Repression as Deterrence: Collecting Data on State Repression

Proposal to the Institute for Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention

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The scholarly literature on confrontational politics between citizens and governments is large and varied; it examines social movements, citizen protests, government repression, genocide, armed insurgency, and outright rebellion. Extreme uses of repression are often preceded by less extreme repression, though our understanding of when and why repressive tactics escalate is underdeveloped. One particular puzzle remains largely unsolved despite so much attention to how governments and citizens interact – what is the sequence of actions between citizens and governments? That is, do citizens organize, protest, or rebel because governments are repressive? Or are governments repressive because citizens organize, protest and rebel?

In all likelihood, both of these sequences happen, but under different circumstances. From the standpoint of a government, repression may serve a useful deterrent purpose, signaling the government's unwillingness to tolerate dissent, and thereby quashing future protests. But it might also be the case that such preventive repression may galvanize social movements, ensuring greater effort at organization and dissent in the future. On the other hand, though, tolerating dissent without repression may well permit the development and maturation of social movements with the capacity to threaten the government. So the question of how much dissent to tolerate is a difficult one for governments, and a difficult one for citizens gauging when the repressive apparatus of the state will spring into action.

The challenge to answering this question lies in disentangling this "action-reaction" sequence, because the counterfactuals are not known. For example, what would have been the level of dissent if the government had not repressed? Would it have been higher or lower than what we observe? Evaluating questions like these requires data on dissent and on non-dissent-related repression. Refined data on protest events (as a measure of dissent) exist. Similar data on repression do not – collecting those data is the immediate subject of this proposal. Repression events outside of protest are often less visible in media reports, but have a large impact on the costs of collective dissent. They also form a missing piece of explanation of when violence becomes massive in scope sometimes escalating to mass atrocity and genocide. How shifts in repressive tactics and collective dissent interact in the lead up to these massive repressive events has the potential to help predict where and when we are likely to see mass atrocities.

In the pilot we launched in summer 2017, funded by Harpur's JPM Faculty Development Grant program, we collected more than 1,100 repressive events. The pilot established

feasibility, and face validity. These events captured the types of repression that we had set out to measure. For example, we have 107 repressive events in Myanmar between 1999 and 2014. These show a pattern of increased attacks on the media including arrests, physical assault, and deportation of foreign journalists as well as attempts to censor access to the internet. These events also show attacks on the Rohingya people by state agents. In conjunction with the Mass Mobilization protest data, we can see both an escalation in the use of repression by the state as well as a sustained peaceful protest movement calling for constitutional reform, civil rights, and media freedom. These events are exactly the ones that we know preceded the mass atrocities currently taking place in Myanmar. These events also point to a vicious cycle of dissent and repression which researchers have theorized about.

We believe that this project and the Mass Mobilization project taken together would allow researchers and policymakers to predict which countries were most at risk for mass repressive events before violence escalates to the point that it receives international attention. This would allow policy makers to intervene and break vicious cycles of repression and dissent. However, without a better understanding of how repression escalates and interacts with collective dissent the international community will be stuck reacting to atrocities only after they happen. Our data tentatively suggest that we could have predicted the atrocities in Myanmar long before it escalated to its current level.

The Mass Mobilization Data project, funded by the Political Instability Task Force, has collected data on protests against governments of 162 countries from 1990-2015.[1] Those data contain information for each protest event on when and where protests occur, what protesters want, and what governments do to those protesters. Similarly, this project aims to collect data on "repression events," regarding what specific actions governments take targeting groups and individuals, *outside of* protest events. While data on repression exists, it tends to aggregate events into country-year level measures of how repressive states are. Moreover, such data collections do not distinguish between repressive activity aimed at those already protesting in the streets, and repression outside of protests. For this project, a "repression event" is an action by agents of the government to arrest, detain, physically harm, or destroy the property of, individuals or groups not related to a specific legal charge. Such events must involve actions by state agents against citizens; they must involve the specific targeting of a group (ethnic, religious, social, political), and the abuse of its members or property. These events cannot in anyway relate to protests by that group.

We are asking for $5000 to hire two graduate research assistants to code repression events this summer. In building this dataset, we constructed a search procedure in Lexis-Nexis, and a Google Survey instrument into which coders entered data. This past summer we did a pilot aimed at evaluating the feasibility of the project. We determined that the data are valid and replicable. In the spring of 2018, we will finalize the coding rules. This summer we will begin collecting a global sample of repressive events that we can analyze.

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[1] http://www.binghamton.edu/massmobilization/

The principle sources for coding these data will be newspapers and news wires (via Lexis-Nexis). Coders will follow specific search criteria, and enter information on "repression events" into the Google Survey – that survey feeds directly into a spreadsheet.

Among the features of repression events we intend to collect are:

1. government agent (military, police, secret police, etc.)
2. size of government contingent (how many police, etc.)
3. target (group name, characteristics)
4. size of target (number of individuals targeted)
5. location of event
6. date(s) of event
7. methods (police raid, arrests, shootings, killings, property destruction, threats, etc.)
8. notes and sources

The goal is to collect a representative sample of "repression events" as a pilot study toward three, interrelated goals:

1. Analyze the data and data collection process (using the diagnostic variables we have already collected) this spring.
2. Alter the search criteria to improve the data collected last summer
3. Create a final pilot in the upcoming summer which is a small but representative sample of repressive events that will permit some basic analysis.

Our goal in summer 2018 is to collect a complete, single year as a small representative, global sample of repressive events: we will collect all country-year events for 2016. We will then evaluate how these events relate to protests and the repression of protest in 2016 so we can draw inferences regarding theories of repression and collective dissent. This will also allow us to point out specific countries which are engaged in wide-scale repression and whether this repression has escalated or de-escalated over the course of the year.

Our intent in 2018-19 is to propose this project to the Political Instability Task Force and to the NSF. PITF is a project of the Central Intelligence Agency, dating back to the early 1990s. As its name implies, its focus is on the causes of state instability. It relies on social science data and methods, often from university scholars, to build predictive models aimed at identifying states at risk of a variety of types of instability including coups, insurgencies, and civil wars. It was this set of concerns that led to PITF's funding of the Mass Mobilization project on protests, and it is our belief PITF will find these data on repression events appealing for many of the same reasons.

These data will pair directly with the Mass Mobilization protest events and will permit more direct evaluation of the action-reaction model, but more importantly will allow

examination of the circumstances under which governments seem to use repressive tactics as deterrents, and the extent to which they seem either to deter future dissent or to provoke it. These are important questions in the scholarship on repression and dissent, as well as for scholars and policy makers interested in mass atrocity prevention.

Budget Request:

$3200 – Graduate RA1 at 8 weeks, 20 hours per week, $20 per hour, summer 2018
$3200 – Graduate RA2 at 8 weeks, 20 hours per week, $20 per hour, summer 2018

Political Science provides $1400

$5000 – Total Request