REPRESSION AND REPUTATION$^1$

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Abstract

The literature views repression as an instrument that increases protest costs and decreases the likelihood of successful protest. If so, states must publicize their repression to deter protest. Typically, they don’t. We provide a simple model to explain why. Repression makes bystander citizens update negatively about the nature of the state, and increases the likelihood they join dissidents, thereby threatening the regime’s survival. Good states concede to good dissidents and repress bad ones, while bad states prefer to repress all dissidents to maintain the status quo. But bystanders don’t know the types of the state or dissidents. When bystanders are more likely to believe that the state is bad or dissidents are good, the bad state uses less repression. We study the implications for the empirical relationship between protest and repression, identify a complementary link between repression and censorship, and apply the model to the Iranian Revolution. *JEL Codes: D02, D74, H1.*
1 Introduction

“In the early hours of Friday, 19 July 1988, the [Iranian] regime suddenly, without warning, isolated the main prisons from the outside world.... Thus began an act of violence unprecedented in Iranian history—unprecedented in form, content, and intensity” (Abrahamian 1999, 209-10). In the next five months, the regime sent as many as 12,000 political prisoners to the gallows. Despite the unprecedented scope of repression, the Iranian regime has always denied that it happened. Similarly, the Chinese regime has never publicized the 1989 Tienanmen massacre. Even during the Brazilian military regime when torture was the order of the day, torturers were instructed to “press hard without leaving marks” (Dassin 1998, 180).

However, in formal models, repression is viewed merely as an instrument used by regimes to increase the cost of dissent and/or decrease the likelihood of successful protest, and hence to deter protest. In Acemoglu and Robinson (2001) repression completely deters protest; In Boix (2003) and Acemoglu and Robinson (2006), repression discontinuously decreases the likelihood a revolution succeeds; In Besley and Persson (2011), Conrad and Ritter (2013), Ritter (2013), and Svolik (2013) repression decreases the likelihood of successful protest via a contest function, and in Rozenas (2010) via its effect on electoral outcomes; In Lichbach (1987), Persson and Tabellini (2009), Bueno de Mesquita (2010), Fearon (2011), Shadmehr and Bernhardt (2011), and Boix and Svolik (2013), more repression corresponds to higher expected costs of protest. True as it may be, if this were the whole story, then regimes would always publicize their acts of repression, at least in dictatorships. However,
they rarely do so. This paper is an attempt to understand why.

Repression does increase the cost of protest as suggested by the literature, but it also raises a consequential question for bystander citizens who have not yet joined the protest: what kind of regime kills or tortures political prisoners, and generally, uses repression against its dissenting citizens? Of course, the answer partly depends of what kind of dissidents were repressed. If they were “spreading corruption that threatens social and political well-being” of the people, or if they were foreign agents committed to espionage to subdue the country to foreign powers, or if they were “irresponsible radicals” who had little care for the lives and properties of others, then it would be the duty of a good government to effectively use coercion against such bad dissidents. However, if they were protesting against corruption or discrimination, then it would be the duty of the government to address their demand; only a bad government would repress good dissidents.

In reality, the majority of bystander citizens have very limited information about the types of the dissidents and the state. However, they recognize that good governments are likely to only repress bad dissidents, while bad governments prefer to repress all dissidents who aim to change the status quo. Thus, while a good government always does the “right” thing, repressing bad dissidents and conceding to good ones, a bad government faces a trade off: pay the costs of concession to the dissidents or repress them and face the risk of bystanders updating negatively about the state and joining the dissidents.

When bystanders’ prior beliefs are that dissidents are sufficiently likely to be bad or the government is sufficiently likely to be good, the bad gov-
ernment always uses repression and the bystanders never join the protest. However, when bystanders believe that the dissidents are likely to be good or the government likely to be bad, subtle behaviors arise in equilibrium: both the bad government and bystanders chose their responses probabilistically. The bad government sometimes represses and sometimes concedes; and bystanders, when observing repression, sometimes join the protest and sometimes stay quiet, letting the government suppress the dissidents. Moreover, when bystanders believe that the government is more likely to be bad, the bad government uses less repression in order to avoid the risk of bystanders joining the dissidents following repression.

These results provide a theoretical lens to understand why some regimes use repression and concession in a seemingly inconsistent manner. For example, scholars of the Iranian Revolution have attributed the collapse of the Pahlavi regime to “the Shah’s contradictory impulses and policies”: his “indecision and confusion” that caused the “vacillation” of state response to dissent between repression and concession (Arjomand 1988; Zonis 1991; M. Milani 1994; A. Milani 2011). Our results indicate that such “vacillations” can be the reflection of equilibrium state response in a strategic environment in which the regime is concerned about protests spreading to a bystander population that is unsure of whom to support. We show that the sequence of events in the Iranian Revolution is consistent with the predictions of our model.

These findings also provide insights to interpret mixed, puzzling empirical findings regarding the relationship between repression and protest. There is a large empirical literature investigating whether repression provokes fur-
ther protest or prevents it, but the results are puzzling: sometimes repression prevents protest and sometimes, it provokes protests; other times, there is no relationship (Davenport 2007). However, these empirical works do not account for the subtle interaction that arise in equilibrium: the state and the bystander population chose their responses probabilistically. This implies a probabilistic relationship between repression and protest in equilibrium: protest leads to concession with some probability, and to repression with some probability. In turn, repression provokes further protest with some probability, and ends the unrest with some probability. Thus, instead of looking for whether repression leads to more or less protest, empirical studies must focus on estimating the probabilities with which each pattern emerges.

Finally, we identify a complementary link between repression and censorship. One may think that repression and censorship are substitutable means by which regimes try to contain protests. Censorship impairs coordination among dissidents and prevents bystanders from learning bad news about the regime, reducing the likelihood of protest, and hence the need for repression to suppress or deter protest. Moreover, higher levels of censorship make it less likely that citizens observe repression, reducing its deterrence value to the state. Conversely, repression reduces the need for censorship as it deters protests. These observations imply a negative correlation between the levels of repression and censorship. We show that this view is incomplete. Observing repression makes bystanders update negatively about the state, increasing the likelihood that they join the protest. Higher levels of censorship make it less likely that bystanders observe repression, reducing the negative consequences
of repression for the state. This implies a complementary link between repression and censorship, and hence predicts a positive correlation between them.

Next, we present the model and its solution. We then apply the model to the sequence of events in the Iranian Revolution. Finally, we study the implications of the model for the relationship between repression and protest. A Conclusion follows. In an appendix, we extend the model to study the informational role of the size of repression.

2 Model

A ruler, a dissident, and a bystander interact in two periods. In each period, the dissident protests, demanding a change, the ruler decides whether to concede to the dissident or repress him and whether to hide repression. In the first period, the bystander decides whether to join the protest. There are two types of dissidents, good and bad. If a good dissident’s demands are met, the bystander’s payoff increases by $a$. In contrast, if a bad dissident’s demands are met, the bystander’s payoff falls by $a$. Similarly, there are two types of rulers, good and bad. A good ruler only cares about his principles of honesty and doing the “right” thing—repressing the bad dissident and conceding to the good one. In contrast, a bad ruler’s preferences are incongruent with the bystander’s. He always prefers to maintain the status quo: If he meets a good dissident’s demands, his payoff falls by $b_g$, and if he meets a bad dissident’s demands, his payoff falls by $b_b > b_g$.\footnote{Qualitatively similar results emerge if the bad ruler is incompetent, so that he cannot distinguish good and bad dissidents.} In each period, a new dissident is recognized, however the ruler’s type stays the same in both periods unless he is
deposed. The ruler knows the dissident’s type, but the bystander knows neither the dissident’s type nor the ruler’s type. The bystander has a prior that a dissident is bad with probability $q$ and the ruler is bad with probability $p$.

At the beginning of the first period, the dissident’s type is realized and he protests, demanding a change. The ruler then decides whether to concede to the dissident’s demand or to repress him. If the ruler concedes, the protest ends, the ruler stays in power, and the period ends. If the ruler represses, then he decides whether to hide it. The good ruler cares about honesty and never hides repression, while the bad one may hide repression.\(^2\) The bad ruler’s attempt to hide repression succeeds with probability $\lambda \in [0, 1]$. If the bystander observes repression, then he decides whether to join the protest. Otherwise he stays silent.\(^3\) If the bystander does not join the protest, repression succeeds and the status quo prevails. However, if the bystander joins the protest, the ruler is removed, and the dissident’s demands are met, so that when the dissident is good (bad), the bystander’s payoff raises (falls) by $a$. Moreover, a new ruler assumes office in the next period—who will be bad with probability $p$. The bad ruler’s payoff decreases by $F$ if he is deposed, where $F > b_i/\lambda$, $i \in \{g, b\}$.\(^4\) However, the good ruler—who only cares about doing the “right”

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\(^2\)Alternatively, one can argue that good states do not have the apparatus to censor repression, or the costs of hiding repression are prohibitively high due to institutional settings.

\(^3\)One can extend the model to allow the bystander to Bayesian update following no news of repression. However, we abstract from this information manipulation aspect which is the focus of other papers (Besley and Prat 2005; Shadmehr and Bernhardt 2012). Alternatively, let $- A < 0$ be the bystander’s payoffs when he protest against the bad ruler when the bad ruler has already conceded to the dissidents. We focus on the cases where $A$ is sufficiently large that the bystander never joins the protest if he does not observe repression to avoid being the sole protester against the bad ruler.

\(^4\)The restriction $F > b_i/\lambda$ implies that if the bad ruler knows that the bystander always joins the protest upon observing repression, then the bad ruler prefers to concede rather than to repress and risks being deposed. It is to simplify the exposition of results.
thing—is indifferent between staying and leaving office. Everyone’s status quo payoff is normalized to 0. At the beginning of the second period, the dissident’s type is realized, he protests, and then the ruler decides whether to concede to the dissident’s demand or to repress him. In either case, following the ruler’s action, payoffs are realized and the game ends.\(^5\)

We set up the model such that if the dissident’s demands are satisfied, then the protest ends without the bystander having an opportunity to protest. This is based on the robust finding in the social movements literature that protests are unsustainable without committed dissidents. That literature shows that sustaining protest activities requires lots of resources and planning, and hence it needs committed members/dissidents (McCarthy and Zald 1973, 1977; Gamson 1975; Tilly 1978, 1986, 1996, 2004; Tarrow 1998; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001). Thus, if these dissidents are co-opted, the movement ends. Spontaneous protests occasionally occur, but they typically end soon without achieving any goal. Indeed, many seemingly spontaneous movements are based on complex networks of organizations and committed dissidents (Morris 1984; Diani 2003).

3 Analysis

**Strategies and Equilibrium.** The bystander’s strategy \(\sigma_p \in [0, 1]\) is the probability of joining the protest following repression. The bad ruler’s strategy is a quadruple, \((\sigma_{rg}, \sigma_{rb}, \sigma_{r'g}, \sigma_{r'b}) \in [0, 1]^4\), where \(\sigma_{ri}\) is a probability of

\(^5\)That the bystander does not get to join the protest in the second period is to simplify the model. The sole purpose of having a second period in the model is to endogenize that the good (bad) ruler is, indeed, good (bad) for the bystander.
repressing type $i$ dissident in periods 1, and $\sigma_{ri}$ is the counterpart for period 2. The equilibrium is Perfect Bayesian.

I solve the game by backward induction. In the second period, a bad ruler always represses, is indifferent between hiding repression or not, and receives 0, while a good ruler represses bad dissidents and concedes to good dissidents. Next, consider the bad ruler’s decision in the first period. Recall that $\sigma_p \in [0, 1]$ is the probability that the bystander joins the protest. If the bad ruler does not repress a type $i$ dissident, his payoff is $-b_i + 0 = -b_i$. If he does repress, he tries to hide it, and his expected payoff is $\lambda(\sigma_p(-F) + (1-\sigma_p)(0+0)) + (1-\lambda)(0+0) = -\lambda \sigma_p F$. Thus, the bad ruler represses type $i$ dissident if and only if

$$b_i > \lambda \sigma_p F, \; i \in \{b, g\}.$$  (1)

Because the bad ruler dislikes the bad dissident more than the good one, if he represses the good dissident, then he also represses the bad one: $b_g \geq \lambda \sigma_p F$ implies $b_b > \lambda \sigma_p F$. The following observations help to characterize the equilibria:

**Remark 1.** In equilibrium, the bad ruler represses the good dissident with positive probability, i.e., $\sigma_{rg} > 0$ in equilibrium. If the bad ruler does not repress the good dissident, then the bystander never joins the protest because following repression, (1) the bystander knows that the dissident is bad, and (2) the bystander’s updated belief that the ruler is good is at least as high as his prior—implying that the current ruler’s replacement is more likely to be bad. But if the bystander never joins the protest, then the bad ruler has incentives to repress. In turn, if the bad ruler represses the good dissident with positive probability, it follows that he must repress the bad dissident with probability 1, i.e., $\sigma_{rg} > 0$ implies $\sigma_{rb} = 1$. Therefore, the bad ruler’s
equilibrium strategy reduces to a probability of repressing the good dissident, which we subsequently denote by \( \sigma_r = \sigma_{rg} \in [0, 1] \) to simplify exposition.

**Remark 2.** In equilibrium, the bystander sometimes does not join the protest, i.e., \( \sigma_p < 1 \). If \( \sigma_p = 1 \), then the bad ruler never represses because \( \lambda F > b_b > b_g \), and hence the bystander does not have incentives to join the protest following repression because only the good ruler represses.

Next, consider the bystander’s strategy. Following an act of repression, the bystander updates about the types of the ruler and the dissident. Let \( p' \) be the bystander’s belief about the likelihood that the ruler is bad, and \( q' \) be his belief about the likelihood that the dissident is bad. Recall that \( \sigma_r \) is the likelihood that the bad ruler represses the good dissident. Then Bayes’ rule implies

\[
p' = \frac{q + (1 - q)\sigma_r}{q + (1 - q)\sigma_r p} \quad p > p \quad \text{and} \quad q' = \frac{q}{q + (1 - q)\sigma_r p} > q.
\] (2)

Thus, if the bystander joins the protest, his expected payoff is

\[
[q'(-a) + (1 - q')(a)] + [p(0) + (1 - p)(1 - q)a] = [(1 - 2q') + (1 - p)(1 - q)]a,
\] (3)

where the first and second brackets are the expected payoffs from the first and second periods, respectively. If the bystander does not join the protest, his expected payoff is

\[
[0] + [p'(0) + (1 - p')(1 - q)a] = (1 - p')(1 - q)a.
\] (4)

Thus, from equations (3) and (4), the bystander joins the protest if and only if

\[
1 - 2q'(\sigma_r) > (p - p'(\sigma_r))(1 - q),
\] (5)

where we made explicit that the bystander’s beliefs depend on the bad ruler’s strategy \( \sigma_r \) via Bayes’ rule, according to equation (2). When deciding whether
to join the protest, the bystander faces a trade off: support the ruler and possibly prevent the implementation of good changes in the current and future periods, or support the dissident and risk the implementation of bad change in the current period and replacing a good ruler with a possibly bad one in the future. Inequality (5) illustrates this trade off: the right hand side captures the change in expected payoff from keeping the current ruler, and the left hand side captures the expected payoff from implementing the dissident’s demands.

Previous remarks show that the only possible pure strategy equilibrium is the one in which the bad ruler always represses and the bystander never joins the protest, i.e., $\sigma_r = 1$ and $\sigma_p = 0$. Moreover, the bystander does not join the protest if and only if $1 - 2q'(1) \leq (p - p'(1))(1 - q)$, where $p'(1)$ and $q'(1)$ are from (2) with $\sigma_r = 1$. In fact, there is a set of parameters in which this inequality holds. That is, there is a set of parameters for which there is a unique equilibrium in which the bad ruler always represses and the bystander never joins the protest. This set of parameters is associated with small $p$ and large $q$.

Clearly, when the bystander faces a low chance of having a good ruler or a good dissident, he does not change the current ruler because (1) it is likely that the dissident whom he joins in protest wants to implement a policy that hurts him, i.e., the dissident is bad, and (2) there is not much to gain from having a good ruler since the chance of facing a good dissident in the future is low anyways.

In any mixed strategy equilibrium, when $0 < \sigma_r, \sigma_p < 1$, the bad ruler must be indifferent between repression and concession, and the bystander must be indifferent between joining and not joining the protest following repression.\footnote{Technically, there is also an equilibrium in which the ruler always represses, but the bystander plays a mixed strategy, i.e., $\sigma_r = 1$ and $\sigma_p \in (0, \frac{b}{\lambda p})$. But this is a knife-edge
Thus, from (1) and (5),

\[ b_g = \lambda \sigma_p F \quad \text{and} \quad 1 - 2q'(\sigma_r) = (p - p'(\sigma_r))(1 - q), \]

where the bystander’s beliefs, \( p' \) and \( q' \), must be consistent with the bad ruler’s strategy using Bayes’ rule. Thus, substituting \( p' \) and \( q' \) from (2) into (6) yields the equilibrium strategies.

\[
\sigma_p = \frac{b_g}{\lambda F} \quad \text{and} \quad \sigma_r = \frac{q}{(1-q)p \left[ 1 + (1-p)(1-q) \right]}.
\]

**Proposition 1** There exists a combination of \( p \) and \( q \), \( A(p,q) \), such that, in equilibrium: If \( A(p,q) < 1 \), then the bad ruler represses the dissident with probability \( \sigma_r^* = A(p,q) \) and the bystander joins the protest with probability \( \sigma_p^* = \frac{b_g}{\lambda F} \). Otherwise, the bad ruler always represses the dissident and the bystander never joins the protest. Moreover,

\[
A(p,q) = \frac{q}{(1-q)p \left[ 1 + (1-p)(1-q) \right]}.
\]

**Some Determinants of Repression and Protest.** As the bad ruler’s payoff from being deposed falls—as \( F \) increases—he becomes more hesitant to repress to avoid being deposed. As a result, following repression, the bystander updates less negatively about the ruler’s type because he believes that it is less likely that repression was done by a bad ruler. Therefore, the bystander becomes less inclined to join the protest and depose the ruler—\( \sigma_p \) decreases. Similarly, as the bad ruler’s payoff from concession falls—as \( b_g \) increases—he becomes more inclined to repress. As a result, the bystander updates more negatively about the ruler’s type following repression, and hence becomes more inclined to join the protest to depose the ruler—\( \sigma_p \) increases.
Corollary 1 Suppose $A(p, q) < 1$, so that the bad ruler and the bystander play mixed strategies in equilibrium. Then, increases in the bad ruler’s costs of concession, $b_g$, and decreases in his office rent, $F$, both increase the likelihood that the bystander joins the protest, i.e.,

$$\frac{d\sigma_p(F)}{dF} < 0 < \frac{d\sigma_p(b_g)}{db_g}.$$ 

When the likelihood that the dissident is bad is not too high so that the bad ruler sometimes concedes and sometimes represses, i.e., when $A(p, q) < 1$, increases in the likelihood that the dissident is bad have both strategic and non-strategic effects. There are three non-strategic effects: (1) The loss from having a bad ruler in the next period decreases because both good and bad rulers repress bad dissidents. (2) Following repression, the bystander’s belief about the likelihood that the ruler is bad decreases, i.e.,

$$\frac{\partial p'(q, \sigma_r(q))}{\partial q} = \frac{(1-p)p\sigma_r}{s+q(1-q}\sigma_r p) < 0.$$
Following repression, the bystander’s belief about the likelihood that the dissident is bad increases, i.e., \( \frac{\partial q'(q, \sigma_r(q))}{\partial q} = \frac{p \sigma_r}{(q + (1-q) \sigma_r p)^2} > 0 \). However, there is also a strategic effect: The bad ruler adjusts his behavior by repressing more, i.e., \( \frac{d\sigma_r(q)}{dq} = \frac{2 - p - (1-p)q^2}{p(1-q)^2(2 - p - (1-p)q)^2} > 0 \). This strategic adjustment by the ruler then feeds back into the bystander’s beliefs so that, following repression, the bystander’s belief that the ruler is bad increases, i.e., \( \frac{dp'(q, \sigma_r(q))}{dq} = \frac{(1-p)^2}{(3-p-q(1-p))^2} > 0 \), while his belief that the dissident is bad decreases, i.e., \( \frac{dq'(q, \sigma_r(q))}{dq} = -\frac{1-p}{(3-p-q(1-p))^2} < 0 \). That is, the effect of the ruler’s strategic adjustment—increasing repression—swamps the direct, non-strategic effect so that when the likelihood that the dissident is bad increases, the bystander updates more negatively about the ruler following repression, but updates less negatively about the dissident. Similarly, one can show that as the prior likelihood that the ruler is bad increases, the bystander updates more negatively about the dissident, updates more positively about the ruler, and the bad ruler represses less. Corollary 2 states the effect of changes in the bystander’s prior beliefs about the likelihood of bad ruler and bad dissident on the ruler’s level of repression.

**Corollary 2** Suppose \( A(p, q) < 1 \), so that the bad ruler and the bystander play mixed strategies in equilibrium. Then, increases in the likelihood that the ruler is bad and decreases in the likelihood that the dissident is bad both decrease the likelihood of repression, i.e., \( \frac{d\sigma_r(p)}{dp} < 0 < \frac{d\sigma_r(q)}{dq} \).

**The Complementary Link Between Repression and Censorship.** One may view repression and censorship as substitutable instruments used by regimes to contain protest. Censorship prevents bad news to be conveyed to
citizens and impairs coordination among dissidents, while repression increases the costs of dissent. Thus, high censorship reduces the need for repression, and harsh repression deters protest, reducing the need to censor. The deterrence effect of repression further strengthens this substitutability link: when the level of censorship is high so that repression is less likely to be observed, repression is less likely to deter protest, reducing its value to the state.

Our paper shows that this view is incomplete: there is also a complementary link between repression and censorship that implies a positive correlation between the two. Lower levels of censorship make it more likely that the bystander observes repression, and hence updates negatively about the state. As a result, the state represses less when it censors less. This mechanism creates a complementary link between repression and censorship. Corollary 3 formally states this result.

**Corollary 3** Suppose \( A(p,q) < 1 \), so that the bad ruler and the bystander play mixed strategies in equilibrium. Then, increases in the likelihood that repression is observed decrease the likelihood of repression: \( \frac{d\sigma_r(\lambda)}{d\lambda} < 0 \).

4 Reputation and Repression in the Iranian Revolution: Cinema Rex and Black Friday

Our theoretical results imply that when the bystander becomes more pessimistic about the ruler, so that he believes that the ruler is more likely to be bad, the ruler becomes more likely to take an accommodative stand toward the dissident, swaying away from repression to concession. The sequence of events in the Iranian Revolution provides an illustrative example.
From the mid-1960s to the late 1970s, the Shah faced opposition from the left, liberals, nationalists, and a fraction of the religious population, but never saw any major unrest. The sparks of protests started in 1977, and the first major demonstration—organized by the Islamic opposition and Khomeini’s followers—occurred in January of 1978. Demonstrations continued through the Winter and Spring, but remained limited in scale. The regime responded with repression: dissidents were arrested, beaten, tortured, and killed (Abrahamian 1982, 505-17). The regime propaganda presented the dissidents as foreign agents and religious fanatics seeking to disturb the progress of the country, while the government was trying to contain their damages with minimal violence. That is, the Shah was portrayed as a kind, progressive, humanitarian leader defending his nation against a group of religious fanatics and foreign agents. “By the Summer of 1978 the streets were remarkably quiet” (Abrahamian 1982, 510). In fact, Amouzegar, the Iranian prime minister said in an interview in May: “The recent disturbances in Iran have ended for ever” (Hosseiniyan 2006, 240). There was some unrest throughout the Summer, but overall it seemed that the movement was going to die.

But on August 19, a ferocious event happened that ended the calm. Arsonists set fire to Cinema Rex—a movie theater in the Southwestern city of Abadan—and killed roughly 400 civilians locked inside. Such a level of atrocity against defenseless, innocent people was unprecedented in modern Iranian history. The answer to “who was responsible?” turned out to be critical in the sequence of events that led to the Shah’s collapse. The regime blamed

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the Islamic opposition, and the opposition blamed the regime’s secret service. The opposition won the public opinion, and soon “thousands of Iranians who had felt neutral and had until now thought that the struggle was only between the shah and supporters of religiously conservative mullahs felt that the government might put their own lives on the block to save itself. Suddenly, for hundreds of thousands, the movement was their own business” (Green 1982, 96; Mottahedeh 2004, 375). That is, people became more pessimistic about the type of their ruler—in our model, $p$ increased.

Only eight days after the Cinema Rex incident, on August 27, the Shah replaced his prime minister Amouzegar with Sharif-Emami to create a government of “national reconciliation.” Sharif-Emami, who had family ties to the clergy, “had been known for harboring anti-American sentiments” (Milani 2011, 387). He made strong pro-Islamic gestures and several concessions to the opposition: he returned the imperial calendar to the Islamic one, closed down casinos, began releasing the imprisoned clergy, and promised to free political prisoners and hold free elections. He widely publicized his conciliatory attitude. In an interview with Kayhan, one of the largest newspapers in the country, he said: “We definitely contact the high-ranking clergy—for whom I have a special respect—and we talk to them, and resolve the differences. If they have issues, special attention will be paid to those issues, and with this, I am very hopeful that, God willing, all the differences will be resolved” (Ruhani 2002, v. 3, 329). Even the Shah took unusually pro-Islamic gestures. In a meeting with the representatives of Islamic countries, he said “We have pride in the religion of Islam. We see that even in those [old dark] times, this religion
brought about equality for the people.... I wish that Muslims stay together and
defend Islam and defend the right of Muslim people” (Ruhani 2002, v.3, 331).

This conciliatory attitude was extended when the regime allowed demon-
stration at the end of Ramazan, the month during which Muslims fast. How-
ever, a few days later, the opposition called for further demonstrations. Scared
of losing the control of the streets, the regime hastily announced martial law
around the midnight of September 7. The following day, September 8, 1978,
protestors gathered despite the martial law—some knew, some didn’t—and se-
curity forces opened fired. Official figures placed the number killed under 100,
but the opposition figures were in thousands. The day, dubbed “Black Fri-
day,” was a turning point. Almost immediately after Black Friday, widespread
strikes started to break out and demonstrations became more frequent and vi-
olent, so that by October, Iran was in crisis and the regime on its way to
collapse.8

Many scholars of the Iranian Revolution have argued that the Shah’s “vac-
illation” between repression and concession, reflecting his “indecision and con-
fusion”, facilitated the collapse of the Pahlavi regime. Mohsen Milani (1994,
114-16) argues that “what proved most detrimental to the government was
the Shah’s indecision. On the one hand, he continued with his liberalization
[meaning limited concessions].... On the other hand, he took strong action
to suppress the growing revolutionary movement.... He either had to crush
the growing movement or to relinquish some of his power and strike a deal

8It is also worthwhile to mention that the regime reduced repression even further
following the Black Friday. “Basically, after Jhaleh [Square at which the shootings started
on September 8], the Shah refused to allow the use of deadly force against the Iranian
people” (Zonis 1991, 249).
with the moderate faction of the popular movement. He opted to do neither”. According to Abbas Milani (2011, 385), the Shah “showed weakness when he needed to show strength, and he feigned power when he had none.” Arjomand (1988, 114-17) claims that “the Shah’s contradictory impulses and policies,” and “his debilitating dejection, bungling, and indecisiveness” were crucial to the collapse of the regime. He then attributes this indecisiveness to the Shah’s “psychodynamics”: “The Shah, unlike his father, was a weak person” whose “well-known disposition to folis de grandeur understandably turned into paranoia.” Arguing that the Shah could have employed his “monopoly of arm might” more effectively to prevent the revolution, Zonis (1991, 250-51) claims that “the refusal of the Shah to order his troops to action was a decisive factor in his defeat.” Like Arjomand, Zonis attributes this to the Shah’s psychology: “In the waning months of the revolution, the Shah had experienced a massive psychic regression which brought with it a psychological paralysis entailing memory losses and an inability to act” (Zonis 1991, 253).

This paper shows that the Shah’s so called “vacillation” between repression and concession can be the reflection of equilibrium decisions in a strategic environment in which repression can make the neutral bystanders update negatively about the regime and join the dissident, dramatically decreasing the chances of the regime’s survival. I do not claim that the Shah’s psychology was inconsequential in the success of the revolution, I rather suggest an alternative explanation within the paradigm of rational choice that can explain the events that have previously been attributed to the Shah’s psychological breakdown.9

9Roberts (1996) calls this paper’s mode of explanation “the logic of situation” and the literature’s mode “the logic of dispositional traits”. See pages 182-3 for a comparison
5 Protest-Repression Nexus

There is a large empirical literature investigating the relationship between repression and protest to determine when repression prohibits and when it provokes further protest. However, as Davenport’s (2007, 8) review of this literature finds, results are mixed and puzzling: “Sometimes the impact of repression on dissent is negative (Hibbs 1973); sometimes it is positive (Francisco 1996, Lichbach & Gurr 1981, Ziegenhagen 1986); sometimes it is represented by an inverted U-shape (Muller 1985); sometimes it is alternatively negative and positive (Gupta & Venieris 1981, Moore 1998, Rasler 1996); and sometimes it is nonexistent (Gurr & Moore 1997)”.

Moreover, existing theories provide little insight into how to interpret these mixed findings. According to political process theories, repression is associated with contractions in political opportunities, and hence repression should prohibit further protest (Tilly 1978, 1986, 1996, 2004; Muller, Dietz, and Finkel 1991; Tarrow 1998; McAdam 1999; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001; Tilly and Tarrow 2007). According to grievance-based theories, repression intensifies grievances, and hence repression should provoke further protests (Gurr 1970; Muller 1985; Useem 1998; Buechler 2004). Although these theories are considered as competing and substitutes, one may combine them to argue that the effects suggested by both theories coexist. Thus, when the first effect (contractions in political opportunities) dominates, repression prevents further protest, and when the second effect (increases in grievances) dominates, repression pro-

with Jon Elster’s views. This approach resonates with Roemer (1985), in which he tries to explain the role of ideology within the paradigm of rational choice.
vokes further protest. However, this approach has a major problem: it is nearly impossible to measure grievances—especially, in contentious contexts—and hence any observed relationship between protest and repression is consistent with the model, making it effectively irrefutable without measuring grievances.

Proposition 1 provides a theoretical lens to view these mixed empirical findings about when repression ends protest and when it provokes further protest: When people believe that the regime is likely to be good and the dissidents tend to be bad, i.e., when \( p \) is small and \( q \) is large in the sense that \( A(p, q) \geq 1 \), protests lead to repression, but repression does not breed further protest. In contrast, when people tend to believe that the regime is likely to be bad and the dissidents are likely to be good, i.e., when \( p \) is large and \( q \) is small in the sense that \( A(p, q) < 1 \), then the regime randomizes between repression and concession, while potential protesters randomize between protesting and not protesting; that is, the regime represses with probability \( \sigma_r \) and the people protest in response to repression with probability \( \sigma_p \). Thus, we can calculate the probabilities with which different patterns emerge. For example, the likelihood that repression leads to concession is the likelihood that the ruler and the dissident are good, i.e., \((1 - p)(1 - q)\), plus the likelihood that the ruler is bad and the dissident is good and the bad ruler concedes, i.e., \(p(1-q)(1-\sigma_r)\):

\[
(1 - p)(1 - q) + p(1-q)(1-\sigma_r) = (1 - q)(1 - p\sigma_r).
\]

Corollary 4 characterizes the likelihood of each pattern in equilibrium.
**Corollary 4** Three patterns can emerge in equilibrium. When $A(p, q) < 1$:

- protest $\rightarrow$ concession $\rightarrow$ no protest, with probability $(1 - q)(1 - p\sigma_r)$,
- protest $\rightarrow$ repression $\rightarrow$ no protest, with probability $[q + (1 - q)p\sigma_r](1 - \sigma_p)$, and
- protest $\rightarrow$ repression $\rightarrow$ protest, with probability $[q + (1 - q)p\sigma_r]\sigma_p$.

When $A(p, q) \geq 1$: protest $\rightarrow$ repression $\rightarrow$ no protest.

When the ruler is sufficiently likely to be good and the dissident is sufficiently likely to be bad so that $A(p, q) \geq 1$, repression never leads to the escalation of unrest. But when $A(p, q) < 1$, protests can escalate as bystanders join the dissident. Corollary 5 captures the effects of changes in the environment on the likelihood of an escalating protest.

**Corollary 5** The likelihood of a protest cycle, protest $\rightarrow$ repression $\rightarrow$ protest, increases when the bad ruler’s costs of concession, $b_g$, or the likelihood that the ruler or the dissident are bad, $p$ or $q$, increase or the bad ruler’s office rents, $F$, decreases. That is, higher $b_g$, $p$, or $q$, or lower $F$, all lead to higher $[q + (1 - q)p\sigma_r]\sigma_p$.

### 6 Conclusion and Discussion

“The seed of revolution is repression”, once said Woodrow Wilson. Repression may deter protest and maintain the status quo, but it surely changes the people’s beliefs about the Leviathan: it (partly) reveals the nature of the beast. The literature has focused on the deterrence aspect of repression, ignoring the information that repression reveals about the nature of the state. We abstract from the well-studied deterrence effect, and focus on this informational aspect.
We made our analysis in a simple framework: there are two types of dissidents, good and bad, and both always protest. There are also two types of states, good and bad, who both know the dissident’s type. The good state always does the right thing, repressing bad dissidents and conceding to good ones. The bad state, however, always wants to keep the status quo, and hence prefers to repress all dissidents. What complicates the bad state’s decision is that there are bystander citizens, who have not joined the dissidents yet, but may decide to join them; an event that the bad state wants to avoid. These bystanders don’t know the types of the dissidents or the state, but they know that bad states like to repress more that good ones, and hence update negatively about the state each time they observe repression. We analyzed the equilibrium behaviors that arise, and studies some of its implications.

The model could be extended in various ways. One can add repression and protest costs, endogenize the good state’s behavior so that it also acts strategically, allow for a continuum of repressive policies, or extend the game to an infinitely repeated one. But the main results remain robust, and the identified mechanisms, and hence the message of the paper stays the same.

More interestingly, one could endogenize the dissidents’ behavior by contemplating scenarios in which dissidents try to provoke the state to respond with violence, so that the bystander population update negatively about the state and join the dissidents. Indeed, the strategy of provoking violent state response was used in the civil rights movements of the 1960s (McAdam 1983).

Typically, the literature has focused on state strategies to contain protest, limiting the study of dissidents’ behavior to a decision of whether or not to
protest, or how much effort to put into protest—which determines the like-
lihood of success via a contest function. In studies of dissident behavior,
the focus has been on free-riding problem (Tullock 1971; Lichbach 1995, 1998;
Van Belle 1996; see also Kalyvas and Kocher 2007) and coordination (Edmond
2008; Egorov, Guriev, and Sonin 2009; Persson and Tabellini 2009; Bueno de
Mesquita 2010; Egorov and Sonin 2011; Shadmehr and Bernhardt 2011). Little
has been said about the dissidents’ effort to build their reputation as advocates
of an alternative that not only is better than the status quo, but is also vi-
able. Dissidents who call for protest without preparation are often discredited
(Chehabi 1990, 165); those whose proposed alternative is disliked by the peo-
ple are marginalized; those unable to convince the people that they can beat
the military might of the state receive no following. The strategies dissidents
use to overcome these problems provide a rich area for future research.

7 Appendix: The Informational Content of Repression Size

Criticizing censorship and prohibition in the United States in 1920s, Willie
Raskin, Billy Rose, and Fred Fisher wrote the song “Fifty Million Frenchmen
Can’t be Wrong”. Parts of the lyrics reads

When they put on a show, and it’s a hit
No one tries to censor it
Fifty million Frenchmen can’t be wrong.
And when a book is selling at it’s best
It isn’t stopped; it’s not suppressed

23
Fifty million Frenchmen can’t be wrong.
Whenever they’re dry
For brandy or rye,
To get it, they don’t gave to give up their right eye.
And when we brag about our liberty
And they laugh at you and you and you and me
Fifty million Frenchmen can’t be wrong.

Despite the humor in the song,\textsuperscript{10} it captures the important link between the number of people holding an idea and the expected validity of that idea. Similarly, the size of the dissidents contains information about the legitimacy of their demands. To capture this observation, I modify the model to allow for $N$ dissidents who protest at the beginning of each period. To simplify the exposition of results, I assume that good dissidents protest together and bad ones protest together, i.e., the dissidents’ types don’t mix. Thus, when a group of $N$ dissidents protest, they are bad with probability

$$q_N = \frac{q^N}{q^N + (1-q)^N},$$

and they are good with the remaining probability. As the number of dissidents increases, the bystander can make a more accurate assessment about the dissidents’ type. The bystander’s updated assessment critically depends on his original belief about the dissident type: a larger protest makes the bystander even more confident in his original assessment. In particular, when the bystander’s original belief is that dissidents are more likely to be good (bad), a

\textsuperscript{10}The musical comedy “Fifty Million Frenchmen”—first performed in 1929, and a recent version in 2013—and the corresponding movie reference to this song.
larger protest makes the bystander even more confident that the dissidents are good (bad). As the size of the protest approach infinity, the bystander becomes almost sure whether the protesting dissidents are good or bad. Equations (8) and (9) formalize these findings.

\[
\frac{dq_N}{dN} = \frac{(1-q)^N q^N}{((1-q)^N + q^N)^2} \ln \left( \frac{q}{1-q} \right) = \begin{cases} > 0 ; q > \frac{1}{2} \\ < 0 ; q < \frac{1}{2} \end{cases}
\]

(8)

\[
\lim_{N \to \infty} q_N = \begin{cases} 1 ; q > \frac{1}{2} \\ 0 ; q < \frac{1}{2} \end{cases}
\]

(9)

These results have important implications for the relationship between protest and repression. When \( q < \frac{1}{2} \), if \( A(p, q^N) < 1 \), then as the number of dissidents increases the bad ruler stirs away from repressing the dissidents to conceding to them; and if \( A(p, q^N) \geq 1 \), eventually we enter the region where \( A(p, q^N) < 1 \), that is, the bad ruler switches from always repressing dissent to some level of concession.

8 References


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