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# The Arab Spring, Winter, and Back Again? (Re)Introducing the Dissent-Repression Nexus with a Twist

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### The Arab Spring, Winter, and Back Again? (Re)Introducing the Dissent-Repression Nexus with a Twist

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The Arab Spring is broadly understood as follows: after accepting long-standing autocracies, which engaged in various degrees of repressive governance, in 2011 people in many countries throughout the Arab world rose up and challenged those rulers. This understanding is simply wrong: it is both atheoretical and ahistorical, by which we mean that it fails to engage both existing theory on dissent and repression as well as the contentious political events that occurred throughout the region over the past decades.

Let us elaborate a bit on the standard narrative for understanding the Arab Spring. Almost all countries in the region were initially confronted with state repression, that is, enhanced surveillance, police presence, curfews, beating, tear gas, shooting, and massacres, which is standard operating procedure for states, especially those with autocratic institutions (for example, Khalili and Schwedler 2010; Lust-Okar 2005). In response to these activities, some challengers publicly pressed their claims (continuing to fight in the streets) and some were defeated (returning home, going to jail, being exiled or killed). Over time, some of the challenges resulted in regime changes (for example, Tunisia), some resulted in coups and later additional dissident-state interactions with both sides engaging in activity (for example, Egypt), and some resulted in rather one-sided political violence being utilized by the government against the challengers (for example, Syria).

Do the events described briefly above transform or challenge our understanding and research on government repression and popular uprisings? As described above, the answer is no. Indeed, these patterns fit directly in line with what is commonly referred to as the "Dissent-Repression Nexus"—a body of work extending over four decades that seeks to rigorously explore what challengers do against governments as well as what political authorities do against those that challenge them (e.g., Davenport 1995; 2007a; Francisco 1995; Gurr 1970; Lichbach 1987; Moore 1998; Pierskalla 2010; Shellman 2006; Tilly 1978). No one who studies political conflict and violence would be surprised that prior authoritarianism and repression—something that we can think of as an Arab Winter, would later prompt desires for change and popular uprisings—the Arab Spring.

We advance two broad arguments here: (1) prominent narratives about the Arab Spring not only fail to engage the existing literature on the topic, but equally fail to understand the "Spring" in the dissent-repression histories of the countries, and (2) some elements of the events described above have revealed new elements of conflict processes and those interested in the dissent-repression nexus must adjust accordingly—doing so quickly because they now have an audience prepared to listen to them.

### EVERYTHING NEW IS OLD AGAIN: THE DISSENT-REPRESSION NEXUS REDUX

For approximately 40 years researchers have reported that states respond to behavioral challenges from the citizenry (that is, protest, terrorism, and insurgency) with coercion and repression (that is, protest policing, counterterrorism, and counterinsurgency). Indeed, because of the stability of these findings across space, time, context, and methodological technique, this has been called "The Law of Coercive Responsiveness" (Davenport 2007a). That states in the Middle East and North Africa have considerable experience with coercion and repressive behavior is well documented.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, repression has been found to influence behavioral challenges in a variety of different ways. In particular, Lichbach (1987:268–271) catalogs the then available theory and evidence supporting a positive (stimulative), negative (deterrent), and curvilinear (both u-shaped and inverse u-shaped) impact of repression upon protest. Twenty-five years later we are remarkably little better informed about the extent to which the impact of repression upon dissent tends to take one of these forms over the others, or why. The majority of responses to Lichbach's piece have argued that the relationship changes as a function of one or more variables discovered within the context of time series investigations. For example, Rasler (1996) proposes that *time* matters and maintains that repression deters all forms of dissent in the short run, but stimulates it in the long run. Olzak and Olivier (1998) focus on both *race* and *national* context, reporting that in the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>Regarding this first point, note that the list of scholars above does not include the conflict theorist Gene Sharp, who has been essentially pulled out and placed as the one individual that can reveal some insight into what has been taking place. We believe that this is a mistake because although there are some important insights to Sharp's work, it is only through considering this research alongside the Conflict-Repression Nexus that recent events truly become comprehensible. Indeed, we believe it is no more appropriate to isolate discussions of nonviolence from other forms of contention than it makes sense to isolate discussion of terrorism (for example, Tilly 2007) or civil war (for example, Cunningham and Lemke 2011). Quite the contrary, it is through the integration of distinct forms of conflict behavior that any one form is best understood.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup>See, for example, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and US Department of State reports on countries in the region during the 1990s and 2000s. For academic work, see Anderson (1987), Khalili and Shwedler (2010), and Lust-Okar (2004, 2005).

United States arrests of black protesters deterred protest but stimulated whiteblack racial conflict while in South Africa arrests stimulated anti-apartheid protest whereas banning deterred it. Araj (2008) offers an unusually complex contextualization of the impact of repression on dissent, finding that harsh repression motivates the suicide bombing campaigns of three groups through three different processes; this is similar to other work by Francisco (2004).

Moore (1998) abandons traditional time-series analysis for a sequential ordering of the data over time and reports support for Lichbach's (1987) model of substitution: protesters shift the form of dissent from nonviolent to violent as a function of whether the government represses one form more than the other. Shellman (2006) also adopts the sequential data structure, though he advances, and finds support for, a theory that suggests that the coercive level of dissent is primarily a function of ensuring that the dissidents at least match the level of coercion that the government metes out. Most recently Lyall (2009, 2010) has reported that random targeting (see, also, Mason and Krane 1989) and the use of mechanized units both stimulates dissent, while the use of locally recruited troops deters it.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of work on the topic of violent conflict within countries has failed to heed the call of scholars such as Snyder (1978) and others who make the case for shifting away from national aggregate studies that theorize as well as empirically examine the impact of the structural characteristics of economies, polities, and societies while systematically ignoring the behavior of dissidents and states (that is, their tactics and strategies). Enormously influential articles by Collier and Hoeffler (2004) and Fearon and Laitin (2003) extended this practice to the study of the probability that more than X people were killed in "civil war" in a given country in a given year. While that type of inquiry has absorbed the talents of dozens of scholars, numerous pages within influential academic journals and extensive resources of funding institutions throughout the world over the past decade it sheds little light on the dissent-repression nexus and simple, yet important questions such as:

- Does repression work and, if not, why do governments continue to use it?
- Is the state better off if it negotiates with or attacks and arrests protesters?
- Should the state deploy police and/or soldiers to break up a protest?
- Are the dissidents better off embracing nonviolent tactics or armed struggle, and if the latter, guerrilla style attacks or terror tactics?
- Or, similar to a topic brought up by Saideman in a related commentary, what role do external actors play in dissident-state interactions? Who does intervention help in contentious interactions? And why?

The events of the Arab Spring make painfully clear how important and policy relevant such questions are, yet one would be hard pressed to find any useful insight to such questions in the literature published on the topic of "civil war" since 2000, which has increased significantly since this time—disaggregated

or not. The situation is not completely dire. For example, Lyall (2009, 2010) has demonstrated a knack for designing studies that illuminate answers to the sorts of questions identified, and there is promise that work by scholars such as Balcells (2010) as well as Fjelde and Nilsson (2012) will lead others to embrace the earlier work of researchers such as Davenport (1995), Francisco (1995), and those reviewed above who study not only structures but the behavior of dissidents and states with attention to temporal dynamics as well as cross-sectional covariation. Furthermore, there is some promise that work by scholars such as Cunningham (2011) has extended the consideration of government behavior beyond mere coercion as there has been use of accommodation as well. At the same time, such discussions would be even more accurate as well as compelling if they were to embrace the work of earlier researchers such as Tilly (1978) who not only brought accommodation together with repression but further integrated it with other forms of political influence as well (for example, material payoffs and normative power).

There is some insight from prior research that assists us with beginning to understand the variance that emerged across governments of the Arab Spring. For example, existing literature on state repression generally ignores the diversity that exists within autocracies. At present, different political systems are generally collapsed together, leaving unique approaches to political order unexamined. This limitation is important for policymakers, activists, and everyday citizens around the world seeking new ways to reduce government coercion. Davenport (2007b), however, examines 137 countries from 1976 to 1996 and finds that single-party regimes are generally less repressive than other autocracies. Results also show that military governments decrease civil liberties restriction and the end of the Cold War has varied influences on repression, depending upon the form considered and whether this variable is interacted with another. There are thus alternative routes to peace, but these routes are not equally robust.

As one can see, the core findings of the conflict-repression nexus fit directly with newer work, pushing it in diverse ways which will only improve the latter's ability to comprehend what is taking place. Nevertheless, standard commentary and discussion in the popular media fail to engage this scholarship and view what occurs as unprecedented, having come unexpectedly from nowhere. This discourse emerges primarily from academics, journalists, and pundits who study specific countries and not dissent and/or repression explicitly, as if there was no literature upon which we might draw to understand those events.

#### NEW SPINS ON REPRESSION AND DISSENT

Having argued that much valuable "old wine" has been ignored, we now turn to consider what the Arab Spring has revealed with respect to incomplete theory and empirical work in the literature.

#### Disaggregation

To begin, recent events like the Arab Spring clearly disclose that there is a need to disaggregate actors which has not previously been done too well—especially with regard to those on the state-side of the interaction. There is some assistance that can be offered here as some newer work has begun to differentiate between actors. For example, in their study of state-sponsored torture, Conrad, Haglund, and Moore (2012) identify diverse "agents of control," that is, Police, Prison, Military, Intelligence, Immigration Detention, and Paramilitary. This becomes useful as we attempt to understand who is more/less violent in their activities, how loyal/obedient diverse agents are to central authorities and who is the most/least likely to disobey commands or defect from supporting political authorities (also see Butler, Gluch, and Mitchell, 2007). This variation is central for understanding not only current events in the Arab Spring but also earlier events as well, such as the fall of Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines.

#### (Re)Conceptualization

What is also needed in the literature is a better mapping and understanding of diverse forms of political conflict and violence—something more consistently done in the past but not successfully (for example, Eckstein 1969). We find this need illustrated well within popular discussions of Egypt during the Arab Spring. As the events were underway as well as after the events in question, many individuals throughout the world used the word "revolution" to describe what was taking place because there appeared to be mass participation in the removal of a political leader. This usage largely reflected a somewhat dated ("third generation") conception of revolution where the events in question involved "rapid, basic transformations of a society's state and class structures accompanied and in part carried through by class-based revolts from below" (Skocpol 1979:4). As Goldstone (2001:140) mentions, however, "Skocpol's definition ignores such matters as revolutionary ideologies, ethnic and religious bases for revolutionary mobilization, intra-elite conflicts, and the possibility of multiclass coalitions." Indeed, he maintains that a more accurate definition of revolution includes three components: (a) efforts to change the political regime that draw on a competing vision (or visions) of a just order, (b) a notable degree of informal or formal mass mobilization, and (c) efforts to force change through noninstitutionalized actions such as mass demonstrations, protests, strikes, or violence (Goldstone 2001:142). Note that there is nothing here about rapidity. Using this definition to understand the discussion about what took place in Egypt, it is clear that the second as well as third elements were present and it is also clear that the first was not. Indeed, the more one looks at the relevant events and attempts to categorize them, Egypt looks more like a coup (that is, an "illegal and overt [attempt] by the military or other elites within the state apparatus to unseat the sitting executive" (Powell and Thyne 2011:252). These distinctions are important for discourse, policy and activism. If we cannot properly categorize events, then we cannot properly discuss, examine or understand them.

#### External Influences

Although taking place in the Arab World many of the factors believed to have an impact on the Arab Spring emerged from outside of this context (as highlighted within the Saideman contribution to this commentary). The factors themselves are somewhat varied and they will involve diverse approaches to examine them effectively.

Perhaps one of the most widely observed arguments in popular discourse about the Arab Spring is the impact of social media and the reduction in the cost of communication. Needless to say, the jury is still out on this effect but there are some useful points that would be worthwhile to keep in mind as these subjects are being investigated (for example, what existed at different points in time, how did these diffuse across time and space as well as how was such information received and when did some transition from virtual to real and vice versa).

Second, there was a potentially major impact of the US government. For example, in trying to assess whether the militaries of different governments would stand down from repressive activity or stand up for repressing behavioral challengers, many looked not to the relationship between the relevant security force and the government in question. Instead, they looked to the relationship between the relevant security force and the United States which had provided aid, training, and armaments to many of those involved. The relationships are not simple. Thus, prior to issuing \$1.3 billion to Egypt in military aid (which was in part held up because of failures to advance democracy), the Egyptian government was forced to make a variety of promises about improving human rights conditions. After the funds were issued, however, many of these efforts were suspended or reversed (Washington Post 2011). This should prompt researchers to consider both (government to security force and security force to external sponsor) relationships simultaneously as they attempt to ascertain what took place in the past as well as what will/could take place in the future.

The United States's other role concerns being a major developer of "non-lethal" weaponry, which was used repeatedly as the various governments in the Arab Spring attempted to deal with the various behavioral challenges that emerged. Concerned with the popular backlash commonly prompted by lethal repressive violence, a number of countries around the globe (interestingly led by the United States, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom) have specialized in the development and distribution of so-called "nonlethal"

crowd control methodologies such as "kinetic energy" (impact projectiles and water cannons), acoustic mechanisms (flash bang grenades), irritant chemicals (tear gas), and chemical incapacitants (toxic chemical or biochemical, that is, "agents acting on neuroreceptors in the central nervous system to cause sedation, disorientation, hallucination, mood changes, unconsciousness, and death" [Lewer and Davison 2005]). Indeed, for perhaps the first time, such weapons were on popular display in a manner that was relatively open and transparent—which was one of the main reasons for their development. As designed and employed, these repression-light approaches might not engender the same degree of domestic and international outrage that is required to prompt human rights activism and policy change. Without the carnage of older, more overtly deadly weaponry, it is possible that repressive action might be able to proceed undisturbed. This has important implications for repression because if authorities do not fear losing legitimacy by using nonlethal approaches and there is less of a likelihood of anti-repression activists getting involved because they have more violent matters to attend to, then relevant coercive action could be employed with impunity. Add to this the legitimation of repressive behavior under international derogations, states of emergency/exception as well as the limited interest/ability in pursuing coercive agents under many transitional justice efforts, then many of the factors typically believed to reduce government repression have been diminished. Detailed evaluation of such processes need to be included in future work.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Above, we have argued that conventional narratives about the Arab Spring fail to engage relevant scholarship about the processes and outcomes of violent political conflict. One could make the case that much of the journalistic profession is rooting out what is "new" and therefore we should not be surprised by their inability to seek out and/or utilize what has already been discovered to guide future discussion. There is something to be said about them searching for "experts" as designated by place names and not necessarily by topic areas. One could also make the case that policymakers are similarly myopic in their focus on the most immediate circumstances and that the mass population is simply following the lead of the actors mentioned above.

It may also be the case, however, that the conflict scholarly community itself is to blame for the lack of incorporation. Perhaps the structure and/or content of our prose has hindered engagement with the diverse communities identified above and thus the onus is upon us to become more user-friendly. On this point, we have some guidance. Perhaps the *Political Violence @ a Glance* blog can serve to improve the situation as it is staffed by political scientists who make a living studying conflict processes who hope to engage

journalists, pundits, and interested others in the way that Dan Drezner has at *Foreign Policy* or the group blogging at *The Monkey Cage*, and so on have been able to do.<sup>3</sup> While it is well and fine to observe the shortcomings of the status quo, it remains incumbent upon those of us whose professional lives revolve around understanding conflict processes to make our work available to journalists, policymakers, and the engaged public. We have, as a community, done poorly to date. Perhaps those within the conflict community can more consistently carve out some time to more consistently assist those outside of our community figure out what is going on inside of it within *Miller McClune* magazine, the *New York Times*, or a venue near you. The authors of this article have launched a podcast project in which we identify the tropes used in the print media to describe and "explain" political violence, and we both will blog at *Political Violence @ a Glance*. Let a thousand more flowers bloom.

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### When Conflict Spreads: Arab Spring and the Limits of Diffusion

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As we observed the events of 2011 with protests developing across the Arab world, it was easy to be struck by some of the similarities to Eastern Europe 20 years earlier. The collapse of the Berlin Wall and of Communism was followed by ethnic conflict as three federations fell apart nearly simultaneously and by widespread but incomplete democratization. Scholars responded by pondering how contagious these phenomena were: did ethnic conflict and separatism spread from the Soviet Union to Yugoslavia to Czechoslovakia (Lake and Rothchild 1998)? If so, how? While there had been prior work on diffusion in international relations (Midlarsky 1978; Siverson and Starr 1991; Vasquez 1992), the events of the first stages of the post-Cold War era triggered a new generation of work on cross-national diffusion (Buhaug and Gleditsch 2008; Kuran 1998). The sequence of events in 2011 makes it appear that the outbreaks of dissent are related, yet we have very distinct outcomes across the Arab world. By taking seriously what we mean by diffusion and what we learned from the end of Communism, we can assess why democracy has not yet spread as widely as we might have hoped and expected. Thus, this commentary proceeds in four parts: explaining the focus on regime change and not ethnic conflict; examining how political phenomenon may spread; applying our understanding of diffusion to the events of 2011; and then developing some implications for the social science of transnational dissent.

To be clear, Arab Spring has not yet reached a decisive end nor will it anytime soon. At the time I am revising this piece, Egypt's situation is still unresolved, Libya's transition is a violent work in progress, and the Syrian government's repression of stubborn dissent has led to a civil war with no end in sight. So, I will focus strictly on 2011.

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