



**Inclusive Peace**  
setting change in motion



Image Credits: Thomas Val, 2020

# Trajectories of Exile Movements

April 2025

[inclusivepeace.org](https://inclusivepeace.org)

# Trajectories of Exile Movements

For the past two decades, the decline of freedom in the world and rising authoritarianism have driven an increasing number of people into exile.<sup>1</sup> The trend shows that more countries have slid toward repression than political openness, but the decline has been accompanied by electoral unrest and public protests.

Due to the lack of an existing dataset on exile movements, Inclusive Peace investigated states with histories of authoritarian government and looked for evidence of opposition movements, governments-in-exile, and exiled political groups. The following graphic illustrates the trajectory of 41 exiled groups throughout the 20th and 21st centuries from different regions of the world. The trajectory of political exile can oscillate between “return” and “no-return” pathways, each with distinct outcomes shaped by their initial organisation, political goals, received support and iterations. Those still in exile may follow varied pathways, ranging from full integration into the host country to recurrent cycles of displacement due to entrenched authoritarian rule.

The key factors important for the exile experience are:

1. the form and history of an exiled group (role and identity, organisation, ideology, leadership, resources)
2. external context (geopolitics, international support, strategy and policy change)
3. host country context (regional power, global power, ideological compatibility between exiles and host country)
4. home country context (regime type, level of repressions, access to political processes, public opinion).

**The “duration” of exile was defined as the length of time in years from when a group was forced to leave their home country, usually marked by a specific event (coup, elections, persecutions, etc.) to either when they returned or formally dissolved due to domestic political changes.<sup>2</sup>**

As shown by Figures 1 and 2, most exile movements spend decades in exile. Exiles in the late 20th century often remained abroad for decades due to the prolonged rule of authoritarian regimes in their home countries, as well as the enduring polarisation of the Cold War, in which the NATO powers and the socialist powers both had compelling reasons to sponsor governments in exile for decades. The two most important relationships illustrated by this dataset are:

1. Exiles in opposition for more than a few years generally return as the beneficiaries of struggle by other actors, either new resistance forces in the homeland, or a political change driven by invasion or occupation.

This relationship would be the most interesting to explore in an expanded data project. It may be possible to determine whether exiles’ chances of success diminish in a linear fashion, or whether there is a threshold number of years beyond which chances of success drop off precipitously. Exiles may nevertheless enjoy significant influence in the new political transition due to their symbolic legitimacy.

1. Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2024.

2. The comparison of duration (in years) required for estimation of some durations (e.g., ZANU from Zimbabwe with approximately 20 years from the 1960s to 1980).

## 2. The longer a regime lasts, the longer its exiles must endure.

This is an intuitive point, but still worth stating: return from exile is very closely related to political change and especially political liberalisation at home. Exiles from Latin American countries generally returned relatively quickly, as periods of military rule were generally frequent but short-lived. Exile by African and East European regimes was generally longer-lasting, which may be due to the greater availability of support from either the US or the USSR during the Cold War (whereas the Americas were insulated from this pressure by Soviet respect for the “Monroe doctrine”).

Earlier exiled groups often include governments-in-exile (ousted by invasion, revolution, or military coups) while recent cases are made up of broader movements and coalitions against authoritarian rule. In addition, the population seems to cluster around the period between the 1950s and 1960s, which reflects geopolitical changes, decolonisation struggles, and the rise of liberation movements that feature less formal organisation than governments-in-exile but are often organised around ideology or nationalism (e.g.: ANC from South Africa, FRELIMO from Mozambique, Peronists from Argentina).

Armed resistance organisations fade the fastest, while governments-in-exile have had the longest history of operating from abroad. This may be because armed resistance movements are expected to deliver continuous evidence of their vitality (kidnappings, bombings, insurgency), whereas government-in-exile can remain active even while in a kind of hibernation or stasis, relying on engagements in certain international fora or alliances. The standard of evidence of vitality applied to governments-in-exile is also much less demanding: a high level meeting every few months or an active social media account. The duration of anti-USSR exile groups was among the longest, sometimes enduring even after the end of Soviet rule. The longest exile – the Rada of the Belarusian Democratic Republic has been in exile for 107 years.

The sample seems to indicate that the average duration of exile has been dropping consistently since the first half of the 20th century. Shortened durations seem to be explained by successive waves of democratisation (as in Latin America, Eastern Europe), which have driven political liberalisation sufficient for many exile groups to either return or give up their struggle. There have also been more recent examples, where a relatively short duration has meant that organised exile movements have been dissolved, discontinued, or disintegrated. However, it is yet to be seen how the most recent cases will evolve over time.



## Comparison of duration of exile

