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PREVENTING DISSENT: SECRET POLICE AND PROTESTS IN DICTATORSHIPS

Short Title: PREVENTING DISSENT

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Abstract. This research note examines the impact of secret police organizations on the occurrence of anti-regime protests in authoritarian regimes. We argue that such organizations are related to lower levels of protests via two related mechanisms: intelligence gathering and an increased perception of risk among citizens, which reduce citizens' ability and willingness to mobilize, respectively. Using new data on secret police organizations in dictatorships covering the post-WWII period, our findings support the main expectation. This research contributes to our understanding of security institutions, anti-regime protests, and the repression-dissent nexus.

Keywords. Secret police, protests, dictatorships, repression, security apparatus.

Replication Data. Replication files are available in the JOP Dataverse (<https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/jop>). The empirical analysis has been successfully replicated by the JOP replication analyst.

Introduction

Besides quelling mass protests, fighting insurgents, and confronting plotters, many autocratic governments engage in preventive repression, that is, state-led activities aimed at preventing organized opposition to the regime from emerging and overtly challenging the status quo (e.g., Davenport 2007, 2009; Earl 2011; Sullivan 2016a,b). These activities are crucial to safeguard the incumbent regime. As Dragu and Przeworski (2019: 77) put it, dictators' "first line of defense is preventive repression, routinely exercised by specialized security agencies." Such specialized agencies are typically *secret police organizations*, which monitor society and persecute dissenters by making use of covert operations, extensive informant networks, and other coercive tactics (such as torture and political imprisonments) to extract information and eliminate opposition activity (Plate and Darvi 1982; Scharpf and Gläsel 2020). Many such organizations have become infamous for their capacity to instill fear. Names like Gestapo (Nazi Germany), Stasi (German Democratic Republic), KGB (Soviet Union), Savak (Shah's Iran), Brigada Político-Social (Francoist Spain), and DINA (Pinochet's Chile) are recognized by many, particularly their numerous victims, as true manifestations of political terror. However, despite their centrality, police organizations in general and secret police in particular have received little attention in the comparative authoritarianism literature.¹ Do secret police reduce the incidence of protests as conventional wisdom would suggest?

Spurred by the distinct regime responses to mass protest campaigns during the Arab Spring, a growing literature explores how organizational dimensions of security forces –such as counterbalancing, recruitment, and personalization– influence repression, troop loyalty, and the outcome of popular uprisings (e.g., Bellin 2012; Lutterbeck 2013; Makara 2013; Dworschak 2020; Chin et al. 2022). This line of research presents three challenges. For one, the impacts of coercive institutions have been evaluated mostly in the context of endgames, namely overt collective challenges credibly threatening to result in regime breakdown. Secondly, most of this research focuses on the role of military (and paramilitary) forces and their response to ongoing uprisings (e.g., McLauchlin 2010; Nepstad 2011; Pion-Berlin et al. 2014; Lee 2015; Albrecht and Ohl 2016; Barany 2016; Croissant et al. 2018). Nevertheless, in most forms of day-to-day political repression and control, the military play little role, if any. Such activities are normally performed by other organizations within the security apparatus, mainly regular police or secret police forces, which remain under-researched

¹ For recent, excellent exceptions see Scharpf and Gläsel (2020) and Hager and Krakowsky (2021).

(Scharpf and Gläsel 2020; Hager and Krakowsky, 2021; Liu and Sullivan 2021).² Finally, while some works distinguish between violent and low intensity repression (e.g., Davenport 2004; Levitsky and Way 2010), they do not examine who engages in the latter. By focusing on reactive repressive tactics, extant studies tend to neglect how some regimes prevent the emergence of unrest and, thus, reduce the risk of escalation into endgame situations. This is critical because, as Levitsky and Way (2010: 58) note, if used effectively, “low-intensity coercion...reduces the need for high-intensity coercion.”

We expect the existence of secret police to be related to lower levels of the most prominent form of overt (and, hence, observable) collective challenge in autocracies: Anti-government protest. This is so, we argue, because such forces specialize in preventing precisely the emergence of organized threats against regimes via two activities. First, they collect political intelligence and eliminate dissenters via extensive surveillance and informants and through the use of torture, imprisonments, and disappearances. These tactics allow dismantling incipient groups and arresting activists. Second, they also increase the perceived threat of detection and punishment, thereby instilling fear among the population, reducing its willingness to mobilize. Using new, original data on secret police organizations and a latent protest variable, our results suggest that the existence of secret police organizations significantly reduces the incidence of anti-regime mobilization.

The Argument: Preventing Dissent

Preventive repression is a crucial day-to-day activity of many dictatorships’ security apparatus, but typically not observable, so its effectiveness is difficult to assess. When present, secret police are precisely the part of the security forces charged with preventing dissidents from organizing. The mobilization of protests in unfree environments requires communication between dissidents, mobilization of resources, training, and free spaces for opposition leaders to assemble and plan their actions (e.g., Nepstad 2011; Chenoweth and Ulfelder 2017; Sullivan 2016a,b). Given the functions they perform and the organizational requirements of anti-regime collective action, *we expect the existence of secret police organizations in dictatorships to be associated with a lower incidence of protests*. This expectation, which has not been tested cross-nationally, hinges on two related mechanisms relating to (potential) dissidents’ capacity and willingness to take to the streets.

² While regular police forces are tasked with street patrolling and dealing with all kinds of crime and public disorder; secret police concentrate on neutralizing *political* opposition, and do so by keeping the identity of its members and its operations secret and by specializing on political intelligence and surveillance operations, but also by using arbitrary arrests, torture, and disappearances to investigate and prevent collective challenges.

The first mechanism stresses the importance of secret police in gathering relevant information on dissidents' and would-be challengers' beliefs, identity, and underground activities. Such identification facilitates selective and targeted repression directed at specific individuals and organizations which undermines opponents' *capacity* to mobilize (Sullivan 2016b). A key challenge any dictator faces is being able to identify potential inside and outside opposition to their rule in information-poor environments.³ Suppressing threats stemming from society requires regimes to identify covert organizations and activists, thwart communication and coordination between opponents, and gauge the strength and location of potential challenges. As Sullivan (2016a: 647) notes, “[g]overnments are able to suppress dissent when they direct repression at the generally clandestine mobilization activities necessary to inspire and sustain dissident organizations, such as holding meetings, training participants, and campaigning for funds.” Secret police monitor and penetrate the societies where they operate, collecting political intelligence by creating extensive networks of spies, covert agents, and paid informants (Plate and Darvi 1982; Dimitrov and Sassonn 2014; Greitens 2016).⁴ Information is also obtained from prisoners through the use of torture and blackmail. Using this information, they are in turn able to dismantle clandestine organizations, arrest leaders and activists, and oftentimes eliminate (disappear) them.

The second related mechanism often documented in case studies of well-known organizations has to do with the psychological and behavioral consequences derived from the existence of secret police and its tactics: Their ability to instill fear and distrust among citizens.⁵ As Ritter and Conrad (2016: 87) claim, preventive repression “can also cow citizens into quiescence by attacking their *willingness* to challenge the state.” Via extensive surveillance and arbitrary arrests, secret police contribute to creating a highly uncertain and oppressive environment. Deterrence mainly works if police forces manage to effectively increase the perceived likelihood of detection (and subsequent punishment), so hindering discontented individuals' willingness to join (or form) clandestine groups, communicate, recruit, and plan coordinated challenges (De Jaegher and Hoyer 2019). A reputation of brutality against detainees in secret facilities reinforces this effect by signaling the cost of dissent. Further, as Young (2019: 140) remarks, “dissent decisions are affected in systematic

³ Information about citizens' beliefs is not readily (and credibly) available in autocratic polities (Ritter and Conrad 2016), where the risk of retaliation and the lack of participatory channels to voice demands lead citizens to falsify their preferences and pushes opponents to organize clandestinely.

⁴ For instance, the Romanian Securitate employed 450,000 informers by 1989 (Deletant 2005: 314-15). Similarly, NKVD had amassed an informant network of ~500,000 people as early as 1934 (Gregory 2009: 39).

⁵ We refer the reader to the reference list in the Appendix, which includes many case studies used to code the secret police variable.

ways by citizens' emotional states." Fear instilled by secret police, as recent studies in political psychology suggest, discourages participation by increasing pessimism about regime strength and others' involvement in overt mobilizations (Aldama et al. 2019; Young 2019).

Contrary to our main expectation, some arguments suggest that *secret police may in fact be related to more protests*. Several studies stress the potential backlash effect of harsh repression (e.g., Lichbach 1987; Rasler 1996; Moore 1998; Francisco 2004; Pierskalla 2010; Young 2012). In the case of preventive repression, some of the tactics employed by secret agents (i.e., extensive surveillance, broad daylight arrests, torture) may also lead to increased anger among citizens and, in turn, spur mobilization. For example, Hager and Krakowsy (2021) find that in Communist Poland, communities exposed to secret police officers were more likely to protest. Similarly, Steinert and Dworschak (2022) show that in the GDR, political imprisonment spurred protests. Grievances and social discontent may also emerge from the inhumane treatment secret police administer to prisoners in their facilities, where detainees are often tortured, held in poor conditions, and even disappeared. Such brutality stems partly from the recruitment patterns in these units. As Scharpf and Gläsel (2020) show, Argentina's secret police agents were more likely to be unskilled and mediocre since they had little chance of being promoted in the regular and hierarchical security forces.

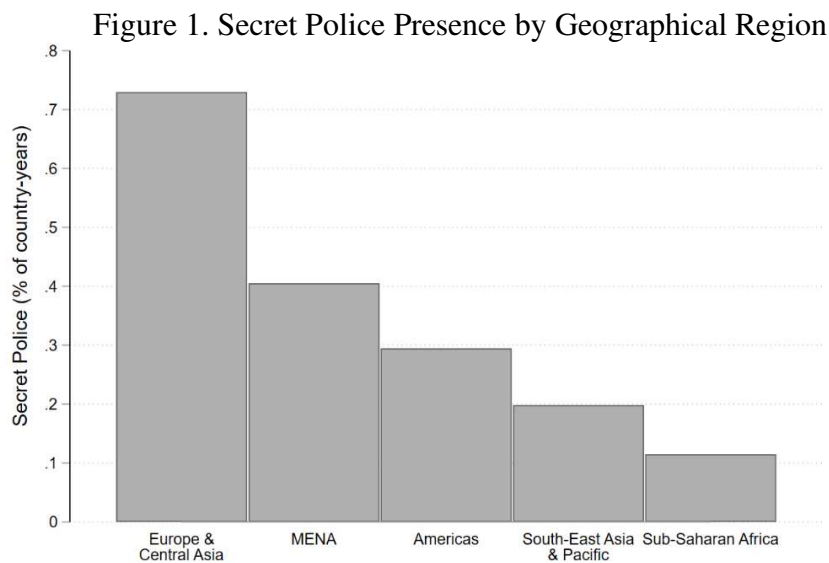
Data and Research Design

Until now, no comprehensive, global data on the existence of secret police in non-democratic countries existed. To test our main expectation, we therefore collected new, original data. We code an internal security agency as a secret police if it meets five criteria: a) it is a political police force, denoting that it targets political opponents and dissidents to preserve the status quo; b) it is not controlled by other security agencies and answers directly to the autocratic leader; c) the identity of its members and its operations are secret; d) it is an internal security organization that specializes in political intelligence and surveillance operations, and e) it carries out violent policing practices such as arbitrary searches, arrests, interrogations, torture, indefinite detention, and disappearances.⁶

Data was collected based on a list of candidate countries, covering all non-democracies, including the autocracies coded by Geddes et al. (2014) and mixed regimes as identified via the Polity score (Marshall et al. 2016). For these countries, we surveyed existing accounts of internal security services and datasets on paramilitary forces to find

⁶ Importantly, this definition excludes anti-terror or anti-narcotics police units as well as military intelligence services, even if these organizations fit some of the five criteria.

candidate organizations. Using literature and additional online sources, these organizations were then in- or excluded based on the criteria detailed above. We assign a value of 1 if an organization meeting these criteria exists in a country-year and 0 otherwise. Organizations that were instituted as another type of security force but then repurposed into secret police are coded since the adoption of secret policing tasks. Figure 1 shows the distribution of this variable over non-democratic country-years by region. Secret police have been prevalent in Europe and Central Asia and far less common in Sub-Saharan autocracies.⁷



To measure countries' level of protest, we employ the latent protest variable introduced by Chenoweth et al. (2014) and used in Escribà-Folch et al. (2018). This measure results from an item-response theory (IRT) model which combines information from eight existing anti-government protest datasets (i.e., yearly counts, event data, and campaign data) into a single variable.⁸ The latent variable is thus not a count of protests but rather an aggregation and scaling of existing information on protests. This has at least two important advantages. First, it allows us to capture not only the presence or absence of protest events but also variation in their intensity. It thus more precisely reflects whether protest increases and spreads (rather than whether if it reaches a certain benchmark) in any given country-year. And second, by combining information from multiple datasets, the variable provides very good global coverage, both temporally and geographically. Our analysis ultimately includes 3,251 observations from 111 non-democratic countries covering the period 1962-2010.

⁷ See the Appendix for the full list of secret police organizations.

⁸ These datasets are ACLED, SCAD, ECPD, SPEED, LAPP, IDEA, Banks, and MEC. See Appendix for details.

Due to the continuous nature of our dependent variable, we employ OLS models with errors clustered on country to capture temporal dependencies within units. To isolate the effect of secret police against confounding variables which may affect both the presence of such organizations as well as protest levels, we include country- and year-fixed effects. Country-fixed effects guard against the influence of difficult to measure, slow-moving confounders such as history and culture while year-fixed effects capture temporal systemic shocks such as the end of the Cold War. We also include a set of control variables capturing structural factors underlying protest and the presence of secret police: logged population, logged GDP per capita, a two-year moving average of economic growth, and the population share of politically excluded ethnic groups.⁹ Finally, we control for contextual factors such as neighboring countries' protest levels, intrastate conflict, and coup attempts.

Results

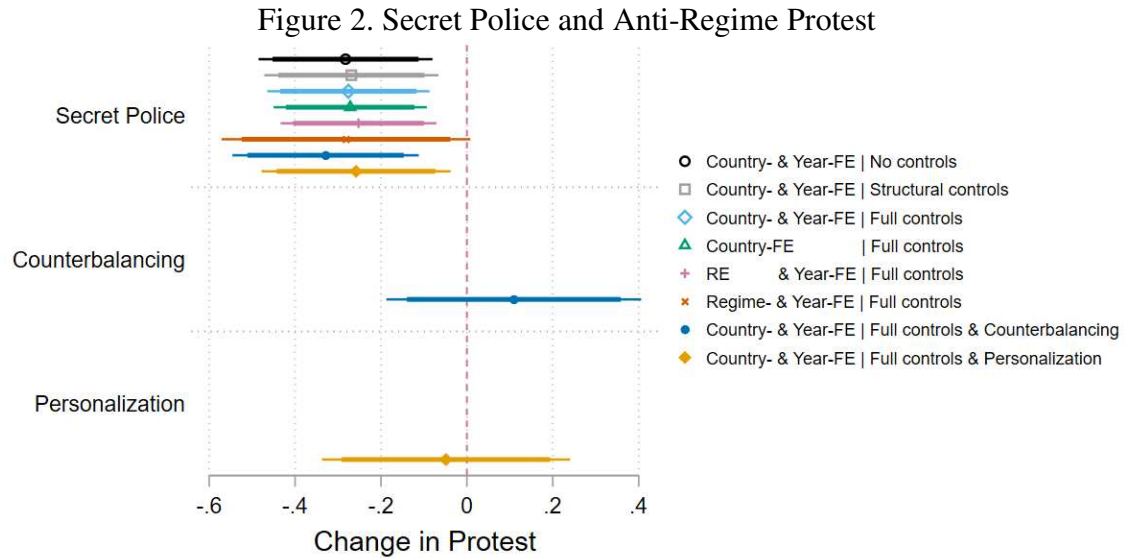
Figure 2 reports the substantive results of eight models, showing the estimated change in protests associated with switching secret police from absent to present. The first three of these follow the description above but differ in their set of control variables. We first omit all controls, then account only for the structural covariates that should credibly be unaffected by secret police presence, and finally also add covariates which may well introduce post-treatment bias. The coefficient of secret police is negative, statistically significant, and very similar across all three models. These results are thus in line with our expectation that secret police reduce protest activity and are unaffected by the choice of controls. Substantively, the -0.27 effect of secret police found in these models is larger than the drops in anti-regime protest exhibited by Poland and Estonia upon gaining independence in 1990 and 1991, respectively, or that by South Africa following the first multiparty elections in 1994. In other words, these results suggest that secret police have a protest-reducing effect which is otherwise often associated with large popular campaigns reaching their political goals.

Figure 2 also includes three important additional specifications. First, we omit year-fixed effects to ensure that our result does not depend on their inclusion.¹⁰ Second, we replace the country-fixed effects with random effects. And third, we use regime case- instead of country-fixed effects because recent research on authoritarian politics notes that there is a trade-off between the two (Derpanopoulos et al. 2017). The results show that neither the statistical nor substantive significance of our finding depends on how we address unit

⁹ Data sources and details on the controls are described in the Appendix.

¹⁰ In the Appendix, we also replace them with a general as well as country-specific time-trends.

heterogeneity. However, the coefficient of secret police is less precisely estimated when using regime-fixed effects. This model relies only on variation within specific regime spells to estimate the coefficient. The result may thus hint at a relevant relationship between individual regimes and their secret police, with eventual successors being likely to terminate inherited secret police.



Note: Marginal effect of secret police, based on eight different model specifications. Symbols indicate point estimates, thick and thin whiskers, respectively, 90%- and 95%-Confidence Intervals.

Finally, Figure 2 reports the results of two additional models where we control for two alternative dimensions of how security forces are organized: Counterbalancing, which indicates the fragmentation of the security forces, and regime personalization, which captures to what extent the security elites' fate is linked to the leader's. These are important, potential confounders shown to affect protest (Chin et al. 2022). Concerning counterbalancing, the model examines whether the impact of secret police is actually driven by the existence of other parallel security organizations. As for personalization, the estimated effect of a secret police could be not due its task specialization, but pick up that these and other security forces are under the direct control of the ruler and staffed with loyalists. As such, Figure 2 allows us to ensure that the secret police indicator does not simply capture these other dimensions as well as to compare their effects on protest. The results show that the effect of secret police is robust to their inclusion. Further, the statistically insignificant effect of personalization suggests that the staffing of secret police need not rely on personal loyalties, building instead on individuals' career pressures (Scharpf and Gläsel 2020).

The Appendix reports several robustness checks: Controlling for additional potential confounders, a sensitivity analysis to bound the influence of potential, unaccounted-for

confounders, checking for parallel-trends and estimating staggered difference-in-differences models, altering how time trends are modeled, and employing alternative IRT models.

Conclusion

Using original data on secret police organizations, this short article provides the first cross-national test on the effectiveness of secret police and finds that the presence of secret police forces in autocracies reduces protest activity. With most regime changes in autocracies being the result of popular uprising (and elections), this finding has important implications for the prospects of democratization, as they suggest that secret police can contribute to the survival of autocracies. The results also point to the importance of preventive repression, which regimes are now able to upgrade due to rapid innovations in digital technology, opening up new ways for surveilling, controlling, and detecting political opponents.

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