

Between the Streets and the Mountains: Rethinking Courage, Choice, and Accountability in Activism

By [Prof. Ruel F. Pepa](#)

Asia-Pacific Research, April 27, 2026

Region: [South-East Asia](#)

Theme: [Justice](#), [Society](#)

In memory of Alyssa Alano, a student leader at the University of the Philippines Diliman, who was among 19 people killed in a clash between Philippine government forces and New People's Army rebels in Toboso, Negros Occidental, on 19 April 2026.

Across the world, political activism takes many forms. From bustling city streets filled with chants and placards to remote mountain encampments where armed struggle unfolds, young and old individuals commit themselves to challenging governments they perceive as oppressive, corrupt, or unjust. Despite their differences in method, these activists often share a common ideological foundation: a desire for systemic change and a rejection of abuse of power.

Yet, the divergence in tactics creates a deep and often uncomfortable tension within activist movements themselves.

Some activists choose to operate in open, legal spaces. They organize protests, mobilize communities, build coalitions, and engage institutions. Their struggle is visible, public, and largely nonviolent. It depends on persuasion, moral pressure, and the belief that systems, however flawed, can be influenced or reformed through sustained civic engagement. These activists often invest time in building legitimacy, cultivating public support, and framing their cause in ways that resonate broadly. Their tools are speeches, petitions, strikes, and elections; their battlefield is the public sphere.

Others, however, become convinced that such avenues are insufficient. Repeated crackdowns, unresponsive leadership, or deeply entrenched inequalities can erode faith in peaceful methods. For them, the state is not merely unjust but structurally incapable of reform. Viewing armed struggle as necessary, they retreat to the margins, sometimes literally, into forests, deserts, or mountains, where they join revolutionary forces and prepare for direct confrontation. In these environments, discipline, secrecy, and survival replace visibility and dialogue. The logic shifts from persuasion to coercion, from symbolic resistance to material disruption.

At the level of principle, both groups may claim alignment. They speak the same language of justice, resistance, and liberation. They may even draw from the same historical narratives or ideological texts, honoring similar figures and moments of struggle. But in practice, their choices place them in entirely different realities wherein one is grounded in civil resistance, where success depends on legitimacy and numbers while the other, in

armed conflict, where success hinges on strategy, endurance, and force.

This divide is not merely strategic; it is deeply moral and psychological. Nonviolent activists may view armed struggle as a dangerous escalation that risks lives, alienates potential allies, and invites severe repression. Those who take up arms, in turn, may see peaceful activism as a naïve or complicit approach that legitimizes systems they believe must be dismantled entirely. Each side can come to question the other's effectiveness, commitment, or even integrity.

The tension between these paths often shapes the trajectory of movements. In some cases, they coexist uneasily, influencing one another in complex ways wherein peaceful protests create space for negotiation, while the threat of armed resistance increases pressure on authorities. In others, the divide leads to fragmentation, weakening the broader cause.

This divergence reflects a fundamental question at the heart of political struggle: how change is achieved, and what costs are acceptable in its pursuit. While the goal of justice may be shared, the means of reaching it remain contested revealing that within any movement for change, unity of purpose does not guarantee unity of action.

In moments of death, this disparity becomes most stark.

When an armed activist is killed in battle against government forces, it is not uncommon for non-armed activists in urban or "lowland" settings to issue strong condemnations. Statements of outrage, mourning, and solidarity circulate widely, often framing the fallen individual as a victim of state violence. Names are memorialized, stories are shared, and the language used frequently mirrors that applied to civilians harmed in clearly one-sided acts of repression.

But this reaction raises a difficult question: what exactly is being condemned?

An armed encounter between state forces and rebel fighters is, by definition, a conflict in which both sides anticipate and accept the possibility of lethal outcomes. Those who take up arms do so with an implicit or explicit understanding of the risks involved. Death, in this context, is not incidental; it is an inherent part of warfare. The battlefield, whether in remote terrain or contested rural zones, operates under a fundamentally different logic than a protest march or a community assembly. It is shaped by strategy, force, and survival rather than persuasion or public visibility.

This does not mean that all deaths in such contexts are morally equivalent or beyond scrutiny. Questions of proportionality, conduct, and legitimacy still matter deeply. Was the killing part of an active engagement, or was it an execution after capture? Were the rules of engagement followed, or were they violated? These distinctions are crucial, yet they are often blurred or ignored in the language of blanket condemnation.

For non-armed activists, the impulse to denounce such deaths may stem from genuine solidarity, a broader opposition to state power, or a desire to maintain a unified narrative of resistance. However, it can also reveal an unresolved tension: an attempt to reconcile two fundamentally different modes of struggle under a single moral framework. By framing all deaths of activists as comparable instances of victimization, the specific realities of armed conflict risk being flattened or obscured.

At the same time, acknowledging this complexity can be uncomfortable. To recognize that

an armed fighter knowingly entered a lethal confrontation is not to deny their cause or diminish their humanity. But it does complicate the narrative. It forces a distinction between tragedy and injustice, between loss and wrongdoing. Not every death in conflict can be understood in the same way as the killing of an unarmed protester or civilian.

This tension underscores a broader challenge within activist movements: how to speak honestly about the consequences of different strategies without fracturing solidarity. It raises questions about responsibility, representation, and the ethics of framing. In trying to honor the dead, movements must also grapple with the realities of the paths those individuals chose as well as the fundamentally different worlds those choices inhabit.

To ignore this reality can lead to a kind of selective moral framing. When non-armed activists condemn the killing of an armed rebel without acknowledging the conditions of armed struggle, they risk oversimplifying a complex situation. The fallen activist was not a passive participant; they made a conscious decision to engage in violent resistance, to operate in a space where confrontation is expected and where lethal force is not an aberration but a defining feature.

This does not reduce their death to something insignificant or unworthy of grief. Rather, it changes the nature of how that death is understood. There is a difference between condemning an abuse such as the killing of someone who is unarmed, detained, or otherwise out of action due to injury or damage and responding to a death that occurs within the dynamics of an armed clash. When these distinctions are blurred, moral language can lose precision, and with it, the ability to critically assess what actually took place.

This is not to deny the value of their conviction or the sincerity of their cause. On the contrary, choosing to enter an armed struggle often reflects a level of commitment that goes beyond rhetoric and into personal risk. It requires individuals to accept isolation, hardship, and the constant possibility of death. In many cases, those who take this path do so because they believe all other avenues have failed or are fundamentally closed to them. Their decision can be rooted in a deep sense of urgency, frustration, or moral duty.

But that same decision also carries consequences that cannot be easily separated from the choice itself. To participate in armed resistance is to accept a different ethical and practical framework in which actions are judged not only by intention but by their role within a cycle of force and counterforce. Death, in this setting, is not simply something inflicted; it is something risked, anticipated, and, to some extent, incorporated into the logic of the struggle.

Recognizing this does not require abandoning empathy or solidarity. It does, however, call for a more careful and honest vocabulary that can hold two ideas at once: that a person may be deeply committed to a cause one finds just, and that their chosen method of pursuing it places them in a fundamentally different moral and strategic landscape. Without that clarity, responses risk becoming more about preserving a unified narrative than about understanding the realities on the ground.

At the same time, it would be overly simplistic and ultimately misleading to dismiss non-armed activists as merely lacking courage. Courage is not a single, uniform quality that only appears under fire. It manifests in different forms, shaped by context and choice. Standing unarmed before riot police, returning to the streets after repeated crackdowns, organizing communities under constant surveillance, or risking arrest, imprisonment, or social

exclusion are acts that demand a sustained, often quieter kind of resolve. It is a courage rooted not in confrontation through force, but in persistence, visibility, and the willingness to endure pressure without retreating into violence.

For many, this path is not the “easier” option but a deliberate commitment to a different philosophy of change that seeks to transform systems without reproducing the very dynamics of coercion and harm they oppose. The risks may be less immediately lethal than those faced in armed resistance, but they are no less real. Lives can be upended, livelihoods destroyed, and personal safety continually threatened. Courage here is measured not in moments of battle, but in the ability to continue despite exhaustion, fear, and uncertainty.

The real issue, then, may not be about who is braver, but about how movements understand and respect differing paths of struggle. When these paths are reduced to caricatures wherein one side is seen as reckless militants while the other as timid reformists, the possibility for honest dialogue collapses. Each approach emerges from a set of assumptions about power, change, and what is possible within a given political context. Recognizing this does not require agreement, but it does require a willingness to engage those differences without dismissiveness.

Activism does not inherently require armed resistance. History offers numerous examples of transformative change achieved through nonviolent means, where mass participation, moral pressure, and institutional engagement reshaped political realities. At the same time, it also shows that some movements have turned to armed struggle when they rightly or wrongly concluded that all other avenues were blocked or ineffective. These choices are rarely made in a vacuum; they are shaped by conditions on the ground, by lived experiences of repression, and by differing interpretations of what constitutes viable action.

What is essential, then, is clarity and consistency. Movements must be honest about the implications of the strategies they endorse or defend. If nonviolent activism is the chosen path, it should be articulated not as a default or a limitation, but as a principled stance with its own logic and expectations. If armed struggle is supported or justified, that support should come with an acknowledgment of its realities like its risks, its ethical complexities, and its consequences.

Without this clarity, tensions deepen. Language becomes a tool not for understanding, but for smoothing over contradictions. Solidarity risks becoming performative rather than grounded. But with it, movements can at least confront their internal differences with integrity, recognizing that while their visions of justice may align, the roads they choose to pursue will not always converge.

If activists choose to support armed resistance, whether directly through participation or indirectly through advocacy, messaging, or material aid, they take on more than a symbolic position. They align themselves, at least in part, with a form of struggle in which violence is not incidental but structural. That alignment carries an obligation to confront its realities without euphemism: that armed conflict entails not only the possibility but the likelihood of injury, death, and escalation; that it draws in not just committed fighters but often affects surrounding communities; and that it can reshape the very movement it aims to advance. To support such a path while speaking of it only in abstract or romantic terms risks turning lived consequences into distant concepts.

At the same time, those who reject armed methods have their own responsibility to remain

consistent in how they articulate their position. If the commitment is to nonviolence, whether for strategic, ethical, or pragmatic reasons, then that stance should be reflected clearly in moments of crisis. It becomes difficult to maintain coherence when one simultaneously distances oneself from armed struggle while invoking the sacrifices of those who engage in it as if they were interchangeable with nonviolent actors. Respecting individuals who chose that path does not require adopting their framework or blurring the distinctions that define it.

This is where the question of consistency becomes especially important. Movements often rely on shared narratives to sustain unity, but when those narratives flatten meaningful differences, they can obscure more than they reveal. Acknowledging that different strategies carry different consequences does not weaken a movement; it can, in fact, strengthen its internal honesty. It allows participants to understand not only what they are working toward, but what they are and are not willing to endorse along the way.

Condemnation, to be meaningful, must therefore be grounded in a full understanding of context, not just emotion or ideological alignment. Outrage alone, however sincere, is not a substitute for clarity. To condemn effectively is to identify what, specifically, is being objected to: is it the fact of death itself, the conditions under which it occurred, or the broader system that produced the conflict? Without that precision, condemnation can become diffuse like an expression of grief or anger that gestures toward injustice without clearly naming it.

A more grounded response does not require detachment or indifference. It allows space for mourning, for solidarity, and for critique, but it anchors those responses in a recognition of reality. In doing so, it avoids collapsing distinct experiences into a single narrative and instead engages with the difficult, often uncomfortable truth that the paths people choose in pursuit of change shape not only their goals, but the terms on which they live and die within that struggle.

In the end, the divide between the streets and the mountains is not just geographical. It is philosophical, strategic, and deeply human. It reflects fundamentally different answers to the same underlying questions: What is power? How does it yield? What risks are justified in trying to transform it? And what responsibilities come with the methods one chooses? These are not abstract disagreements; they shape how people live, act, and ultimately what they are willing to sacrifice.

For those in the streets, change is often imagined as something built patiently, collectively, and in public view. It relies on legitimacy, numbers, and the belief that systems can be pressured, reformed, or reshaped from within or alongside existing structures. For those in the mountains, change may be seen as something seized through rupture rather than reform, through confrontation rather than negotiation. Each path carries its own internal logic, and each demands a different kind of commitment, discipline, and tolerance for uncertainty.

Bridging that divide, then, requires more than expressions of solidarity that gloss over these differences. It demands intellectual honesty: a willingness to name what each path entails without softening its edges or selectively framing its consequences. It also requires mutual respect not in the sense of uncritical agreement, but in recognizing that individuals arrive at their choices through lived experiences, constraints, and convictions that are not always visible from the outside.

Perhaps most difficult of all, it calls for a readiness to confront uncomfortable truths about choice, risk, and responsibility. Every strategy carries trade-offs. Every form of resistance creates not only possibilities, but costs borne by those who choose the path and often by those around them. To engage seriously with these realities is to move beyond simplified narratives of heroism or victimhood and toward a more grounded understanding of struggle itself.

Such an approach does not resolve the divide, nor does it eliminate tension. But it creates the conditions for something more durable than surface-level unity: a form of engagement rooted in clarity rather than assumption. In that space, disagreement can exist without distortion, and when solidarity is expressed, it can carry a weight that is earned through understanding rather than asserted through rhetoric.

*

Click the share button below to email/forward this article. Follow us on [Instagram](#) and [X](#) and subscribe to our [Telegram Channel](#). Feel free to repost Global Research articles with proper attribution.

Prof. Ruel F. Pepa is a Filipino philosopher based in Madrid, Spain. A retired academic (Associate Professor IV), he taught Philosophy and Social Sciences for more than fifteen years at Trinity University of Asia, an Anglican university in the Philippines. He is a Research Associate of the Centre for Research on Globalization (CRG).

Featured image [source](#)

Global Research is a reader-funded media. We do not accept any funding from corporations or governments. Help us stay afloat. Click the image below to make a one-time or recurring donation.



The original source of this article is Asia-Pacific Research
Copyright © [Prof. Ruel F. Pepa](#), Asia-Pacific Research, 2026

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: **Prof. Ruel F. Pepa**

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). Asia-Pacific Research will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. Asia-Pacific Research grants permission to cross-post Asia-Pacific Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Asia-Pacific Research article. For publication of Asia-Pacific Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: editors@asia-pacificresearch.com

www.asia-pacificresearch.com contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: editors@asia-pacificresearch.com