

Exposing the Various Non-State Actors of Repression and Causes of Extreme Repression

Donovan A. McFarlane
College of Business, Westcliff University, Irvine, California
E-mail: donovanmcfarlane@westcliff.edu

Steven J. Green School of International and Public Affairs, Florida International University
Miami, Florida
E-mail: dmcfarla@fiu.edu

College of Arts and Sciences, Barry University
Miami Shores, Florida
Email: dmcfarlane@barry.edu

Abstract

This paper exposes the non-state actors of repression by describing their roles and modus operandi, and their impact on citizens and the power of the state as the monopolizer of legitimate use of coercion or physical force. Repression is perceived as the coercive use of power through physical actions that may include different types of violence by the state and certain non-state actors to induce or prohibit certain behaviors, responses, or actions from citizens, and oppositions, as a way of communicating or strengthening the authority of a state, monarch, or government. It also includes the use of information and intelligence to create situations of oppression for citizens. Repression is a widespread practice in modern society and a challenge to the interactions and relationships of citizens and nations.

1. Introduction

Repression as a state-induced strategy to control and foster ‘social order’ has been viewed from various perspectives, and mostly negatively, as it often involves political threat or threat of violence, physical action, and human rights abuse¹. Repression can be defined as the act of subduing someone by institutional or physical force.² While the state is viewed as having the monopoly to the legitimate use of force or coercion and other non-physical legitimized means, non-state sponsors of repression have been just as active throughout human history as mechanisms of repression across societies and nations. There are various non-state actors of repression, and the degree to which states engage repression can vary depending on perceived challenge and the need for change. This paper exposes the non-state actors of repression by describing their roles and modus operandi, and their impact on citizens and the power of the state as the monopolizer of legitimate use of coercion or physical force.

2. Non-State Actors of Repression

Because the respect for citizens and regard for their rights vary from government to government, the degree to which the state uses physical force, and to which it employs non-state actor repression also varies.³ Non-state actors of repression tend to be more violent and unrestrained in their actions against citizens or civilians as evidenced in torture, extrajudicial killings, and excessive imprisonment or detainment without rights.⁴ There are several different non-state actors of repression that can be identified as active across the globe. These include militias and informal groups, and informal groups are especially noted for their economic interests as non-state organizations fostering and facilitating repression.⁵ Other non-state actors of repression may include non-state militias to which the state or some regimes delegate authority.⁶ Several non-state actors of repression are explored below.

2.1 Informal Groups

Informal groups have served as powerful non-state actors of repression from the early days of organized society,

¹. Jacqueline H.R. deMeritt. “The Strategic Use of State Repression and Political Violence” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedias*. Oxford University Press, 2017.

². Ibid.

³. Butler, Christopher K., and Neil J. Mitchell. (2007). Non-State Actors, States, and Repression: The Effect of Militias and Informal Armed Groups on Human Rights Violations, 1-31.

⁴. Bueno de Mesquita, Bruce, George W. Downs, Alastair Smith and Feryal Marie Cherif. 2005. “Thinking Inside the Box: A Closer Look at Democracy and Human Rights.” *International Studies Quarterly*, 49: 439-57.

⁵. Ibid.

⁶. Kristine Eck. 2015. Repression by Proxy: How Military Purges and Insurgency Impact the Delegation of Coercion. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 2015, Vol. 59(5) 924-946.

by acting in what they perceive is the particular interest of the state and populace, despite the questionable strategies and tactics they might use. These informal groups are often motivated by economic and political interests, and are believed to be ‘goods-seeking agents’. Many informal groups see association with the state as an economically and even strategically beneficial way to growth and survival. Thus, to many informal groups that become non-state actors of repression, their own purpose or reason for being is realized in their actions and association with the ‘legitimate’ power of state mechanism that enforces control or wields authority that is immediately recognized by and fear by citizens or the people or civilians. Informal groups like pro-government militias assume great deal of responsibility and accountability that can free the state from questions concerning justice, equal rights, and in case of human rights issues and challenges from equal or even lesser authorities. Their degree of effectiveness will vary with size, power, and the degree to which they can influence and obtain outcomes in particular situations. More so, their leadership becomes a critical factor in their success. The use of new media – social media in the 21st century has become significant in creating opportunities for both informal groups and pro-government militias in conflicts involving civilian and non-civilian groups.

Informal groups that are non-military in nature represent strong support for states in their attempts at repression by creating an ideological bridge for support from among the general population or oppressed. It is often the case that many do not understand the ways and means of repression, and can become part of such mechanisms by virtue of passive or active support and endorsement. This is seen in the media where extreme leftist governments have used state media control mechanisms to embolden and build the legitimate power of dictators and support their inhumane and unjust policies and actions. Informal groups with strong economic power are especially strong as non-state actors of repression because of their influence on state policies via political connections and social influence.

2.2 Social Media and Religious Groups

Over the past decade, social media groups have become very powerful in aiding repression by the state as they engage communication and social networking to bolster policies that are dangerous to citizens and their well-being. For example, social media groups have emerged that support everything from anti-immigration policies to anti-gay politicians and policies that increase and advocate for the discrimination and mistreatment of various groups across society.

Religious groups can be very powerful non-state actors of repression, especially when a dominant and largely influential religious group or authority figure takes the perspective or side of an oppressive government or regime and influences actions and policies against minorities or other religious groups. This is often the case in Middle Eastern, Asian, and Southeast Asian territories where religious authority is still revered, and where powerful clerics can influence actions and reactions. Social media and religious groups influence repression with far less responsibility and accountability than militias and informal groups, and this makes them particularly challenging to restrain as they use ideology to accomplish their purpose of supporting states in their repressive acts against citizens, especially minority citizens.

2.3 Militias

It has often been the case that in disruptive regions or nations, military leaders have tended to “subcontract the task of control and repression to allied militias that have the local intelligence skills necessary to manage the civilian population” (924).¹ As Eck notes, these militias may sometimes be delegated by the state to take action, and can be known by various names, including most popularly in some regions as pro-government militias (PGM), and are armed groups that can take sole or partial responsibility for the use of state-authorized coercion in territorially delimited areas.² States may make this choice because of the roles and consequences of responsibility and accountability in preserving the state as the legitimate authority of coercive force, as well as to maintain political balance.

In many countries across the globe, the authority of states is being challenged on a daily basis, and as a result, repression is becoming more commonplace in certain regions of the globe. Whatever the case maybe, “two factors will increase the probability of states delegating control to a proxy militia, namely, military purges and armed conflict”.³ In many regions of the world where military conflicts are ongoing, the use of repression is a daily part of the approach that the state, legitimate or non-legitimate, employs in maintaining its presence and power. Moreover, military purges are used to fortify the strength of new governments or regimes that view repression as a vital factor in discouraging resistance from opposing parties as well as the general population. Among the non-state actors of repression, militias are feared more than any other because they are armed and brutal in their assault and often go unpunished.

¹. Ibid.

². Ibid.

³. Ibid.

3. When Repression Becomes Extreme

There are instances where practices of repression have gone to the extreme, and this has been witnessed across the globe various times in both armed and unarmed conflicts. For example, conflicts between tribes on the African continent have created instances of purges such as tribal purges, as well as genocide as seen in case of the Rwandan Genocide, and also witnessed with the Kurdish population in Saddam's Iraq. It is not simply sanctions that drive the state to extreme cases of repression, but usually attack directly against the state that serves to threaten and undermine the legitimacy of a standing government or administration, especially a dictatorial regime. As Franz and Kendall-Taylor note, the motivation of dictators or dictatorial regimes using repression is quite clear.¹ Dictators often seek to suppress any group or individuals that come to question their authority because such authority originally is or was obtained and/or maintained through illegitimate means or are perpetuated through inhumane, cruel, and often extreme violations of human rights. While sanctions have been the cause of drastic actions by states, physical attack or other provocations including attempts to overthrow government create more extreme cases of repression than other acts.

Sanctions have certainly worsened human rights violations in targeted countries over their uses in the last several decades.² However, originally meant as non-violent policy alternative to the sort of military interventions we have witnessed with the Administration of George W. Bush in 2001 and beyond while dealing with Iraq and terrorism, sanctions have sparked significant backlash in the form of various repressive strategies by targeted countries and their regimes. These sanctions by virtue, have made the lives of citizens more agonizing as they become the point through which these regimes vent their anger and frustration with outside intervention.

4. Conclusion

States vary in their use of repression, and the degree to which non-state actors of repression are present vary from society to society, and region to region. Democracy seems to be less rigged with repression because of the tenets and principles by which such a system functions, and because of the inherent respect for their citizens and their rights. Repression is the use of physical force or other threatening and violent strategies and approach to discouraging action, inciting fear and gaining conformance from citizens. It should be discouraged by both the state and non-state actors. However, the use of physical force and threat has become useful in instances to suppress violence or discourage behaviors detrimental to governmental and social order from and by citizens. Since the state has been the monopolizer of legitimate use of force, it is important to understand how sharing this "power" with non-state actors creates challenges and can result in even greater violations of human rights and dignity.

Repression may be more widespread than scholars and researchers would like to think as evident from the pervasiveness of human rights violations across nations. Furthermore, as Hafner-Burton notes, "a substantial percentage of states repress their citizens" (593).³ Given this understanding, it should not be surprising that many states make use of non-state actors to facilitate repression on many fronts. These non-state actors use force in frightening ways that sometimes seem even more extreme than the state because of the lack of officialdom, bureaucratic structures, and their lack of dependence on the populace for public support, as this is not vital to their existence.

Bibliography

- Bueno de Mesquita, Bruce, George W. Downs, Alastair Smith and Feryal Marie Cherif. "Thinking Inside the Box: A Closer Look at Democracy and Human Rights." *International Studies Quarterly*, 49: 439-57, 2005.
- Butler, Christopher K., and Neil J. Mitchell. Non-State Actors, States, and Repression: The Effect of Militias and Informal Armed Groups on Human Rights Violations, 1-31, 2007. <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.474.5360&rep=rep1&type=pdf>
- deMeritt, Jacqueline H.R. "The Strategic Use of State Repression and Political Violence" in *Oxford Research Encyclopedias*. Oxford University Press, 2017. <http://politics.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-32>
- Eck, Kristine. Repression by Proxy: How Military Purges and Insurgency Impact the Delegation of Coercion. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 2015, Vol. 59(5) 924-946, 2015.
- Franz, Erica, and Andrea Kendall-Taylor. A dictator's toolkit: Understanding how co-optation affects repression in autocracies. *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 51(3), 332-346, 2014.
- Hafner-Burton, Emilie, M. Trading Human Rights: How Preferential Trade Agreements Influence Government

¹. Franz, Erica, and Andrea Kendall-Taylor. 2014. A dictator's toolkit: Understanding how co-optation affects repression in autocracies. *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 51(3), 332-346.

². Wood, Reed, M. 2008. A Hand upon the Throat of the Nation": Economic Sanctions and State Repression, 1976-2001. *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 52, No. 3 (Sep. 2008), 489-513.

³. Hafner-Burton, Emilie, M. 2005. Trading Human Rights: How Preferential Trade Agreements Influence Government Repression. *International Organization*, Vol. 59, No. 3 (Summer, 2005), 593-629.

Repression. *International Organization*, Vol. 59, No. 3 (Summer, 2005), 593-629, 2005.
Wood, Reed, M.A. Hand upon the Throat of the Nation: Economic Sanctions and State Repression, 1976-2001.
International Studies Quarterly, Vol. 52, No. 3 (Sep. 2008), 489-513, 2008.

About the Author

Dr. Donovan A. McFarlane is a part-time Assistant Professor of Business in the College of Business at Westcliff University, where he teaches a variety of graduate courses including Strategic Management, International Business, and Marketing. He is also an Adjunct Lecturer in the Department of Politics and International Relations in the Steven J. Green School of International and Public Affairs at Florida International University, where he teaches American Government, and an Adjunct Lecturer in the Department of History and Political Science in the College of Political Arts and Sciences at Barry University, where he teaches Political Science and Public Administration.