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

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Abstract

Recent high-profile examples such as the Free Syrian Army and M23 suggest that when governments violate human rights, they risk spurring resistance within their own security forces. Does repression generally lead to regime coups and rebellions originating from the regime? Under what conditions are we most likely to observe this process? I argue that when governments engage in repression, they tend to lose legitimacy at both the domestic and international levels, increasing the risk of defections from the regime. This risk should be even greater when significant numbers of soldiers share ethnic ties with the individuals being repressed, and when the military has limited centralized control over its members. Using a global sample spanning the years 1946–2013, I find robust evidence that repression is associated with an increased probability of coup attempts, and limited evidence for a link to rebel groups originating from the regime. The ethnic ties hypothesis finds more support than the military centralization prediction. The results add support to previous arguments that internal backlash provides a disincentive for governments to repress.

Introduction

- Examples: FSA, M23, NLA, Franco's Nationalists, Yemen?
- Importance: not a huge percentage of cases, but present in many severe civil wars, and key drivers of broader conflict trajectory. Military rebels were first rebel groups in Syria, Libya, Yemen? - very possible that these cases of unrest would not have escalated to civil war had the military remained cohesive. In the DRC, M23 has prolonged the fighting in a country that otherwise seemed headed toward peace

for the first time in over a decade.

When the Arab Spring protests spread to Syria in March 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). Riad al-Assad, who defected from the Syrian Air Force 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 in 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 (**???**) could potentially account for them, many, including theories focusing on ethnic discrimination (e.g. Cederman et al., 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.

Conceptualizing Military Defection

Few scholars have examined the phenomenon of rebel groups emerging from the regime military. However, several similar processes have been explored in the literature. Albrecht and Koehler (2018) distinguish between atomized and collective

In this section I review these concepts and discuss their relation to military rebellion.

Castillo views these as a spectrum, whereas others like Singh view them as largely distinct processes.

Rebellion

These definitions of rebellion do not preclude the possibility of such groups emerging from the state. However, the point at which an actor becomes disassociated with the state has not been fully articulated.

Coups d'état

- Does address dissent in regime
- But doesn't account for action outside the regime.

Scholarly definitions of coups d'état often explicitly exclude revolts that occur outside existing military structures. For instance, Powell and Thyne (2011: 252) define coups as "illegal and overt attempts by the military or other elites *within the state apparatus*

to unseat the sitting executive [emphasis added]." As such, cases of military rebellion including the Free Syrian Army and M23 are not coded as coups in their widely-used dataset. Similarly, many theories of coups focus on the behavior of military or political elites (e.g. Roessler, 2016; Bove and Rivera, 2015; Casper and Tyson, 2014). Many coups, however, are initiated by non-elite members of the military. Singh (2014) distinguishes between coups from the top (military elites), middle (unit commanders), and bottom (enlisted men), finding that coups initiated by lower-ranking military members tend to be motivated by their treatment within the military rather than broader political concerns. While the coups from the bottom in Singh's case studies largely resemble traditional coups in the sense that the plotters attempted to seize control of the existing military apparatus, he hints at the possibility tactical diversity in this category, noting that low-ranking officers lack the ability to divert existing procedures and structures to their cause. Albrecht and Eibl (2018) similarly distinguish between coups attempted by elite and combat officers, finding that the two categories have different causes. Whereas the probability elite officer coups is largely a function of the structure of the regime and military, combat officer coups are associated with societal concerns such as low levels of welfare spending and the absence of political liberalization.

In summary, this literature shows that revolt can come from any level of the military. While these works focus on cases where this dissent manifests in attempts to seize control of the regime from within, they raise the possibility that dissident soldiers, especially those from the lower ranks, could form organizations that challenge the state from the outside. Indeed, Singh (2014) finds that coups typically result from covert organizations of plotters within the military.

Mutiny

Nepstad

Book

Defection

Seymour

Staniland

Christia

Desertion

The Sources of Military Loyalty

I argue that the key factor shaping the probability of military rebellion is the regime's ability to retain the loyalty of its armed forces in the face of emerging threats. States have four broad, non-mutually-exclusive categories of mechanisms through which they can promote loyalty.

First, states can tailor their recruiting processes to select for soldiers who are likely to be loyal. For example, Bahrain has built a military composed almost exclusively of Sunni Muslims, while the majority Shia population is barred from service (Barany, 2011; Lutterbeck, 2013). This common sectarian background contributes to cohesion both among soldiers and between the military and the Sunni ruling class, and is a basis for division between soldiers and the predominantly Shia population (Bellin, 2012). Furthermore, stacking the security forces with members of minority ethnic or religious groups induces loyalty through the fear that excluded groups will engage in reprisals should the regime fall (**???**; McLauchlin, 2018). Even states with nominally inclusive military institutions often reject recruits perceived as having questionable loyalty. For instance, while Israeli law calls for near-universal conscription, in practice, Palestinian Arabs with Israeli citizenship are exempt (Røislien, 2013). Most states also apply screening at the individual level, using

interviews or background checks to assess potential disloyalty.

Second, the promotion of loyalty is typically a core goal of military training and socialization, which states often deliberately engineer to maximize feelings of group solidarity, patriotism, and deference to authority. These techniques can produce cohesion and loyalty even in difficult circumstances. For example, since 1994, the Rwandan military has successfully integrated Hutu and Tutsi soldiers through a political education course known as Ingando that emphasizes pre-colonial ethnic harmony. Subsequently, soldiers from both ethnic groups are sent on joint deployments meant to build trust (Jowell, 2014). Small-group loyalty has long been thought to be a crucial determinant of battlefield cohesion (Shils and Janowitz, 1948). Such bonds often result from training, as does a more general sense of distinction from civilian life and professional pride (Strachan, 2006). Effective training also promotes military Cohesion by improving combat effectiveness, and in turn reducing the probability of disloyalty in response to battlefield defeat (Castillo, 2014).

A third, loyalty strategy is the use of symbolic and ideological power. Nationalist ideology is a powerful force for loyalty in general (Hobsbawm, 2012), and its pull is often especially strong within militaries. For example, some attribute the German army's resilience in 1945 to the emphasis on unconditional loyalty to the state found within Nazi ideology. Political indoctrination was also a crucial mechanism of control for the Soviet Union, which went as far as to embed political officers (Comissars) with significant authority in military units (Castillo, 2014). At the individual level, there is evidence that soldiers exposed to more propaganda fought harder (Barber and Miller, 2019).

Lastly, material incentives play a crucial role in controlling the military. Desertion and mutiny are typically met with harsh punishments. During World War II, there were numerous examples of disobedient soldiers on both the Allied and Axis sides being executed (Strachan, 2006). Other negative sanctions include imprisonment, non-lethal corpo-

ral punishment, demotion, and discharge. States also use positive inducements to retain the loyalty of their soldiers. For example, Britain was able to maintain the loyalty of Indian soldiers during World War II because while much of the country faced famine, soldiers and their families were supplied with adequate food (Roy, 2009). Many states offer soldiers a level of pay and benefits that would be difficult to replace. Soldiers may also receive informal benefits, such as opportunities to engage in plunder.

Loyalty and Novel Threats

Grewal

Johnson & Thyne

Morency

Nassif

Bou Nassif

Gal - pg 6 - IDF Col. Geva resigned after being ordered to prepare for unprecedented invasion of Beirut.

Scharpf - commanders who do not share the leader's ideology less likely to carry out repression

Some training and lots of socialization tailored to one enemy

McLauchlin - command and control can vary geographically

- Militaries tend to be good at ensuring compliance for action against existing/long-standing threats.
  - Public support
  - Institutionalization of procedures, culture

- Militaries tend to be less good at ensuring compliance for action against new threats, especially domestic ones.
  - Public opposition. In the abstract, repression of fellow citizens unpopular even if public would be supportive of action against actualized dissent.
  - Prep for pre-existing threats limits capacity for addressing future threats.

  Defection is a function of the regime's preparedness to repress the internal threats it faces. This preparedness in turn is a function of two factors:

  - The novelty of the threat. Governments go to great lengths to recruit and socialize their security forces in such a way that they will carry out orders to fight their enemies of the time. But if the targets of military action change over time, it may be harder for the regime to ensure compliance, particularly if the new targets are domestic civilians.
  - The volume of targets. Regimes often have certain units that they view as particularly loyal, often the secret police. If the threats to the regime can be handled by these units, the risk of defection should be minimized. But if the threat is large enough that regular military forces must be deployed, the risk of defection increases dramatically.

Sincerity. This effect could be the result of sincere concern for human rights, or the opportunistic use of bad behavior by the regime to claim legitimacy.

McLauchlin's concept of control - predictability could be another determinant. Institutionalized repression is predictable - leadership will anticipate and prevent many opportunities for defections. The dynamics of repression shocks are much harder to predict.

While repressive shocks can create opportunities for defection by undermining the regime's compliance mechanisms, opportunity alone is insufficient for conflict (Most and Starr, 1989). If repression is to produce defection, it must also create willingness among

soldiers to turn against the regime. I argue that this should in fact occur for a variety of reasons.

- Sincere humanitarian concerns
  - Soldiers may have enlisted to fight interstate foes, terrorists, existing rebels. They are socialized to dehumanize these entities. Turning their weapons on civilians is not what they signed up for. They haven't been socialized to dehumanize protesters, other civilians.
- Ethnic ties
- Concerns about prosecution from domestic or international courts
- Concerns about reprisals from rebels, militias, etc.
- Opportunism - increased odds of obtaining international legitimacy and support

Some novel threats easier to address than others

Other Pathways to Military Fragmentation

I make no claim that repression shocks are the only source of military rebellion. Other mechanisms leading to military fragmentation surely exist. Furthermore, these mechanisms are not mutually-exclusive, and may interact in interesting ways. Thus, I explore what I expect to be the most common alternative paths to fragmentation.

- Opportunism
- Inability to employ optimal methods for cohesion
  - No minority group large enough to meet security needs
  - Competing concerns/political bargains lead to conscription
  - Rough/large terrain

The Form of Military Defection

- Security - maybe punishing deserters incentives collective defection?
- Incentives
- Coup-proofing
- Geographic location

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