



A dictator's toolkit: Understanding how co-optation affects repression in autocracies

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Abstract

A dictator's motivation for using repression is fairly clear, but why some repress more than others or favor particular types of repressive strategies is less obvious. Using statistical analysis, this article demonstrates that a dictator's reliance on co-optation fundamentally alters how repression is used. Specifically, it finds that co-optation through the use of political parties and a legislature creates incentives that lead dictators to decrease empowerment rights restrictions, like censorship, while increasing physical integrity rights violations, like torture and political imprisonment. This occurs because, by creating parties and a legislature, a dictator draws his potential opposition out of the general public and into state institutions, making it easier to identify who these opponents are, to monitor their activities, and to gauge the extent of their popular support. This reduces the need to impose broad types of repressive measures, like empowerment rights restrictions, that breed discontent within the overall population. At the same time, co-optation creates the risk that rivals, once co-opted, will use their positions within the system to build their own bases of support from which to seek the dictator's overthrow, generating incentives for dictators to increase physical integrity violations to limit the threat posed by these individuals.