Endorsing Repression:  
Nonviolent Movements and Legitimizing Regime Violence in Autocracies  
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*****Conference Draft*****  

Abstract  
This paper examines how autocracies legitimize the use of violent repression against nonviolent civil resistance movements. Literature on nonviolent resistance suggests that if movements are able to remain nonviolent then they are less likely to be repressed, and if repression does occur it is likely to backfire by outraged citizens and draining the regime of authority. Understanding the methods that autocracies use to endorse and justify the use of violence helps to clarify regime strategies to mitigate backfire, maintain a cohesive repressive apparatus, and ultimately insulate their rule from challenges. The paper finds that autocracies draw on regime ideologies while highlighting xenophobic themes and a responsibility to protect public order. The paper situates three nonviolent movements in the cross-national literature on civil resistance before tracing each in more detail: the 2009-10 Iranian ‘Green Movement’, the 2007 Burmese ‘Saffron Revolution’, and the 1989 Tiananmen Square movement in China.  

Acknowledgments  
The author wishes to thank the UCD College of Human Sciences Research Fund for travel support to present this work and to Francois-Xavier Lefebure for excellent research assistance.
Introduction

Nonviolent resistance presents a serious challenge to authoritarian regimes. While autocratic governments almost always have an overwhelming advantage over protesters when it comes to the means of violent coercion, nonviolent resistance has the potential to drain the regime of its legitimacy and capacity (Sharp 2010). Nonviolent resistance can succeed in dislodging an authoritarian regime as the spectacular cases of Iran in 1979, the Philippines in 1986, and South Korea in 1987 all demonstrate. In addition to these examples of successful cases, however, one can easily point to instances of regimes that brutally crack down on protesters with violence and retain their power.

Scholarly understanding of nonviolent protest in authoritarian regimes has expanded significantly in recent years (see Schock 2013). Landmark studies have mapped the factors that help explain movement outcomes by examining both the characteristics of the movements themselves and the states in which they are located (e.g. Chenoweth and Stephan 2011; Nepstad 2011; Chenoweth and Stephan 2008; Schock 2005; Boudreau 2004). Central to the dynamics of non-violence resistance is the ability and willingness of regimes to employ violent repression. A concept variously called “political jiu-jitsu” or “backfire” or the “paradox of repression” posits that regimes face a dilemma: they are compelled to repress nonviolent movements but the very act of repression engenders moral outrage that in turn strengthens the anti-regime movement. Authoritarian regimes therefore have reasons to minimize their reliance on repression in order to avoid backfire dynamics that may ultimately undermine their own power. This paper argues that one way in which autocratic regimes do so is to draw on broader regime ideologies or legitimation strategies to authorize and justify the use of violence against nonviolent protesters. Authoritarian regimes control and manipulate the public sphere to make the violent repression of
nonviolent protesters appear more legitimate by “otherizing” protesters as enemies of the regime and portraying the regime’s security forces as the protectors of public order.

This paper proceeds in four sections. First, a brief review of literature on nonviolent resistance will provide theoretical context for the remainder of the paper. Second, the paper will provide a cross-national overview of all nonviolent resistance movements from 1946 to 2006 by combining the most prominent dataset on nonviolent campaigns with a coding of political regimes based on their legitimation claims. It will discuss patterns of nonviolent resistance and repression in different regime types and use these patterns to help select cases for further qualitative examination. Third, the paper will examine qualitatively the aftermath of three instances of regime repression of nonviolent protest movements: China in 1989, Burma/Myanmar in 2007, and Iran in 2009-10. Cases were selected because of their differing regime types at the time of the movement. Fourth and finally, the paper will conclude with brief remarks that summarize its findings and discuss their relevance for our understanding of nonviolent resistance and authoritarian resilience.

Nonviolent Resistance in Autocratic Regimes

Cross-national research suggests that a large nonviolent movement against an autocracy can be effective in removing the incumbent regime. According to one major study, the advantage of a nonviolent strategy is emphatic: major nonviolent campaigns are fully or partially successful 53% of the time while violent movements only succeed in 26% of cases (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011). The authors attribute the success of nonviolent movements to at least four major factors: the enhanced moral legitimacy of nonviolent campaigns relative to violent campaigns, the high levels of broad-based participation that a nonviolent movement can facilitate, the “backfire”
effect that often accompanies repression of nonviolent movements, and the increased ability of nonviolent campaigns to encourage government personnel to shift their loyalty to the movement.

While questions remain about the theory and data on which these claims rest (see Lehoucq, forthcoming), subsequent scholarship has attempted to refine and build on these findings. For example, research has confirmed that defections from security forces are pivotal for the success of nonviolent movements (Nepstad, 2011), that the organizational capacity of the movement itself bears heavily on its outcome (Sutton et al., 2014), and that activists and democracy promotion organizations help diffuse nonviolent protests and methods across borders (Bunce & Wolchik, 2013). Furthermore, research has found that nonviolent protests are more likely than violent methods to lead to democracy rather than autocracy once the target regime is removed (Celestino & Gleditsch, 2013).

With some notable exceptions (e.g. Nepstad, 2011), scholarship on nonviolent resistance has tended to conceptualize authoritarian regimes as existing on one side of a spectrum running from autocracy to democracy. For example, Chenoweth and Stephan (2011: 67) use the familiar Polity IV measurement of -10 (extreme autocracy) to 10 (extreme democracy) in their count of the frequency of nonviolent movements in different regime types. This approach tends to dichotomize political regimes into democratic and autocratic without reflecting on the differences that may be inherent to different subtypes of regimes. Conceptualizing regimes based on their ruling coalitions (e.g. military, single-party, monarchy) and/or their legitimacy claims (as will be discussed below) can illuminate patterns that may go unnoticed with a dichotomous approach.

Recent theoretical advances in the analysis of authoritarian politics have helped clarify the foundations of autocratic resilience and bear on the ways in which nonviolent resistance may
challenge them. Svolik (2012) divides the puzzle of authoritarian resilience into two “problems”: the problem of authoritarian control and the problem of authoritarian power sharing. The latter is concerned with cohesion among elites within the regime while the former is concerned with keeping the population from overthrowing the regime. Or, in Schedler’s (2013: 35) terms, a nonviolent uprising presents both a “vertical” challenge to the regime as well as difficulties avoiding “lateral” divisions within the regime as to the appropriate response. When facing a major nonviolent movement, an authoritarian regime must therefore consider not only repressing the movement so that challengers are no longer in the streets, but also doing so without dividing elites within the regime. The attention in the nonviolent resistance literature to the influence of security force defections on the likelihood of movement success demonstrates the importance of regime cohesion for meeting nonviolent threats.

In order to maintain both cohesion and control, authoritarian regimes make use of three tools: legitimation, co-optation, and repression (Gerschewski 2013). Legitimation provides reasons why the regime is entitled to rule, while co-optation attempts to tie strategically important actors to the regime’s survival and repression allows the regime to neutralize challengers. A nonviolent movement can challenge all three of these pillars as well as their interrelationships. By taking to the streets to demonstrate their displeasure, protesters are signaling that they are not satisfied with the regime’s legitimacy. If they can convince actors within the regime to defect to their cause then nonviolent campaigners may erode the regime’s efforts at co-optation or even repression. If the regime does repress the campaign, then it may invigorate the movement by lending it sympathy and support. Furthermore, if the regime does engage in repression then its task of legitimating its rule becomes more difficult because it must
confront the argument that if the population were convinced of the regime’s legitimacy then people would not be attempting to collectively remove it from power.

This means that an authoritarian regime confronting a nonviolent campaign has numerous challenges. Of course the preferred option from the point of view of the autocracy is to stop the movement before it gathers momentum. So-called “free spaces” or “autonomous places that are relatively independent from the influence of dominant society” can provide the venues in which people may develop oppositional consciousness and can therefore help transform “indignation into insurgency” (Nepstad 2011: 6). Autocratic regimes aim to prevent free spaces from becoming threatening to regime rule by either repressing them or attempting to ensure that the state’s ideological messages influence the discussion that takes place in them. If an authoritarian regime can frustrate the “framing” efforts of the nonviolent movement then it can blunt the movement’s ability to gather the widespread support so crucial to a successful outcome (see Benford and Snow 2000). For example, to prevent people from framing foreign nonviolent uprisings as analogous and desirable in their own context, authoritarian regimes attempt to proactively “diffusion proof” themselves by blocking news about nonviolent movements abroad and/or portraying them in a negative light (Koesel and Bunce 2013).

When preemptive measures of this sort fail, autocratic regimes may be faced with a nonviolent movement that challenges their rule. In many cases, the regime chooses to violently repress the protesters in order to regain control. If the regime does unleash security forces it faces at least two problems. First, it runs the risk of the repression backfiring and reinvigorating the movement. Second, the regime empowers the security forces charged with putting down the rebellion, which may embolden them in intra-regime interactions such that they become a coup threat to the top leadership (Svolik 2013).
When engaging in repression of nonviolent movements, authoritarian regimes therefore face the difficult task of endorsing it in ways that derive from and contribute to the regime’s legitimating messages while also maintaining internal cohesion. As Schedler (2013: 47-48) puts it, authoritarian regimes are “official propagandists of elite unity” given that any ostensible divisions may be exploited by opposition groups. Repressing nonviolent challenges strains the ability of authoritarian regimes to continue to legitimate their rule while also projecting the image of cohesion. Given that different autocratic regimes have different legitimating messages, it is worth assessing the extent to which there are distinct patterns of nonviolent activity and repressive responses in various regime subtypes, a task to which the next section turns.

**Cross-National Overview**

To obtain an understanding of cross-national patterns of nonviolence resistance over time, data from the Nonviolent and Violent Campaigns and Outcomes (NAVCO) data project was combined with regime coding from Kailitz (2013). The NAVCO dataset, while characterized by some limitations (see Lehoucq, forthcoming), nevertheless represents the most comprehensive effort to code various characteristics of nonviolent movements (for data and codebook, see Chenoweth & Lewis 2013a; for discussion see Chenoweth & Lewis 2013b). The dataset covers major nonviolent campaigns from 1946 to 2006 with the aim of secession, regime-change, or opposing occupation and the unit of analysis is the campaign year. The total number of relevant observations for the purposes of this paper is 345 campaign years between 1946 and 2006.

Campaign outcomes are assessed at two levels of specificity. First, campaigns are coded dichotomously as a “success” when the campaign achieves its goals within one year of peak
activity or when the desired outcome is directly attributable to campaign activities and as not a success when it does not meet these conditions. Second, the dataset includes an ordinal “progress” scale from 0 to 4 meant to capture the success of the movement in finer detail. This measure will be described in more detail below.

These data were combined with the effort by Kailitz (2013) to code political regimes based on how they legitimate their rule. The typology attempts to capture the “basic organization of the political regime” by focusing on who is legitimized to rule, who is legitimized to select rulers, and how rule is legitimately exercised (ibid.: 41). Despite the availability of other political regime datasets, this one was chosen for its unique focus on legitimation, which allows for a cross-national picture of nonviolent movements in regimes with different foundations of legitimation. The dataset disaggregates regimes into seven subtypes: liberal democracy, electoral autocracy, ideocracy, one-party autocracy, monarchy, military regime, and personalist autocracy. It also includes two other categories less directly linked to legitimation: transition and failure/occupation. The data are coded by country year and for each campaign year in the NAVCO dataset the Kailitz regime classification was added. Most of these regime types are familiar, but Kailitz introduces the term “ideocracy” to mean regimes in which “the exercise of power is justified by a utopian and totalitarian ideology that is defined as the common interest of the governing and the governed” (ibid.: 42). Most ideocracies after the end of World War II are communist, although Kailitz codes Afghanistan under the Taliban from 1996 to 2001 and Iran since the 1979 revolution as ideocracies (ibid.).

Some simple descriptive statistics that combine the NAVCO and Kailitz datasets reveal interesting patterns. Figure 1 shows the frequency of nonviolent campaign years by the Kailitz regime classification. From this figure it is clear that nonviolent campaigns were particularly
frequent in electoral autocracies, liberal democracies, ideocracies, and military autocracies during this period. The two most frequent categories are not particularly surprising given that liberal democracies are more likely to allow nonviolent movements to emerge in the first place and that electoral autocracies operate on the pretense of democratic freedoms. More surprising is the number of nonviolent campaigns with maximalist goals in military autocracies and ideocracies given that these regimes would be likely to employ repression at early stages of a movement to squelch it before it gained enough momentum to become publicly visible.

**Figure 1: Frequency of Nonviolent Campaigns by Regime Type**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regime Type</th>
<th>Movements, 1946-2006</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Failure/Occupation</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Transition</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personalist Autocracy</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monarchy</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military Autocracy</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One-party Autocracy</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideocracy</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electoral Autocracy</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Democracy</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 2* shows the success rate of nonviolent campaign years disaggregated by regime type. Here it is clear that nonviolent movements in liberal democracies met with much more success than those of any other regime type. The exception is the “transition” coding, which is to be expected because states that were in transition years were likely to be there as a result of the movement itself. It is thus likely that the other regime types are underestimated given that a
country may move into the “transition” category from one of the other categories. Even so the percentage of successful years for military autocracies (4.3%) and communist regimes (2.1%) are remarkably low. Electoral autocracies (12.1%) and one-party autocracies (15.4%) are well below the average success rate of all 345 campaign years in the dataset (20.3%). Figure 2 excludes monarchies and personalist autocracies because the frequency of nonviolent movement years was extremely low in this dataset at four and five, respectively.

Figure 2: Campaign Success by Regime Type

Finally, Figure 3 draws on the ordinal scales of progress and repression to obtain a more disaggregated view of campaign dynamics in each regime type. Again monarchies and personalist autocracies are excluded from the figure because of their low level of frequency. The Progress scale is a 0 to 4 measure in which 0 means the status quo holds, 1 means that there were visible movement gains short of concessions, 2 signifies that the movement achieved
limited concessions, 3 indicates that significant concessions were achieved, and 4 means that the movement was complete successful. The Repression measure is a 0 to 3 scale that attempts to capture how the regime responds to the movement. A score of 0 means there was no state repression, 1 signifies mild repression, 2 moderate repression, and 3 indicates that extreme repression was used.

Comparing these two scales for each regime type yields some expected and some intriguing patterns. Not surprisingly, nonviolent movements in liberal democracies have higher levels of progress (2.5) and met with lower levels of repression (1.4). This is consistent with the conventional wisdom that in liberal democracies citizens have more latitude to articulate grievances and more freedom to associate with other likeminded individuals. State in transition also display high levels of progress (2.7), which is not surprising since they are undergoing a transition that may be due to the movement itself, and high levels of repression (2.1), which is plausibly explained by regimes engaging in last-ditch repression to hold power.

Movement progress in non-democratic regimes is much lower relative to liberal democracies and states in transition. Movements in electoral autocracies (1.4), ideocracies (1.2), one-party autocracies (1.5) and military autocracies (1.2) struggle to make progress in achieving their aims. The willingness of non-democratic states to use repression to put down challenges to their power would most directly explain this pattern. Yet these descriptive statistics show that different types of nondemocratic regimes have on average used different levels of violence in meeting challenges. Ideocracies have used roughly the same amount of average repression on nonviolent protesters as liberal democracies (1.4) while military autocracies (2.5) and electoral autocracies (2.3) hedge more toward using extreme levels of repression to maintain power. One-party autocracies (2.0) lie in between the extremes. Thus while all non-democratic regimes in
this classification are able to stifle the progress of nonviolent movements, the empirical pattern suggests that they vary in their reliance on violent repression to maintain power.

Figure 3: State Repression and Movement Progress, 1946-2006

These patterns hint at two puzzles. First, it is a puzzle how ideocracies (and to some extent one-party autocracies) have been so successful in squelching nonviolent movements without resorting to extreme levels of repression. Given that these types of regimes often do not have alternative avenues for political participation beyond regime-dominated institutions and that they are likely to be more willing to use repression than their democratic counterparts (Davenport 2007), it is unclear how these regimes neutralize nonviolent movements so successfully. Recall that only 2.1% of movement years in ideocracies were considered successful in meeting their aims within one year. Repression can only partially explain this pattern and
given their emphasis on ideology one would expect legitimation via the regime’s ideology to play a role in stifling nonviolent movements before they can gain traction.

Second, given the high levels of repression of nonviolent movements in electoral autocracies and military autocracies, it is a puzzle that nonviolent movements do not meet with more success. The logic of repressive “backfire” would suggest that as a regime uses extreme levels of repression against nonviolent protesters it stokes moral outrage among the citizenry at large which in turn feeds the strength of the nonviolent movement by lending it more domestic and international support (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011: 50-52; Nepstad 2011: 15-16; Schock 2005: 89-90). Yet only the average repression and progress scores for states in transition behave in ways consistent with this logic as these regimes have used relatively high levels of repression (2.1) and movements have met with high levels of progress (2.7). Electoral autocracies and military autocracies, on the other hand, employ even higher levels of repression (2.3 and 2.5, respectively) and yet movements in these regimes have seen their progress more stifled than in other regime subtypes (1.4 and 1.2, respectively). These descriptive patterns suggest that the logic of “backfire” may operate in many instances (i.e. those states that did transition) but that there are a number of electoral autocracies and military autocracies that manage to contain the backfire effects of repression. How they do so is an open question.

Attention to how non-democratic regimes attempt to legitimate their rule can help explain both puzzles. Autocratic regimes recognize the danger of the backfire effect and take steps to mitigate its impact on their power by crafting messages that attempt to legitimate the repression that they use against nonviolent protesters. Nonviolent movements often also attempt to counter the state’s narrative through the use of parallel media structures or social media to get their messages heard (Sutton et al., 2014). If movements are successful in doing so then the chances
for post-repression mobilization may increase, but nonviolent protesters face serious challenges in a media landscape that is often dominated by the state (ibid.). The following section turns to qualitative analysis of repression in three nonviolent movements to understand how different regimes attempt to contain the effects of repressive backfire.

**Three Case Studies**

This section turns to three case studies to trace the processes involved in endorsing repression of nonviolent movements. It examines three instances of regime repression: China’s repression of the 1989 Tiananmen movement, Burma/Myanmar’s suppression of the 2007 pro-democracy campaign, and Iran’s stifling of the 2009-2010 Green movement. These cases were chosen for further examination because they took place in different regime subtypes in Kailitz’s typology. China in 1989 was a communist ideocracy while Burma/Myanmar in 2007 was a military autocracy. Iran is a complicated case for regime typologies. Kailitz codes it as an Islamic subtype of ideocracy, which is a sensible interpretation given the role reserved for clergy in the constitution and the overarching ideology of the revolutionary regime. Yet within the constraints of this regime architecture reasonably democratic elections are an important dimension of governance. Given that the clergy vets candidates for office and that the Supreme Leader remains the most powerful individual in the country regardless of who holds elective office, however, Iran’s elections are by no means entirely democratic. For these reasons this paper treats Iran as a unique hybrid between an ideocracy and an electoral authoritarian regime.

Discussion of each case provides enough background information to situate the reader, but devotes most of its space to examining the following hypotheses derived from the literature
reviewed above as well as the cross-national overview of nonviolent movement dynamics in different regime types:

- **H1**: When they choose to violently repress a nonviolent movement, autocratic regimes attempt to endorse the use of repression by drawing on the regime’s overarching legitimating formula.
- **H2**: Autocratic regimes that repress nonviolent movements attempt to marginalize protesters by blaming their leaders for inciting disorder and valorize the security forces by highlighting their role in preserving order.
- **H3**: Autocratic regimes attempt to cast nonviolent protesters as beholden to foreigners and therefore not committed to the regime’s vision of legitimacy.

*Tiananmen Square Movement, China 1989 (Communist Ideocracy)*

By now the events of 1989 at Tiananmen Square in Beijing are well known except, ironically, within China itself. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP or party) has gone to extraordinary lengths to manage the memory of the most serious collective challenge to its rule since the Mao era (see Lim 2014). Today information about the repressed uprising is censored in nearly all media platforms and if it is referred to at all in state-controlled media is called the “Tiananmen Incident” as in a 2009 *Global Times* article or a “myth” propagated by the Western media as in an unattributed 2011 *China Daily* opinion article (ibid.: 96-97).

The movement arose in a context generated by the stresses of China’s reforms during the 1980s (see Baum 2011). As China opened economically the party became concerned with the seemingly increasing influence of Western values and with citizens testing the limits of free
expression. Inflation, corruption, and inequality all increased during the 1980s and fed citizen grievances with the Party’s performance. Student unrest in 1985 and 1986 over a variety of issues, including poor quality accommodation and food on campus, reached a pinnacle in December of 1986 when a student at Shanghai Jiaotong University asked then-mayor Jiang Zemin if he had been elected mayor of Shanghai. Jiang responded with an attempt to intimidate the student by asking for his identification number and department which prompted some students to further heckle Jiang (ibid.: 392). Protests spread throughout December of 1986 to over 150 colleges and universities in seventeen cities with somewhere between 20,000 and 75,000 students demonstrating (ibid.: 393). By the end of the month the security forces had reasserted control at the behest of top leader Deng Xiaoping. CCP General Secretary Hu Yaobang, who had been seen as a liberal within the Party and relatively permissive of the protests, was forced to resign by the Party leadership on 16 January 1987. The Politburo dismissed Hu because he was too liberal and tolerant of Western ideas, made errors in economic policy, political affairs, and foreign relations, and frequently expressed his opinion publicly “without authorization from the Central Committee” (ibid: 396-398).

The protests, repression, and dismissal of Hu in 1986-87 gained renewed significance when Hu died on 15 April 1989. Students mobilized to honor Hu’s memory and the gatherings quickly turned to politically-salient demonstrations. By April 21st there were 100,000 students in Tiananmen Square and quickly thereafter the Beijing Autonomous Federation of Students was formed to help organize the movement. An April 26 editorial in the party-run People’s Daily newspaper titled “It is Necessary to Take a Clear-Cut Stand Against Disturbances,” of which more will be said below, antagonized the students by questioning their motives. Protests continued throughout the next month with more than 1 million people marching in Beijing by
May 17th. Martial law was declared in Beijing on May 20th and troops began their advance from the outskirts of Beijing toward the square but were blocked by ordinary citizens for several days and were forced to withdraw on May 23rd. Protests intensified with hunger strikes and a thirty-foot high ‘Goddess of Democracy’ statue adding dramatic images to the events. The events in Beijing inspired similar protests in cities throughout China, although much less is known about events outside the capital. On the night of June 3rd People’s Liberation Army (PLA) troops again advanced toward Tiananmen with instructions to clear the square by dawn and this time they opened fire on civilians who blocked their path. Most students left the square voluntarily and by the next day it was cleared. In total, at least 241 people and potentially up to 1,000 were killed and thousands more were wounded in Beijing alone.

Once the party made the choice to repress the movement it had to do so without generating backfire and thereby stoking the movement further. But first the CCP attempted to quell the protests via the April 26th editorial, which was the party’s first major response to what was quickly becoming a major protest movement. Discussions between Deng Xiaoping and Premier Li Peng on April 25th formed the basis of the editorial (Nathan 2002), which cast the students as being governed by their emotions and manipulated by “an extremely small number of people with ulterior purposes” (this and all subsequent editorial quotations from People’s Daily 1989). This small group, according to the editorial, “spread rumors, attacked party and state leaders by name, and instigated the masses” with the intent to “poison and confuse people's minds” in order to “to sow dissension among the people, plunge the whole country into chaos and sabotage the political situation of stability and unity.” The movement was neither spontaneous nor genuine, according to the CCP, but rather “a planned conspiracy and a disturbance.” The editorial highlighted the disorder apparently wrought by the protesters, noting
the “serious incidents in which some lawbreakers carried out beating, smashing, looting, and burning.” If the protesters were allowed to achieve their ostensible aims of sowing disorder, then “a China with very good prospects and a very bright future will become a chaotic and unstable China without any future.”

The editorial did not achieve its aims. Rather it was seen by the students as an affront and revealed the apparent tone-deafness of those at the top of the party hierarchy (Zhao 2001: 155-156). The next day, April 27th, saw renewed and expanded student protests at Tiananmen Square met with a more conciliatory stance by the party. Dialogue sessions between the government and students along with less strident official rhetoric over the next week helped to convince most students to demobilize (ibid.: 159-161). Student hunger strikes reinvigorated the movement and as noted above, attempts at repression in late May failed only to see the CCP redouble its efforts and finally succeed at repressing the demonstrations by June 4th.

The party’s repression of the movement can be divided into three phases: (1) the immediate crackdown on June 3-4; (2) the months following the crackdown in which the party investigated, arrested, and in some cases executed movement participants; and (3) the censorship and information manipulation surrounding the events of 1989 that continues to this day. The party was most vocal about the first phase of repression – the immediate crackdown – because this was the most visible. It had to say something about why it repressed the movement violently in order to legitimate its actions and contain the potential for backlash.

On June 6, the government began to laud the martial law troops and refer to protesters as “rioters” (Baum 2011: 459). Deng Xiaoping’s speech on June 9th to the martial law units that suppressed the movements was his first public appearance since the crackdown. In it Deng situates the movement in the broader political context by speaking at length about how the
CCP’s reforms have been successful in raising people’s standard of living. The current party line of “reform and opening” had not been implemented perfectly, Deng acknowledged, but in its basic elements it was the correct policy and must be continued. Deng did not appeal to overarching ideas of communist solidarity or Marxism, but rather touted the CCP’s successful performance. The protesters themselves were cast as “ordinary people who are unable to distinguish between right and wrong” who were being manipulated by “a rebellious clique and a large number of the dregs of society, who want to topple our country and overthrow our party” (these and subsequent quotations in this paragraph from Deng 1989). To deal with the former, Deng recommended increased political education to promote “plain living and [an] enterprising spirit.” The latter were appropriately repressed by the PLA, which for Deng showed itself to be “truly a great wall of iron and steel of the party and state…the defender of the country, the defender of socialism, and the defender of the public interest.” For the “cruel” enemies who opposed the PLA, the party “should have not one bit of forgiveness for them.”

To demonstrate connection between the PLA and the people, the CCP had soldiers who participated in the June 3-4 crackdown remain in Beijing for up to two months to visit local schools and residential committees in order to tell their stories (Lim 2014: 28). Soldiers were given a wristwatch and a medal with the words “Defender of the Capital” written on it and the government published a book title The Defenders of the Capital (ibid.: 29-30). The effort to portray the martial law troops as heroes, in other words, extended from the very top in the form of Deng’s June 9th speech to the intensely local via school visits and imagery on personal effects. In contrast to the public affirmations of PLA heroism the party concealed information and justifications for arrests and executions in the several weeks and months after June 4th. In Baum’s (2011: 459) words, “first came the self-congratulations; then came the denials.” At least
1,600 people were arrested in the aftermath of the initial repression according to official sources with some estimates putting the number in the tens of thousands (ibid.). The human rights group Asia Watch documented arrests in the aftermath of Tiananmen and noted that the “Chinese authorities have made strenuous efforts to conceal the scope of the crackdown” (Asia Watch 1990). Further arrests and intimidation of movement participants was likely done under a more general crackdown on crime in the following months. Asia Watch reported that at least 49 people were executed, 45 of whom were workers and four of whom were peasants. No students or intellectuals were executed although several hundred were arrested. The explicit justification for this kind of repression, if it was given at all, was to punish “rioters,” “thugs,” or “black hands” associated with June 4th.

The framing of protesters as criminals and unpatriotic rioters was meant to marginalize them and their cause and to justify the repression visited upon them. Later, themes associated the blaming of foreigners became more prominent. A People’s Daily editorial six months later, on 11 January 1990, argued that “international reactionary forces are bent on subjugating our country,” meaning that the party “should deal a timely and forceful blow at the sabotage by hostile forces” (cited in Munro 1990: 3-4). Several leaders in the CCP understood that Tiananmen was motivated at least in party by student sympathy for Western ideas of democracy and free expression (Shambaugh 2008: 42-45), which in turn made those ideas suspect and those associated with such ideas targets for punishment. This is consistent with Deng’s advice on 9 June 1989 to squelch movements before they start: “As soon as a trend emerges, we should not allow it to spread” (Deng 1989).

In sum, the CCP attempted to endorse the repression at Tiananmen by: (1) attributing the movement to the work of a few unsavory characters manipulating impressionable students; (2)
chastising the movement for interfering with the order so necessary to China’s recent economic success; (3) lauding the PLA martial law troops as patriotic defenders of the public interest; and (4) blaming foreigners for attempting to use the Tiananmen bloodshed to undermine China.

‘Saffron Revolution,’ Burma/Myanmar 2007 (Military Autocracy)

In 1988 major pro-democracy protests rocked Burma and brought down the 26-year regime of General Ne Win. The success, however, was ephemeral as the military quickly reasserted its control as the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). The SLORC, which renamed itself the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in 1997, ruled until it gradually liberalized to a military-dominated civilian regime in 2011 (Dukalskis 2009; Pedersen 2011). While the SLORC/SPDC ruled the country by using extremely high levels of violent repression, another series of pro-democracy street protests was able to emerge in 2007.

Although sporadic and low-level unrest had occurred throughout the first half of 2007, the proximate cause of the protests can be found in the government’s sudden decision to remove fuel subsidies on 15 August 2007, which almost instantly raised the prices of many goods and services (Thawnghmung & Myoe 2008). Scattered protests were relatively contained initially, but in September they escalated. Government forces violently repressed a group of monks protesting in the north-central city of Pakokku on 5 September 2007 and after the government refused to issue an apology several thousand monks began marches in the main city of Yangon (formerly Rangoon) on September 22nd. On September 24th and 25th tens of thousands of demonstrators marched through the streets of Yangon as the military attempted to quell the protests.
The military announced that starting on September 26\textsuperscript{th} there would be curfews and a prohibition on gatherings of more than five people. During the next two days, protests continued but the military repressed them both with public clashes during the day and raids on monasteries at night. At the time the government reported that ten people had been killed and 3,000 arrested, but non-government sources found that more than 30 people were killed and 4,000 arrested, many of which remained in jail for a long period of time (ibid.).

Unlike the Tiananmen movement in China, the so-called ‘Saffron Revolution’ in Myanmar took place in the digital age. Even with its extreme isolation, the SPDC found it difficult to prevent information about the repression of the movement from being disseminated. The government attempted to slow Internet speeds and/or shut off access almost entirely as it ratcheted up the violence used on protesters and civil society. By September 28 the government had stemmed traffic to 14\% of the previous week's average, then the next day to 7\% of the previous week's average, until finally on September 30 traffic halted entirely. Access was possible again on 4 October 2007 (Subramanian 2011).

The timing of the internet shut-off suggests that the regime was more concerned with preventing images and information about state repression from circulating than with stifling the ability of organizers to communicate with one another. Myanmar’s Internet penetration during this period was below 1\% and so the aim of the shut-down appears to have been to prevent internationally-connected urban activists and journalists form disseminating images of the military’s repression. This tactic was aimed at containing international attention to the movement that would bring external pressure to bear on the SPDC. The Internet in Myanmar had long had more significance for its ability to facilitate connections with international actors than to network among domestic actors (Kalathil and Boas 2003: 96). Ultimately, of course, news and images of
the repression were smuggled out of the country via satellite connection to the BBC and CNN as the internationally-acclaimed documentary *Burma VJ* vividly portrays.

Domestically, the SPDC attempted to legitimate the repression through traditional media channels. Throughout its tenure the SLORC/SPDC was keen to emphasize the extent to which it was a force for order that tamed the centrifugal forces that characterized politics in Myanmar. The military sees itself as a disciplinary force that sits above the chaos and indecisiveness of democratic politics. It situated its propaganda response to the 2007 movement squarely within these themes and relied on radio, TV, newspaper, and public address systems such as neighborhood megaphones to disseminate these views.

The official response downplayed regime violence and amplified the apparent disorder wrought by movement participants. On 27 September 2007, at the height of protest activity in which there were tens of thousands of people in the streets, *Radio Myanmar* commented on one incident the previous day in Yangon in which “nine unidentified males were killed and 10 other males and one female injured” and noted that this action was necessary “to safeguard the life and property of citizens...[from]...those who want to create disturbances in the peaceful and tranquil nation” (*Radio Myanmar* 27 September 2007). The next day an editorial in the *New Light of Myanmar* (28 September 2007), the state-run newspaper, sought to “inform the public about the conspiracies of anti-government terrorist groups holding negative views to disturb and destroy government's endeavours for the good of the nation and people.” The Information Ministry even advertised a hotline on television so that citizens interested in “avoiding rumors” could get “accurate news” (*TV Myanmar*, 28 September 2007). Two weeks later, a *New Light of Myanmar* (12 October 2007) editorial noted that “the elements who are not happy with stability, peace and progress of the nation are creating problems and committing destructive acts, so the entire people
are to participate with Union Spirit in the process of transforming the nation into a democratic one.” Editions of the *New Light of Myanmar* in October 2007 even listed the winners and losers from the nonviolent movement, claiming in bullet-point format that because of demonstrators: “Peace-loving people have to live in state of alarm; Learning of students disrupted; Commodity flow stagnant; Vendors have hard times; Passenger transport services delayed.” Not only were ordinary people harmed by the demonstrations, according to the regime, but also: “Only the notorious neo-colonialists benefited; Instigators covertly earning dollars; Expertirates [sic] and ax-handles living in luxury; Followers of colonialists earning handsome dollar rewards” (*New Light of Myanmar*, 13 October 2007). In short, the regime portrayed movement participants as threats to order and security and as unpatriotic, thereby attempting to delegitimize the protesters so that citizens would be hesitant to openly sympathize with them and would view them as legitimate targets of repression.

The main opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), came in for particular criticism by the SPDC. As an organization with widespread popularity and a charismatic leader in Aung San Suu Kyi, the regime worked to prevent the NLD from acting as a rallying point around which backlash to regime repression could coalesce. It did so by attempting to discredit information about the repression that the NLD circulated. Just after the initial days of widespread public repression, *Radio Myanmar* (28 September 2007) claimed that the NLD had “been hiring people on daily wages in an attempt to mislead the people about public participation in the demonstrations and also to increase the number of participants.” A radio broadcast the previous day not only warned listeners that the NLD was paying people to protest, but also that foreign media organizations were paying cash to collect news (*Radio Myanmar*, 27 September 2007).
Consistent with its more general suspicion of outside influences, the SPDC propaganda response to the repression of 2007 stressed that the demonstrators were manipulated by foreign entities. During its tenure from 1988 to 2011 editions of the *New Light of Myanmar* featured slogans asserting that the “people's desire[s]” was to oppose those “relying on external elements” or “holding negative views” and to crush “all internal and external destructive elements as the common enemy.” Foreign media was targeted as a disruptive and dangerous influence as entities like the BBC, Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), and Voice of America (VOA) were accused of lying and “sowing hatred.” During the 2007 protests the SPDC amplified these themes as *Radio Myanmar* (27 September 2007b) branded the BBC and VOA “disruptive elements” and reminded the population that they were “full of lies.” A few days later the *New Light of Myanmar* (2 October 2007) provided an historical overview of the BBC, which reminded people that it was associated with the British government, and alleged that DVB was begun by the United States CIA in Norway. An editorial ten days later argued that “western media are making attempts in collusion to destabilize the nation, while the anti-government groups are instigating unrest and protests” (*New Light of Myanmar*, 12 October 2007). The aim was to portray the protesters as unpatriotic and information about repression as propaganda from the West in order to discourage public displays of moral outrage that might lend support to the protesters and undermine the regime’s legitimation efforts.

Despite the fact that the SPDC was a military regime with a less encompassing ideology than the Chinese Communist Party, the rhetorical steps that each entity took to contain nonviolent backlash after repressing a nonviolent movement were strikingly similar. Both regimes worked to conceal the details of the violence they wrought on protesters in order to minimize the possibility for onlookers to sympathize with protesters. Like the CCP, the SPDC
emphasized that demonstrators were agents of disorder who were swayed by disingenuous leaders and that they were blocking the national progress being achieved under regime guidance. The SPDC was more proactive than the CCP in claiming that information about repression was the work of foreign journalists or intelligence agencies. Nevertheless, the SPDC actively sought to contain the potential for “backfire” from its repression of the Saffron Revolution.

*Green Movement, Iran 2009-10 (Islamic Ideocracy/Electoral Autocracy)*

During the second half of 2009 and lingering on into early 2010, Iran experienced a series of protests that became known as the “Green Movement.” As mentioned above, Iran is thought of in the Kailitz dataset as an Islamic Ideocracy, which captures important dimensions of the Iranian political system, namely the revolutionary ideology, the prevalence of Islam as a legitimating device, and the enormous power of the supreme leader. Yet Iran also features elections for the national legislature and the president. The candidates, however, must be vetted beforehand by the Guardian Council, half of whom are appointed by the supreme leader and half of whom are elected by the parliament (candidates of which have themselves been vetted by the Guardian Council previously). Participation is thus restricted, but nevertheless the presidential elections are often competitive and feature real policy differences between the candidates. The election in 2009 between incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and challenger Mir-Hossein Mousavi was no different and revolved around whether to endorse or repudiate the populist and socially conservative policies of the Ahmadinejad administration.

On 13 June 2009, the government announced that Ahmadinejad had won the previous days’ election over Mousavi by a 62% to 34% margin. Widespread accusations of vote fraud prompted Mousavi supporters to take to the streets. The regime conducted a partial recount of the
votes during the second half of June and determined that there were no irregularities and that the election was valid and binding. Protests occurred regularly during June and July of 2009, and continued for several months on significant days, such as Student's Day and the funeral of prominent cleric and Ahmadinejad critic Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri in December of that year.

The government and subordinate militias and security forces repressed the movement. Official sources admit that over 30 people were killed and 4,000 were arrested (Human Rights Watch 2009). In the weeks and months that followed, the government subjected a handful of elites to show trials, intensified censorship on traditional media and bloggers, broke up public gatherings, and intimidated civil society organizations and activists (ibid.). The security services used data generated by Twitter and other social media platforms to locate and arrest movement participants (Morozov 2011).

The definitive regime response to the protests and the repression came on June 19th in a nationally televised speech by Supreme Leader Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Seizing the opportunity for procedural legitimation afforded to electoral authoritarian regimes, Khamenei framed the elections as an expression of support for Iran’s political system. Praising the population for its solidarity, he argued that the 85% voter turnout is evidence of people’s “genuine fondness for their system” and that the elections acted as a demonstration of Iran’s “religious democracy to the entire world” (IRINN, 19 June 2009). The elections, Khamenei argued, were legitimate because people trusted the process enough to participate at such high rates.

Further drawing on the legitimation formula of electoral authoritarianism, Khamenei argued that the election was not a contest between the political system and extra-systemic
candidates, but rather among candidates who all endorsed the legitimacy of Iran’s political arrangements. All four major candidates were “members of the system. All of them belong to the system....Of course, they have different opinions. They have different plans. They have a range of differences in their various political stances. But all of them belong to the system....This race took place within the system” (ibid.). Khamenei stressed that “the dispute is not between the revolution and counter-revolution. The dispute and difference is between the members who are within the framework of the system. The people who have voted for these individuals, believed in the system” (ibid.).

In order to explain how the protests arose in the first place if the population was content with the political system, Khamenei located blame with foreign entities. Speaking of the United States, the United Kingdom, and Israel, Khamenei claimed that:

Inside the country, their agents were activated. Vandalism started. Sabotaging and setting fires on the streets started. Some shops were looted. They wanted to create chaos. Public security was violated. The violators are not the public or the supporters of the candidates. They are the ill-wishers, mercenaries and agents of the Western intelligence services and the Zionists (ibid.).

Protesters, according to this perspective, were misled by foreign intelligence agents while the agents themselves worked to disrupt public safety with the aim of damaging the regime. Khamenei implored Iranians to “please see the hands of the enemy. Please see the hungry wolves in ambush, who are gradually removing their mask of diplomacy and showing their true faces. Be aware of them” (ibid.). The foreign media were also complicit in undermining Iran’s electoral system, according to Khamenei: “The enemies in various media, which mostly belong to the malicious and evil Zionists, tried to portray that the disputes were between the advocates and opponents of the system” (ibid.).
State-owned media outlets and state-controlled organizations followed the content of Khamenei's speech in responding to the 2009 protests and repression. The strategy was to downplay the repression and to portray the movement itself as the work of foreign agents so that any repression that did occur was justified. For example, a political talk show on 20 June 2009 on state television featured experts and lawmakers discussing the interference of the BBC, BBC Persian, and CNN in the internal affairs of Iran (IRINN, 20 June 2009). A radio program the same day reported on comments by the Foreign Ministry spokesman, Hasan Qashqavi in which he accused CNN and the BBC of setting up a “psychological war room” and BBC Persian and Voice of America of being “officially the children of Mr. Netanyahu and Lieberman” with objectives to divide and weaken Iran, noting that these organizations receive funding from the British and American governments (Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran Radio, 22 June 2009).

Adopting similar explanations as regimes in China and Myanmar, the Iranian regime argued that the protesters could be divided into devious, manipulative leaders and naïve followers who were misled by those with sinister intentions. Iran’s chief of intelligence Gholamhoseyn Mohseni-Ezhe'i claimed that the leaders are a small group while most people fall into the category of misled followers (IRINN 24 June 2009). This approach attempts to endorse repression for movement leaders while allowing the regime to avoid rhetorically trapping itself into repressing most of the movement participants. Again, the movement leaders were portrayed as beholden to foreign interests and entities. Interior Minister Seyed Sadeq Mahsouli claimed that intelligence agencies from the US, UK, and Israel were supporting the protests financially with the aim of undermining the popularity of the Iranian system (Fars News Agency, 24 June 2009). Going farther, an op-ed in a state newspaper berated the opposition leader Musavi for his
irresponsibility in supporting the “riots” and urged him to withdraw his support for the protesters (Parviz 2009).

In sum, the official Iranian response to repression of the 2009 movement relied on the claims that the elections were legitimate and that those behind the protests had ulterior motives. The leaders of the movement were few and were sinister foreign agents while the majority was comprised of ordinary Iranians duped by foreign intelligence agents and traitorous leaders. The aim was to authorize state repression and to minimize the propensity for Iranians to sympathize with the protesters. Ultimately, however, scattered protests continued for several months with paramilitary organizations responding by unleashing violence on demonstrators and security services arresting those perceived to be movement leaders. The regime continued to offer similar attempts to legitimate repression until ultimately the protest cycle was repressed.

Conclusion

Authoritarian regimes attempt to stop nonviolent civil resistance movements before they start. Security services take several measures to avoid being challenged in the streets: they gather intelligence on particularly threatening groups or individuals, attempt to co-opt civil society leaders with material incentives, censor news that might help mobilize a movement, intimidate activists with real or threatened violence, and/or monitor particularly sensitive or significant public places for signs of emergent protests. If these measures fail and discontent does make it to the public square, authoritarian regimes frequently physically repress protesters and arrest or kill their leaders. This paper has explored the ways in which different kinds of autocracies attempt to legitimize this repression.
The inquiry is important for at least two reasons. First, research on nonviolent civil resistance suggests that regime repression often leads to moral outrage among the citizenry and therefore reinvigorates the movement. The increased number of participants and renewed oppositional vigor is meant to lend the movement greater chances of success. Authoritarian regimes appear to understand this and therefore take steps that attempt to contain the possibility for repressive backlash. This paper traced in detail the aftermath of three repressed nonviolent movements to understand the rhetorical strategies that authoritarian regimes take to minimize blowback.

Second, with some notable exceptions, research on nonviolent movements often does not take into account how different regime types may react in the aftermath of repressing a nonviolent movement. This paper situated its analysis in a regime typology that takes into account the legitimation formulas of nondemocratic regimes in order to assess the possibility for different patterns of endorsing repression. Descriptive statistics suggested that electoral autocracies and military regimes repress nonviolent movements extensively and that in all types of authoritarian regimes progress for nonviolent protesters is more difficult to achieve than for their counterparts in liberal democracies or states in transition.

Qualitative analysis of China (ideocracy), Myanmar (military autocracy), and Iran (ideocracy/electoral autocracy) suggested that on the one hand all three relied on some similar rhetorical tactics, such as marginalizing protest leaders, framing the protests as “riots,” blaming foreign agents, and concealing regime repression against ordinary citizens. Yet they also responded in ways consistent with their overarching legitimation strategy. The military autocracy of Burma/Myanmar emphasized that it was necessary to restore order and discipline to a chaotic maelstrom. In China the CCP valorized the People’s Liberation Army as heroic defenders of the
people’s interests and stressed the positive performance of the CCP during the 1980s. Iran, unique among the three cases, was able to base at least part of its endorsement of the repression on its electoral authoritarian structure, although it emphasized alleged foreign forces behind the movement more than China or Burma. The results show that authoritarian regimes repress nonviolent movements, but they also attempt to endorse that repression in ways consistent with their legitimating messages in the hopes that the movement is definitively squelched.

References