



RESEARCH BRIEF – NOVEMBER 2013

EXPLAINING GOVERNMENT REPRESSION IN AFRICA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Why do government leaders in Africa repress some groups and activities but not others? Using the Social Conflict in Africa Database (SCAD), CCAPS researchers examine how the characteristics of a social conflict event, and the nature of the regime, interact to determine repressive outcomes. They find that events that are more threatening to the central government are more likely to be met with force. However, leaders that have faced a history of factionalism and disloyalty in the security services are less likely to resort to force as orders to repress may backfire. This is especially true when ethnoreligious splits within society may exacerbate rifts inside the regime.

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The current situations in Syria and Egypt, and the 2011 NATO-led military intervention in Libya, have refocused international scrutiny on state repression of social movements. Repression is often used by governments in order to silence domestic dissent, but can at times spiral out of control leading to a full-blown war. While repression of opposition movements has frequently been used as a tool of statecraft, leaders must carefully weigh the risks and benefits of doing so.

Why, then, do government leaders in Africa repress some groups and activities but not others? For instance, in 2011, Sudanese police opened fire on a student demonstration in the town of El-Fasher, but doctors who were protesting for better salaries in Khartoum just a few days later were left alone by security forces. Thus, even a largely repressive government like Sudan's is more likely to respond to some protests than others. Typically, researchers have looked at why certain governments, as a whole, are more repressive than others. But, even repressive regimes do not crack down on all challengers, and relatively moderate governments sometimes do use force. What can account for these differences?

This brief examines how the characteristics of a social conflict event, and the nature of the regime, interact to determine repressive outcomes. The more threatening protests are to the survival of the government, the more likely it will respond with force. However, in many African countries, state control of the military and police has been weak. Therefore, the preferences of state leaders and of the security forces may not be one and the same when it comes to enacting repressive policies. Orders to crack down on opposition supporters may not be followed or could even backfire, causing police and military forces to defect from

the government. Therefore, incumbent rulers must weigh external threats as well as internal ones – the threat of mutiny or dividing the military and police – when issuing orders to repress.

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THREATS TO THE REGIME

State leaders face two types of threats: external and internal (see Table 1). This research posits that, as the level of external threat – the challenges from popular forces – increases, leaders will be more inclined to use repression to silence challengers.

However, states are not unitary actors, and leaders often face internal threats from the very same forces that are called upon to enact repressive policies. State leaders facing a history of divided militaries and weak civilian control over security forces – conditions which are common to many African states – are especially concerned with defection from the regime and should thus be less likely to engage in repression.

External Threats

Scholars, journalists, and policy analysts often focus on actions in the street by popular forces. These dissident activities can be more or less threatening to leaders depending on the tactics used and demands made. One important dissident tactic involves the decision to use violence. Peaceful forms of dissent, such as demonstrations and labor stoppages, are less immediately threatening and should thus be less likely to be repressed than riots and lethal attacks. The location of the challenge is a second tactical consideration. Challenges occurring in urban areas should be more likely to be met with repression, as they jeopardize political and economic stability. Challenges from rural areas should be less likely to be repressed, since they generally will not have the same political and economic impact and because state security forces may not be able to reach remote areas.

The demands issued constitute a third dimension of external threat. Contentious events that make claims against government authorities should be more likely to be repressed than those that target actors outside the national government, such as private firms, foreign governments, or rival

Table 1. Internal and External Dimensions of Threat

This study posits that governments will be more likely to repress challenges when they use violence, occur in urban areas, target the government, make political demands, or frame demands in ethnoreligious terms. The government should be less likely to repress challenges when there is a history of military factionalism posing an internal threat within the government.

EXTERNAL THREATS	INTERNAL THREATS
Use of violence by opposition (+)	History of military factionalism (-)
Events in urban areas (+)	
Government-targeted events (+)	
Demands to change political system (+)	
Ethnic challenges (+)	

ethnic groups. By contrast, political demands – such as those seeking to liberalize the political system, promote opposition candidates, or press for major policy reforms – should be relatively more threatening to the government since they call for a redistribution of political power within that state.

Military Factionalism

Militaries in many African countries have histories of being weak, factionalized, and not firmly under the control of civilian authorities. The armed forces in Sierra Leone and the Central African Republic, for example, crumbled in the face of relatively small rebel groups. In other cases such as Guinea, Mali, and Madagascar, leaders have been deposed by their own security services. Given that there have been relatively few international conflicts on the African continent, the main purpose of many state security forces has been to maintain domestic control and preserve the incumbent leader's rule. Yet these security forces may also pose threats to the rulers they serve.

The impetus for many coups in Africa can be attributed in part to ethnic divisions and competition for power. Ethnicity remains a powerful cleavage around which to mobilize partisan support. The 2008 coup in Guinea by Moussa Camara, for instance, was partly fueled by ethnic divisions as Malinke, Fulani, and Soussou factions within the government jockeyed for power.¹ Similarly, divisions between Northern and Southern ethnic groups have dominated politics in Uganda since independence, and have been echoed in the military.

Although coups can unfold quickly and strike at the central government, military mutinies also pose grave challenges that may evolve into civil war. As a recent case in point, Tutsi soldiers that were incorporated into the Democratic Republic of Congo's military following a 2009 peace agreement mutinied in 2012, calling themselves M23. These forces claimed that the central government was doing little to protect ethnic minorities in the eastern part of the country.

Because of this risk, factionalized militaries and police forces pose special problems for incumbent leaders facing popular dissent. Leaders of countries with a history of frequent coups and mutinies often cannot count on the military and police to effectively confront dissidents. Divisions within society are likely to be reflected within the military, and therefore directives to repress can either be ignored or can backfire through military and police defections. Indeed, recent civil wars in Libya and Syria were fueled by military defections, as soldiers refused to obey orders to crush the opposition. Therefore, regimes with factionalized security forces should be more likely to use repression sparingly. Knowing that social cleavages may be mirrored within the security apparatus, leaders are reluctant to issue orders that could inflame such tensions.

The question of loyalty within security forces becomes especially acute when opposition activists express their demands in ethnic, tribal, or religious terms.

Given that many African states and militaries are divided along ethnic lines, the question of loyalty becomes especially acute when opposition activists express their demands in ethnic, tribal, or

religious terms. Where there has been a history of divided loyalty within the security forces, orders to suppress ethnic or religious movements are especially likely to split the regime, and therefore, it is expected that the impact of military factionalism will be greater when regimes face ethnoreligious disputes.

This study uses the Social Conflict in Africa Database to test the conditions under which regimes used repression against opponents.

DATA ANALYSIS

To test the claims presented above, this research uses the Social Conflict in Africa Database (SCAD).² SCAD contains information on 7,965 events, including peaceful demonstrations, labor strikes, riots, and armed attacks, in 47 African countries over the period 1990 to 2011.³ This analysis examines whether or not the regime used repression against opponents.

While there is large cross-sectional variation in rates of repression – the Egyptian government repressed 45 percent of all events, while the barely functioning Somali government repressed only one percent – there is still significant variation within countries over time. In Nigeria for example, rates of repression plummeted between 2010 and 2011 (from 28 to 5 percent, respectively), even as the number of events increased due to an uptick in ethnoreligious rioting in the North.

The explanatory factors considered in this analysis also largely come from SCAD. First, SCAD accounts for whether or not an event was *violent*: riots, pro-government violence, and anti-, extra-,

and intra-government violence are all coded as violent events. In the full SCAD dataset, events are evenly distributed between violent and nonviolent events (49 and 51 percent, respectively). Second, SCAD also accounts for whether the *target* of an event was the central or regional government (47 and 6 percent of events, respectively), as well as whether the event occurred in an *urban* area (55 percent of events) or whether the event was *nationwide*, occurring in several cities and rural areas (11 percent of events). Third, SCAD tracks the event *duration*, in days – an important factor given that longer events may provide more opportunity to enact repression.

In order to model whether particular issues and opposition demands were more likely to result in repression, this study included SCAD data on whether the opposition expressed political demands (28 percent of events), economic demands (29 percent of events), and ethnoreligious claims (17 percent of events). Some overlap exists because multiple issues could be coded for a single event; for instance, a single event can be both economic and political.

Finally, an indicator of *military factionalism* is used to measure internal threat. This variable was constructed by using a running count of past instances of intra-governmental violence: armed clashes between two or more actors within the ruling government (i.e. coups, mutinies, and factional fighting between armed units). This variable ranges from zero occurrences of intra-government violence in a given country (43 percent of observations) to 10 past coups and mutinies (the Democratic Republic of the

Congo and Ivory Coast). This indicates a military that has demonstrated itself to be unreliable agents of the government. In order to test whether past military factionalism has a more pronounced effect with respect to particular issue areas, this variable is interacted with the issue indicators. Again, an interaction between ethnoreligious issues and this factionalism variable is expected to be significant and negative.

FINDINGS

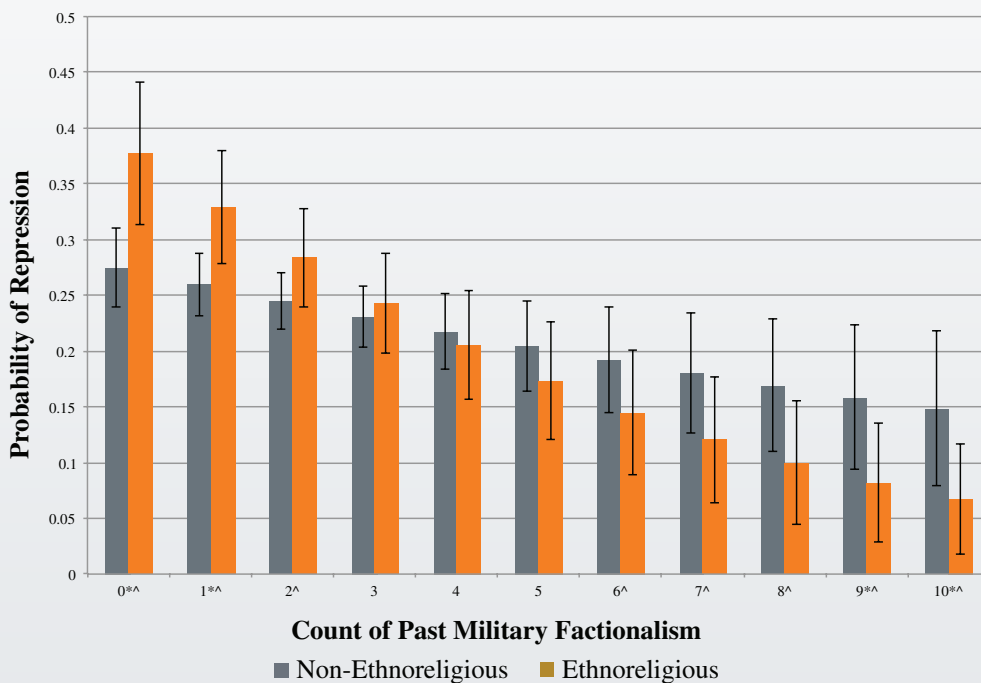
The statistical analysis lends support to the theoretical framework. The results find that violent events are more likely to be repressed. Violent events are 62 percent more likely to be repressed than nonviolent events, holding all else constant. Events that targeted the central government or regional government

When contentious events involve ethnic or religious issues, countries with a history of past intra-government violence are especially less likely to conduct repression.

are associated with a 144 percent and 136 percent increase, respectively, in the probability of repression. Events in urban areas are 11 percent more likely to be repressed than those that occur in rural areas. Finally, events that make political demands are 43 percent more likely to be repressed. There is no evidence that dissidents with economic grievances and demands are more likely to be repressed.

As expected, the results find that military factionalism is associated with a significant reduction in the likelihood of repression. Taking a hypothetical country and holding all other factors constant, raising the number of past

Figure 1. The Effect of Military Factionalism on Different Types of Demands



* denotes two-tailed, two-sample t-test significant at < 0.1

^ denotes one-tailed, two-sample t-test significant at < 0.1

internal military conflicts from two to five decreases the probability of repression by 16 percent.

As dissidents become more threatening to the regime, through their tactics or demands, the state is more likely to respond with force. However, this response is heavily conditioned by the reliability of state security forces.

Finally, ethnoreligious demands have a negative and statistically significant interactive effect with regime factionalization. When contentious events involve ethnic or religious issues, countries with a history of past intra-government violence are especially less likely to conduct repression. In order to see how factionalism has different effects depending on the demands of the protesters, the interaction effect is displayed graphically. Figure 1 plots the predicted probabilities of non-ethnoreligious events and ethnoreligious events being repressed as a function of past intra-government violence. Both types of protest slope downward as military factionalism increases, but the decline is far steeper for ethnoreligious events. At zero instances of past intra-regime violence, ethnoreligious dissent is 37 percent *more* likely to be repressed than other events. However, as past intra-regime violence increases, ethnoreligiously motivated events are less likely to be repressed. In the extreme, a country with 10 previous instances of intra-regime violence is 55 percent *less* likely to repress an ethnoreligious event. Therefore, unreliable militaries are less likely to crack down on protestors, but especially when protests are couched in identity terms.

INSIGHTS FOR ASSESSING REPRESSION

The decision to repress social conflict is part of a bargain between the government, protesters, and state security forces. This brief has shown that as dissidents become more threatening to the regime, through their tactics or demands, the state is more likely to respond with force. However, this response is heavily conditioned by the reliability of state security forces. In countries with a history of internal divisions, repression is far less likely and even more so if protests threaten to divide the regime along ethnic lines.

For policy makers and analysts, the critical question – which cannot be answered here – is how to strike a balance between regime stability and accountability. Repression can be a useful tool for maintaining the status quo, at least in the short term. Moreover, the state has a duty to crackdown on forms of dissent that are violent or extreme by their very nature. However, silencing all government critics violates fundamental human rights and political freedoms, and can backfire in the long run as citizens turn to ever more extreme tactics. ▼

ENDNOTES

- 1 Alpha Camara and Antony Sguazzin, “Guinea Coup Leaders Name President, Governing Council,” *Bloomberg News*, December 24, 2008.
- 2 The Social Conflict in Africa Database (SCAD) is co-directed by CCAPS researchers Idean Salehyan and Cullen Hendrix. It is available as a searchable online database or for download at www.scaddata.org.
- 3 For a full description of the data see Idean Salehyan, Cullen Hendrix, Jesse Hamner, Christina Case, Christopher Linebarger, Emily Stull, and Jennifer Williams, “Social Conflict in Africa: A New Database,” *International Interactions* 38, 4 (2012): 503-511.
- 4 Other controls and modeling choices are described in a complete version of this paper available from the authors.

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A dramatic, low-angle photograph showing a person in silhouette running through a field of thick, billowing smoke and fire. The person is carrying a large, light-colored basket or crate on their back. The background is a bright, hazy sky with a sun or fire source creating a strong glow and lens flare. The overall mood is one of urgency and displacement.

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