of your activism.

Readings

A – Legislative Branch

The *Legislative Branch* is a deliberative assembly with the power to create, cancel and amend laws, raise taxes and review and adopt a budget. It's commonly called a Parliament or Congress and can be made up of one or two Chambers – an Upper House and a Lower House – depending on the country and the political system.

The members of the legislature are usually elected and act as representatives of the people. This could happen by participatory elections – with the populace directly choosing their representatives, or through indirect elections -- by having other bodies electing the members. Participatory elections for Congress and Senators are the cornerstone of American politics, while French and Moroccan Senators are elected by members of local bodies and other local and national institutions.

In parliamentary systems of government, where the head of state holds limited and symbolic power, the legislature appoints the executive and is supreme. Italy (a Republic) and Spain (a Monarchy) each have parliamentary systems yet the President or the King has limited power. The head of government, or Prime Minister, holds most of the power and is entrusted by the parliament to govern. The executive branch depends on the legislature for its appointment; the legislature installs the head of government.

In presidential systems of government, the executive branch is equal to and independent from the legislature. The head of the executive branch is directly elected by the people and has to work in close collaboration with the legislature as in the American system.

B – Executive Branch

The *Executive Branch* of government is responsible for the day-to-day management of the country. In many countries, it is referred to as the “government” – which differs from the word “state” that encompasses all branches of government, agencies and institutions. In parliamentary systems, the head of government- or Prime Minister- is the head of the executive branch. In presidential systems, the President is both the head of state and the head of the executive branch as is the case in the United States or Argentina.

The head of the executive branch is assisted in his functions by a number of ministers or cabinet officials who are responsible for specific areas such as health, education, defense, etc.

The purpose of the executive branch is to enforce the laws issued by the legislature. It doesn't have the power to legislate or interpret laws (which is the role of the judiciary). However, in some cases the Prime Minister or the President may have the power to legislate during a state of emergency.

C – Judicial Branch

The *Judiciary* is the system of courts which administers justice in the name of the state. It consists of civil, criminal and other types of courts, including a court of final appeal. Judges, magistrates and support personnel make up the judicial system.

The judiciary is independent from the legislature and the executive branch, and has immunity from other government bodies to ensure its impartiality when ruling in disputes or interpreting laws.

Assignment

Please answer these questions based on our discussion of the three branches of government:

- Are your legislators elected in free and fair elections?
- Would legislators consider your demands during and after elections?
- Do you feel your legislators are receptive to the demands and concerns of their constituencies?
- How can you change laws in your country?
- Do you feel that the executive branch attained power through the will of the people?

- What can you do if you feel that you are unfairly treated by the executive branch?
- Can the executive branch prevent you from receiving the rights and privileges the law grants you? If so, what can you do to influence the executive branch?
- Are you allowed to complain about unfair treatment to the court system?
- What is the nature of the judiciary in your country? Is it independent? Can you get a fair trial?
- Why is an independent judiciary important to activists?
- Can you have more influence on a democratically-elected official or on a non-democratically elected official?

Assessing Your Political Environment

Lesson 4: Analyze Your Civic Freedoms

Lesson Overview and Objectives

Overview

In this lesson, we will analyze the practice of liberties in your country and consider how much ability you have to freely express yourself or organize public gatherings.

Objectives

By the end of this lesson, you should be able to assess how the following freedoms are practiced in your country – and how these freedoms affect your activism plan.

- Your right to freedom of speech.
- Your right to freedom of assembly and protest.
- Your right to hold public events.

Readings

A – Freedom of Speech

Freedom of Speech is a cornerstone of democratic rights and freedoms. It includes any act of receiving, seeking and sharing ideas and information regardless of the medium used. The media, the internet, lectures, conferences, opinion pieces, books, etc. are used to express ideas and communicate information.

Freedom of Speech isn't without limits; for instance, false allegations and hate and racist speech are punishable by law in many countries. Nonetheless, in democracies, citizens must have free access to information and ideas, and have the right to freely express their views. Freedom of Speech is vital, not only for human dignity, but also to the principles of political participation, transparency and accountability.

Article 19 of United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognizes the Freedom of Speech as a human right. (<http://un.org/Overview/rights.html>)

A – Freedom of Assembly

Freedom of Assembly is the right for individuals to come together and collectively pursue, express, promote and defend a common goal or interest. In democracies, groups use this right to protest or advocate government policies.

Article 20 of the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognizes the Freedom of Assembly as a human right. (<http://un.org/Overview/rights.html>)

Assignment

Let's discuss the following questions:

- As an activist, can you express yourself freely?
- Can the media freely report events in your country?
- Can you easily express your ideas and concerns?
- How can the media help your activism plan? Would free media be a burden or an advantage for your activism plan?
- Can you organize a peaceful demonstration or rally to raise awareness for your cause? What are the risks?

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Lesson 5: The Role of Civil Society

Lesson Overview and Objectives

Overview

In this lesson, we will examine how civil society groups operate in your country, how much freedom they have, and whether you can benefit by working with them to achieve your activism goals.

Objectives

By the end of this lesson, you'll explore how NGOs, unions and syndicates, and political parties function in your country and how they may be useful in your activism plan by identifying:

- The environment in which NGOs operate.
- The environment in which unions and syndicates function.
- The environment in which political parties operate.

Readings

A – Non-Governmental Organizations

Non-Governmental Organizations – NGOs – are legal organizations created by individuals or organizations without representation, participation or interference of a government. NGOs can be formed to provide assistance and support for social, political, cultural and economic projects, and are generally divided into two categories: operational and advocacy. Some NGOs implement projects on the ground while others advocate for ideas.

In democracies, NGOs are the cornerstone of a healthy political system, and play a crucial role for the advancement of civil society. Emerging democracies are more likely to succeed in their transition if they have strong and healthy NGOs. Authoritarian and totalitarian regimes often prohibit or clamp down on NGOs because they press for democratic change. Under a dictatorship, it's more difficult for NGOs to obtain licensing or to operate and its members can be persecuted or harassed by the government.

B – Unions and Syndicates

A *Union* or a *Syndicate* is an organization made up of individuals who share the same professional interest, such as workers, students, engineers, farmers, etc. The Union or Syndicate defends the interest of its members from their employers, government or unfair legislation. In democracies, unions are independent from the government and can

sometimes advocate to change or initiate legislation and laws. In undemocratic societies, unions are controlled by the government to ensure that they won't pressure the government with their demands and requests.

C – Political Parties

A *Political Party* is a political organization that espouses an ideology or a vision. It seeks to reach and maintain the control of government usually through presidential, legislative and local elections. All democracies have political parties who attain power through the ballot box.

In undemocratic environments, the role of political parties varies. There is little distinction between the party and the state. In the old Soviet Union, the Communist Party was part of the state's institutions. In other cases, the ruling party could have a monopoly on state resources, marginalizing other parties, and ensuring that they only serve as a democratic façade as in Syria.

Assignment

The following questions will serve as the base of discussion for this section:

- Can NGOs operate freely in your country?
- What is the relationship between NGOs and the government? Are all types of NGOs treated the same way?
- Can you partner with a Union or a Political Party in order to further your agenda?
- Are Unions free in your country? Are they independent?
- Can Political Parties be effective in your country even when they are in the opposition?

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Lesson 6: Your Political Environment Affects Your Activism Plan

Lesson Overview and Objectives

Overview

In this lesson, we will focus on analyzing the specific effects of your political environment on your activism plan.

Objectives

By the end of this lesson, you should be able to:

- Assess how the political environment can affect your project from inception to implementation.

Assignment

Identify what parts of your activism plan will need modification to reflect your political environment.