Warning Shots: Low-Level Violent Repression as a Signal of Violent State Resolve

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**Abstract:**

Primary to all other goals of the state is the goal of survival. While citizen well-being, economic prosperity, defensive strength, and other features of well-made states are undoubtedly more impressive and desirable traits, state survival and stability comprise the foundation upon which all other aspects of the state are built. As such, when emerging challengers threaten the state’s survival, it follows that the state will address the threat using whatever tools are at its disposal. Even better if the state is able to preempt said challengers before they emerge and damage the resources or perceived legitimacy of the state. Given the immense threat that challengers pose to survival, particularly when the state is developing or new, it follows that states would like to deter the emergence of such contenders using whatever resources are at their disposal, one such being the repression of their population and the targeting of any challengers that emerge. States do not know all the groups within their population that might emerge as challengers to the state’s authority and/or territory, so the entirety of the populous comprises a potential threat. So, why \textbf{\textit{wouldn't}} a state repress its population if the emergence of internal challengers would threaten the state's survival?

The answer to this is twofold - cost and efficacy. The use of repression against the civilian population carries both domestic and international costs for the state. The norm of civilian immunity is deeply ingrained in the international community and in international law (\cite{Bellamy2012a}). Violations of this norm can incur sanctions from abroad, loss of support, or decreased reputation. Domestically, the use of repression can cost the state the support of their citizens and the revenue the citizenry provides (\cite{DeMeritt2013a}). If the choice is between survival and the costs of repression, it may still be worth it for the state. This has been demonstrated to be true in autocracies where repression is much more likely when the threat of the leader losing power is high (\cite{Abouzzohour2021a}). So then, the true question is, is repression of a state’s population effective in preventing the emergence of challengers to the state’s survival?

I argue that the use of repression against a state’s civilian population not only is not successful in preventing the emergence of domestic territorial challengers, but also creates an environment in which potential challengers may see no viable alternative to seizing territory. Once a challenger has emerged and seized territory, however, this relationship becomes more complex as states encounter dual domestic audiences for their actions – the newly emerged group that has seized control of territory as well as the broader population from which additional challengers might emerge.

In this article, I put forth a theory explaining how a state’s use of repression influences the motivations and incentives for non-state actors within the sovereign state to seize control of territory. After laying out this theory, I generate a number of testable hypotheses regarding the emergence of a state’s first territorial contender as well as subsequent challengers. Using data on territorial contenders from Lemke and Crabtree (\citeyear{Lemke2020c}), I evaluate my hypotheses using a combination of repeat failure modeling and multiple interrupted time series designs. I conclude by situating these findings within the broader context of the state making and human rights literatures, proposing promising avenues for future research.

**Is Repression a State Making or State Breaking Tool?**

To unpack why states would choose to violate strong international norms and repress their citizens, it is important to start by stating what the state wants. While the motivations of the state may be complex and varied, underlying all else is the desire to survive. Much has been written regarding this fundamental desire for survival by the state, most notably by the late Charles Tilly (\cite{Tilly1975,Tilly1985,Tilly1990b}). Tilly paints a picture of states as actors\footnote{In this article, I focus on "the state" as a unitary actor. This is a strong assumption that glosses over much of the complexity of how governance actually occurs. However, I assert that such a simplification is necessary for isolating the interactions between non-state actors and the government of the sovereign state. Therefore, I leave the exploration of the actors within the state to future work.} who engage in a variety of essential activities with the purpose of protecting their resources, ensuring the survival of the state, and building up the governance structure through conflict and state making. Central among these activities is "attacking and checking competitors and challengers within the territory claimed by the state." (\cite[p. 96]{Tilly1990b}) This activity is referred to as "statemaking" by Tilly.

This central goal of state preservation and expansion necessitates that a steady and sufficient supply of resources be extracted from the state’s territory and population. While the state could use force to seize these resources from the population, a much more sustainable strategy is through continued resource extraction in the form of taxation. The state can maximize its extractive capacity through developing the internal structure of the state, strengthening bureaucratic institutions, building physical infrastructure, and other internal improvements. Ensuring the continuation of their extractive capacity also requires the state to protect its core population and its current regime. These state making goals are directly challenged by oppositional or dissident factions from within the territory that disrupt the flow of resources and the stability of the area.

These internal challengers can come in many varieties. Examples of commonly studied categories of internal challengers are self-determination movements (\cite{Coggins2014a}), de facto states (\cite{Florea2014c}), unrecognized states (\cite{Caspersen2012c}), rebel groups (\cite{Arjona2016a,Huang2016c,Stewart2018c}), or territorial contenders (\cite{Lemke2020c,LemkeKarstens2022}). Opposition to the state can form along existing fault lines among the population such as socioeconomic, class, or ethnic identities, geographical similarities, or common goals. The threat posed by the opposition group is dependent on what demands it makes of the state (\cite{Gobel2021}), whether the group is actively in conflict with the government (\cite{Carey2010a}), how much the group's members contribute to the regime's financial or political survival (\cite{Conrad2013d,DeMeritt2013a}), and whether the group has seized control of territory (\cite{KarstensLemkeFragile}). The level of threat can vary drastically, from harmless dissent on the light end all the way to state failure on the extreme. While domestic and international costs of repression certainly matter in a state's decision to repress, the impact of these factors are mitigated by the threat posed by the opposition (\cite{Gartner1996a}). In cases where the state fears the level of threat is high enough to endanger its survival, I expect the state to want to take action to prevent or address the threat.

Many of the ways in which a state can check internal challengers and/or deter the emergence of opposition fall under the umbrella term of repression. Repression is the use or threat of physical sanctions against a person or group for the purpose of imposing costs on the target as well as discouraging certain actions or beliefs believed to be harmful by the state (\cite[p. xxvii]{Goldstein1978}). Repression can include violations of bodily integrity rights such as extrajudicial killing, torture, or starvation, as well as violations of civil rights like freedom of movement, speech, or assembly.\footnote{There is reason to believe that the form of repression affects how it is perceived by the repressed (\cite{FarissSchnak2014,Esberg2021a}). I do not address the effect that the form of a state's repressive strategy may have on deterring internal challengers in this article due to data availability. This is a promising area for future work.} While the means of repression differ from case to case, a constant fact is that repression is designed to use the coercive power of the state to manipulate the behavior of the target and the audience.

I focus on repressive acts perpetrated by official state actors. States are the most studied perpetrators of repressive acts. This is not to say that non-state actors such as territorial contenders, rebel groups, secessionist movements, or terrorist organizations are not capable of committing the same repressive acts as states. Quite to the contrary, non-state actors can use strategies of repression to control or influence individuals in their areas of influence. However, I and many other repression scholars choose to focus on the state due to its unique access to repressive resources, monopoly on the legitimate use of force, and perceived legitimacy within its borders. When a state chooses to repress members of its population, it does so as an official actor. Its actions are being evaluated by its population, members of the regime’s winning coalition, as well as international actors. This influences the state’s decision-making process. This means that sometimes states might engage in repressive behaviors like censorship less for the purpose of manipulating the target and more for the satisfaction of its supporters (\cite{Esberg2020}).

When facing the threat of potential emergent challengers, a state may choose to use repression directly to eliminate or check internal rivals to the state's authority. Given the state is able to identify potential challengers or groups, it can use its coercive power to inhibit the threat's ability to function. Violent forms of repression can be used to eliminate group leaders or physically intimidate supporters, thus preventing them from mobilizing in the first place. Similarly, states can also use non-violent forms of repression to achieve this goal. Targeted surveillance or policing can be used to demonstrate control of the area and monitor the group’s behavior. Arbitrary arrests and political imprisonment can be used to directly remove group leaders without resorting to lethal force. And finally, forced migration can be used to move the population of the area to another region. All of these strategies are used to directly disrupt the formation of the internal challenger through the removal of leadership, the hindrance of organization, or the intimidation of supporters.

From the perspective of the state, successful repression would consist of no or fewer active internal challengers to the state. A state need not wait for opposition to amass or do concrete harm to the state to begin a repressive campaign. In cases where the state anticipates the emergence of a serious threat from its population, it makes sense that the state would preemptively repress their population (\cite{NordasDavenport2013}). Preemptive repression could stifle the formation or organization of opposition through the denial of civil liberties and freedoms. Even if the state only represses a few potentially problematic groups or demographics, doing so could prevent the formation of unified opposition (\cite{Fedorowycz2021a}). Additionally, by flexing the repressive muscles of the state, the state signals its willingness to respond strongly to future opposition.

In general, when a state uses repression against its population, it attempts to deter the emergence of challengers and remove any pre-existing threats. From this, I derive hypothesis 1A:

**Hypothesis 1A:** States that heavily repress their civilians will be less likely to face domestic territorial challengers.

However, this story and hypothesis address only one part of the picture. Up to this point, I have focused solely on the risks internal challengers pose to the state and how the state is likely to respond to said challengers. This excludes, however, the arguably most important actor in the interaction, namely the audience of the state’s repressive actions: the citizens and potential internal challengers.

**How Repression is received:**

Consider the story I presented in the previous section, in which states decide if and whom to repress based on the level of threat they perceive. This treats the civilian population as essentially static: a group of individuals who pose a set level of threat based on the composition of the population, preexisting dissent, or any number of other traits. In practice, however, the citizens of a population are a conglomerate of people and groups that make choices of their own depending on both their own desires as well as the environment in which they operate. As such, while the state might see a population as posing a certain level of threat, that threat is only realized if members of the citizenry decide to act. Repression and dissent are strategic and interrelated, meaning that states decide to repress based on their perceptions of how the population will respond, while the population acts based on how they believe the government will respond (\cite{Pierskalla2010,Ritter2014a,Shadmehr2022a}).

Bloom (2020) the reaction of the repressed to repression depends on what practices are being repressed.

States do not always (or even often) target all members of their population with repression evenly. While a blanket, indiscriminate repressive strategy may be advantageous when the state does not know who among the citizenry are potential threats to the state’s survival, it is more cost effective and possibly more impactful if the repression is restricted to specific groups. Experiencing repression has a profound effect on a state’s population, particularly those who are the targets of the repression. Existing literature in political psychology has explored how repression shapes the self and group identification of its targets. Individuals or groups that are collectively targeted by repression are more likely to form bonds and rearrange their group identification to be more closely aligned with one another. This strengthens existing bonds within the repressed group and weakens past divisions. Conversely, when one group is subject to targeted repression and another is not, this can result in increased polarization (Nugent 2020, pg 292).

**When does repression work?**

Having now looked at repression from the perspective of the state as well as from the perspective of the repressed population, does hypothesis 1A still hold? The answer to this is heavily conditional on

* When does repression work?
* Stop the bleeding – when the state is facing both active contenders and the potential for more simultaneously.
* Research Design
  + Overview
  + Territorial Contenders
    - Description of them
    - Temporal Range
    - Explain Sample
  + Human Right Protections
    - Description
    - Components
    - Temporal Range
    - Things that need to be managed given that they are estimated

**Measuring Human Rights**

In order to capture how states treat their citizens, I use the human rights protection (hrp) scores originally creates by Chris Fariss as my primary independent variable (\cite{hrpscores}).

For the purposes of my analysis, I treat the posterior mean score of the hrp model as a country-year indicator of state respect for human rights. This is appropriate and does not bias my findings when used as the dependent variable, given that any error surrounding the estimate can be accounted for by the error term of the model. However, when used as an independent variable on the right hand side of the model, latent scores such as this require additional treatment in order to account for the uncertainty surrounding the estimate (\cite{hrpappx}). In models where I use the human rights protection scores as an independent variable, I account for this uncertainty by using a simulation approach, much like one would use for instances of multiply imputed data (\cite{King2001}).

Best practices for handling situations such as this are fully explained by \citet{Mislevy1991} and \citet{FarissSchnak2013}, though I briefly explain the procedure as I applied it here. Using the mean and standard error of the posterior estimates provided by \citet{hrpscores} for each country-year, I took a random draw for entry. I then saved this set of simulated human rights protection scores as a new variable. I repeated this procedure five times, resulting in five simulated sets of human rights protection scores.\footnote{These simulated sets of data can be found in the replication files for this article.} When estimating my models, I estimate each five times, each with a different set of hrp scores, saving the model results for each iteration. While the other variables in the model were not simulated, due to the effect of the hrp variable on all coefficient estimates in the model, each model resulted in different coefficients and standard errors for all variables. After completing all five runs, I combine the results in accordance with best practices. The reported coefficient estimate is the mean of all five estimated models. The standard error is calculated using Donald B. Rubin's \citeyear{Rubin1987} formula, listed below in equation 3.1.

In this formula, $s^2\_{k}$ represents the squared standard error for simulation $k$, $m$ represents the number of total simulations (5 in this case), and $\sigma^2\_{\beta}$ represents the variance in coefficient estimates between simulations. Essentially, this distills down to the average standard error plus the variance in the coefficient estimates multiplied by a correction term to account for the simulated nature of the data. Using these calculated coefficients and standard errors, I am then able to calculate the remaining statistics reported in my results section.

* + Controls

**Control Variables**

There are many reasons to believe that the regime type of the state will influence the state’s use of repression as well as how the population might respond to said repression.

* + Modeling Strategy
* Results and Discussion
  + Repeat Failure
  + Interrupted TS to separate the ordering.

**Conclusions**: