

# Repression as a Cause of Coups

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## **Abstract**

Previous work has shown that the possibility of defection from regime security forces may deter the use of repression. Yet, such defection nevertheless occurs in cases such as Syria (The Free Syrian Army), Libya, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (M23).

## **Introduction**

When the Arab Spring protests spread to Syria in March of 2011, the regime of President Bashar al-Assad quickly responded with forceful repression, including the torture and killing of a 13-year-old boy (Macleod and Flamand 2011). While this brutality was presumably intended to deter threats to the regime, it arguably backfired by provoking the defection of a substantial portion of the regime military including Colonel Hussein Harmoush, who expressed a feeling of complicity in the government actions, saying that “I defected from the Syrian Arab army and took responsibility for protecting civilians... I feel like I am responsible for the deaths of every single martyr in Syria,” (Abouzeid 2011). Riyad al-Assad, who defected from the Syrian Air to form the Free Syrian Army rebel group, similarly declared his intent to protect protestors and resist the regime military (Lister 2016). Several other contemporary rebel groups have similar origins, including M23 in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the National Liberation Army in Libya, suggesting that the phenomenon could be widespread. This paper thus seeks to answer two questions. First, does the use of repression place regimes at greater risk of desertion and coups? Second, under what conditions is repression most likely to produce such outcomes?

The fragmentation of the regime military is a key dynamic in many conflicts, and potentially explains why the Arab Spring led to civil war in Syria and Libya, but not in other countries. Similar processes have occurred in numerous other cases, as more than 15% of rebel groups since World War II have traced their origins to the regime military, and an additional 9% were founded by civilian regime officials (Bowden 2017). These rebellions have received little attention from scholars, and while some existing theories of civil war onset such as greed theory (Collier and Hoeffler 2004) could potentially account for them, many, including theories focusing on ethnic discrimination (e.g. Cederman, Wimmer, and Min 2010) and protest escalation (e.g. Pierskalla 2010), assume that rebellions originate outside the government. Studying these cases thus offers the possibility of enhancing our understanding of civil war onset.

Another prominent form of regime fragmentation — coups d'état — has been the subject of much scholarship. While most of the existing literature focuses on broader structural conditions affecting coup risk, some identify a connection between protests and coup occurrence (Casper and Tyson 2014; Johnson and Thyne 2018). Hendrix and Salehyan (2017) consider the government's response to protests, finding that the possibility of regime fragmentation often deters the use of repression. Yet, fragmentation does occur, suggesting the need for further research analyzing fragmentation as a dependent variable. Additionally, deterrence effects create the possibility of endogeneity, but existing studies have not fully corrected for this concern. This study advances the literature on coups and repression by making coups a dependent variable, by accounting for the possibility of endogeneity through the use of an instrumental variable, and by examining a wider set of cases than previous studies.

This research also contributes to the literature on human rights. Understandably, most work in this area has focused on the causes of human rights violations. Several scholars, however, have turned their attention to the consequences of human rights violations for

outcomes such as foreign direct investment (Blanton and Blanton 2007) and foreign aid (Lebovic and Voeten 2009), and others have suggested that repression could provoke infighting amongst regime factions (Hendrix and Salehyan 2017). These consequences of human rights violations could offer insight to preventing abuses in the future. For example, if regime fragmentation has the potential to constrain abusive behavior (Hendrix and Salehyan 2017), disrupting the flow of private benefits to soldiers might undermine solidarity and strengthen this effect. By comparing specific mechanisms linking repression to regime fragmentation, this study offers the prospect of such policy recommendations.

I proceed with a review of the literature on regime fragmentation, including coups, rebellions, and desertion. Next, I articulate three theoretical processes that could link repression to regime fragmentation. I then specify a research design to test these propositions, and present results from fixed-effects and instrumental variables regression models. I conclude by situating the results in the broader literature, and by offering suggestions for future research.

## **Prior Work on Regime Fragmentation**

While some forms of political violence are often considered jointly, such as protests and civil war or civil and international war, coups d'état are typically treated as distinct phenomenon, and are not considered jointly with other forms of violence.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>One notable exception is Roessler (2011)

## **Research Design**

### **Control Variables**

As coups have been shown to be most prevalent in relatively poor states (Londregan and Poole 1990), I include the per capita gross domestic product using data from Gleditsch (2002) (version 6.0 beta) for the period 1950-2011.

# Results

Table 1: Fixed-Effects Logit Models of Coups

	(1) Model 1	(2) Model 2	(3) Model 3	(4) Model 4
Latent Protection Score	-0.50*** (0.11)			
Low Protection Score		-0.02 (0.19)		
navco_repression			0.16* (0.07)	
NAVCO Campaigns				0.28 (0.16)
Autocracy	-0.65*** (0.15)	-0.52*** (0.15)	-0.52*** (0.15)	-0.52*** (0.15)
Democracy	-0.24 (0.20)	-0.30 (0.20)	-0.31 (0.20)	-0.31 (0.20)
Military Regime	0.33 (0.18)	0.44* (0.18)	0.37* (0.18)	0.37* (0.18)
log GDPpc	-0.24 (0.17)	-0.32 (0.17)	-0.30 (0.17)	-0.30 (0.17)
log Population	-1.54*** (0.18)	-1.34*** (0.17)	-1.35*** (0.17)	-1.35*** (0.17)
Civil Conflict	0.22 (0.19)	0.56** (0.18)	0.32 (0.20)	0.39* (0.20)
High Disappearances				
High Extrajudicial Killing				
High Political Prisoners				
High Torture				
Genocide				
N	4340	4340	4340	4340

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

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