I Didn't Sign Up for This: Repression and the Fragmentation of Regime Forces

David Bowden

August 25, 2018

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 question. 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 Syria and Libya, but not in other countries. Similar processes have occurred in numerous other cases, as original data presented herein shows that 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. 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'etat — 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'etat are typically treated as distinct phenomenon, and are not considered jointly with other forms of violence.[1] Given examples such as the Free Syrian Army, however, I argue that there is considerable overlap between coups and civil wars. Thus, I analyze coups and rebellions that originate from the regime jointly under the umbrella term "regime fragmentation."

[1] One notable exception is Roessler (2011).

Dissent, Repression, and Coups

The literature often conceptualizes coup attempts as coordination problems among elites (Weeks 2008; Svolik 2012b; Powell 2012). Protests can potentially solve this coordination problem by revealing the regime's ability to deter challenges (Casper and Tyson 2014; Johnson and Thyne 2018). These signals are likely to be especially influential when protests are non-violent (Johnson and Thyne 2018), occur in or near the national capital (Johnson and Thyne 2018), and are amplified by a free press (Casper and Tyson 2014). Protests can also serve as a motive for coup attempts by signaling the illegitimacy of the regime (Johnson and Thyne 2018), and enhance opportunities for successful coups by empowering the military (Svolik 2012a).

While protests are associated with a statistically-significant increase in the probability of coups (Casper and Tyson 2014; Johnson and Thyne 2018), responding to protests with force is not necessarily a wise choice for regimes. Hendrix and Salehyan (2017) argue that the use of repression can cause backlash within the military, and show that this possibility deters repressive tactics, particularly when coup-risk is especially, as is the case for militaries that have previously experienced infighting, and for protests which emphasize ethnic or religious identities. While this deterrent effect is substantial, a great deal of repression occurs nonetheless. Neither Hendrix and Salehyan (2017) nor any other study to my knowledge examines the reverse relationship assessing, in effect, whether the assumption that repression leads to regime fragmentation is correct. Furthermore, the use of repression is likely endogenous to potential reactions to its use (Ritter and Conrad 2016). The body of evidence on the relationship between repression and regime fragmentation would therefore be strengthened by analyses using causal identification techniques such as the instrumental variable analysis presented here.

Repression and Civil War

Many scholars of political violence and human rights have examined the "repression-dissent nexus," often focusing on the role of government repression in escalating unrest. There is widespread agreement that repression can backfire and escalate dissident activities, though the conditions under which this occurs are contested. Early work in this area disaggregated dissident activity, showing that repression reduces non-violent dissent while increasing violent opposition (Lichbach 1987; Moore 1998). Rasler (1996) emphasizes temporal dynamics, providing evidence that repression reduces dissident activity in the short-run while increasing it in the long-run. Pierskalla (2010) criticizes prior studies for their lack of attention to strategic interplay, and finds that escalation should only occur in the presence of a third-party threat. The preceding findings concern primarily the qualitative character of dissent, rather than the quantitative volume. The consistency of repressive or accommodative policies (Lichbach 1987), the forcefulness of repressive tactics (Hegre et al. 2001; Pierskalla 2010), and prior history of civil conflict (Bell and Murdie 2018) have been posited as explanations for the aggregate level of dissent.

The preceding studies generally define escalation in relative terms, leaving unclear the frequency with which the violence they observe aligns with scholarly definitions of civil war.[2] However, several works do focus specifically on civil war as a form of escalation. Some scholars conceptualize repression and civil war as distinct equilibria (Besley and Persson 2009; Choi and Kim 2018). The probability that repression is met by effective resistance (the civil war outcome) rather than remaining one-sided is shown to increase with the material value of winning control of the government (Besley and Persson 2009), decrease with the inclusiveness of political institutions (Besley and Persson 2009; Choi and Kim 2018), and increase with the size of the dominant ethnic group relative to the

[2]Such definitions typically entail a minimum threshold of severity such as 25 fatalities per calendar year, a substantial degree of organization on both sides, and some amount of competitiveness between the two sides. For a representative example, see Pettersson and Eck (2018).

size of the minimum winning coalition (Choi and Kim 2018). Others treat repression and civil war as sequential steps in a process of escalation. In this view, repression often proves counterproductive as it decreases support for the regime (Young 2013) and increases the probability of civil war. Interestingly, this relationship does not appear to be conditional on the efficacy of repression, as effective repression increases the risk of civil war by further inflaming tensions, while ineffective repression does so by emboldening dissidents (Davenport, Armstrong II, and Lichbach, n.d.). In addition to being associated with the onset of civil conflict, repression predicts increased violence by existing rebel groups (Shellman, Levey, and Young 2013).

The studies reviewed here have consistently found a link between repression and the onset of civil conflict. However, tests of specific theoretical mechanisms have been less conclusive. A potential reason for this is that while all of the theories above assume that rebel groups emerge from non-state dissident movements, original data presented here reveals that a large number of rebellions included in commonly-used datasets are launched by members of the regime. Differences in the conditions under which repression produces these two types of rebellions could account for the inconclusive results on mechanisms observed thus far. This analysis could shed light on such a possibility.

Theorizing Regime Fragmentation

H1a: Repression increases the probability of coups H1b: Repression increases the probability of regime rebellion

H2: There is a positive interaction between the level of repression and the share of the military with ethnic ties to the repressed

H3: There is a positive interaction between the level of repression and the level of infighting amongst military factions

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) Coup	(2) Regime Rebellion	(3) Coup	(4) Regime Rebellion
Latent Protection Score	-0.50***	-0.94***		
	(0.11)	(0.23)		
NAVCO Repression			0.16*	0.25
			(0.07)	(0.14)
Autocracy	-0.65***	-0.85**	-0.52***	-0.58
	(0.15)	(0.33)	(0.15)	(0.32)
Democracy	-0.24	-0.19	-0.31	-0.37
	(0.20)	(0.48)	(0.20)	(0.48)
Military Regime	0.33	0.17	0.37*	0.34
	(0.18)	(0.46)	(0.18)	(0.45)
log GDPpc	-0.24	0.08	-0.30	-0.05
	(0.17)	(0.40)	(0.17)	(0.38)
log Population	-1.54***	-1.01*	-1.35***	-0.58
	(0.18)	(0.40)	(0.17)	(0.36)
Civil Conflict	0.22	-0.98*	0.32	-0.67
	(0.19)	(0.42)	(0.20)	(0.45)
N	4340	2210	4340	2210

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

Table 2: Fixed-Effects Logit Models of Coups

	(1) Coup	(2) Coup
Latent Protection Score	-0.60*	-0.17
	(0.29)	(0.36)
Latent Protection Score	0.00	
	(.)	
	(0.01)	(0.02)
	(.)	
Autocracy	-0.47	-0.58
	(0.39)	(0.40)
Democracy	-0.23	-0.27
	(0.62)	(0.61)
Military Regime	-0.75	-0.79
	(0.57)	(0.57)
log GDPpc	-0.09	-0.01
	(0.39)	(0.40)
log Population	-1.69***	-1.78***
	(0.43)	(0.46)
Civil Conflict	-0.11	-0.27
	(0.43)	(0.44)
Latent Protection Score ×		(0.01)
N	778	778

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

References

Abouzeid, Rania. 2011. "The Soldier Who Gave up on Assad to Protect Syria's People." *Time*. https://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2077348,00.html.

Bell, Sam R, and Amanda Murdie. 2018. "The Apparatus for Violence: Repression, Violent Protest, and Civil War in a Cross-National Framework." *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 35 (4): 336–54.

Besley, Timothy, and Torsten Persson. 2009. "Repression or Civil War?" *American Economic Review* 99 (2): 292–97.

Blanton, Shannon Lindsey, and Robert G. Blanton. 2007. "What Attracts Foreign Investors? An Examination of Human Rights and Foreign Direct Investment." *The Journal of Politics* 69 (1): 143–55.

Casper, Brett Allen, and Scott A. Tyson. 2014. "Popular Protest and Elite Coordination in

a Coup d'état." *Journal of Politics* 76 (2): 548–64.

Cederman, Lars-Erik, Andreas Wimmer, and Brian Min. 2010. "Why Do Ethnic Groups Rebel?: New Data and Analysis." *World Politics* 62 (1): 87–98.

Choi, Hyun Jin, and Dongsuk Kim. 2018. "Coup, Riot, War: How Political Institutions and Ethnic Politics Shape Alternative Forms of Political Violence." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 30 (4): 718–39.

Collier, Paul, and Anke Hoeffler. 2004. "Greed and Grievance in Civil War." *Oxford Economic Papers* 56 (4): 563–95.

Davenport, Christian, David A. Armstrong II, and Mark I. Lichbach. n.d. "From Mountains to Movements : Dissent , Repression and Escalation to Civil War." *Unpublished*.

Gleditsch, Kristian Skrede. 2002. "Expanded Trade and GDP Data." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46 (5): 712–24.

Hegre, Havard, Tanja Ellison, Scott Gates, and Nils Petter Gleditsch. 2001. "Toward a Democratic Civil Peace? Democracy, Political Change, and Civil War, 1816-1992." *American Political Science Review* 95 (1): 33–48.

Hendrix, Cullen S., and Idean Salehyan. 2017. "A House Divided: Threat Perception, Military Factionalism, and Repression in Africa." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 61 (8): 1653–81.

Johnson, Jaclyn, and Clayton L. Thyne. 2018. "Squeaky Wheels and Troop Loyalty: How Domestic Protests Influence Coups d'état, 19512005." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 62 (3): 597–625.

Lebovic, James H., and Erik Voeten. 2009. "The Cost of Shame: International Organizations and Foreign Aid in the Punishing of Human Rights Violators." *Journal of Peace Research* 46 (1): 79–97.

Lichbach, Mark Irving. 1987. "Deterrence or Escalation? The Puzzle of Aggregate Studies of Repression and Dissent." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 31 (2): 266–97.

Lister, Charles. 2016. "The Free Syrian Army: A Decentralized Insurgent Brand." *Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World*, no. 26.

Londregan, John B., and Keith T. Poole. 1990. "Poverty, the Coup Trap, and the Seizure of Executive Power." *World Politics* 42 (2): 151–83.

Macleod, Hugh, and Annasofie Flamand. 2011. "Tortured and Killed: Hamza Al-Khateeb, Age 13." *Al Jazeera*. https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2011/05/201153185927813389.htm

Moore, Will H. 1998. "Repression and Dissent: Substitution, Context, and Timing." *American Journal of Political Science* 42 (3): 851–73.

Pettersson, Therése, and Kristine Eck. 2018. "Organized Violence, 19892017." *Journal of Peace Research* 55 (4): 535–47.

Pierskalla, Jan Henryk. 2010. "Protest, Deterrence, and Escalation: The Strategic Calculus of Government Repression." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 54 (1): 117–45.

Powell, Jonathan. 2012. "Determinants of the Attempting and Outcome of Coups d'état." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56 (6): 1017–40.

Rasler, Karen. 1996. "Concessions, Repression, and Political Protest in the Iranian Revolution." *American Sociological Review* 61 (1): 132.

Ritter, Emily Hencken, and Courtenay R. Conrad. 2016. "Preventing and Responding to Dissent: The Observational Challenges of Explaining Strategic Repression." *American Political Science Review* 110 (01): 85–99.

Roessler, Philip. 2011. "The Enemy Within: Personal Rule, Coups, and Civil War in Africa." *World Politics* 63 (2): 300–346.

Shellman, Stephen M., Brian P. Levey, and Joseph K. Young. 2013. "Shifting Sands: Explaining and Predicting Phase Shifts by Dissident Organizations." *Journal of Peace Research* 50 (3): 319–36.

Svolik, Milan W. 2012a. "Contracting on Violence: The Moral Hazard in Authoritarian Repression and Military Intervention in Politics." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 57 (5): 765–94.

———. 2012b. *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Weeks, Jessica L. 2008. "Autocratic Audience Costs: Regime Type and Signaling Resolve." *International Organization*. /core/journals/international-organization/article/autocratic-audience-costs-regime-type-and-signaling-resolve/3EB4447D7E4584B523BFA6D5AC1542D3.

Young, Joseph K. 2013. "Repression, Dissent, and the Onset of Civil War." *Political Research Quarterly* 66 (3): 516–32.