

FEATURE ESSAY

Moral Hazard in Authoritarian Repression and the Fate of Dictators

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The popular uprisings that have recently swept across the Middle East have brought down some of the most entrenched and repressive authoritarian regimes in recent history. A key actor in these uprisings have been these regimes' own militaries. In Tunisia and Egypt, their refusal to quell the uprisings quickly sealed their leaders' fates; in Libya and Syria, their initial loyalty to the leadership resulted in protracted, violent confrontations between the rebels and the regimes; and in Bahrain, 1,200 troops from neighboring Saudi Arabia saved a crumbling monarchy.

Why did soldiers stick with some dictators and break with others? In this essay, I suggest that the political position that militaries take during mass, pro-democratic uprisings is critically shaped by their role in authoritarian repression. While everyday repression in Middle Eastern dictatorships – as in most dictatorships – has been handled not by soldiers but instead by the police and specialized internal security agencies, these repressive agents simply do not have enough personnel, equipment, or training to suppress an uprising of several tens of thousands of protesters. Soldiers, therefore, are any dictator's repressive agent of last resort.

Yet dictators are wary about relying on their militaries for repression. They understand that involving their militaries in the repression of internal opposition entails a fundamental moral hazard: the very resources and privileges that enable soldiers to suppress the regime's opposition also empower them to act against the

regime itself.

Consider the recently ousted Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who fled into exile in January 2011 amidst widespread protests against his government.² Like his predecessor Habib Bourguiba, Ben Ali relied for repression on internal security forces rather than the military (Ware 1985, 37). Both presidents deliberately kept the Tunisian military small, underequipped, and out of politics, fearing that a politically indispensable military might turn against them (Nelson 1986, Chapter 5). In Tunisia, military personnel were prevented from any political association, including membership in the regime-sanctioned Socialist Destourian Party (renamed the Constitutional Democratic Rally party under Ben Ali), and both leaders maintained the exclusive power to promote military officers (Ware 1985). When members of the Tunisian military attempted to participate in the ruling party's congress in 1979, Bourguiba refused to attend and dismissed the defense minister (Nelson 1986, 290).

Compare the impotence of the Tunisian military to the privileged political position of its Egyptian and Syrian counterparts. The Egyptian military has been the repressive pillar of the regime since the Free Officers brought down the monarchy in 1952 (Waterbury 1983, Chapter 14), and the military's role in repression was formalized by an Emergency Law that has been in effect with minor suspensions since 1967 (Cook 2007, 26-27). Meanwhile, the Syrian military came to dominate internal politics after a 1970 intra-party coup d'état that pitted the military wing of the Baath party against the civilian one. After the then-Minister of Defense Hafez al-Asad prevailed, he purged the defeated faction

and jailed its leaders for life.³ This is precisely the kind of praetorianism that most dictators fear.

The moral hazard in authoritarian repression thus presents dictators with a key dilemma: If they exclude soldiers from repression, they expose themselves to threats from the masses. But if they do rely on their militaries for repression, they become vulnerable to challenges from within the repressive apparatus. Waterbury (1983, 336) summarizes the latter concern when he describes Gamal Abdel Nasser's fears of his own military: "It is not really surprising that Nasser would be, from the outset, suspicious of his own military. He was able to seize power using his alliances within it, and there was no logical reason why others still in uniform could not do the same."

Hence in dictatorships that heavily rely on their militaries for repression, soldiers acquire political leverage that they can exploit. In return for their complicity in internal repression, militaries frequently demand privileges and immunities that go beyond what is necessary for suppressing the regime's opposition. As David Hume observed,

"The sultan of Egypt, or the emperor of Rome, might drive his harmless subjects, like brute beasts, against their sentiments and inclination: but he must, at least, have led his mamelukes, or praetorian bands, like men, by their opinion." (Of the first principles of government, 1741)

The military-run enterprises in Egypt (Cook 2007, 19) and Syria (Droz-Vincent 2007, 202) thus may be the modern counterparts of the donativa that Roman emperors gave the praetorian guards and the army in return for their support against rivals and the Senate (see e.g. Campbell 1994, Chapter 7).

Of course, dictators do not have

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2 See, e.g., "A dictator deposed" *The Economist* online, 15 January 2011; "Ali Baba gone, but what about the 40 thieves?" *The Economist*, 20 January 2011.

3 Van Dam (1979, Chapter 5); see also Seale (1990) and Zisser (2001).

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complete freedom when choosing whether and how much to rely on their militaries for repression. The military's size, labor-intensive nature, and proficiency in the deployment of large-scale violence are indispensable in dictatorships that frequently face or anticipate mass, organized, and violent opposition. These regimes must integrate their militaries within their repressive apparatus by granting them appropriate material and institutional resources. Once soldiers attain such a privileged political position, they naturally attempt to preserve it. Thus many authoritarian leaders simply inherit already politically pivotal militaries from their predecessors, as Hosni Mubarak and Bashar al-Asad did when they ascended to the Egyptian and Syrian presidencies.

In Chapter 5 of my forthcoming book, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge University Press), I study how the moral hazard in authoritarian repression shapes dictators' solution to the dilemma that I highlighted above: whether and how much to rely on their militaries for repression. Briefly, I find that as the military's political indispensability grows, three regimes of interaction between dictators and their militaries emerge. I call the first perfect political control: it obtains when dictators either do not need to use their militaries for internal repression or when they are consciously accepting some vulnerability to threats from the masses in exchange for maintaining political control over their militaries. The latter is a trade-off that Tunisian presidents Bourguiba and Ben Ali appear to have found acceptable. The few instances when the deployment of the Tunisian military against internal opposition was necessary – during a nation-wide strike in 1978 and the bread riots of 1984 and 2008 – were isolated and followed by the soldiers' immediate return to the barracks. The risk entailed in this strategy proved fatal when the 2010 uprisings overwhelmed Ben Ali's internal security services and forced him into exile.

At the other extreme, when dictators face mass threats of unusual magnitude, they have no choice but to endow their militaries with expansive resources and concede to any of the military's institutional or policy demands – they are effectively under military tutelage. This was, for instance, the position of Cuban governments after the fall of Gerardo Machado's dictatorship in 1933. In newly-independent Cuba, the army became indispensable in the suppression of internal disorder. But the army's political pivotalness grew even further after Machado began substituting compromise with political allies with their repression by the army. When in 1936 President Miguel Mariano Gómez – the first leader after the Machadato who did not owe his post to an overt military intervention – criticized the bloated military budget and vetoed a bill that expanded the army's role in rural education, the bill's proposer and army chief of staff Fulgencio Batista asked the Congress to impeach the president. The prospect of a surefire military coup compelled the Cuban Congress to comply with Batista's request, and the new president, Federico Laredo Brú, served as a "pliant accomplice to military rule for the remainder of the 1930s" (Pérez 1976, 108-11).

But when mass threats to the regime or the military's inherited capacity to intervene are in between these extremes, genuine bargaining over the military's institutional privileges and the government's policies takes place. This bargaining has a very specific form: the soldiers would like to use their guns to extract concessions from the government by threatening intervention; governments meanwhile have an incentive to test the soldiers' resolve to intervene by adopting policies that defy their demands. Because this interaction entails the conscious manipulation of the risk of an overt military intervention – an outcome that both parties prefer to avoid – I call it *brinkmanship bargaining*.⁴ Military dictatorships

⁴ On brinkmanship as a bargaining strategy that uses threats "that leave something to

emerge when in this push and shove for influence either the military or the government "rocks the boat" too much.

In turn, differences in dictators' reliance on their militaries for repression have potentially far-reaching consequences for the political role that militaries take during pro-democracy uprisings and in the democracies that may emerge out of them. When their position under dictatorship approximates the theoretical case of perfect political control, militaries do not have the material capacity, legal immunities, or vested political interest in taking an active role during pro-democratic uprisings. Hence it may not be surprising that, after seeing the magnitude of the protests, the Tunisian army chief of staff General Rachid Ammar defied Ben Ali's orders to assist the overwhelmed police and internal security services and thus sealed his fate.⁵

By contrast, politically pivotal militaries have a vested institutional interest in picking the right side during a pro-democracy uprising. If they side with the regime, they will certainly preserve or even expand their privileges, but they also risk losing everything if the uprising succeeds. The incentives to stick with the regime may be compounded by some of the institutional measures that dictators take in order to overcome the moral hazard in authoritarian repression. Coup-proofing measures – as they are sometimes called – frequently exploit sectarian and ethnic loyalties. Thus in Baathist Iraq, for instance, internal security services were overwhelmingly staffed by individuals from Tikrit (Batatu 1978, Chapter 58) – Saddam Hussein's (as well as his predecessor's) place of origin; in Jordan, Transjordanians (as opposed to Palestinians) receive preferential treatment in military recruitment (Brooks 1998, 49); and in Libya, Muammar Qaddafi appointed his family and tribal relationship," see Schelling (1960, 187-206).

⁵ See, e.g., "Tunisia's upheaval: No one is really in charge" *The Economist*, 27 January 2011.

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tives in the most sensitive security posts (Martinez 2007, 94). In Syria, Alawis – a minority Shia sect to which the al-Asads belong – has been favored in key security positions as well as the bureaucracy and the governing Baath Party since Hafez al-Asad's ascent to the presidency in 1971 (Van Dam 1979, Chapter 9). Because differences between the regime and the rest of the country have been drawn along these sectarian lines for decades, the officers within the Syrian military may fear that if the regime falls, all Alawis will fall with it. They therefore have an incentive to fight tooth and nail for the regime's survival.

If, on the other hand, authoritarian militaries side with the masses, they may preserve their privileges in the short run but risk losing them over time as the need for their services in the fight against internal opposition naturally declines under democracy. This seems to be the calculated risk taken by the Egyptian military. During the negotiations over Egypt's future constitution, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces – Egypt's interim governing military body – proposed a set of drafting principles according to which the Council alone handles “all the affairs of the armed forces,” including its budget, approves “any legislation relating to the armed forces,” and protects the country's “constitutional legitimacy.”⁶ The Egyptian military hopes to entice the pro-democratic, liberal Egyptian elite into a Faustian deal similar to that which it had offered to their authoritarian predecessors: we will protect your vision of democracy against mass threats from the poor and the conservative majority in exchange for the perpetuation of our political privileges and institutional autonomy.⁷

Hence any future, potentially demo-

6 Constitutional principles according to the text issued by the SCAF-appointed Deputy Prime Minister Ali al-Selmi on November 1, 2011.

7 “Egypt's Military Expands Power, Raising Alarms”, *The New York Times*, October 14, 2011.

cratic Egyptian leadership will govern in the shadow of the country's military-dominated authoritarian past. But unlike dictators, most elected governments can take advantage of their popular support to discourage their militaries from intervening. In Egypt, therefore, future elected governments may face even more pronounced incentives to engage in brinkmanship with their military than most dictators do – they will want to exploit their popular support in order to assert their formal authority.

This is precisely what the Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif did during his last term in office. In 1998, the Pakistani chief of army staff General Jehangir Karamat suggested that the government create a National Security Council that would permanently institutionalize the army's role in security affairs, which according to the general included the management of the economy and internal political instability.⁸ Enjoying widespread popularity after a landslide electoral victory in 1997, Sharif won a public confrontation with Karamat over the issue and forced the general to resign. But when in 1999, after his popularity waned, Sharif attempted to dismiss Karamat's successor Pervez Musharraf in another public confrontation – this time over Pakistan's defeat in the Kargil War with India – he was deposed.⁹

The moral hazard in authoritarian repression thus helps us understand not only the repressive choices and the resulting vulnerabilities of dictatorships. It also sheds light on the fate of pro-democratic uprisings and the challenges to democracies that emerge out of them.

8 See “Pak army chief tells Sharif to create a security council,” *The Times of India*, 7 October 1998; “Backdoor Junta,” *The Times of India*, 8 October 1998; “Pakistani Premier Prevails in Clash With General,” *The New York Times*, 20 October, 1998.

9 A Soldier's Soldier, Not a Political General,” *The New York Times*, 13 October, 1999; “Countdown to Pakistan's Coup: A Duel of Nerves in the Air,” *The New York Times*, 17 October, 1999.

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