

Civil Dissent and Repression: An Agency-Centric Perspective

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Abstract

Do governments make a strategic choice in deciding what type of security agent to use for repression? Research acknowledges the role of auxiliary groups such as militias in repression, yet surprisingly little attention is given to the state's formal domestic security agents, such as the police. We show that formal security organizations and auxiliary groups enhance the government's ability to repress by acting as strategic complements. As the better-regulated force, formal agents are often employed against violent riots, when regimes worry more about the ability to control the agents and their behavior more than about being visibly linked to the violence. In contrast, auxiliaries are often used to repress nonviolent campaigns, when the government seeks to benefit from agency loss in order not to be associated with the violence, which can be costly in these contexts. We empirically verify these linkages on country-month data for Africa using panel vector-autoregression (pVAR), which accounts for endogeneity, not only between the dependent and independent variables, but also the dependent variables. We complement these statistical results with case-based evidence and descriptive original data from non-African countries.

Keywords: Repression, police, militias, civil unrest, riots, agency, political violence

The role of domestic security agents—especially auxiliary groups such as militias, civil defense forces, and irregular forces—in repression gained scholarly attention only recently. As a result, we know relatively little about how these groups and their conduct relates to repression by official law enforcement agencies, such as the police. In this study, we focus on two related key questions: when will regimes choose to deploy official agents versus auxiliaries to repress dissent? And if so, do they make a *strategic* choice regarding which agent to use?

Auxiliaries—i.e., organizations and groups that are not an integral part of the state's domestic security apparatus—influence the probability and scope of state violence. In particular, a recent wave of research shows that auxiliaries make repression more likely by allowing the government to deny involvement in the violence (AKA “plausible deniability”) and by having better

access to local information compared with state force (e.g., [Ahram 2011](#); [Carey, Mitchell, and Lowe 2013](#); [Aliyev 2016](#); [Koren 2017](#); [Raleigh and Kishi 2018](#)). But while auxiliaries might be useful in some contexts, there is also a risk they choose to pursue their own ends, which can be disastrous in others. For instance, in Tajikistan, the regime's decision to align with pro-state militias exacerbated and prolonged conflict, increased civilian casualties, and caused to an overall weakening of the state ([Markowitz 2011](#)). Using auxiliaries might not be an optimal strategy when the regime aims to maintain control, mitigate violence “spillovers,” and visualize its repressive capacity (e.g., [Carey, Colaresi, and Mitchell 2015](#); [Raleigh and Kishi 2018](#)).

One conspicuous omission in repression research is the lack of focus given to the state's *formal* domestic security agent, such as the police. Partly, this is because police

behavior is assumed to directly reflect regime decisions, which explains why the two are rarely studied separately (Davenport 1996). The police and other formal organizations represent the quintessential “state monopoly on violence” (Weber 2016); while the military reflects the state’s ability to wage external violence, the police (and related organizations) represent the same with respect to internal violence (Davenport 1996). Why, then, do governments sometimes choose to use auxiliaries to ensure domestic order and, perhaps more importantly, when? Moreover, do these agency types serve as *substitutes*, such that the government deploys them without discretion? Or do they *complement* each other, meaning governments use them *strategically* in a way that maximizes their respective advantages in particular contexts?

We answer these questions as follows. Drawing on relevant literature, we delineate the particular characteristics of each type of agent—formal and auxiliary—as they pertain to the government deploying these agents. Focusing on two types of civilian dissent—violent and nonviolent—we draw expectations as to how the characteristics of each agent type should define whether this agent is deployed to repress in a particular context. Briefly, we posit formal agents, as the better-regulated, organized, and trained forces, are preferred for repressing violent dissent, such as riots and other forms of aggressive popular mobilization that threaten political stability. In contrast, we argue that if faced with nonviolent dissent—e.g., strikes, marches—the regime will often prefer to use auxiliaries, considering the high potential costs of repressing such dissent (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011; Hendrix 2015) and the advantages provided by plausible deniability compared with the possibility of agency loss (Mitchell, Carey, and Butler 2014).

We test these theoretical expectations empirically on country-month data of repression events by official police forces and auxiliaries in Africa for the years 2007–2011, obtained from the Armed Conflict Locations Event Dataset (ACLED) Version 8 (Raleigh et al. 2010). To test each hypothesis, we operationalize two explanatory variables, one denoting violent mobilization such as riots, and the other nonviolent dissent events, within a given month, using the detailed event data from the Nonviolent and Violent Campaigns and Outcomes (NAVCO) 3.0 event dataset (Chenoweth, Pinckney, and Lewis 2017). We report panel vector-autoregressions (pVARs), which provide a more complete treatment of policy endogeneity, and are hence used often in political economy studies (Sigmund and Ferstl 2017), but are rarely applied in human rights and repression research.¹ We complement

these statistical results with case-based evidence from Pakistan and Iran to put these patterns in global context. For example, original data we collected on urban riots and nonviolent dissent in Pakistan between 2006 and 2015 show that formal organizations are responsible for repressing 77 percent of violent riots but only 38 percent of nonviolent dissent events, while informal groups were responsible for repressing only 17 percent of violent dissent incidents but 62 percent of nonviolent dissent events.

Across these different empirical tests, therefore, we repeatedly find that with respect to state-based repression, formal and auxiliary agents complement one another rather than acting as substitutes. Indeed, our study reveals that governments employ auxiliary agents to complement the wide variety of civilian-targeted repressive actions carried out by the state’s official security agents. This conclusion opens some interesting new lines of inquiry into repression and its determinants, and how agent-centric characteristics shape repression and political violence dynamics. In doing so, our findings help to overcome important limitations in repression research highlighted by past studies (e.g., Davenport 2007; Pierskalla 2010; DeMeritt 2016) and suggest ways to improve our understanding of these behaviors moving forward.

Previous Research

Scholars have found that overt civilian dissent aimed at altering the political status quo is relatively common, especially in states characterized by poor governance and corruption (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011). Overt dissent is hence defined as a “confrontational activity ... that disrupts and challenges any government actor, agency, or policy” (Carey 2006, 2), meant to “diminish the perceived legitimacy of authorities through increases disruption within society” (Davenport and Loyle 2012, 76–77).

Repression scholars often classify anti-regime dissent into two broad categories: nonviolent and violent (Davenport 1995, 1996; DeMeritt 2016; Chenoweth and Stephan 2011). In their efforts to challenge the state, dissenting citizens can use nonviolent tactics, including marches, “sit-ins,” and strikes, as well as more violent tactics, such as riots, highly disruptive demonstrations, destruction of property, and even direct attacks against government targets (Tilly 1978; Davenport 1995; Carey 2006). Violent riots, especially when accompanied with the destruction of property and attacks against security forces and other agents of the state, often appear to be a more immediate danger than nonviolent campaigns such as peaceful marches (Davenport 1995; Carey 2006). Indeed, the threat of violent mobilization, whether

1 For an exception see Davies 2016.

spontaneous or due to deliberate instigation, is perhaps one of the gravest threats to governments (Tilly 1978; Carey 2006). Violent dissent also tends to spread rapidly within countries (Tilly 1978; Davenport 1995), which implies it can evolve into a credible threat against the government's rule, and even deteriorate into a civil war, as happened recently, e.g., in Syria and Libya.

Additionally, an extensive body of research focuses on the determinants and consequences of nonviolent dissent, "including symbolic protests, economic boycotts, labor strikes, political and social non-cooperation, and nonviolent intervention" (Stephan and Chenoweth 2008, 9–10), which occurs relatively frequently (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011; Davenport and Loyle 2012; Gurr 2000). Debates exist about the net benefits that citizens may obtain from engaging in violent versus nonviolent dissent (see, e.g., Chenoweth and Stephan 2011; Davenport 1995; Hendrix 2015; Gurr 2000). Indeed, while governments appear to view nonviolent mobilization as a threat to their rule, it is rarely perceived as serious and immediate threat as violent dissent is (Davenport 1995; Moore 2000). Yet nonviolent resistance can coalesce into large-scale campaigns where the per capita cost of participation is typically low (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011; Hendrix 2015). It can also escalate into violent confrontation with the state, especially if met with state-led violence, which can backfire on the government, further weakening its political stance (Stephan and Chenoweth 2008). As Tilly notes, "violence ordinarily grows out of collective actions which are not intrinsically violent" (1978, 74), especially if the government employs heavy-handed repression against the nonviolent protests (Stephan and Chenoweth 2008; Chenoweth, Pinckney, and Lewis 2017).

Often lacking sufficient material capacity to redress citizens' grievances that trigger discontent, governments rely on repression as an alternative response to both types of dissent (Davenport 2007). Indeed, relevant studies typically find, as DeMeritt (2016), that "an increase in dissent yields an increase in repression unconditionally," meaning that if civilians mobilize, the government's choice of how to repress it is uniform. As leaders often fear that domestic dissent can escalate effectively enough to pose an immediate and credible threat to the political status quo, repression is intended to minimize disruptions to the social order, assert political control, and "protect established institutions, practices, and individuals or clear the way for new ones by raising the costs of challenging activity" (Davenport and Loyle 2012, 77) (Moore 2000; Carey 2006; DeMeritt 2016, see also). Yet, this perspective neglects some important repression determinants, including the role of agency in shaping these behaviors over time. For instance,

Pierskalla (2010, 136) argues that, "[i]t would be useful to incorporate notions of loyalty and bureaucratic self-interest to model the implementation of repressive policies. In many instances, repression crucially depends on the willingness of the repressive bureaucracy (e.g., police, military, secret police) to actually follow through on the orders of the government."

Explaining how governments choose to repress, therefore, requires taking into account the types of agents available and their specific features. As a result, past research has evaluated the role of auxiliaries—i.e., organizations and groups that are not an integral part of the state's domestic security apparatus, but which operate under its auspices, or at least with its approval—influence the probability and scope of state violence. Mason and Krane (1989), for instance, argue that a state's decision to rely on violent, unaccountable agents makes political backlash more likely and increases rebel support.

A more recent wave of research, stimulated in large part by the availability of new data (Carey, Mitchell, and Lowe 2013), looks at the role of pro-government militias (PGMs)—auxiliary armed groups that can represent governments, different ethnic and political communities, or private actors—in facilitating political violence and state repression. Here, scholars primarily emphasize three broad features of such groups that make repressive state violence more likely.

First, auxiliaries are often linked to the regime only loosely, providing the government with "plausible deniability" (Mitchell, Carey, and Butler 2014; Carey, Colaresi, and Mitchell 2015). Second, auxiliaries often have better access to local information compared with state forces, facilitating their ability to operate in specific areas or identify problematic targets (Carey, Colaresi, and Mitchell 2015; Jentszsch et al. 2015), especially when some militias grow powerful to act as an alternative to the state (Ahram 2011; Aliyev 2016). Finally, scholars argue that, often, auxiliaries provide a "cheaper" alternative, in pure material terms, to using formal organizations, thus facilitating political violence (Koren 2017; Raleigh and Kishi 2018).

Although political leaders can rely on auxiliary agents to carry out repression, they can deploy agents from the official security apparatus, namely the police, gendarmeries and regulated paramilitary forces (e.g., the Italian Carabinieri, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard in Iran), and even the military. Considering that many official domestic security agents are formed specifically to tackle domestic threats, such agents are arguably most likely to be deployed against dissent. It is therefore both surprising and unsurprising that such domestic organizations received relatively little attention in research

on repression and political violence. Surprising, because they serve a central role in carrying out the regime's orders, and when and how to follow them; unsurprising because, as official organizations, their behaviors are assumed and often do reflect the regime's desires (Weber 2016; Davenport 1995).

When citizens challenge the political status quo, the government may respond with repression (DeMeritt 2016; Carey 2006); if it does, it makes a choice between employing official security agents or auxiliary groups. Our central question is therefore as follows: When would governments prefer using official security forces (police, gendarmeries) for repression, and when would they prefer to rely on auxiliary groups? Moreover, we ask if this choice is strategic, namely: do governments use the agents at their disposal indiscriminately, so they serve as simple substitutes for each other, or whether they make a choice based on the type of agent, meaning the two types are complementary?

Before proceeding, we should define our theory's scope conditions. First, because we explore the government's use of different security agents in the face of dissent, we do not restrict our analysis of the government's behavior in this regard to just periods of civil war, although we do account for such periods in our empirical models below. Second, we recognize that the probability of repression might vary by regime type. Moreover, some states, e.g., China, might be considered as developing, but in fact have extremely well developed and effective set of coercive and institutional capacities, which might shape how their governments react to dissent. Considering that we analyze the use of security agents by governments broadly, we build a more general theory without focusing on the type of regime that may employ these security forces. Indeed, research suggests that the majority of world countries have, or had, the ability to select between formal and auxiliary organizations (e.g., Carey et al. 2013). Empirically, we control for regime type in our empirical models below, considering that regime type can and does affect the probability of repression of dissent; and for state capacity in one of our robustness models (Table A5 in the supplementary appendix), to account for the possibility that some stronger/weaker states do not have the option to choose one agent type over another.

Formal Security, Auxiliary Groups, and Repression of Dissent

Agent Types and Their Characteristics

By "formal domestic security agents," we refer to police forces and gendarmeries (which are, essentially, regulated paramilitaries). By "police," we refer to a subcategory of

official state forces that exists in (nearly) every modern society. Officially, police are "custodians of the state's monopoly on force" (Brewer et al. 1996, 21), and the "specialized body given primary formal responsibility for legitimate force to safeguard security" (Reiner 2000, 7). Police forces are directly and officially linked to the state, operate under the government's jurisdiction, and are tasked with maintaining domestic political stability through the application of physical force (Brewer et al. 1996; Reiner 2000). Hence, violence by police is, by definition, tied to violence by the state.

Similar to the police, gendarmeries are official, regular security agents that function as "militarized security units, which are trained and organized under the central government to support or replace the regular military" (Böhmelt and Clayton 2018, 198).² Gendarmeries are openly trained, equipped, and mobilized by the state to enforce the law alongside or under the auspices of the police (Janowitz 1988). Thus, like the police, gendarmeries "have a clear and official association with the regime" (Böhmelt and Clayton 2018, 198). Some examples of gendarmeries include the Italian Carabinieri, the Israeli Border Police, the National Gendarmerie in France, the Russian Border Service, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard in Iran, the Nigerian Security and Civil Defense Corps, and the Assam Rifles in India.

In general principal-agent (P-A) theory terms (see, e.g., Laffont and Martimort 2002), the government is the "principal" decision-maker. If needed, it can contract official security "agents" to perform specific tasks. These agents' role as enforcers is rooted in the government's (principal) overriding interest in preserving its own authority and ensuring its policies are adhered to, which requires a sufficient degree of public order (Brewer et al. 1996; Janowitz 1988). Because maintaining this order exceeds the ruler's (that is, the principal's) ability alone, it must support, arm, and mobilize security *agents* to perform the functions of maintaining law and order domestically. In modern states, official police and gendarmeries assume this role. Therefore, official organizations have, by design, goals that are highly compatible with those of the regime. While variations exist, police troops, on average, benefit from and take pride in their association with the state. They are less likely to deviate from the regime's official policy line—including

- 2 Similar to Böhmelt and Clayton (2018), we conceptualize gendarmeries as official security organizations trained by the government. As such, gendarmeries not only serve to supplement the national army, but may also be deployed along with the police to tackle domestic political threats.

the order to repress dissenters—due to two distinct features.

First, as suggested in the “Extended Principal–Agent” (EPA) model from [Brehm and Gates \(1997\)](#), official security forces are under the government’s direct control. As the principal, the government designs and uses formal contracts such as setting wages and monitoring performance in order to exert direct control over these agents, ensure their interests are compatible with those of the government, and “induce compliance” in handling matters of domestic security ([Brehm and Gates 1997](#), 47–48; [Reiner 2000](#)). Formal contracts are optimized to *recruit* individuals (e.g., officers, lieutenants, cadets) whose interests are aligned with the state’s security goals and priorities ([Brehm and Gates 1997](#); [Reiner 2000](#)); and to assign some trustworthy members (officers) with right to maintain and regulate the agent’s activities, thus tying “sense of identity to the organization” that they serve ([Brehm and Gates 1997](#), 54). Assigning the right group of official security agents with the right tasks and reinforcing an organizational identity are highly effective ways of achieving compliance, as members are much less likely to shirk their security duties ([Brewer et al. 1996](#); [Brehm and Gates 1997](#); [Reiner 2000](#)). Both features minimize the “concern over adverse selection” ([Brehm and Gates 1997](#), 6) of individuals with the “wrong” attributes. Promoting compatibility of objectives between the principal and members of the official security agent hence provides the former with another means of ensuring control over the agent, further curtailing prospects of noncompliance ([Reiner 2000](#)).

Second, official security agents are subject to the government’s decision-making over time. The formal contractual relationship between the government and official security agents is, in P-A terms, “time-stationary,” i.e., stable over time ([Maskin and Tirole 1999](#); [Laffont and Martimort 2002](#)). Formal contracts allow the government to control compensation schemes and performance standards not only in the current, but also in all future periods. Successive governments also formulate strategies for handling domestic security issues and making higher-level appointments, often using the same standards and contracts as their predecessors. Hence, the ultimate strategic decision-making capacity lies not only in the hands of the official security agent, but crucially also in the hands of the specific government body responsible for overseeing this agent (e.g., Ministry of Domestic Affairs). This further reduces the possibility of agency loss by ensuring official security agents “will take actions that are consistent with the principal’s interests” ([Lupia 2001](#), 3375).

The implication of these different issues is that official security agents are viewed as representing the state’s legitimate use of force ([Brewer et al. 1996](#); [Reiner 2000](#)). The government optimizes its contracts with official security agents to control their actions, promote alignment of interests, and induce compliance with the state’s security directives, meaning it is hence *directly accountable* for their behavior. This fact is commonly known to all citizens, agents/troops, and the government, and hence has important theoretical implications.³

Note that while we focus here on police forces and gendarmeries, there is the question of whether and when governments might use the military for repression. We indeed concede that under certain circumstances in which formal organizations are unable to subdue violent rioters, governments may use the national army to control violent opposition as a last resort ([Koren 2014](#)). Outside of such extreme and relatively rare cases, governments have less incentives to employ the army to repress domestic rioters as doing so may force the army’s command-and-control to divert troops from the border to the domestic theater. Since such diversion may leave the country more vulnerable to external threats in border regions, it will dissuade the government from using the army to engage in riot control unless it is absolutely forced to do so. Employing the army to quell riots will also adversely affect their operational efficacy and combat capabilities as these troops are trained to fight external wars rather than suppress domestic citizens. It may also dent the army’s legitimacy and demoralize domestic security agents including the police and paramilitary, further discouraging the use of military forces for routine repression. Nevertheless, considering this is a possibility, we report a sensitivity analysis in Table A4 in the supplementary appendix, where instead of formal domestic security organizations, we code only actions by the military to illustrate our theory is robust to this concern.

In contrast to official security agents, auxiliaries—civil/local defense forces, pro-government, political, ethnic militias or even criminal gangs—have been extensively analyzed in contemporary research (e.g., [Carey, Mitchell, and Lowe 2013](#); [Mitchell, Carey, and Butler 2014](#); [Cohen and Nordås 2015](#); [Raleigh and Kishi 2018](#); [Jentzsch et al. 2015](#)). A key feature

3 This does not mean that there are no agency problems between governments and official security forces, as recognized by [DeMeritt \(e.g., 2015\)](#). However, we suggest that due to the reasons discussed above, such problems are simply less prevalent and less severe in official forces compared with their severity in auxiliaries.

of these groups is that, while they may receive some (typically implicit) support from the government, they are *not* visibly controlled by official state entities, do not have overseeing departments or ministries, and often are not openly aligned with the command-and-control of the country's regular armed forces or identified as members of the police and gendarmeries (Mitchell 2004; Carey, Mitchell, and Lowe 2013; Carey, Colaresi, and Mitchell 2015).

Therefore, while one might attribute an auxiliary's action to the state, the chain of command is fragmented, and the number of checks and balances placed on such agents is lower compared with formal organizations. This does not mean they operate completely independently of the state; indeed auxiliary groups, especially PGMs, must have by definition informal or semiofficial ties to the state (see, e.g., the definition in Carey, Mitchell, and Lowe 2013, 250), or else they are designated as rebels or at least unsanctioned organizations. Moreover, as Aliyev (2016) argues, some auxiliaries might be "state manipulated—e.g., "death squads" and other forms of regime enforcers—while others are "state-parallel," with the latter category covering "popular mobilization forces, offensive sub-state counterinsurgents, and tribal or traditional militias" (Aliyev 2016). Even organized crime syndicates—such as the "triads" recently used for repression in Hong Kong—can be "deeply loyal to the government" and are used for repressing peaceful dissent (Sataline 2019, 1). Nevertheless, auxiliaries, even state manipulated ones, generally operate with more autonomy compared with official security organizations, at least with respect to bureaucratic limitations and control.

According to P-A theory, greater autonomy from the state becomes a means to an end insofar that it provides the auxiliary agent with more flexibility in pursuit of their own objectives. While this flexibility compounds the principal's (government's) inability to control auxiliary groups, it does allow it to maintain a reasonable demarcated distance from these auxiliaries. This means there is no clear guarantee *ex ante* that auxiliary agents will adhere to the state's policies, rather than switch loyalties or follow their own agendas (Mitchell 2004; Carey, Colaresi, and Mitchell 2015; Aliyev 2016). For the principal, however, these weaknesses in state regulation have two primary implications.

First, political officials cannot compel auxiliary agents to fully align their interests with the government's objectives or assume these groups will follow orders. Agency loss is thus likely to occur "when the agent and principal do not have common interests" (Lupia 2001, 3376). Accordingly, the principal will rationally prefer not to rely on these groups in situations deemed as "high risk."

Second, having informal or loose links to the agent allows the principal to credibly claim incomplete knowledge of the latter's actions to third parties (Maskin and Tirole 1999; Laffont and Martimort 2002). This implies that governments cannot be held accountable for the actions of auxiliary agents (Mitchell, Carey, and Butler 2014; Eck 2015; Koren 2017). Carey and Mitchell (2016, 3), for instance, emphasize that, "a key motivation for governments to use PGMs is to avoid accountability for violence and establish plausible deniability." That the relatively loose link between the government and these auxiliary groups allow the former to shirk responsibility for actions taken by the latter in some situations has empirical implications as discussed below (Mitchell, Carey, and Butler 2014; Koren 2017).

Implications for State Repression

Extant research often distinguishes between two types of civilian dissent, namely violent and nonviolent (e.g., Chenoweth and Stephan 2011). Violent dissent, as we discussed above, often appears as a more immediate danger than nonviolent one; it spreads rapidly within countries and can evolve into a credible threat against the government's rule, and even deteriorate into a civil war (Tilly 1978). Accordingly, governments face strong incentives to demonstrate they have sufficient coercive capacity to take punitive action against violent dissenters, thus preserving their rule and restoring political order (Davenport 1995, 2007).

When faced with violent dissent and to ensure an effective *tour de force*, it is important that the government avoids any agency loss, especially on the part of auxiliary security organizations whose agendas are incompatible with that of the regime. Hence, it must regulate and control the selected agent's behavior to ensure compliance and minimize the possibility of deviations from its preferred policy. We believe that, as a result, when faced with violent mass mobilization, the government will prefer, on average, to deploy official security agents rather than auxiliaries, for at least three reasons.

First, the time-stationary contractual relationship between the government and its official agents ensures the latter must operate directly under its jurisdiction, and recruits and promotes individuals that share the regime's ultimate goals. This establishes a clear relationship of authority between political officials (the principal) and the official security apparatus (agent). Being able to employ and directly regulate its formal security agents allows the government to rapidly and effectively repress violent dissent and helps it to contain high-risk areas (in

which violent dissenters are active) before they spread to other areas.

Second, the ability to select and screen the personnel recruited into the formal security organization, which is common knowledge to all observers, means that when official security agents are deployed against rioters, the latter learn the state has the capacity and will to suppress unsanctioned violence. Furthermore, the time-stationary contractual ties between the government and its formal agents means the principal can repeatedly use official forces to inflict punishment on violent dissenters in current *and* future periods with minimal concerns about agency loss (McCubbins, Noll, and Weingast 1987; Maskin and Tirole 1999). As the rioters learn the government has no qualms about sustaining targeted repression, the anticipated probability of sustained crackdown *ex ante* significantly raises the dissenters' *ex post* costs of participation in riots, deterring any further action against the state. By deploying official agents, the government can credibly signal its hawkishness and persuade the rioters it will not succumb to their demands. This statement is supported by case-based evidence. For instance, when violent riots erupted in Karachi, Pakistan in 2001, the Minister of Interior Moinuddin Gaidar publicly stated that the police and Rangers (a formal gendarmerie) were "jointly mobilized in Karachi to act against the rioters to especially show to those that challenged the state that the government has the *capacity and demonstrated will* to crush with force the violent trouble-makers" (Ghausi 2001, emphasis added).

Third, the performance standards and *ex post* ability to control the official agents' behavior over time provides substantial leverage for incumbents to restrain the degree of physical force employed by these official security agents against the rioters. This leverage is vital as it helps the government to hedge *ex ante* against the possibility that the agent may use excessive force, leading to further escalation of violence and tit-for-tat attacks on both sides. Dictating the formal agents' actions help the principal minimize the "probability and magnitude of noncompliance" (McCubbins, Noll, and Weingast 1987, 253). The ability to minimize noncompliance by official security agents limits these agents' discretion to react too aggressively or not aggressively enough, thus further incentivizing governments to use them against violent dissenters.

Unlike formal security agents, auxiliary groups are more autonomous and loosely connected to the government (Mitchell 2004; Carey, Colaresi, and Mitchell 2015; Aliyev 2016). As such, during violent riots, auxiliaries lack the advantages offered by formal agents for at least three reasons. First, auxiliary groups have minimal

contact with the government, which weakens the latter's ability to communicate directly with the troops deployed for repression. Auxiliary groups rarely have a well-institutionalized hierarchy, or a clear "go-to" person for government officials to contact (Koren 2017). Consequently, coordination problems are exacerbated, and operational planning becomes less effective, while the risk of agency loss increases (Mitchell, Carey, and Butler 2014). This limits the government's ability to quickly and effectively suppress the threat of violent, high-risk dissent. Second, in contrast to official agents, the looser associations of auxiliaries with the government means their response against rioters is less conspicuously attributed to the government (Mitchell, Carey, and Butler 2014). While this might be an advantage in some situations (as discussed below), it is a limitation if the government wants to be associated with the violence to illustrate its repressive capacity, as the deterrent signal sent to the rioters is hence weaker. Finally, greater autonomy of auxiliary groups limits the government's ability to regulate the former's behavior and ensure that their repressive violence does not exceed or fall short of the needed threshold to disperse the rioters. Faced with violent dissent, auxiliary groups might respond by being finicky, shirking away from the challenge, or by using excessive force.

Accordingly, the aforementioned claims suggest the following:

H1: *A higher number of violent dissent events will be significantly associated with a higher frequency of repressive attacks by formal security forces, but not auxiliary groups*

In contrast to violent dissent, nonviolent dissent is rarely perceived as serious and immediate a threat (Davenport 1995). Yet, it can coalesce into large-scale campaigns where the per capita cost of participation is typically low, and even cause violent confrontation with the state, especially if protests are met with state-led violence (Hendrix 2015; Chenoweth and Stephan 2011).

Accordingly, governments face a trade-off when confronted with domestic nonviolent resistance: on the one hand, repressing nonviolent dissent can deter further civilians from joining the mobilization effort and help ensure that the political status quo prevails (Hendrix 2015). On the other hand, being directly associated with repression of unarmed, nonviolent individuals can backfire against the government and entail high domestic and international costs (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011). Domestic, because dissent might escalate and become violent, increasing the costs incurred and level of threat faced by the government, while at the time the public will be far less likely to approve a violent response

compared with violent dissent (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011; Carey, Colaresi, and Mitchell 2015). International, because states and international organizations might sanction governments that use direct violence against civilians (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011).

Interestingly, the downsides of relying on auxiliary armed groups when violent mobilization is concerned are offset by the advantages with respect to repressing nonviolent dissent for at least two reasons. First, an effective way of preventing nonviolent campaigns from achieving their goals is to perpetrate some degree of repression to pressure the dissenters to accept the political status quo (Hendrix 2015; Chenoweth and Stephan 2011). Being directly associated with attacking unarmed marchers is considered illegitimate and can hurt the government's reputation (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011). Although concerns about being perceived as illegitimate will not discourage all governments from deploying official agents, it will prefer not to rely on these agents and be visibly and clearly link to repression.

Instead, we argue that governments now have strong incentives to deploy auxiliaries (e.g., militias and local defense forces) to ensure plausible deniability. By "contracting out" violent repression to auxiliary groups, governments can take advantage of their own asymmetries of information—while the government is aware it deployed the auxiliary agent, it is much harder for citizens and external actors to know that. The relative autonomy of auxiliary groups allows the government to distance itself from their actions, even though this may compound *ex post* agency loss problems for the state. This allows governments to repress for strategic benefits while evading accountability and the potential costly repercussions to its reputation that result from attacking nonviolent campaigners (Mitchell, Carey, and Butler 2014). If violence spirals out of control, they can simply blame these auxiliary "bad apples" while also stating the ultimate blame lies with the protesters, as happened, for instance, during the 2009 protests in Iran (Alfoneh 2016). More recently, in "the case of Hong Kong ... thugs for hire" were employed by the city's authorities to repress nonviolent protestors, offering "an expedient strategy to intimidate protesters and allow authorities to skirt responsibility for any violence that may take place" (Ong 2019, 1). In these situations, the government can have its cake and eat it too by ensuring that nonviolent dissenters face high costs from acting while disavowing responsibility for the violence.

Second, in contrast to formal agents, the government does not have to invest much, or at all, in training and arming auxiliary groups (Carey, Mitchell, and Lowe 2013; Koren 2017; Rudbeck, Mukherjee, and Nelson

2016). Many informal groups—e.g., the interahamwe in Rwanda (Koren 2017) or even the Basij in Iran (Golkar 2015)—are composed of many volunteers who are unfit to serve in official organizations and hence receive little or no regular training, equipment, or logistic support from the government (Ahram 2011). Often, these individuals tend to be nationalistic, so what they lack in training they can more than compensate for in zeal (Mitchell, Carey, and Butler 2014; Rudbeck, Mukherjee, and Nelson 2016; Aliyev 2016). Employing such auxiliary groups is therefore a "cheaper" option—in pure materialistic terms—compared with using formal security organizations. Thus, to complement their repression of violent rioters by using official security forces, the government will employ auxiliary agents to repress nonviolent dissidents. This behavior is similar to how governments employ militias to complement their "official" repression of civilians via sexual violence (Cohen and Nordås 2015, 878–79).

Building on the theoretical relationships between the two agent types (formal and auxiliary) and nonviolent dissent discussed above, we derive our second testable hypothesis:

H2: *A higher number of nonviolent dissent events will be significantly associated with a higher frequency of repressive attacks by auxiliary groups, but not formal security agents*

Empirical Analysis

Comparative analyses conducted at the sub-annual level are useful for evaluating the state's responsiveness to different types of mobilization (Davenport 2007). However, specific cases may exhibit more complex relationships between the dependent and independent phenomena of interest. To account for these issues, we test our hypotheses using a combined quantitative-qualitative methodology.

Statistical Analysis of African States

Our statistical analysis focuses on Africa for two reasons. First, effectively analyzing sub-annual variations in violence by different repressive agents requires a dataset that includes high temporal specificity not only on violence by different types of domestic security groups, but also on riots and nonviolent dissent events. In our case, such data are only available for Africa over our period of interest. Second, from a theoretical perspective, auxiliary agents are especially prevalent across the continent (Raleigh and Kishi 2018), suggesting that—insofar that any regime might rely on auxiliaries—African states provide a useful test sample for our purposes.

Data on repression events come from the Armed Conflict Location Events Dataset (ACLED), which relies on reports by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the media to code information on political violence incidents in Africa (Raleigh et al. 2010).⁴ ACLED includes a broad spectrum of dyadic interactions incorporating not only formal state groups but also political and ethnic militias and local defense forces, which ensures our models capture a sufficiently high number of heterogeneous repression events.

We used ACLED to create our two dependent variables (DVs) in several stages. First, we kept only incidents perpetrated by actors designated as government forces (formal), or ethnic or political militias (auxiliaries). In the second stage, we removed any attacks not perpetrated against rioters, protests, or civilians. We then removed all attacks perpetrated by an actor designated as “Military Forces” under the “Notes” column to ensure we capture only repression by police and gendarmeries. We also removed all attacks by “unidentified” actors to ensure no attacks by mutinous groups were included. To code our first DV, *Formal Repression_{it}*, we keep a subset of these events perpetrated by actors denoted as “Police” in the “Notes” column⁵ and aggregate them to the country-month level. Any remaining attacks, i.e., those perpetrated by auxiliary groups, were aggregated to the country-month level to create our second DV, *Auxiliary Repression_{it}*.

To create our main independent variables (IVs), we relied on the NAVCO 3.0 dataset (Chenoweth, Pinckney, and Lewis 2017). NAVCO 3.0 is a CAMEO-based, multilevel data collection effort of major nonviolent and violent resistance campaigns around the globe at the *event-day level*, which assembles over 100,000 hand-coded observations of nonviolent and violent methods in twenty-one countries around the world between 1991 and 2012. One potential source of bias is that NAVCO 3.0 oversampled from the Middle East and Africa, but due to our empirical focus on the latter, this is actually an advantage. We construct our IVs in several stages. First, to ensure our variables capture dissent, specifically, rather than other forms of civil conflict, we keep only events denoted as initiated by opposition movements,

activists, and unidentified unarmed nonstate actors. To create our first IV, *Violent Riots_{it}*, we first subset all events designated as “Riots,” “Clashes,” or “Violent Protests” under the “violent tactics” description column and aggregate these incidents to the country-month level. To create our second IV, *Nonviolent Dissent_{it}*, we keep only the subset of our original opposition-, activist-, and unidentified-based events denoted specifically as “primarily nonviolent” under the “tactics” description column, and aggregate these incidents to the country-month level. Combined, then, our DVs and IVs provide an exceptionally useful tool of testing the hypotheses derived in the previous section.

To account for country-specific traits and their effect on repression, we also include some country-month and country-year controls that can affect repressive violence.⁶ These controls include the onset of a civil war, defined as a conflict with at least twenty-five combatant deaths (Themnér and Wallensteen 2015); the incidence of a coup d’état (Powell and Thyne 2011); population size (Gleditsch 2002); oil prices (Ross 2011); whether a state was a democracy, i.e., given a Polity2 score of 7 or higher by the Polity IV dataset, or not (Marshall, Jaggers, and Gurr 2013); and the number of natural disasters experienced by a given country in a given month (Guha-Sapir, Below, and Hoyois 2011), which could lead to a higher-than-normal policing activity.⁷ Summary statistics for all variables are reported in tables A1–A2 in supplementary appendix.

Before proceeding, it is worth exploring some trends in the data, in order to understand their structure and identify an effective modeling strategy. Firstly, as figure 1 suggests, repression by formal organizations and repression by auxiliaries exhibit different trends, with formal repression peaking around month 49 in the series, while auxiliary repression experiencing a peak around month 17. Second, there appears to be a strong correlation between violent riots and formal repression, and possibly a weaker correlation between auxiliary repression and nonviolent dissent. The latter relationship can be explained by the fact that auxiliaries might be deployed for a variety of purposes, including repressing dissent,

4 ACLED also covers some Middle Eastern and Asian states, but only after our temporal period of interest, January 2007–December 2011, for which information was available on our explanatory and control variables.

5 ACLED does not contain information on violence by gendarmeries and regulated paramilitaries. We assume that such attacks are coded as perpetrated by actors denoted as “Police.”

6 It is important to note that any biases involved with including variables measured at a higher level of temporal aggregation in our country-month models are likely to lead to autocorrelation, and hence to a higher possibility of falsely rejecting rather than accepting our hypotheses.

7 We report an additional model that accounts for the possibility our results are explained by limited state capacity in table A5 in the supplementary appendix.

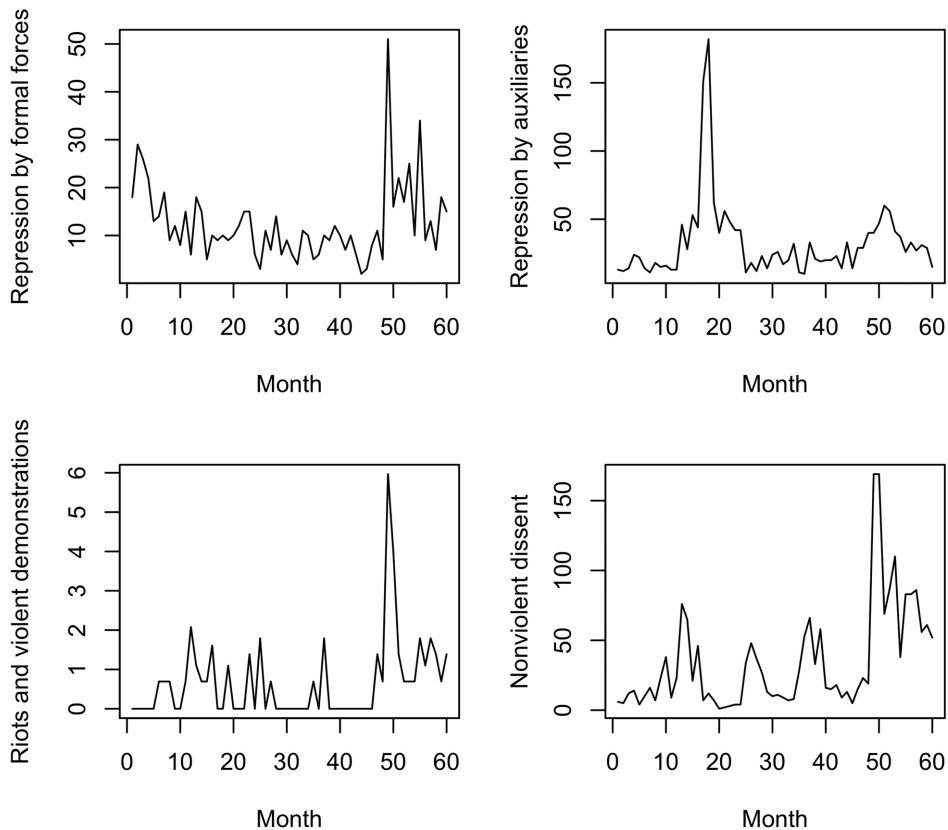


Figure 1. Variations in repression and mobilization, January 2007–December 2011.

while formal domestic security organizations are more focused on preventing mass unrest. Indeed, this notion is supported by figure A1 in the supplementary appendix, which shows that there is a strong correlation ($r = 0.4$) between formal repression and riots, and a weaker, although still positive relationship between auxiliary repression and nonviolent dissent ($r = 0.04$).

Nevertheless, considering that formal and auxiliary repression are highly correlated ($r = 0.26$), the aforementioned raw correlations might be masking the true relationship, especially considering that violence by auxiliaries could “backfire,” resulting with riots and hence repression by formal organizations. Figure 1 supports this logic. While some overlap exists between different type of dissent and repression, the frequency of repression by formal agents rose sharply during times of frequent violent dissent, while repression by auxiliaries (the highest and second highest “peaks”) increased during times of nonviolent dissent. However, any inference from these correlated, highly endogenous series can only be conducted by modeling these processes effectively,

accounting not only for the simultaneous relationship between each dependent and IV, but also for the serial correlation between both DVs.

The nature of our DVs and IVs, then, suggests that endogeneity is likely present in the data, and as repression by formal and auxiliary agents is correlated, i.e., both groups were deployed in the same country-month. Recognizing these potential limitations, we rely on dynamic pVAR models, which account for endogeneity not only between the dependent and IVs, but also between our two DVs (see, Davies 2016). By relying on first difference generalized method of moments (GMM) estimators, pVAR models use past DV values to instrument the exogenous effect of our IVs on dynamic processes over time across different units of analysis (Sigmund and Ferstl 2017). A key assumption of these GMM models is that the necessary instruments are “internal” and rely on lagged values of the instrumented variables. The pVAR model is accordingly specified as a system of equations, one per time period, where the instruments applicable to each equation differ (in later time periods, additional lagged

Table 1. Levin–Lin–Chu unit root tests

	$t - 1$	$t - 2$	$t - 3$	$t - 4$	$t - 5$	AIC
Z value	-33.67***	-21.07***	-17.12***	-13.40***	-12.15***	-9.244***

* $p < .1$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

Alternative hypothesis: stationarity of both dependent variables.

values of the instruments are available). Because these are panel data models, unit fixed effects are canceled, providing a straightforward instrumental variable estimator. Moreover, pVAR models can be estimating on more than one DV, thus allowing us to identify the (a) “exogenized” effect of each of our IVs (b) and each respective DV lag on (c) both DVs simultaneously. Such pVAR models are hence ideal for testing our theoretical argument in a rigorous manner, ensuring any causal arrow flows from our IVs to DVs rather than the other way around.

Because such models are computationally extensive, as adding time periods exponentially increases computational demands and increases the probability of overfitting (Sigmund and Ferstl 2017), we focus our analysis on a 60-month period for which information on all our variables was available, during which African states experienced multiple instances of elections and food shortages (January 2007–December 2011).⁸ To ensure stationarity, we report Levin–Lin–Chu unit root tests in table 1.⁹ As table 1 illustrates, the assumption that the combined DV series is stationary over the January 2007–December 2011 period is accepted for up to five lags, as well as for the ideal number of lags based on

8 We report negative binomial models that evaluates our theory over a longer country-month period for which data were available (1997–2011) in table A6 in the supplementary appendix, to illustrate our findings are robust to this choice. Interestingly, although our results hold when examined over the entire 1997–2011 period, we also find a statistically significant effect of non-violent dissent on formal repression. Considering that these models do not account for endogeneity, one possible explanation is that repression of nonviolent dissent by auxiliaries “backfires” in some contexts, leading to riots and hence deployment of formal organizations to subdue the rioters. Another possibility is that earlier in the data series, governments used formal organizations for repression indiscriminately, but later auxiliaries gained more importance as tools of nonviolent dissent repression.

9 Levin–Lin–Chu tests can be viewed as a pooled version of the (Augmented) Dickey Fuller tests and can hence be applied to panel time-series data.

Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) scores, suggesting a lack of unit route, i.e., that the series’ shape distribution does not vary over time. This, in turn, means using pVAR models is allowed within this framework. Figure 1 additionally illustrates that the series are stationary.

In line with the standard way of modeling pVAR models, the specifications reported in table 2 include three types of IVs: endogenous (i.e., DV lags), predetermined (i.e., IVs potentially correlated with the DVs’ past error term), and IVs treated as unaffected by the DV as done in standard ordinary least squares (OLS) frameworks (Sigmund and Ferstl 2017). In our pVAR models, the endogenous variables are the one-month lag of *Formal Repression_t* and *Auxiliary Repression_t* (with up to five-month lags reported in table A3 in the supplementary appendix). The predetermined variables are *Violent Riots_t* and *Nonviolent Dissent_t*, which vary by the month, as well as the country-year IVs *Civil War Onset_t* and *Coup_t*. These IVs are all directly related to political violence and are hence likely to be directly predetermined by the DVs. The rest of the controls were treated similarly to OLS framework as to avoid over-identification, which is likely in GMM-based models (Sigmund and Ferstl 2017). Additionally, considering any potential skewness on *Formal Repression_t* and *Auxiliary Repression_t*, we log both DVs and their lags prior to entering our models.¹⁰

Table 2 reports three one-month DV lag pVAR models. The first (baseline) includes only our IVs of *Violent Riots_t* and *Nonviolent Dissent_t* in addition to one-month DV lags. Controls for civil war and coups are added in the medium model, followed by a full model that includes all controls. Across all models in table 2, the results confirm both H1 and H2. The coefficient of *Violent Riots_t* has a positive and statistically significant effect ($p < .1$, two-tail test) on *Formal Repression_t* but a statistically insignificant association with *Auxiliary Repression_t*. *Nonviolent Dissent_t*’s coefficient, in contrast, has a positive and statistically significant effect ($p < .05$,

10 In table A6 in the supplementary appendix, we illustrate that our findings are at least plausibly robust to this decision by reporting a set of negative binomial models designed for event-count variables.

Table 2. Determinants of repression, January 2007–December 2011

	Baseline		Medium		Full	
	Formal	Auxiliary	Formal	Auxiliary	Formal	Auxiliary
<i>Violent Riots_t</i> ¹	0.346 [*] (0.203)	0.072 (0.125)	0.347 [*] (0.191)	0.096 (0.113)	0.347 [*] (0.194)	0.087 (0.117)
<i>Nonviolent Dissent_t</i> ¹	0.032 (0.035)	0.062 ^{**} (0.030)	0.035 (0.033)	0.072 ^{**} (0.032)	0.033 (0.032)	0.073 ^{**} (0.032)
<i>Formal Repression_{t-1}</i>	0.146 ^{***} (0.051)	0.008 (0.032)	0.144 ^{***} (0.051)	0.002 (0.033)	0.124 ^{**} (0.050)	-0.008 (0.033)
<i>Auxiliary Repression_{t-1}</i>	0.065 ^{**} (0.027)	0.279 ^{***} (0.076)	0.062 ^{**} (0.026)	0.287 ^{***} (0.074)	0.050 [*] (0.029)	0.272 ^{***} (0.063)
<i>Civil War Onset_t</i>	-	-	0.139 (0.100)	0.102 [*] (0.059)	0.148 (0.093)	0.113 [*] (0.059)
<i>Coup D'état_t</i>	-	-	-0.090 (0.069)	-0.094 (0.088)	-0.141 ^{**} (0.070)	-0.139 (0.097)
<i>Population_t</i> ¹	-	-	-	-	-1.464 (1.045)	-1.563 (1.754)
<i>Oil Price_t</i> ¹	-	-	-	-	0.205 ^{**} (0.090)	0.271 (0.210)
<i>Democracy_t</i> ¹	-	-	-	-	-0.706 ^{***} (0.204)	-0.082 (0.184)
<i>Natural Disasters_t</i> ¹	-	-	-	-	-0.030 [*] (0.015)	-0.001 (0.022)
Observations	3,048		3,048		3,048	
N groups/states	51		51		51	
Hansen χ^2	365.10		377.86		372.95	

* $p < .1$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

Variable coefficients are reported with standard errors in parentheses.

¹Natural log.

two-tail test) on *Auxiliary Repression_t* and a statistically insignificant association with *Formal Repression_t*. Importantly, although the effect of violent riots on formal repression is statistically weaker, it is also substantively larger, meaning a riot is more likely to attract a response by formal organizations, on average, compared with attacks by auxiliaries against a nonviolent event (although such repression may also be more likely to be reported compared with repression by auxiliaries).

Importantly, these results are not driven by endogeneities with the DVs, or the fact that both DVs may be autocorrelated. As illustrated in table A3 in the supplementary appendix, these results are robust to the inclusion of deeper lags, up to five months, illustrating our results' robustness to serial correlation. Additionally, Hansen χ^2 scores across both tables suggest all models are robust but weakened by many instruments. The results thus suggest that a causal relationship exists between violent by different categories of repressive agents and the type of dissent faced by the regime that are directly in line with our theoretical argument.

Finally, although we do not discuss the effects of the controls here, considering interpretation might be problematic in causal analysis setting, one interesting finding in table 2 relates to the effect of democracy. This variable's coefficient is negative in both columns, suggesting that, in line with past research (e.g., [Davenport 2007](#); [Chenoweth and Stephan 2011](#)), democracies tend to repress less than non-democracies. However, the coefficient is only significant in the formal repression column, suggesting that democracies avoid *visible* repression, but not necessarily covert violence. This finding is in line with past research (e.g., [Mitchell et al. 2014](#)), which finds that auxiliaries are most prevalent not in full democracies or complete autocracies, but rather in transitional and "middle-of-the-way" democracies.

Cross-national Case Studies

Overall, the quantitative analysis of African countries confirms our theoretical expectations regarding the complementary effect of formal and auxiliary domestic security organizations. To determine the generalizability

of these findings to other world regions and identify more nuanced relationships, we conduct two short case studies of non-African states: Pakistan and Iran. Our decision to study these two specific countries relies on the “typical” case selection approach advocated by Seawright and Gerring, whereby an effective analysis “focuses on a case that exemplifies a stable, cross-case relationship ... in which the evidence at hand (in the case) is judged according to whether it validates the stipulated causal mechanisms or not” (2008, 299). Accordingly, it is important to ensure that relevant confounders remain constant across the two cases to help verify the stipulated causal mechanism is responsible for the observed variations. The focus on Pakistan and Iran as our cases allows us to account for regional variability (both states are located in central Asia), degree of political openness (both states are nondemocracies), and ethno-religious fractionalization (both states have a large Muslim majority).

Rangers and Political Militias in Pakistan

Organizationally, the Pakistani Police Service is divided into four main arms (e.g., Punjab Police, Sind Police) corresponding to the country’s four provinces. Pakistan also has several formal gendarmeries (e.g., Rangers, Frontier Corps), which operate under the auspices of the Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Defense, and Narcotics Control (Nadeem 2002; Faiz 2003). As noted by Faiz (2003, 23), “naiks, inspectors, and superintendents in Pakistan Rangers” are carefully selected by the Ministry of Defense based on their “social background and reputation for loyalty to the state” to ensure alignment of interests between the Rangers and Pakistan’s government. Subunits within the Rangers that are “best suited to quell violent domestic riots” due to their “experience, training and previously demonstrated loyalty are routinely assigned” by Pakistan’s Interior Ministry to repress violent dissidents in the country’s major cities (Faiz 2003, 25; Nadeem 2002). Recruitment and assignment of loyal individuals into Pakistan Rangers via specified screening allows Pakistan’s Interior Ministry to “control the Rangers and guarantee that they fulfill the security functions” (Nadeem 2002, 95) they are expected to implement. Accordingly, Pakistan citizens “believe that the actions taken by the Rangers and the police are directed by Interior Ministry officials” (Faiz 2003, 26).

Patterns of formal agent deployment in Pakistan are in line with our theoretical argument. When a wave of violent riots erupted in the nation’s largest cities in October 2001, the government employed both local forces of the Sind Police and the Rangers (a gendarmerie under the Interior Ministry’s command) to “incarcerate, repress,

and even shoot-at-sight” (Chattha and Ivkovic 2003, 159). Minister of Interior Moinuddin Gaidar publicly stated in an interview that the police and Rangers were “jointly mobilized in Karachi to act against the rioters to especially show to those that challenged the state that the government has the capacity and demonstrated will to crush with force the violent trouble-makers” (Ghausi 2001). Further, as Faiz (2003, 40) notes, Pakistan’s Interior Ministry officials were “confident that they could fully manage the operations of the Rangers for dealing with rioters” since the Rangers’ rank-and-file were meticulously selected for their “loyalty, competence and willingness to execute” their tasks. Similarly, during the 1995–1996 riots, the government (led by Benazir Bhutto) publicly “expressed its determination to restore law and order in Karachi and in this context called upon police to use “ruthlessness” and to shoot “terrorists” (the rioters) on sight” (HRW 1996, 4).

In contrast to official security forces, auxiliary groups in Pakistan consist mostly of political militias (Staniland 2015) or local defense forces in tribal areas. These “militias are loosely aligned with Pakistan’s establishment” (Nadeem 2002, 127) and are often used to terrorize the opposition rather than target active dissenters. As Staniland (2015, 775) explains, “linkages between the armed militias of political parties and various Pakistani governments in Karachi can be seen as mutually beneficial arrangements for negotiating militarized elections.” Sending formal agents to target the opposition highlights a clear link between the government and political intimidation, which can have both domestic and international repercussions. Relying on auxiliaries, on the other hand, muddles the link between the government and repression of the opposition, especially considering that, “mainstream national political parties, ruling at the state or center, absorbed local criminals as muscle for managing militarized election” (Staniland 2015, 776), which provides the government with further plausible deniability. Accordingly, we would expect to see the government relying more heavily on these auxiliaries if and where they seek to intimidate and repress political opposition.

Human rights organizations have long highlighted this issue. Throughout the 1990s, the Bhutto- and Nawaz Sharif-led governments used the informal MQM-Haqiqi militia to “harass and threaten the opposition and unarmed civilians” (HRW 1996, 23) engaged in nonviolent dissent. The MQM-Haqiqi militia also used to abduct, repress, and incarcerate a large number of peaceful activists by putting them into “detention,” where they were “often illtreated and denied legal safeguards” (HRW 1996, 23). Human rights activists also noted that the violent attacks against nonviolent activists carried out by

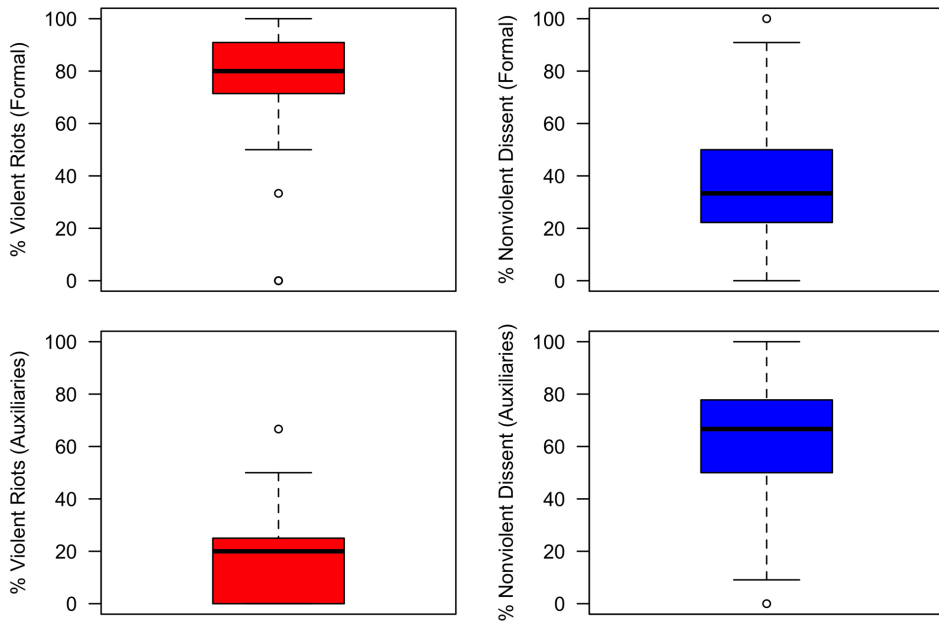


Figure 2. Repression by dissent and agent type in Pakistan.

MQM Haqiqi were often conducted with “the acquiescence of various government agencies” (HRW 1999, 24).

The Bhutto- and Sharif-led governments not only denied any links between the regime and the MQM-Haqiqi group but went as far as to publicly blame the group for disturbing peace and communal harmony (HRW 1999; Ghauri 2001). Nadeem (2002, 141) further notes that Pashtun tribal militias that were “loosely aligned” with Pakistan’s security forces have often been used to intimidate and suppress peaceful non-violent opposition protesters in the country’s FATA region since the mid-1990s. Successive governments in Pakistan have denied any links with these militias (Ghauri 2001; Nadeem 2002). This, again, confirms the advantages of agency loss inherent to contracting out repression of non-violent opposition to independent or semi-independent auxiliaries.

To provide more effective evidence, we systematically collected information on violent and nonviolent dissent events in seven of the largest cities in the Sind and Punjab provinces of Pakistan for the years 2006–2015 using primary and secondary sources listed in the supplementary appendix. As figure 2 illustrates, formal organizations (upper row) are responsible for repressing 77 percent of violent dissent events over the period, but only 38 percent of the nonviolent ones, on average. In contrast, auxiliaries (lower row)—mainly political militias—were responsible for repressing 17 percent of

violent riot incidents but 62 percent of nonviolent dissent events, on average. Figure 2 thus provides additional confirmation for the notion that formal and auxiliary agents are complementary tools of state repression.

The Iranian Basij

The Basij is a semi-official PGM tasked with the “moral” control of the Iranian population as well as assisting formal organizations—the police and the Revolutionary Guard—in handling domestic dissent (Golkar 2015; Alfoneh 2016). Despite the fact that it has a hierarchical structure, which corresponds to its geographic mobilization capacity and deployment, unlike the Revolutionary Guard (under whose jurisdiction it falls) the Basij is not a gendarmerie but rather a semi-official auxiliary force (Alfoneh 2016). Most members and local cadre commanders are unpaid, heavily indoctrinated, and get only basic military training (Golkar 2015, 47–53). As an informal auxiliary group, the Basij focused on attracting “voluntary recruits” without any formal vetting or selection process (Ostovar 2013; Golkar 2015).

Since its formation in 1980, the Basij has undergone multiple phases of restructuring. Since the mid-1990s, it is primarily tasked with enforcing the cultural and religious norms of the regime, preventing “un-Islamic” behavior (e.g., arresting women who don’t wear hijab in public), and breaking student opposition movements

(Golkar 2015, 95–96). In response to the 2009 Green Movement, which protested the reelection of President Ahmadinejad, the Basij went through a major transformation to its current form as a “mass organization more focused on internal suppression and on defending the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) against the alleged “soft war” or “cultural war,” which essentially involves non-military measures” (Golkar 2015, 27; see also Alfoneh 2016). The Basij’s “Ashura [men only] and Al-Zahra [women only] battalions are used to confront soft threat or in preparatory period” and “aid the IRI in nonagent, passive defense,” as well as contain “the nonviolent phase” of “semihard threats” (Golkar 2015, 101). These battalions constitute the vast majority of active Basij members. As its history illustrates, then, the different informal characteristics of the Basij ensured that, in line with our theoretical expectations, it was used mostly against nonviolent dissidents (Alfoneh 2016). As such, the use of informal Basij units that only included voluntary recruits made it easier for Iran’s regime to deny its role in suppressing nonviolent protestors (Ostovar 2013; Alfoneh 2016).

Interestingly, since December 2006, the Basij acquired the possibility of becoming “formalized” in certain crisis situations. The Basij developed close ties with the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps after 2006, when it was placed “under the direct authority of the IRGC’s commander-in-chief ... (with) units that operate within the IRGC” (Ostovar 2013, 347). The Basij is also bent on “recruiting young people, ... and instilling in them devotion to the Iranian regime and its politicized interpretation of Shia Islam” (Ostovar 2013, 347). Selection, screening, and recruiting regime loyalists who favor the view of Shia Islam into the Basij helped the Iranian regime to increase its direct control over this group via its control over the Revolutionary Guard, increasing the probability it will comply with the regime’s directive to repress violent opposition while not employing excessive violence (Golkar 2015; Alfoneh 2016). Hence, in case of massive riots, local formal forces are under the “instruction to use the Basij in police status,” which includes, for example, deploying a Basij motorcycle unit against the rioters (Golkar 2015, 97). Using the Basij to repress violent dissidents under the auspices, control, and close monitoring of a formal organization such as the Revolutionary Guard allows the regime to demonstrate its will and capacity for repression (Ostovar 2013; Alfoneh 2016).

That the Basij can be “formalized” if needed provides a more nuanced confirmation of our claim that, when faced with severe forms of dissent, it is crucial for the government to retain the ability to clearly regulate its security agents’ behavior and maintain complete power over

decision- and strategy-making. Indeed, this is illustrated by the fact that “[i]n this type of extreme circumstances, the IRI would rely on the more indoctrinated Basij” (Golkar 2015, 102) rather than just deploy Basij troops *en masse*. The Basij hence provides an interesting example that confirms our theoretical expectations: in its most frequent auxiliary form, it is used to preempt nonviolent dissent; if dissent intensifies, it might be deployed against active rioters, but only if the government can ensure complete control over the organization and create clear connections between it and the state, which can only be achieved via “formalization” and by relying on the members who are most likely to comply and follow orders.

Conclusion

Our ultimate conclusion is that often, governments that decide to repress civil dissent make a *strategic* choice between deploying formal agents or relying on auxiliaries, and that this choice varies based on the type of dissent they face. As such, our findings have some relevant policy implications. For instance, while past research highlighted the importance of a professionalized military for ensuring domestic stability (e.g., Huntington 1981), our findings have similar implications for police and gendarmeries/paramilitary professionalization. Reducing (developing) states’ ability to rely on auxiliaries via professionalization can hence help raise the costs of targeting nonviolent dissidents and reduce the degree of political violence aimed at unarmed individuals.

There are some potential limitations. For instance, our combined mixed methods approach may not systematically account for cases outside of Africa or identify particular mechanisms within African states that might help to elucidate our theory. In that regard, more detailed statistical analyses using a global sample, as well as specific case studies that look into different countries and world regions, can help validate and complement our theory and findings. This is especially important considering that the choice governments make as to which agent type to deploy can be subjected to additional constraints not mentioned here, e.g., whether auxiliaries are actually available for deployment, or the type of the regime facing dissent. Especially considering that it is not only failed states that use auxiliaries (see, e.g., Bates 2008), our emphasis on accountability and the fact that such organizations can and, as we showed, are often used as strategic complements, have some relevant implications.

For scholars, our analysis and findings draw new linkages between formal and auxiliary security organizations, their interrelationships, and how they relate to broader global-political repression patterns.

Disaggregating our framework both temporally and with respect to agent type helps to overcome some past limitations in repression research, which often relies on the country-year as a unit of analysis, thus reducing the ability to identify variation in state responses; or focuses only on one type of agency, formal or auxiliary (Davenport 2007; Pierskalla 2010). Our findings thus suggest that one fruitful direction for future research is to also disaggregate agency and dissent geospatially, which can add theoretical and empirical nuance. Our results also illustrate the benefits of analyzing the behaviors of both formal and auxiliary domestic security agents within a single framework. Rather than focusing only on one specific agent type, future research can acquire new understanding of the role played by different agent types in repression and better explain its determinants.

Supplementary Information

Supplementary information is available at the *Journal of Global Security Studies* data archive.

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