People Power?

Nonviolent Coordination in the Shadow of Violence

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Introduction

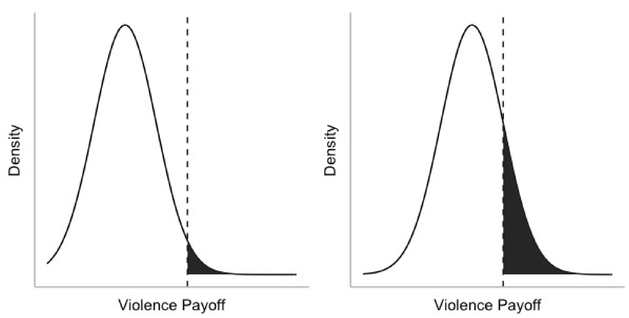
Anti-regime protests in dictatorships take starkly different paths: some protests swell and force the regime to collapse, while others diminish under regime repression. Still others fail to sustain nonviolence, as dissenters take up arms to resist the regime.

Repression and Violent Preferences

Dissenters cannot often stage mass anti-regime protests, as two "shadows of violence" – repression and support for violent movements by dissenters – constrain individuals' choices to participate in protest. Repression is state coercion which increases the cost of collective action. Dissenter violence is the contribution to or participation in the use of force with the objective of overthrowing the regime. Dissenters forego peaceful anti-regime protest to volunteer for terrorist organizations, provide material support to an insurgency, or form a violent revolutionary movement.

Model Setup

Players are a continuum of dissenters indexed by i who can mobilize for contentious action. There are two periods. In the first period, all dissenters choose actions simultaneously. Dissenters join an anti-regime *protest* or do not protest. In the second period, dissenters who chose not to protest choose whether to support *violence* against the regime by a revolutionary movement or do *nothing*. Dissenters face a regime with strength θ, which is the proportion of dissenters who must protest for the regime to change. Strength is the infrastructural power of the state.



Payoffs: Payoffs for dissenter i are:

$$U_i(\theta, r, \omega, \psi) = \begin{cases} p \cdot \theta - c(r) & \text{if Protest} \\ s \cdot (\theta - \omega) + \psi - d(r) & \text{if Not Protest, Violence} \\ 0 & \text{if Not Protest, Nothing} \end{cases}$$

Information: Before choosing an action, each dissenter receives a private signal of regime strength: $x_i = \theta + \nu_i$. Each ν_i is an independent realization of a random variable distributed $N(0, \sigma^2)$.

Strategies: Each dissenter plays a switching strategy. That is, she protests if and only if the private signal she receives of regime strength is sufficiently large.

$$s_i(x_i, r, \omega, \psi) = \begin{cases} \text{Protest} & \text{if } x_i \geq k \\ \text{Not Protest} & \text{if } x_i < k \end{cases}$$

Two features of the environment are common knowledge. The regime – a non-strategic player – represses with intensity $r \in [0, 1]$. Second, there is a distribution of dissenter preferences for violence. Preferences are distributed $\psi \sim N(\mu, \alpha^2)$.

Equilibrium

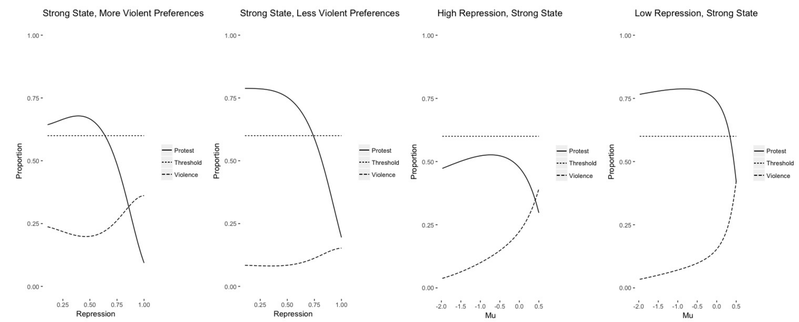
The dissenter must estimate the probability the regime change threshold is met. In particular, what is the likelihood the regime changes given the proportion who protest?

$$Pr(\text{Regime Change}) = Pr(1 - \Phi(\frac{k - x}{\sqrt{2}\sigma}) \geq \theta) = \Phi(\frac{1 - \Phi(\frac{k-x}{\sqrt{2}\sigma}) - \theta}{\sigma})$$

Proposition: *If $d(r) > \mu$ and $\omega > x_i - \frac{d(r)-\mu}{s}$ (violence is sufficiently destructive), the model has a unique equilibrium in switching strategies in which all dissenters play cutoff θ^*. For every signal x a dissenter receives there is a unique corresponding cutoff.* Once θ^* is known, the true proportion of dissenters who protest is the probability the private signal each dissenter receives is larger than θ^*.

Analysis

The analysis reveals three key contributions of the model. First, the backfire effect of repression on protest occurs only when violent preferences among dissenters are large. Second, the backfire effect is always accompanied by dissenters substituting protest for supporting violence. Third, increasing violent preferences at low levels can incite additional protest, while at high levels spoil the possibility of nonviolent regime change through protest.



- Left panels: The relationship between repression and protest is non-monotone. Under the following jointly sufficient conditions, $d(r) \leq x_i - \omega + \mu$ and $\theta^* > 0$, repression increases protest when the violent fringe is large and repression is low.
- Right panels: There is a non-monotonic relationship between the preferences for violence and nonviolent protest.

Contributions

- The analysis theoretically links two concepts in the study of dissent: substitution and backfire. Backfire results from coordination effects as dissenters switch into protest from violence and doing nothing under increasing repression.
- The model unpacks beliefs and coordination motives which are heterogeneous within a group, where a group level of analysis abstracts away from these issues.
- The option of supporting violence integrates literature on nonviolent dissent with the study of support for violent revolutionary movements.